

Why does ASEAN need a Charter? Pushing actors and their national interests

Rabea Volkmann

Summary

After forty years of its existence ASEAN decided to draft a Charter. In November 2007, the heads of state and government of the member states signed the Charter, the national ratification processes are going on. For forty years, the Association has been known for the highly informal 'ASEAN Way' of diplomacy. By introducing a Charter and giving the association a formal framework, this informality is abandoned to a certain extent. The article examines the question why ASEAN introduced a Charter. Based on interviews, newspaper articles and speeches, the article analyses which ASEAN member states have been pushing for the Charter and why. Firstly, the article formulates the assumption that Singapore and Indonesia are the most important actors that pushed for the Charter. Both of them have the capabilities and the political will to influence on ASEAN and to push for more integration. The second part examines the interests Indonesia and Singapore pursued in pushing for the Charter. Cooperation is always a means to realize interests, which are essential to understand why ASEAN has introduced a Charter. This article concludes that Singapore has mainly economic interests that it wants to realize through the Charter, or more specifically through the image Singapore hopes ASEAN will get by adopting the Charter. Indonesia has mainly security interests, which include democracy and human rights, as Indonesia adheres to the concept of human security. Hence, Singapore and Indonesia have different interests but both have the interest to improve the image of ASEAN and of themselves in the world and in their countries.

Keywords: ASEAN; ASEAN Charter; Singapore; Indonesia; interests

1 Introduction

Forty years after its foundation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) drafted a Charter. The heads of governments and states of its ten members signed the Charter on the 20th of November 2007 and the national ratification processes are proceeding.¹ The idea to give ASEAN a Charter is not a new one. In the early 1970s, the five founding members of ASEAN considered the possibility of developing some constitutional document to formalize the establishment of ASEAN. However, at the time the leaders decided to adopt a far less institutionalised means

¹ The ASEAN members that have ratified the Charter until July 2008 are in the following timely order: Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam, and Cambodia. The ratifications of Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar are still awaited: For information about the ratification processes see: www.aseansec.org/AC-update.pdf.