REALIZING ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (ASCC) reflects ASEAN's social agenda of poverty eradication and human development, which also addresses the cultural and civilizational cohesions in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2014). Success of such integration depends on the level of cooperation among the diverse cultural groups in ASEAN. The inspiration of specific religio-cultural norms and practices often dictates the inter-cultural cooperation. Islam as the most widely practiced religion in ASEAN inspires the success of ASCC. This paper provides an analysis of the potentials of Islamic values and cultural practices in ASEAN countries to materialize the ASCC. Since the focus of the ASCC is to realize the ASEAN community, it is important to assess the strategic objectives of the ASCC Blueprint and practical Islamic norms, namely the direction for cooperation, coexistence, and dialogue. The paper argues Islamic norms have historically provided stability and progress in various ASEAN nations. In recent global turmoil, Muslims in ASEAN countries have guarded intra-faith coexistence. Islam provides common understanding of values to its' ethnically and nationality varied followers located across ASEAN. The paper describes Muslims are proactively participating in the construction of ASEAN Community irrespective of their citizenry in the Muslim majority or minority countries. Through intensive documentary analysis and selected interviews, the paper identifies that Islamic values are in-line with the normative aspects required for the construction of ASCC. Islam dictates its members and inspires non-members to ascertain the common ground to create regional solidarity for a caring and sharing society by designing and shaping various practical programs across ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Integration, Islamic Values, Common Identity, ASEAN Blue-print.

INTRODUCTION:

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) addresses the realm of human development, cultural and civilizational diversities and prescribes the elements and actions for successful cohesions in Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)[1] (ASEAN, 2014). In realizing ASCC, two intricate imperatives were identified by the ASCC Plan of Action of which the first, ASCC as the social agenda of ASEAN, it is focused on poverty eradication and human development; and second, the ASCC has to evolve while profound changes are taking place in the social landscape of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2014). The generic argument about these changes identifies the globalization and phenomenal expansion of liberal economy as the cause (Georgiadou, 2006; Steger, 2009). ASEAN integration, in the form regionalism, can be both the cause and result of the pace of the changes (Paasi, 2009).

Importantly, the directions of most of the changes depend on the values and practices of the ASEAN people. In addressing these imperatives, the religio-cultural considerations count greater significance. Since, Islamic norms, the values directed by the holy Quran, dictate the everyday actions of its believers (Muslims), it tends to craft greater implication in both the private and public life of Muslims. Importantly, the followers of Islam constantly assess and validate the public policies with the norms of Islam as a religious requirement. Thus, the participation of Muslims in the realization of ASCC would be encouraged if ASCC programs match or at least not contradict with the normative guidelines of Islam.

The demographic fact of Islam being the religion of the majority in ASEAN underscores the importance of Islamic normative inspiration for the realization of ASCC. Islam has been the faith-based inspiration for its followers to protect peace, stability and inspire coexistence in Southeast Asian region. Correspondingly, the ASCC blueprint has identified the inter-religious understanding by respecting different religio-culture of the ASEAN people as a core element of the ASCC (ASEAN, 2009). Thus, this paper attempts to understand the links between the Islamic norms and their role for the realization of the ASCC. The paper is based on qualitative analysis. Besides, the paper used the outcomes from selected semi-structured interviews. Ten expert interviews were taken on ASEAN, ASCC, Islam and its normative implication in regional integration.

METHODOLOGY:

The paper is based on qualitative analysis. It is mainly to investigate the complex textual descriptions of literatures related to ASEAN, ASCC and Islamic issues. For data which is related to ASEAN and ASCC, the documents prepared by ASEAN Secretariat are used. In addition to that, several research works are referred in matters related to ASEAN and ASCC, e.g., Vinayak (2014), Thompson (2014), Tonby (2014), Hoa (2013) Kurlantzick (2012), and Acharya (2003). Most of these research works are positive and critical in their analysis. However, research of Pimoljinda (2013) is used that views largely pessimist about the ASEAN integration. On the other hand, researches and books by Camilleri (2013), Schottmann (2013), (2005), Jilani (2005) and Ali (2002) are used for data related to Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia. Obviously, the important Islamic norms are referred from the Holy Quran and Hadiths.

