

Asean needs strong charter to be effective, say observers

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ASEAN should show political will to adopt a charter that makes the group more effective, observers said yesterday.

Without political will, the charter, set to legally bind the group for the first time in 40 years, will end up a weak, 'wishy-washy' document, said former Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino at a conference here.

Professor Amitav Acharya, deputy director at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said the 10-member group needs to reinvent itself. Its inability to tackle intra-state problems in the region has raised questions of credibility.

Asean needs a charter that offers 'specific and useable instruments for crisis management and conflict resolution' to strengthen the group, he said.

With Dr Azmi Mat Akhir, special assistant to the Asean secretary-general, the observers addressed the question of Asean's future at the Singapore Perspectives 2007 conference here, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

An Eminent Persons Group (EPG), set up during the 2005 Asean Leaders Summit in Kuala Lumpur, is due to submit its recommendations for the Asean Charter to the group's leaders' summit, starting in Cebu tomorrow.

Its report will form the basis of the charter, which will be drafted by a task force in time for the next summit of Asean leaders, due to be held in Singapore later this year.

Asean has traditionally operated on principles of consensus and non-interference, but that will change if recommendations for the charter are accepted.

The EPG's report includes proposals for measures to ensure 'compliance and effective implementation' of the group's decisions, as well as effective dispute settlement mechanisms.

'The charter will establish principles, norms and decision-making procedures,' said Mr Severino, now a visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies.

The Asean way has served the region well, but may not for much longer under current global conditions, he said.

'The best scenario would be to have a great charter that would be complied with, but the worst would be to have a great charter that is ignored.'

Political will is needed to ensure an effective charter is implemented, he emphasised.

Said Dr Azmi: 'Asean has already signalled its commitment towards building an Asean community, but the problem is of ensuring compliance and effective implementation of decisions.'

'Asean should have a legal personality.'