

Book Review: Donald K. Emmerson, ed., *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy and Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), 397 pages.

## **Diplomatic Amity or Democratic Reform?**

*David Capie*

Late in September 2007, only weeks after Myanmar's military had brutally gunned down peaceful protestors in Yangon, ASEAN's foreign ministers gathered in New York. They were there to review progress with the ASEAN Charter, but the subject of Myanmar came up and an unusually heated debate erupted. Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo later described the meeting, saying he and his colleagues were "appalled" by reports of the violence. The ministers expressed their "revulsion" and demanded that the military junta "immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators." For an organization that had long insisted on the importance of the norm of noninterference in its members' internal affairs, this was not business as usual. Bernard Kouchner, the outspoken French foreign minister, cheered what he called a "very strong, incendiary" statement and suggested that "ASEAN is the only group that can influence the [Burmese] government, and I think they can influence China."

More evidence of this apparent departure from tradition appeared in November 2007, when ASEAN leaders gathered for the third East Asia Summit (EAS) in Singapore. The hosts invited the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to give an informal briefing to EAS members on developments inside Myanmar. But while Gambari was in the air flying to Singapore, Myanmar's rulers decided they had had enough. Prime Minister Thein Sein told his ASEAN counterparts that he would not tolerate Gambari's briefing. It would be an unacceptable intrusion into domestic affairs. In the face of resistance, ASEAN's resolve collapsed. The briefing was cancelled. Gambari arrived to discover he had no audience. His Singaporean hosts were left embarrassed and ASEAN looked weak. A single member had forced the other nine to back down.

These two snapshots illustrate the questions discussed in *Hard Choices*. Which is the real ASEAN? Is it a transforming "people-centered" organization

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that makes reference to human rights, democracy, and fundamental freedoms in its new Charter? Or a statist forum that prioritizes unity over liberty and which backs down when the dictators in Naypidaw show the first signs of displeasure?

The hard choices of the title are those ASEAN faces as it enters its fifth decade: the dilemmas raised by the tension between a growing global discourse of human security and ASEAN's traditional preference for a narrow conception of state sovereignty. Should Southeast Asia's leaders recommit themselves to an ASEAN way that ignores the internal affairs of member states, or "encourage democracy and respect for human rights throughout the region—trading diplomatic amity for political reform"? The book devotes particular attention to ASEAN's relationship with its "most reviled member," Myanmar, with several chapters debating whether regional leaders cooperate with the junta in the hopes of encouraging better behavior and to preserve regional unity, or expel it for the sake of political accountability, human rights, and ASEAN's reputation.

*Hard Choices* opens with a chapter by Donald Emmerson discussing the key concepts that underpin the book. How are security, democracy, and regionalism understood in Southeast Asia? How have these ideas changed? And how do they interact? The picture Emmerson paints of the region is fairly grim. Although much is made of Southeast Asia's three-decade-long peace between nation-states, the region itself continues to be blighted by internal conflicts, environmental degradation, and transnational threats. Invoking the measurements of the Failed State Index, Emmerson notes that more than half of ASEAN's members could be said to be at risk of "state failure." He believes this analysis errs on the side of alarmism, but concedes that Myanmar and Timor-Leste deserve to be ranked as in "critical" condition (p.7).

The book's second central concept is democracy. Its importance lies in the apparent disconnect between the global "third wave" of political reform and regional "recalcitrance" that remains in Southeast Asia. Indeed, not only have ASEAN's members been comparatively slow to embrace political liberal norms, but also in recent years the region has slipped backward. In 2006, only the Middle East and North Africa were deemed to have more authoritarian regions than Southeast Asia (p.11.) This begs the question: Is there a role for regionalism in trying to foster more representative government? Or would such an effort merely fracture ASEAN and leave the region insecure as well as illiberal?

Finally, the chapter turns to regionalism. Regionalism in Southeast Asia has become synonymous with ASEAN. *Hard Choices* devotes plenty of space to ASEAN but also rightly notes that by far the majority of regionalist projects are nongovernmental in character. Emmerson's assessment of regionalism in Southeast Asia is fair. "The record of regionalism and its achievements is neither so fulsome as to ensure success, nor so abject as to preclude it," but on balance he seems cautiously optimistic, seeing in the disasters of the Boxing

Day Tsunami and Cyclone Nargis the potential for advancing human security and a “modest agenda on behalf of good governance, human rights and the rule of law” (p. 56).

The ASEAN Charter—a constant presence throughout the book—is one instrument carefully scrutinized as part of this analysis. What impact will it have on the association’s members and governance structures? Writing in 2008, Emmerson is cautiously optimistic that the Charter may empower the chair of ASEAN’s Standing Committee and its Secretary General to reform the ASEAN way, moving away from a restrictive notion of sovereignty.

This analysis is taken up by Jörn Dosch, who provides an overview of the Charter’s development and the evolution of space for NGOs and civil society in Southeast Asia. Dosch’s main argument is unremarkable: national sovereignty still rules the day in Southeast Asia. The commitment to the creation of a regional human rights body in the Charter came about as a quid pro quo for dropping majority voting. As he notes, “between a human rights mechanism and any departure from the consensus-based decision-making, Hanoi, Vientiane and Yangon feared the latter prospect more” (p. 85).