SIGNIFICANCE:

ASCC holds the human dimension of ASEAN, where religious coexistence and cultural tolerance is vital to create a common ASEAN identity. Since the integral focus of the ASCC is to realize the ASEAN community-it is important to link and assess whether the public norms of Islam; such as direction for cooperation, coexistence, and dialogue; inspire the strategic objectives of ASCC Blueprint. The emergence of the unique ASEAN identity doesn't negate or contradict the cultural practices of Islam. This paper signifies, first, by providing an analysis of the ASCC process and locating the critical role of Islam in the process, second, by showcasing inter-connectivity of the actions of Islamic believers and its mandatory normative guideline for nurturing the human, cultural and natural resources for sustained development and harmonious living, which is an essential feature of the realization of ASCC, and finally, by illustrating the positions of Islamic norms in building a caring and sharing ASEAN Community. The realization of ASCC would achieve enduring solidarity and unity among ASEAN people, which requires pro-active participation of the Muslims. Finally, an analytical discussion addresses the challenges towards utilizing the potentials of Islam in realizing ASCC.

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[1] ASEAN is the Southeast Asian regional organization. It was established on 8 August 1967 by signing the Bangkok Declaration. Presently, it has ten member states. Those are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Detail can be found at www.asean.org

ASEAN AND ASCC:

In a region largely bereft of regional organizations, the ASEAN has been the most significant multilateral group in Asia for the past forty-five years (Kurlantzick, 2012). After its' initial attainment of averting Southeast Asia from additional occurrences of war subsequent to the Indochina Wars, ASEAN has invigorated its post-cold war role in the region by architecting its ambitious regional integration and community building project (Amador III, 2011). The ASEAN Leaders accepted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II in Bali, Indonesia on 7th October 2003 to establish an ASEAN Community by 2020. Later on, at the 12th ASEAN Summit on 13th January 2007 in the Philippines, ASEAN Leaders have affirmed their solid commitment to establish the ASEAN Community and signed the Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015 (ASEAN, 2009). The community is premised on three pillars, namely the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASCC. Each pillar has its own Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015 (ASEAN, 2015). Essentially, each pillar is focused on its own elements, and also appreciates its links with others. Following figure shows the complex and interrelated organization chart of the ASEAN.
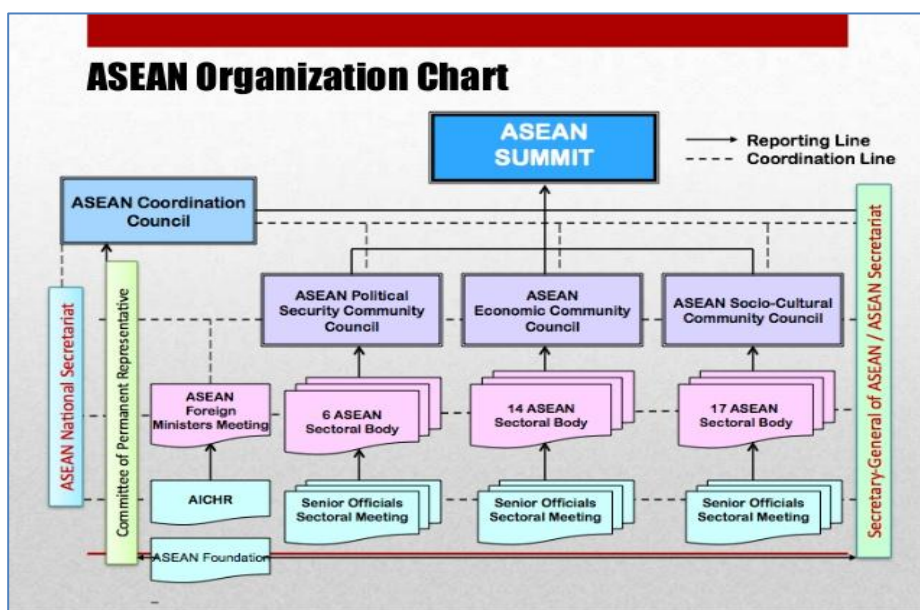

