

## **The Issue of Religion and Social Security in ASEAN\***

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*ABSTRACT: Discussing the issue of Religion and Social Security in ASEAN, the author believes that religion, with its function inclined to good and tolerance, can play a proactive role in reducing regional disturbances. In the spirit of unity and building a peaceful world together, religions relentlessly perform their role in safeguarding social security, sharing values of compassion and tolerance. The best way for social harmony and security, in her opinion, is through dialogues for sharing information and understanding each other in seeking appropriate solutions before possible occurrences of intolerant behaviors or activities.*

### **1. Some Features of the Current Situation of in South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)**

Recently there has been a general recognition that the current situation in Asia and the ASEAN region shows not only its dynamic economical development but also elements arising that would create social, political and security instability. In the context of economic and political competition amongst powers in the region, the ASEAN countries are striving to overcome SARS disease, the AIDS epidemic and other natural calamities. However, issues that make nations most anxious are terrorism and political instability, and according to some opinions, there seems to have been aggressive or abusive religious forces somewhere creating social instability.

Relations between countries are increasingly strengthened and promoted in many areas, together with many initiatives raised at ASEAN forums. ASEAN people have recognized the roles of religion in social security.

#### *ASEAN with Opportunities and Challenges*

In recent years ASEAN has demonstrated its strength and development trends. This strength springs from unity and cooperation.

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In the field of economy, ASEAN is applying measures to improve infrastructure, managerial experiences, declaring openly free trade areas, maintaining global trade networks, proclaiming the right to export shares in the world market and drawing foreign investment resources.

In the field of politics and security, the 9th ASEAN Summit with the theme "Forward to an ASEAN economy, security, social and cultural community" has witnessed the signing of the II Second ASEAN Declaration (II Bali Declaration), proclaiming ASEAN's strategic goal of establishing a strongly united ASEAN community by 2020 with three pillars: politics-security cooperation; economic cooperation, and cultural cooperation. These three pillars are closely associated and mutually reinforced in the pursuit of peace and prosperity in the region.

The Bali Declaration also suggested that the setting out of major development goals and its implementation for the establishment of an ASEAN community with those three pillars is a long, struggling and complicated process, due to various levels of social, cultural and religious development.

The Seminar "*Conflict prevention, conflict solving, and peace making in South East Asia: ASEAN security community and the United Nations*" has raised several challenging issues, including the deficiency of common cultural and lingual characteristics, the differences in viewpoints regarding relations with world powers as well as threats against nations' security. Terrorist activities involving the Al-Qaeda network also become more complex as extreme Islamic groups emerge.

Southeast Asia has a population of more than 200 million people following Islam and, like anywhere in the world, most of these Islamic followers desire peace and social stability. However, there exist a few extremists engaging in terrorist and violent attacks, under the guise of Islamic holy war, for political purposes.

Vietnam became a full member of Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) on 28 July 1995, and since then Vietnam has participated all ASEAN activities and made contribution and initiatives in fields regarding economy, politics, diplomacy, religion, society and international activities, including Asia-Europe cooperation Forum (ASEM) and ASEAN-EU Dialogue.

## **2. Vietnam in ASEAN Community - Religion's Roles in Social Security**

### *1. Religion and the Issue of Social Security in Southeast Asia*

Since events such as the bombings on the island of Bali peninsula and at a Marriott hotel in Indonesia which led to many people killed and wounded, the 11/9 September 11 event tragedy at the twin towers in New York, the bombing in the London subway in England, and especially when since the United States and Britain have carried out major operations in Iraq, the risk of terrorist attacks has constantly been felt in ASEAN countries. The most recent event is the crisis in Thailand, especially in the southern part, where the conflict between Buddhism and Islam has frequently occurred and many Buddhist dignitaries are attacked by forces of Islamic extremists, adversely affecting public safety and security in this country.

Consequently, religion's roles have been recognized by a number of governments. Religion, with its function inclined to good and tolerance, can play proactive roles in reducing regional disturbances caused by some extreme religious groups.

Building on the initiatives made by Indonesia and some other countries in the region, interfaith dialogues have been held, attracting the participation of many representatives from religious organizations, religious scholars and researchers. These dialogues help promote discussion of proposals aimed at achieving social stability and security by practical measures for upholding tolerance and humane values, preventing social division, intolerance and terrorism.

## *2. The Necessity for National and Regional Cooperation of Beliefs and Religions*

There are opinions expressing the need for cooperation between government, non-government organizations (NGO) and religious organizations. Following the initiative by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a center for interfaith dialogue was established in Yogyakarta, "ASEAN - Oceania Center for Inter-Religious Study and Cooperation," with many functions dealing not only in matters involving religion, human rights, and terrorism but also environment and trade, and through religious dialogues not only at national level but also local level.

HIV/AIDS has been seen as a common enemy of mankind, especially for people in Asia at present. The fight against HIV/AIDS is a long war where the involvement of religions is such a great source of encouragement and assistance for those unlucky patients. Humanitarianism and tolerance are of religion's nature.

To cope with such disturbing events in the region and the world, it is necessary for countries to cooperate in order to reduce risks and social disturbances. In that context the attention was paid to religion's roles due to religion's built-in loving and

compassionate nature. Religions in countries are, of course, not the same, and each has its own characters, but all religions' tenets and canon laws share the same purpose of teaching and guiding people toward the good, the true and the beautiful.

