



Extracted from *Democracy in Development. Global consultations on the EU's role in democracy building*

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The European Union and democracy building in Southeast Asia

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Executive summary

This chapter examines the main challenges for democracy building in Southeast Asia, and the manner in which the present role of the European Union (EU) is perceived. Policy proposals and recommendations for consideration by the EU are presented with a view to addressing the gap between policy intentions and Southeast Asian perceptions of the EU's ambitions in promoting democracy building. The chapter is based on consultations and research on the EU's role in democracy building in Southeast Asia, as initiated and conducted by International IDEA during 2008 and 2009.

With the exception of Thailand, all the states in Southeast Asia are post-colonial states. Their different trajectories to independence, ranging from revolutionary wars to peaceful de-colonization, combined with a long history and diverse cultural traits give rise to a region characterized by enormous diversity. By the mid-1970s, most Southeast Asian countries had opted for some form of developmental authoritarian regime, preferring to privilege economic development and political stability at the expense of democracy. Decades of successful economic development paved the way for democracy to re-enter the region by the late 1980s. The influence of this democratic wave, however, was not even.

Economic disparity as a demonstration of the lack of economic development is often used to justify resistance to the introduction of democracy by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in the region. Adverse internal conditions have in turn created an atmosphere that is suspicious of external interference among states in the region. Consequently, all ASEAN states – albeit to varying degrees – jealously guard the principle of non-interference as a principal norm in inter-state relations.

The move towards democracy in Indonesia in May 1998, which followed the examples of the Philippines in 1986 and Thailand in 1992, provides regional champions and further consolidates the notion that Southeast Asia is not hostile to the idea of democracy. The improved prospects for democracy in Southeast Asia are often associated with recently

concluded agreements by ASEAN countries, especially the ASEAN Concord II, the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint. The existence of a vibrant civil society and vibrant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which work primarily to promote democracy and human rights in the region is also a positive development.

Among Southeast Asian states, there is a degree of ambivalence in their perception of the importance or significance of the EU in the region. The EU is perceived as an important actor in economic terms in global and regional theatres, including Southeast Asia. However, it is also seen as geographically, historically, militarily and politically distant. The policy suggestions generated by the International IDEA consultation process seek to narrow the gap between the EU's objectives and its implementation; and to enhance the effectiveness of the EU's role in assisting the democracy building process in the region. Despite regional perceptions that the EU has only limited political influence in the region, there is a recognition that the EU is equipped with both the capacity and the resources to play a much more active and visible role in the future. That, however, would require a willingness on the part of the EU to fully engage with Southeast Asia in a constructive manner and as an equal partner.

Introduction

Any engagement in democracy building in Southeast Asia by the European Union (EU) requires a comprehensive understanding of the state of democracy in the region, and an awareness of the EU's position there, perceived or otherwise. The Democracy in Development project initiated by International IDEA aimed precisely at providing such understanding and awareness. This chapter reflects the regional consultations organized by International IDEA in Jakarta and provides an overview of the findings and the discussions that were part of those consultations.

With the exception of Thailand, all the states in Southeast Asia are post-colonial states and have become modern independent states since the end of the Second World War.¹ Their different trajectories to independence, ranging from revolutionary wars to peaceful de-colonization, combined with a long history and diverse cultural traits give rise to a region characterized by enormous diversity. At the same time, Southeast Asian countries are imbued with the strong sense of nationalism typical of post-colonial states, and preoccupied with the overriding concerns of state-building and regime consolidation in the face of adverse internal challenges – in both political-security and economic terms.

In the immediate post-colonial environment, democracy was not the preferred system of government for many indigenous rulers in the region. Several democratic experiments were short-lived, and those in Indonesia and Myanmar were abandoned in 1957 and in 1963, respectively. By the mid-1970s, most Southeast Asian countries had opted for some form of developmental authoritarian regime, preferring economic development and political stability at the expense of democracy. Decades of successful economic development, however, paved the way for democracy to re-enter the region by the late 1980s. The influence of this democratic wave, however, was not even. As the region

¹ The Southeast Asian countries are: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, and Timor Leste. All except Timor Leste are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

entered the 21st century, Southeast Asia was still home to countries with diverse political systems, ranging from an absolute monarchy and a brutal military junta to democratic and semi-democratic states.