Figure 1: ASEAN Organizational Chart (Wahyuningrum, 2014)

The interconnectivity among the pillars shows the enormity of ASEAN activities, where ASCC holds a significant segment. Although there is a large literature on ASEAN integration and regionalism exists, comparatively little consideration has been provided to its efforts to form a shared social and cultural community (Hoa, 2013). The ASCC aims to contribute to the ASEAN Community through building peoples' orientation and making them socially responsible. The ASCC intends to forge a common identity and build a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced (ASEAN, 2009). Thus, the ASCC strives to bring out the human dimension of ASEAN cooperation and an abiding commitment to address the region's aspiration to lift the quality of life for its people (ASEAN, 2013).

The 13th ASEAN Summit held in Singapore on 20th November 2007, agreed to develop an ASCC Blueprint to ensure that concrete actions are undertaken to promote the establishment of the ASCC (ASEAN, 2009), which was approved by the ASEAN Leaders in Thailand in 2009. The ASCC Blueprint (2009-2015) provides a framework to strengthen the ASEAN Community's belief in their peoples, appreciation of their shared cultural heritage, uphold and extol shared values, and strengthen the capacities and effectiveness of their institutions (ASEAN, 2013). Ever since, ASEAN governments have made some considerable headway in social and cultural collaboration with the goal of building a community of social stability, peace, economic prosperity, and cultural diversity.

However, for a region where the member countries are still at different developmental stages, are culturally diverse, and have different strategic goals, achieving the ASEAN community will be a challenging task (Hoa, 2013). The ASEAN member states are required to stick a critical balance between the human and non-human aspects of the integration. Here the human aspects would always demand more delicate, inclusive and pragmatic programming. The ASEAN Leaders has agreed upon several formal institutional mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Charter, ASCC Blueprint, and other policy guidelines to move forward to realize the ASCC. The realization of ASCC cannot be taken place without the realization of other two commitments for AEC and APSC.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ASCC:

The ASCC is supposed to cover the social and cultural dimensions of the ASEAN integration process (Estrada, 2010). Although the architecture of ASCC is to form uniformity but the formal and informal constraints can oppose the institutionalization of the ASCC. The main purpose of institutions is to reduce uncertainty in exchange (Douglass, 1991). Theoretically, it means building confidence in transactions or negotiations allowing contracting parties to dialogue on almost equal terms.

However, there are apprehensions about losing national authority in decision making once the ASCC would take place. Basically, during the process of regional integration, the policy decision-making of governments becomes prerogative of regional organs, governmental authority shifts toward the new regional decision-making centers, and the state's administration comes under central regional direction (Puchala, 1973). This is similar to the views expressed by Deutsch (Deutsch, et al. 1957). Under these conditions, it requires reciprocal obligations of governments and citizens in each member state to make the process possible (Pimoljinda, 2013).

Dr. Syed M. Khairudin of National University of Singapore expressed his thoughts quite distinctively from Pimoljinda and even from Puchala. Dr. Khairudin viewed that the impact of the integration shall be different for different individuals and groups. He believes that if the integration benefits the ethnic and religious majority people of ASEAN nations, the chances of depriving the ethnic and religious minority would be higher (Interviewed on March 24, 2015). The integrated ASEAN shall be better place for those who already has larger share in the policy making process of any given country.