To understand this, we can look at religion in countries as follows:

- Thailand: Thai citizens have religious freedom, the right to choose their own religion, or freedom not to get involved in any religion. However, the violence in southern Thailand recently continues to be more complex, regardless of the government's peace efforts. On August 28, Thai police stated that in a series of attacks by those suspected to be separatists in the southern region, five people were shot dead in Patani province, of which two were Buddhist; the other three were Muslim, killed while driving nearby. In the past three years there have been approximately 2,500 people killed by violence in this region, where the majority of residents are Muslim followers.

Thailand has sought Malaysian cooperation for stabilizing this southern part. Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanon said that there will be cooperation with Malaysia for achieving economic progress in three southern provinces, and for putting an end to conflicts in this area. In his speech while visiting a famous pagoda in Malaysia's Penang Island on 28 August 2007, he emphasized the necessity for the two countries to help each other solve the problem in southern Thailand. Malaysia will grant scholarships to Thai students and help educational training in these southern provinces where Islamic adherents densely reside. This agreement will pave the way for the establishment of relations between educational organizations in the two countries; with around one hundred Thai teachers will to be sent to Malaysia for training at the end of this month. This close cooperation will be mutually beneficial for the two countries as well as the region.

- Indonesia: The Indonesian Government has recognized five religions, namely: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism. In Indonesia, there is a State body called the Indonesian Council for Religion and Peace. However, there is an emerging problem in that Catholics living in Muslim majority areas may face difficulties in building churches, as do the Muslim minorities in Catholic majority areas in construction of mosques.

- Cambodia: The majority of the population are Buddhists. The government creates conditions for religions to build churches and mosques. Open dialogues between Buddhism, Judaism and Protestantism are frequently conducted to promote religious harmony. There is no religious tension or conflict in Cambodia at the present.

- Singapore: The Government of Singapore recognizes and protects minorities, consequently achieving religious harmony and avoiding discrimination amongst religions.

We are living in a “flat world”, exchanges between nations are opening up, and the citizens of each country could be influenced by different religions' information. This has a very significant application; therefore, steps need to be taken for promotion of religious harmony in society. According to Dr. Myint Aye in "Religion's Roles in Society", to follow true Buddhist teachings is to live harmoniously and compassionately, in tranquility and sharing. This way of living will create peace and happiness in social relations, including relations amongst religions.

The strengthening of cooperation between Indonesia and the Philippines in fighting terrorism has achieved encouraging results. However, this is a long fight and victory can not be obtained by force alone. We need to fight against extreme ideologies by disseminating values that keeping people in close association, such as tolerance. This task requires communities' helping, and in 2004, Australia and Indonesia conducted the first regional dialogue on religion with the participation of many regional religious and political leaders. In the following years, many interfaith dialogues were held in many countries, for examples: Bali, Indonesia; Cebu, the Philippines; Waitangi, New Zealand; and Nanjin, China.

The relation between Australia and Indonesia has expanded beyond fighting terrorism. Indonesia is the most populous country in the world in terms of Muslim followers, the third largest democracy, and is in the frontline of the war against terrorism.

### *3. Religious Influence on Social Life and Security in Vietnam*

Vietnam integrates into the world by maintaining, promoting and developing its cultural identities. Vietnam is a country where there is an intermingling of civilizations, and a long time ago it was the exchange point among cultures of East Asia and Southeast Asia, between Indian and Chinese cultures. Nowadays, in its cultural evolution process, beside indigenous cultures and Confucius Five Teachings, Vietnam's culture also embraces many Western cultural values. Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Protestantism are now exogenous religions which all co-exist with native religions such as Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo Buddhism.

In the practice of religious organizations, it's worth mentioning the roles of non-government organizations, whose spirit of motivation take its source from religion's humanitarianism. For example, CARE International, using funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, has provided financial assistance of up to 698,668 EURO for Bến Tre province, which was damaged by hurricanes and flooding. The hurricane Durian killed 80 people and wounded 1,360 others, and destroyed 50,000 houses (Vietnam News, 23 July 2007). In Hồ Chí Minh City, a Catholic service committee for HIV/AIDS patients was created for organizing a campaign against HIV and looking after patients of this epidemic.

The guarantee of social security and peace anywhere requires religions to perform their roles and coordinate in their works toward common goals of human society. At the same time, this performance and coordination also contributes to prevent religious extremists who regard their religion as superior to a religion followed by others.

Religions can only carry out their service to society in an environment that is favorable, legally safeguarded and assisted when necessary, and so the Constitution and legal documents of some countries have provided specific provisions for creating this environment.

The relation between the nation's state and churches and representatives of religious organizations has progressed to an unprecedented level. The recent exchange of meetings and dialogues between religions and state authorities have promoted mutual understanding and fostered more appropriate behaviors in meeting practical requirements.

Vietnam is undertaking dialogues, cooperation and sharing with all countries in areas of culture and human rights on the basis of equality, mutual understanding and respect; nevertheless Vietnam is resolutely against imposition of culture under the guise of human rights.

In the spirit of unity and building a peaceful world together, religions relentlessly perform their roles in safeguarding social security, and sharing values of compassion and tolerance. The best way is through dialogues for sharing information and understanding each other in seeking appropriate solutions before possible occurrences of intolerant behaviors or activities./.