Dosch detects some change in ASEAN. The language used to describe security has evolved steadily. There is more collective endeavor, for example, in terms of counter-terrorism training or dealing with transnational threats, but the deeds are typically more modest than the rhetoric. Sovereignty concerns and suspicions impede cooperation on a wide range of security issues. Dosch quotes a Malaysian official as saying, “At an operational level, we [in ASEAN] are still not clear as to how we can effectively and efficiently address non-traditional security challenges in a coordinated fashion” (p. 87). His own assessment is blunter: “Few objective observers would challenge the assessment that ASEAN lacks substance. Beyond the political rhetoric and the admirable but nonbinding declarations and agreements, ASEAN has neither the political will nor the institutional means to complete the sequence whereby concerns are translated into strategies, strategies into policies and policies into actual practice” (p. 89).

In chapter three, Termsak Chalermpananupap, a long-serving ASEAN official, discusses the various pillars of an ASEAN community, arguing that the creation of a human rights body was “a significant step forward” for the organization. Termsak makes the provocative claim that the principle of consensus makes “ASEAN a democratic club...if democracy means that consulting is preferred to voting and members are assigned equal rather than differentiated status” (p. 111).

Like Dosch, however, he concedes the practical results of consensus decision-making are often less than impressive. Describing the ASEAN Charter, Termsak concedes that “what made its way into the text was not necessarily what was most desirable. More often than not, it was what no one could object to” (p. 129). He says there is a real “lack of coordination” among the various layers of officials seeking to advance the community idea (p.117), and ASEAN

remains starved of the resources it needs to function effectively.

At the core of *Hard Choices* are five chapters looking at an eclectic range of “issues”: democracy and political development; the crisis in Myanmar; nontraditional security; and environmental issues and nuclear energy. In his contribution, Indonesian scholar Rizal Sukma explores the mystery of how democracy came to be mentioned in the Charter in the first place. He traces its origins to an Indonesian effort to insert “political development” as a goal in the earlier ASEAN Security Community (ASC) initiative (Sukma is too modest to mention his own crucial role in developing the ASC idea).

What does this commitment to democracy mean in practice? Not much. No sooner had ASEAN governments agreed that they would “not condone unconstitutional and undemocratic changes of government” than regional leaders were sitting down with Thai government representatives installed by a military coup. Sukma neatly describes this hypocrisy as ASEAN’s “comfortable inconsistency” (p. 142).

Kyaw Yin Hlaing’s chapter focuses on ASEAN relations with Myanmar. He argues that it was a mistake to let Myanmar give up its turn in the ASEAN chair in 2006-2007 (p. 181), saying the gesture accomplished nothing inside that country. Retaining Myanmar as the chair might have forced it to “loosen up a bit” and it would have allowed foreign journalists into the country to report on the ASEAN summit. Generally, his analysis suggests that ASEAN has little or no leverage with the generals. He comes to the conclusion that many of the regime’s even toughest critics have arrived at: sanctions have not worked and new approaches need to be tried. The chapter draws on interviews with both former and serving Burmese officials. Their views on the ASEAN Charter are especially interesting. One unnamed official wonders whether Myanmar will be the sole target of criticism or if Singapore might also be singled out for unfair treatment of its political opposition. More surprising is the claim that the ASEAN Charter’s “more disturbing implications appeared not to have been made clear to the junta’s top echelon” (p. 187).

Three of the issues chapters focus on transnational security challenges. Mely Caballero-Anthony has established a reputation as one of the leading scholars of nontraditional security (NTS) in Asia. Her chapter explores whether NTS might be a way to move ASEAN toward deeper regionalism. Simon Tay tackles The Haze—the pollution that annually blankets Southeast Asia, despite an international agreement that should have brought it to an end. His claim that “ASEAN is moving beyond...the fetish of non-interference” (p. 221) provides one of the book’s more memorable phrases. Michael Maley turns his attention to energy security in Southeast Asia, concluding that most regional states have left ASEAN almost entirely out of their nuclear plans.

The final section of the book is essentially a debate between two contributors who differ in what they think ASEAN can and should achieve. David Martin Jones invokes John Rawls to make the case for a modest, pragmatic regional organization that prioritizes economic development over democratization.

ASEAN needs reform, but the focus should be on economic integration, not on a “rationalist assault on the sovereign authority of member states.” He writes that “it is not obvious that Southeast Asia’s security would necessarily benefit from the application of abstract norms of democratic accountability and human rights...at the behest of any supranational agency. On the contrary, regional peace as a pragmatic understanding among autonomous states could be jeopardized” (p. 290).

In stark contrast, Erik Kuhonta calls for ASEAN to abandon the noninterference principle and to intervene directly in the affairs of its most errant member to promote democracy and human rights. He argues for what he calls a “middle level intervention”—not a military invasion but the imposition of “punitive sanctions” by the other ASEAN members. Kuhonta admits that “unless regional actors and global powers coordinate...such steps are unlikely to succeed” (p. 312), but argues it is essential to try. Why? Because taking action is vital to “rescu[e] ASEAN’s prestige.” The book’s editor for one is not convinced. The notion that ASEAN might be mobilized in the “evangelical service of liberal democracy” is dismissed by Emmerson as “political science fiction” (p. 56). Few could doubt that such an approach would fracture the grouping and surely risk the pragmatic peace that has been sustained in Southeast Asia for three decades.

*Hard Choices* has its flaws. There is too much repetition of material outlining ASEAN’s origins and the evolution of the Charter. The book could be better integrated with the immense body of theoretical literature on regionalism in Southeast Asia. Some chapters address the linkages among security, democracy, and regionalism better than others. But overall, by refusing to dictate a single argument to the reader, the book ably captures ASEAN’s current contradictions. *Hard Choices* will be a useful teaching resource as well as a valuable addition to the scholarly literature.