Another aspect of ASCC realization is inter-dependency of its three pillars. The realization of ASCC is closely related to the success of AEC. Nevertheless, the AEC doesn't aims for ASEAN Union-it is rather a scheme for integration. Ms. Dato' Naziran Hussain, the Ambassador of Malaysia in Thailand, mentioned that "ASEAN Community is not a union-it is integration" (Interviewed on February 18, 2015). Dr. Sukree Langputeh of Fatoni University, Thailand elaborated that the ASEAN has been emphasizing on AEC, but it is merely economic integration (Interviewed on March 25, 2015). He further viewed the success of AEC can be jeopardized if ASCC fails. On the other hand, the ASPC seeks for a rule based society. The agenda for human development under the ASCC is linked inextricably with the economic and security pillars of the ASEAN Community (ASEAN, 2014). The ASCCs priority for human development and ensuring social protection is essential for uplifting the backward section and minimizing the future chance of intra-nation discontent.

ISLAM IN ASEAN AND ITS ROLE FOR ASCC:

The ASEAN Muslims have largely avoided the cultural aspect from the religion norms. As a result, Islam has made its way in Southeast Asia peacefully and gradually. It has also been provided historic references of non-violence growth in the region. However, one should not therefore be misled by the *abangan* "myth". A number of scholars have observed this phenomenon. As early as 1950s, for example, Harry J. Benda maintained that the Islamic history of Indonesia [as elsewhere in Southeast Asia] is essentially a history of *santri* cultural expansion and its impact on Indonesian religious life and politics (Benda, 1958). The peaceful and gradual Islamization has molded the Southeast Asian Muslim psyche into one which is cosmopolitan, open minded, tolerant and amenable to cultural diversity (Jilani, 2005). It is evident that Indonesia as the largest Muslim country in the world accepts "Pancasila"[2] as its national principal. In contrast to Muslim nationalists who insisted on an Islamic identity for the new state, the framers of the Pancasila insisted on a culturally neutral identity, compatible with democratic or Marxist ideologies, and overarching the vast cultural differences of the heterogeneous population (Country Studies, 2011).

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[2] The 1945 constitution sets forth the Pancasila as the embodiment of basic principles of an independent Indonesian state. The Pancasila principles are: belief in one supreme God; humanitarianism; nationalism expressed in the unity of Indonesia; consultative democracy; and social justice.

However, the reality is that while pre-existing local beliefs and practices resisted the continued process of Islamization, a purer and orthodox form of Islam did, nevertheless, steadily penetrate deeper into parts of the region (Azra, 2005). This trend could be accelerated if the backward sections of Muslim population feel that their concerns are not being addressed by the national/ASEAN Leaders. The sense of alienation could potentially be developed as resistance and conflicts. ASEAN former Secretary General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan at the "Seminar on Religious Pluralism in ASEAN" on August 24, 2012, where it was stated that:

> "…some religious communities will resist some of the changes. The political and economic contexts of each of the member states are not going to be convincing enough for them to believe that growth and development are for them. Look at the southern Philippines, South Thailand or even the Rakhine state in Burma, (they are not) fully committed to growth. They are looking at and hoping for something else. Growth plus, dignity, freedom, space, sense of ownership and sense of belonging…" (Muqbil, 2012).

This clearly indicates that the ASCC shall be inclusive and that to say the concern of particular faith based groups needs to be included in the scheme, in this case it is the Muslim minorities in several ASEAN countries. The success of the ASCC depends on how strategically and justifiably the ASEAN Leaders can bring the disadvantaged groups into the mainstream process of the ASEAN community building.

COOPERATION FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:

In the Quran, the God says in Chapter/Sura Al-Jumuah verse 10: "And when the prayer has been concluded, disperse on earth and seek from the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah often that you may succeed" (Al Quran). Here Allah instructs us to work and develop ourselves as well as the entire society. It also relates the cooperation and social development work with *Ibadah* (prayer), which is an element of the ASCC Blueprint (ASEAN, 2009). It is worthy to note that upon the completion of the prayer a Muslim is instructed to disperse on earth, not staying in the mosque or community. When Muslim travel throughout the communities, they will meet and know new people, culture, etc. Mr. Lutfi Rauf, the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia in Thailand, identifies it as the basis of ASCC, where people to people contact is totally in harmony with the practice of Islam in ASEAN countries (Interviewed on March 3, 2015).

