

ASEAN: same, same not different



ASEAN often proclaims its strength is in its differences. But as long as trade remains the regional bloc's key priority, its member states will never be considered tolerant and remain authoritarian, writes Shaun Liew.

The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye is a great graphic novel.

In it, an imaginary cartoonist draws his homeland Singapore – a tiny island city-state defined by multiple languages, rampant economic success and repressive politics.

As if to prove life imitates art, Singapore's National Art Council has withdrawn [funding](#) for the graphic novel's author, Sonny Liew, because it differed from telling the usual 'Singapore Success Story' and offered up perspectives from Lee Kuan Yew's opponents. What makes art great is diversity, and for Singapore's art council to discourage difference in views is self-defeating.

As is to rub ink in the wound, ASEAN leaders consistently tell us that the regional bloc's strength is its people's diversity. Like art, difference is what makes a nation great, and new ideas make old ones better.

But this stance is at best superficial and at worst hypocritical. Malaysia and Singapore have been under one party rule since independence. The Cambodian prime minister's family effectively [owns](#) the country. And Brunei has not had an election since 1962. These governments consolidated their power by weakening the judiciary, the legislative, and the media.

If political differences cannot be tolerated within ASEAN member states, how can one expect them to be tolerated across ASEAN? Through the ASEAN way -- the commitment to not intervening in each other's affairs. With economic development still being the organisation's overriding priority (take the ASEAN Economic Community for example), trade is much more important than interfering in each other's political affairs -- even when there might be good cause to.

Yet, as Singapore's Bilahari Kausikan has said, "Frankly, we have been interfering mercilessly in each other's internal affairs for ages, from the very beginning."

An example is when Indonesia annexed East Timor (now Timor-Leste) and justified it at the UN with its ASEAN colleagues. Just as Russia justified its invasion of Crimea claiming there were appeals for the Kremlin's assistance, Indonesia justified their annexation similarly. Sexual slavery, forced famines and [genocide](#) ensued. Thankfully today, Timor-Leste is now recognised to by the UN as independent.

More recently, when Malaysia's Najib Razak called for Muslim countries to [condemn](#) the Rohingya genocide, the Myanmar government said it was 'regrettable' that a Prime Minister would undermine Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts to address the plight of the Muslim minority. One could argue this was 'soft' interference, but Najib's main rationale was to attract voters in predominantly Muslim states as elections approach.

ASEAN should realise that domestic political problems do not appear in a vacuum with regional goals. Its current goal is to economically integrate in order to raise living standards. But the more interconnected ASEAN is, the more one country's problems will affect other members.

Free trade is good, and economic giants such as China and India present both a challenge and opportunity for the future, but ASEAN cannot ignore the fact that its own domestic problems can threaten its own project of free trade. To prepare itself for the best outcomes, it must look within for internal cracks and have democratic mechanisms to change them.

ASEAN governments should abandon authoritarian methods and tolerate differences. It is diversity and differences that spur better ideas, and possibly better ways, to govern anyway.