Democracy building in the region should therefore be understood in the context of Southeast Asia as a region with both extreme diversity and a degree of regional commonality. These two main features present challenges but also opportunities for democracy to flourish from within and for external partners, such as the EU, to support and facilitate the process through constructive partnership and sustainable engagement.

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Democracy building in Southeast Asia: challenges and opportunities

Until recently, Southeast Asia was not a fertile ground for democratic ideas to flourish. By end of the 20th century, however, three countries – the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia – had embraced democracy. Even in these countries, the transition to democracy has been neither smooth nor easy. Thailand has experienced problems of democratic backsliding, and is struggling to return to democratic political life. Other countries in the region, especially Myanmar, have shown no enthusiasm for moving towards democracy any time soon. Democracy building in Southeast Asia has been problematic and beset by various challenges in the region.

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The challenges to democracy building

The most-often cited challenge to democracy building in the region is the economic disparity among and within the states (Villacorta 2009). Southeast Asia is host to one of the richest countries and also the poorest country in the world. The gap is evident between the original and the newer Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states. Among its original member states, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of Brunei and Singapore, for example, is USD 35,622 and USD 38,046 respectively. Of the other four original members, Malaysia has the highest GDP (USD 7,969), followed by Thailand (USD 4,116), Indonesia (USD 2,236) and the Philippines (USD 1,843). The new ASEAN member states still fall within the category of low income countries. The per capita GDP of Myanmar is only USD 464, Cambodia USD 756, Lao PDR USD 917 and Vietnam USD 1,052. This gap is also evident with other socio-economic indicators, such as literacy rates and the incidence of poverty.

The economic disparity between the old and new ASEAN member states is also reflected in the attitude to democracy of the various regimes. While the original members, apart from Brunei, are relatively open to democratic forms of government, some of the newer members are either Leninist authoritarian states (Vietnam and Lao PDR) or a military dictatorship (Myanmar). Economic disparity as a demonstration of the lack of economic development is often used to justify resistance to the introduction

of democracy by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in the region. For these countries, democracy is seen as a hindrance to economic development (Petcharamesree 2009). They also argue that a government that can deliver economic prosperity matters more to its local population than the type of political system adopted by the state. From this point of view, democracy is desirable only after economic prosperity and social rights have been achieved.

The difficulty in embracing democracy is also framed within the particular cultural context of Southeast Asian states. All Southeast Asian countries are characterized by multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multicultural populations. In this context, democracy – and its emphasis on human rights – is often seen as an alien concept that does not necessarily resonate with the local and national cultures of Southeast Asian states.

Many ASEAN states have long argued that democracy and human rights cannot be imposed or transplanted from outside, but its development has to flourish from within the state concerned according to its own stages of economic development and cultural context. Indeed, many ASEAN countries still strongly subscribe to the cultural relativist view of democracy and human rights (Villacorta 2009).

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To many governments in Southeast Asia, the multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious character of the state presents a significant challenge to the maintenance of political stability and internal security. Many countries in the region have had to deal with internal insurgencies, ethnic and religious violence, and secessionist challenges. Some of these problems continue to pose formidable problems for ASEAN member states such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines and even Myanmar. The fragile nature of these states means that overarching concerns over the tasks of internal consolidation, state-building and the maintenance of internal security present serious challenges to democracy building in the region. Southeast Asian regimes often argue that democracy might not be readily suitable for a society fraught with severe internal security problems. They believe that such societies require strong and centralized government, and a government capable of establishing social and political stability. It is only this type of government, it is argued, that is capable of undertaking uninterrupted economic development.

Adverse internal conditions have in turn created an atmosphere that is suspicious of external interference among states in the region. Consequently, all ASEAN states – albeit to varying degrees – jealously guard the principle of non-interference as a principal norm in inter-state relations (Krishnan 2009, Sukma 2009, Villacorta 2009). ASEAN reiterated in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Charter in December 2005 that inter-state relations should be based on the recognition of ‘the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference,

subversion or coercion and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another’. Democracy building has long been suspect and regarded as one such external interference. In other words, the democracy building agenda is constrained by the principle of non-interference, and thus democracy can only be promoted within the national boundary of a member state if that state sees fit to democratize on its own initiative. External pressure is deemed a breach of the

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principle of non-interference. Even Indonesia, which is a democratizing state, remains sensitive to any attempt by external forces to push the democratization agenda further.