Islam dislikes poverty, which it describes as something that "approaches disbelief." This means that poverty may lead people to deny God and His wisdom. Consequently, the roadmap of ASCC for poverty reduction in ASEAN and minimizing gaps between the nations is also in conformity with the concept of Islam (ASEAN, 2013). These examples demonstrate that the strategic plan of ASCC compliments rather than contradicts with the Islamic norms.

COEXISTENCE FOR CULTURAL CONSOLIDATION:

ASCC Blueprint directs activities to ensure solidarity and coexistence in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009). To understand the role of Islam into that, we need to unveil the position of Islam in accepting diversity. It is overwhelmingly accepted by practitioners of the most theologies that Islam directs its followers to accommodate and appreciate diversity. Islam is a religion that teaches that all human beings are completely equal in God's sight and are created as such and that all human beings are endowed with consciousness and wisdom through which he or she can know God personally (Ansari, 2011).

The diversity has its praiseworthiness in the normative direction of Islam. Islam and the Quran are clearly appreciative of diversity and dissimilarity -in creation, culture, and beliefs- within human world. In the Chapter/Sura Hood, verse 118, God mentions, "if thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind One People: but they will not cease to be diverse" (Al Quran). This indicates the intention of the God in his creation is to maintain diversity, which emphasizes the importance on coexistence. Finally, Islam provides family bonds among all humanity. God describes in the holy Quran that all human beings as part of one super unit which is humanity. The God addresses the totality of humanity as 'Bani Adam' (children of Adam). This underlines the importance of togetherness of humanity. Such fundamental of Islam is hugely potential for the realization the elements of ASCC related with coexistence.

INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE FOR ASEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE:

Neither the ASEAN Charter nor the ASCC Blueprint make any reference to the dialogue of cultures and civilizations, or even to interfaith dialogue. It is reasonable to infer that some, if not all, member states have shied away from engaging with the dialogical agenda in the regional context for feat that such engagement might have political overtones, and allow regional institutions and process to intrude into the domestic political arena (Camilleri & Schottmann,2013). However, creation of common identity requires a form of dialogue among various groups.

Islam inspires the dialogue process from everyday life to international activities. In Chapter/Sura *al-Kahf,* 18:29, the God says "Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so" (Al Quran). It is also emphasized in Chapter/Sura *al-Baqarah,* 2:256, that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Al Quran). The Quran and Sunnah demand that Muslims engage in dialogue. The changes in socio-political life in ASEAN make the demand for dialogue more pressing. Islam acknowledges the reality and inspires its followers to build the unity through dialogue.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES:

The discussion above demonstrates multi-level links between the Islamic norms and realization of ASCC. Those links can be traced either as opportunities or challenges. Following analysis demonstrates a critical account of those findings in seven points:

BALANCE PRIORITY FOR AEC AND ASCC:

The AEC is the most dominant event in the entire ASEAN Community project. Considering the realization of AEC, ASEAN is the fast moving, divergent and competitive region in the entire world. If ASEAN were a single country, it would already be the seventh-largest economy in the world, with a combined GDP of $2.4 trillion in 2013. It is projected to rank as the fourth-largest economy by 2050 (Vinayak, Thompson, & Tonby, 2014). Thus, the potentials of growth and prosperity through AEC are numerous. However, it is the less priority on ASCC could jeopardize the goal of AEC. The apprehension arises as most of the ASEANs' futuristic plans are targeting the economic side of the integration- leaving little room for the people and cultural integration. Dr. Sukree Langputeh mentioned that if the ASEAN continuously prioritize economy over human the followers of Islam would find it less inspirational for the creation of common ASEAN identity, which is more of a human and value aspect than economy" (Interviewed on March 25, 2015). Thus, prioritizing one over the others might jeopardize the entire scheme of creating ASEAN community.

