

Forging Paths: Enhancing Democracy and Human Rights Cooperation between the EU and ASEAN

By Aniello Iannone

The sensitive agenda of democracy and human rights has not been a main priority of ASEAN-EU relations. However, greater dialogue and coordination as equals in this field would allow them to forge a pragmatic form of multilateralism.

From a structural and ideological perspective, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be considered almost as opposites. The EU, founded and built in the post-war period, places integration as a fundamental principle, while ASEAN, born during the Cold War as a third bloc compared to the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), emphasises national sovereignty and independence. ASEAN has developed a regional order concept based on the **ASEAN Way**, which promotes the protection of national and regional **identities** and is based on **norms reflecting** these collective identities.

As such, one of the major points of contention between the EU and ASEAN concerns human rights and democracy. The EU has always considered human rights and democracy as fundamental pillars of its integration process. Conversely, ASEAN has struggled to adopt a similar approach due to



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its intrinsic nature of promoting national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. **Scholars have pointed out** that the EU considers human rights in a universal way, while ASEAN interprets them in a more contextual and regional manner.

These significant differences in the interpretation and implementation of human rights and democracy influence the political relations between the EU and ASEAN. ASEAN's principle of non-interference, national sovereignty, and its varied political systems contrast sharply with the EU's universal view of human rights and democratic principles and its more interventionist approach to these issues. Added to these discrepancies are the EU's and ASEAN's own internal democratic and human rights challenges.

Democratic and Human Rights Challenges in ASEAN and the EU

ASEAN has long been criticised by many international observers for its approach to human rights. In particular, concerning the role of the **ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights** (AICHR) and its task of protecting human rights, **ASEAN falls short compared to its EU counterpart**. Without overlooking the human rights issues in Europe, which have been **on the rise**, ASEAN's slow progress has been evident on several occasions, especially in the **Myanmar crisis following the 2021 coup**. Besides the **Five-Point Consensus**, ASEAN has not made a clear decision on how to proceed further to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

Looking within ASEAN, dynastic politics in the Philippines and Indonesia, authoritarianism in Myanmar, and political issues in Thailand mean that leaders may prioritise economic performance and **arbitrariness and contingency over rules-based multilateral governance**. These dynamics are accentuated by the growing geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific, which has influenced the internal and external policies of both regions, further complicating cooperation on democratic and human rights issues.

From a democratic standpoint, the EU also faces significant challenges related to democratic backsliding, particularly due to the continuous rise of right-wing populist nationalism. In some **EU countries, the return of populist right-wing politics**—with protectionist policies and authoritarian regulations concerning freedom of expression

—has undermined the fundamental democratic principles.

Challenges as Opportunities for a More Extensive Collaboration

The rise of nationalist right-wing movements in Europe and authoritarianism and autocracies in ASEAN both have the potential to erode multilateralism by slowly replacing it with more inward-looking and restrictive initiatives. Furthermore, the Russo-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, as well as China's pressure on ASEAN in relation to the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea, have tested the EU's and ASEAN's commitment to multilateralism.

However, despite their differences, regional challenges, and an increasingly contested geopolitical context, the EU and ASEAN have continued to collaborate, seeking to find a balance between their respective visions and principles. Indeed, the partnership provides a platform for dialogue and the exchange of best practices, which has the potential to lead to gradual improvements in human rights and democratic governance in both ASEAN and the EU.

Looking ahead, there are opportunities to make the cooperation between ASEAN and the EU more effective. For instance, they could use their existing ties to include civil societies from both regions, perhaps in the form of **a high-profile EU-ASEAN civic forum**. Such an engagement could help expand the discussion on democratic and human rights issues by exchanging local

viewpoints on the democratisation process. Furthermore, it could also contribute to Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations and task forces, such as **the joint task force** to strengthen cooperation for the implementation of the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) between the European Commission, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Inviting environmental groups and indigenous communities to those meetings

would ensure that those affected by deforestation are represented and that any data gaps are addressed.

Conclusion

The EU and ASEAN have diverging priorities in human rights and democracy. The EU is considered a normative superpower, while countries in Southeast Asia have different political systems, which presents practical constraints in complying with the EU's normative vision. Therefore, a stronger cooperation and a constant commitment to dialogue in this field, alongside the economic and security fields, are important as it will enable the two organisations to better understand each other's constraints and pursue common interests as much as possible. The aim of the intensified dialogue should be to discuss and create together an agenda for upholding shared values as equal partners. This would bring lasting benefits to both organisations and help preserve multilateral approaches to common challenges, while avoiding accusations of imposing standards.

Such proactive coordination can serve as an example and forge the path for a pragmatic form of multilateralism that would allow countries to come together when needed despite frictions in some areas, and thus support global peace and security.

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