Weak state institutions present another set of challenges to democracy in the region. A corrupt and incompetent bureaucracy, a partial judiciary, an ineffective or non-functioning legislature and weak security actors are all formidable potential stumbling blocks for democracy building efforts. These problems are more evident in the more democratic Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. In these countries, moving from procedural democracy to a more substantial democracy is proving to be a difficult task. Weak state institutions could perpetuate the low quality of democracy in these countries.

The nature of democracy in some Southeast Asian states, which is still weak and in the early stages of consolidation, also presents a challenge to further efforts to promote a democracy building agenda in the region. Neither Indonesia nor the Philippines can claim to have become a fully fledged democracy. Democracy in Indonesia and the Philippines, the only remaining democracies in the region, is still fraught with problems and defects. Neither has yet acquired strong enough moral credibility to call on others to adopt democracy. Some ASEAN states have repeatedly disparaged the situation in both countries since they embraced democracy. For some developing Southeast Asian states, the democracy of Indonesia and the Philippines is not an attractive alternative to the existing political system – they have even begun to look at the developmental authoritarian types of government in China and Singapore.

Finally, the reality of geopolitics and the influence and interests of the major powers in Southeast Asia could also serve as a stumbling block for the promotion of the democracy agenda in the region. This is illustrated clearly in the case of Myanmar. Even if ASEAN decided to isolate the Myanmar Government because of the lack of progress in the democratization process, such a move would be toothless in the face of Myanmar's growing dependence on, and support from, China and India. The strategic interests of these two major powers mean that they would be more than willing to ignore the domestic problems of Myanmar in exchange for access to the energy resources – especially oil and gas – in that country. Even the democratic India is reluctant to press a democracy agenda on Myanmar for fear that such action would push Myanmar closer to China. Indonesia, the largest democracy in Southeast Asia, has also admitted that any attempt to encourage political change in Myanmar would not be possible without the active support of China and India.

The opportunities for democracy building

Despite the plethora of challenges described above, the prospects for democracy building in Southeast Asia are not altogether negative (Sukma 2009, Villacorta 2009, Krishnan 2009). Opportunities for the pursuit of a democracy building agenda have opened up due to the regional commitment by ASEAN, the presence of regional champions and a vibrant civil society, and public support for democracy.

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Thailand in 1992, provides regional champions and further consolidates the notion that Southeast Asia is not hostile to the idea of democracy. Indonesia and the Philippines were behind the efforts to bring the democracy agenda to ASEAN in 2003–2004. Domestically, both Indonesia and the Philippines are obliged to continue their efforts to consolidate democracy in their respective countries. Thailand, in the meantime, remains preoccupied with the tremendous challenge of restoring democracy after the acute political crisis in the country. The other original members of ASEAN are likely to react positively to a democracy agenda for ASEAN, albeit in a limited way.

The improved prospects for democracy in Southeast Asia are often associated with recently concluded agreements by ASEAN countries, especially the ASEAN Concord II, the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint. Throughout International IDEA's regional consultations in Southeast Asia it has been highlighted that these agreements, despite some inherent limitations, should be seen as an opening, and need to be used as an entry point, for the democracy building agenda in the region. While the commitment to democracy contained in these documents does not necessarily reflect a genuine collective regional will (Krishnan 2009), it nonetheless provides legitimacy for ASEAN and its individual member states to work to push the agenda.

The existence of a vibrant civil society and vibrant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which work primarily to promote democracy and human rights in the region is a positive development for democratization in Southeast Asia (Petcharamesree 2009, Gil 2009). The work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs in their individual countries has been instrumental in promoting human rights and democracy building efforts and there is now an emerging network of such organizations at the regional level. This network is a significant building block for democracy building in both individual member states and the region (Sukma 2009, Gil 2009). More importantly, Pinao shows that there is also growing public support for democracy, including in the non-democratic countries of Southeast Asia (Pinao 2009).