Importantly, consideration on Muslims' issues can link AEC and ASCC, e.g. Halal Economy. Dr. Sukree Lanputeh emphasized the same fact by saying that the three pillars of ASEAN community are interconnected. He emphasized Islamic or halal economy as linking tool between these two pillars by saying that the production of Islamic attires or facilitating the Islamic rituals can support the protection of religo-cultural identity of ASEAN citizenry as well as provide huge boost in production, service and logistic sectors in ASEAN economy (Interviewed on March 25, 2015).   Ms. Dato' Naziran Hussain expressed similar view in her interview. She mentioned:

> "the Sharia banking and Halal economy could be driving force of some major economy in ASEAN. It involves and benefits not only the Muslims but also non-Muslim in ASEAN Community. It also provides mutual understanding, which is necessary for peaceful coexistence" (Interviewed on February 18, 2015).

This demonstrates the balance outcome, which can satisfy both human and non-human parts of ASEAN integration.

LACK OF SECRETARIAL CAPACITY:

It is the ASEAN secretariat that takes lead in implementing the huge scheme of ASEAN integration, which obviously requires capacitated both in human resource and orientations. The success of the realization of ASCC needs to be holistically understood by the officials involved in the scheme. Prof. Abdul Aziz B. AB. Latif of University of Malaysia Kelantan has described this key fact by saying that the ASEAN secretariat shall be sensitized about the importance of religious value, including Islamic values, to successfully implement ASCC

agenda (Interviewed on March 24, 2015). The views of the secretariat officials about the potentials of religo-cultural values as the instrumental inspiration for the realization of ASCC can determine the pace of the program implementation.

Apart of the implementation of ASCC, the challenge remains about the maintenance and monitoring. The ASEAN Secretariat has been given the mandate to monitor and review the implementation of the ASCC Blueprint in each nation of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009). Mr. Lutfi Rauf, expressed his mixed opinion about the performance of the secretariat for the monitoring of ASCC (Interviewed on March 3, 2015). The beginning of ASCC and its monitoring will be effective from the 31st December 2015. Given the short time the secretariats' capacity remains under question.

## THE WEAK DECISION MAKING PROCESS:

The concept of the "ASEAN Way" which means that decisions are made through consensus and that non-interference in the internal affairs cannot be violated is an example of such an informal rule (Amador III, 2011). This earlier decision making policy is hard to maintain with numerous new challenges in the face ethnic conflicts in Myanmar or other parts of ASEAN, which threatens the religo-cultural temper of ASEAN people. Mr. Lutfi Rauf mentioned:

> "the ASCC expects the people of ASEAN to have a common sense of *We Feeling*, the sense of *ASEANness*. To build respects among ethnic groups in ASEAN for cultural, language, and religion diversity through unity in diversity is not an easy task" (Interviewed on March 3, 2015).

Prof. M. Kamal Hassan of International Islamic University of Malaysia also expressed his careful optimism for the realization of ASCC. He viewed that the essence of Islamic notion of *Wasadia* (middle path) is a way to pragmatically realize ASCC (Interviewed on March 23, 2015). This can be elaborate by saying that the ASCC is not a radical shuffle of the identities of any ASEAN citizenry; rather it is an addition with the existing identity. It is important to review the decision making policy in light of the notion of coexistence and harmony but not compromising the interest of the interest of the oppressed section in ASEAN population.

DIVERSITY IN ASEAN:

Although the diversity is optimistically considered an asset in modern globalized and pluralistic world (Basin, 2012), but the success depends mostly on the modality of utilizing the strengths of the diversity. The ASEAN is known not only for its huge economic influence but also for its cultural diversity.
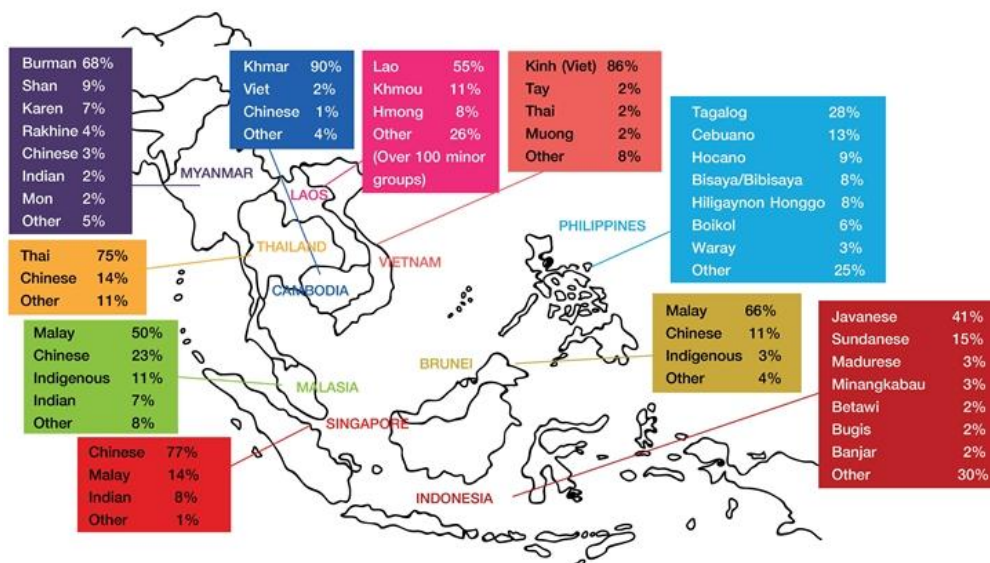
Source : Central Intelligence Agency, The World Fact Book (2009)

Figure 2: Map of Ethno-religious Diversity in ASEAN (CIA[3], 2009)

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[3] CIA stands for the Central Intelligence Agency, which was created in 1947 with the signing of the National Security Act by President Harry S. Truman. Detail can be found at www.cia.gov

Apart from physical landscapes, it is a community of divergent identities composed of five main religions (Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Confucianism) and some animist-influenced practices, as well as hundreds of ethnic groups living within the region (Acharya, 2003; Hirschman & Edwards, 2007; Loffelholz & Arao, 2010). In terms of demographic conditions, the Southeast Asian region is seen as a community-of-communities where there are many ethnic groups with diverse cultural heritages (Osborne, 2010). If the diversity wouldn't be managed properly, even the success of ASCC could be seriously threatened. A remarkable pessimist notion involved with this issue is that the closer their economic cooperation is, the more possibility that the diverse identities within and between member states may clash with one another (Beeson, 2002, 2003). In a larger extend, the success of the entire ASEAN integration scheme depends upon how well the diversity would be managed.

Islam praises diversity and emphasizes its followers to manage it with great care. In Chapter/Sura, namely Hujurat, verse 13, the God mentions:

> "O mankind! We created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that
> ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you
> in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you" (Al Quran).

This verse is clearly directive, rather than persuasive, where God is ordering people to interact with people having diver background. It is also important to note that the verse is guiding it as the way for the righteous. In another place the "righteous" people are being described as successful. Thus, educating Muslims and informing non-Muslims in ASEAN with the right massage of Islam would strengthen the possibility of realizing ASCC.

DEMOGRAPHICAL REALITY OF MUSLIM IN ASEAN:

Islam is the most widely followed religion in ASEAN with about 264 million followers, almost 43% of ASEAN population. Presently, about 20 percent of the world's estimated 1.6 billion Muslims are living in ASEAN.