Southeast Asia's perceptions of the EU: limits, gaps and the potential for comprehensive engagement

This section examines the EU's policies, instruments and objectives for democracy building in Southeast Asia, and how its agenda and image are perceived there – in terms of both policy and implementation. These questions were discussed at the International IDEA consultation process in the region.

The European Community (EC)-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement was signed in March 1980 at the second ASEAN-EC Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Both sides agreed that commercial, economic and technical cooperation would be the focus of the relationship. Any reference to political cooperation, let alone cooperation on democracy building and human rights, was conspicuously absent. In these early years, ASEAN-EC cooperation primarily focused on economic and development issues, especially trade. A greater focus on democracy and human rights began to emerge in the early 1990s.

From 2000, human rights and democracy began to occupy a central place in the EU's policy on Asia as a whole, especially with the publication of the European Commission's Strategic Framework in 2001. In the 2003 Communication from the Commission,

A New Partnership with Southeast Asia, the EU consolidated the place of human rights and the democracy promotion agenda as one of six key priorities in EU relations with Southeast Asia.²

The evolution of the EU's relations with ASEAN seems to have contributed to the strong and persistent impression among Southeast Asian countries of the EU as an economic power. As an economic entity, the EU is regarded as an inspiration, but not as a model, for successful regional economic integration. While ASEAN shares the objective, the emphasis on the uniqueness of the region is construed as a reason why ASEAN has no intention of emulating the EU model of integration. It is telling that in Southeast Asia the EU suffers from a low level of recognition for its developmental and humanitarian efforts. Meanwhile, the EU sees itself and its role in these areas as that of a 'global pioneer' and as a role model (Chaban and Holland 2009).

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Among Southeast Asian states, there is a degree of ambivalence in their perception of the importance or significance of the EU in the region. The EU is perceived as an important actor in economic terms in global and regional theatres, including Southeast Asia. However, the EU is also seen as geographically, historically, militarily and politically distant from the region. Elites and the general public alike regard the EU as a distant, almost invisible, entity. In this context, the EU is construed as a 'significant Other' in Southeast Asian countries, although its importance is undervalued (Chaban and Holland 2009). In other words, the EU is recognized as an important actor but at the same time one that ASEAN countries can live without.

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Given such perceptions, it is hardly surprising that most Southeast Asian countries also see the influence of the EU as limited. In fact, individual EU member states – especially the United Kingdom, Germany and France – are seen to have exercised far greater influence than the EU as a collective entity. This is most notable with regard to the EU's role in promoting democracy and human rights in the region. In general, many in Southeast Asia argue that the limited role of the EU in this area is partly a product of the strong sense of nationalism among countries in the region which, in turn, often shapes the rigid reaction to external involvement. It could also be pointed out that for Southeast Asia, the EU is only a distant power in a region where events tend to be shaped by other, more visible major powers such as the United States, China, Japan and India (Chaban and Holland 2009). Moreover, the growing dynamism of East Asia, which serves as the key driver of regional economic and political developments, further limits the EU's influence in the region.

² The other five priorities are: (1) supporting regional stability and the fight against terrorism; (2) mainstreaming justice and home affairs issues; (3) injecting a new dynamism into regional trade and investment relations; (4) continuing to support the development of less prosperous countries; and (5) intensifying dialogue and cooperation in specific policy areas. See Commission of the European Communities, Communication From The Commission, A New Partnership With Southeast Asia, Brussels, 9 July 2003, COM (2003) 399 final

There is still a lack of awareness in Southeast Asia of the EU's specific policies on democracy and human rights.

In general, the image of the EU as an advocate of democracy promotion does not register strongly in many Southeast Asian countries. However, the role of the EU in the field of human rights promotion is more visible and better recognized. In this field, views are divided between those of many governments in the region and those of civil society

groups. To governments, the EU's agenda on human rights is seen as intrusive, and often serves as a source of friction and tension in EU-ASEAN relations. Civil society organizations, however, criticize the EU for being an ineffective human rights actor. While acknowledging the importance of the work of the EU in this field, there is still a lack of awareness in Southeast Asia of the EU's specific policies on this issue. For example, it has been pointed out that there is little awareness throughout Asia of the 2004 EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. This is caused, among other things, by the lack of active promotional and implementation work carried out by EU missions abroad (Gil 2009).