Country	Population in Million	Muslim Population (%)	Muslim Population in Million
Brunei Darrussalam	. 43	67 %	.29
Cambodia	14.4	7%	1.01
Indonesia	248.5	88 %	218.68
Laos	6.7	1%	0.07
Malaysia	29.8	60.4 %	18
Myanmar	53.3	15 %	8.00
Philippines	96.2	10 %	9.62
Singapore	5.4	16%	.86
Thailand	66.2	10 %	6.62
Vietnam	89.7	1 %	0.90
	610.63	**43.24**	**264.05**

Figure 3: Approximate Muslim Population in ASEAN (Islamic Population, 2014)

In Southeast Asia Muslims are majorities in Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia, while Muslims are located in all other ASEAN countries as significant minority. Consequently, Muslims approach towards the ASCC would significantly determine its course of success.

ISLAMIC NORMS PROVIDING PEACE:

Islam in Southeast Asia could be termed as least Arabicized. The reason behind the minimal impact of Arabian culture in Southeast Asian Islam is due to the process of Islamization in this part of the world. Islam has traditionally been a moderating and constructive force. The early arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia was from India and China, which was modified by the experience of Islam in India and had some very strong elements of Sufism in it (Shih, 2002). As a result Islam in Southeast Asia was an Indianized Islam came on top of an Indianized local culture, which molded with local tradition and adjusted peacefully. Islamic growth has praised the local culture and practices, even to the extent that Muslims accepted all most every long practiced tradition in Southeast Asia unless it directly contradicts with basic notions of Islam. These flexibilities provided larger acceptance of Islam and inspires peace and stability in the region.

Even in the modern time, Muslims in ASEAN states largely reject the global trend of violent means and maintains regional stability. If well recognized and propagated this very aspect would potentially play a constructive role for the development schemes under ASCC.

PROGRESSIVE MEDIA ROLE:

Islam offers its normative guideline for the promotion of human wellbeing and cooperation for the greater benefit for all creation, which is both living and non-living creation (including the environment), which is not much informed through media. This is to say that ASCC needs to further its objectives to improve the social justice, environmental protection and ensure the rights for all (ASEAN, 2009) can be complimented rather than contradicted by the Islamic notions. Mr. Lutfi Rauf mentioned that "as far I am concerned I do not see any contradiction neither discrepancy between the ASCC Blueprint and our practiced culture of Muslim societies in ASEAN" (Interviewed on March 3, 2015). Similarly, Ms. Dato' Naziran Hussain mentioned that "Islam provided guideline for cooperation and assisting others in neighborhoods, society and in larger world. It is not only inspirational but mandatory for the followers of Islam. This is clearly in-line with the elements of ASCC" (Interviewed on February 18, 2015). Unfortunately, most of the Muslims are not aware about these vital duties. Media-based disseminating such information of Islamic guideline for environmental protection or development can enhance Muslims participation in the ASCC process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

With these ethno-cultural dynamics in view, ASEAN governments, over many years or perhaps even since it was established in 1967, have advocated the so-called "network-style of regional cooperation" (Loffelholz and Arao, 2010). In doing so, ASEAN Leaders have considered the concerns and inspirations of its people. However, the ambition of transforming ASEAN into a community demands more sensible, target oriented and forceful initiative to include best practices, religio-cultural norms and values of its citizenry. Perhaps, the inclusion can be visible through expressive mentioning or referring to some of the common norms in its official noting.

It is also worthy to note that Islam is complementing the process of ASCC, not only due to its consistency with its fundamentals but also the procedural aspect of ASCC; it is even at the level of analysis the supreme authority in the formation of the ASEAN community. In ASEAN integration; under integration states don't share its sovereignty; Muslims will be able to participate as driving group without any struggle with its notion of sovereignty. It is not only the followers of Islam having the responsibility to build the ASCC into success but also the perception about Muslims among the others is vital. In this case, the true realization of ASCC needs a greater understanding among various groups. ASEAN states require specific program to create mutual understanding and develop bias-free information, where all ASEAN people can join with one common ASEAN identity.

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