The most striking assessment of the role of the EU in Southeast Asia is the identification of a gap between the EU's objectives and the implementation of policies to achieve those objectives. It has been pointed out, for example, that there is a gap between rhetoric and

action in the EU's role in promoting democracy in Southeast Asia, which results from incoherent and inconsistent EU strategies (Pinao 2009). In the human rights field, for example, a gap exists between the objectives of the Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and their implementation. It has been also asserted that the limited success of the EU in promoting democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia is due to the EU's pragmatism in the management of its relations with the region (Petcharamesree 2009). The EU has also been less effective at pursuing political conditionality in Asia (Pinao 2009).

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There is a recognition, however, that the EU is equipped with both the capacity and the resources to play a much more active and visible role in the future. There is still much room for improvement in the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia. The EU's influence and position as a global power could grow in future (Chaban and Holland 2009). The willingness of the EU to engage fully with Asia is seen as a factor that strengthens the expectation that the EU would and could play a helpful, meaningful and constructive role

as a partner in democracy building in the region.

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Policy proposals for the EU's approach to democracy building

A number of policy suggestions were generated by the International IDEA regional consultation process in Southeast Asia. These seek to narrow the gap between the EU's objectives and their implementation, and to enhance the effectiveness of the EU's role in assisting the democracy building process in the region. The overview below suggests that the EU needs to formulate and undertake its role in the democracy building project

in Southeast Asia taking into account the context, nature, scope, substance, modalities, and methods and structure of engagement.

If the EU wants to play an effective role in regional affairs, it needs to appreciate the context in which such a role can be carried out. The key to such an understanding would be recognition that Southeast Asia is a region characterized by prevailing political, historical, socio-economic, cultural and ideological differences among the countries of the region. It is important to recognize that such diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for democracy building in the region. While it certainly limits what can be achieved, such diversity also provides opportunities for improvement and progress. A measure of realism in the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia is therefore imperative. The democracy building agenda, despite ASEAN's stated commitment to make it a collective regional principle and objective, will invite different reactions and responses from different member states.

In the course of the regional consultation, Southeast Asians reiterated that democracy cannot be imposed from outside but is essentially home-grown. The EU can only be an effective partner when its engagement with Southeast Asia is demonstrably in the spirit of an equal partnership, mutual respect and shared responsibility. Engagement should avoid any tendency to sustain and perpetuate a donor-recipient relationship. More importantly, in order to improve impacts and outcomes, the EU's engagement should be guided by a willingness and a determination to build a sustainable and long-term partnership. Any engagement short of these qualities would certainly invite a backlash, generate resistance and be ineffective. The democracy building agenda is too valuable to be derailed by the intended and unintended consequences of a hierarchy of power among nations.

The EU can only be an effective partner when its engagement with Southeast Asia is demonstrably in the spirit of an equal partnership, mutual respect and shared responsibility. The EU's engagement should be guided by a willingness and a determination to build a sustainable and long-term partnership.

The EU's engagement with Southeast Asia should be guided by the principle of comprehensiveness. Democracy is not a distinct process that flourishes in a vacuum. In taking this reality into account, the EU should not focus only on fields such as trade or human rights. Its engagement should encompass a wide range of issues. Democracy and human rights should be seen as cross-cutting issues which inform and colour the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia. For example, EU assistance with economic development should be seen as strengthening the foundation of democracy in the long term. The limited scope for the democracy agenda in Southeast Asia means that this incremental and long-term approach would require the EU to confine its programmes to a number of specific agendas that are acceptable to all the ASEAN member states, especially the non-democratic members. For example, the EU could focus on less sensitive issues such as strengthening governance capacities, combating corruption, humanitarian relief, disaster management and promoting bureaucratic reform.

Even though the principle of comprehensiveness is preferable, there is also an urgent need for prioritization within specific timeframes. Capacity building, especially in the fields of education and strengthening public awareness, is seen as an agenda that would appeal to the needs of Southeast Asian countries across the region. More activities should be targeted at parliamentarians, the judiciary, civil society and similar actors. There is still an urgent need for the EU to increase its role in working with democratizing

ASEAN states on key issues such as strengthening the political party system, the role of parliaments, security sector reform (with a special focus on military reform), legal reform and the role of the media and CSOs. More comprehensive country-specific strategies and agendas need to be developed in this regard. The EU could also link itself to, and establish a framework of participation in, region-wide democracy projects inside and outside the framework of ASEAN. Such a linkage would assist local champions of democracy building and provide a platform for learning and sharing about democracy not only among the states in the region but also among non-state actors.

At the regional level, there is a wide range of entry points for the EU to deepen its engagement with ASEAN in promoting the democracy building agenda. The ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Community agreement, with its three pillars – the ASEAN Political and Security Blueprint, the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community, provide a basis for ASEAN to work towards a more democratic region. The EU's engagement with ASEAN could support ASEAN and assist it to achieve its own objectives in this area by, among other things, working closely with the ASEAN secretariat. At the same time, the EU needs to intensify its support to democratizing states in ASEAN in their efforts to consolidate democracy.

The success of these countries in consolidating democracy also strengthens their credibility in pushing the democratic agenda in ASEAN as mandated by the ASEAN Political and Security Community and the ASEAN Charter. This approach requires the EU to work with the more democratic members of ASEAN on a bilateral basis.

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The EU needs to devise multi-track engagement strategies with multiple actors and through multiple entry-points. It needs to become more visible in the eyes of the general public, which could be achieved through a reformulation and improvement of its public diplomacy activities. The EU also needs to intensify its interactions, cooperation, partnership and communication with societal elements, especially local media and grass roots organizations. Equally important, it is imperative for EU member states to speak with one voice with regard to 'difficult' or 'sensitive' issues, without abandoning the need to balance pragmatism and principle. A differentiated structure of engagement across the region needs to be formulated, taking into account the different needs and varying stages of political development in each country. It is necessary for the EU to engage ASEAN as a collective entity. However, it is equally important for the EU to engage and cooperate with subregional actors, individual countries and even sub-national actors whenever the opportunities arise. The structure of the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia must take into account the needs and roles of multiple stakeholders across the region and within individual ASEAN member states.

Conclusions

Democracy building in Southeast Asia is a challenge: the diversity of the region, which is characterized by different levels of economic development between and within countries, heterogeneous cultural contexts, different historical trajectories towards independence and adverse internal conditions, as well as the reality of geopolitics and the influence and interests of major powers often serve as major obstacles. For many decades, authoritarian forms of governance, both soft and hard, have been the norm. Southeast

Asia remains a region where communism, monarchy, soft-authoritarianism, military juntas and democracy coexist in a web of regional cooperation aimed at preserving inter-state harmony and maintaining regional stability and peace. Consequently, the principle of non-interference and the primacy of state sovereignty are jealously guarded. In this context, any outside attempt to promote democracy becomes highly problematic.

Democracy, however, is not an impossible dream. There are now opportunities to pursue a democracy building agenda, thanks to the presence of regional champions, the regional commitment of ASEAN, and the presence of a vibrant civil society and public support for democracy. The role of the EU in assisting the process of democracy building in the region needs to be placed in the context of existing challenges and opportunities. Despite regional perceptions that the EU has only limited political influence in the region, there is a recognition that the EU is equipped with both the capacity and the resources to play a much more active and visible role in the future. That, however, would require a willingness on the part of the EU to fully engage with Asia in a constructive manner and as an equal partner.

Democracy is not an impossible dream. There are now opportunities to pursue a democracy building agenda in Southeast Asia.

For the EU to play an effective role in democracy building in the region, it needs to understand and appreciate the context in which such a role would be carried out. The EU can only be an effective partner when its engagement with Southeast Asia is expressed in a spirit of equal partnership, mutual respect and shared responsibility as well as a determination to build a sustainable and long-term partnership. The EU's engagement with Southeast Asia should be guided by the principle of comprehensiveness. It could use a wide range of entry points to deepen its engagement with ASEAN in promoting the democracy building agenda on the basis of the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Community agreements, and work with multiple actors to employ multi-track engagement strategies.

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