

On Struggles and Hope: ASEAN's Ten-Year Path to Human Rights

Philippine extra-judicial killings. Burmese Rohingya genocide. Missing Lao political activists. Human rights are supposedly inherent, yet the victims of these atrocities failed to attain their fundamental rights. Worse, they are not served justice after their deaths.

With these on-the-ground realities, what does it mean to achieve the ten-year-old ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD)? More importantly, how can ASEAN member-states achieve, adhere to, and protect the human rights of every individual within its territory?

On-the-ground realities

Every human person—regardless of their race, gender, religion, and background—deserves fair and just human rights. The AHRD outlines in its document that “every person is entitled to the rights and freedoms set forth” (ASEAN, 2013), which encompasses civil, political, economic, socio-cultural, development, and peace rights.

But despite its ten-year implementation, such a concept remains far from reality as various people across the ASEAN region fail to enjoy their human rights. Extrajudicial deaths have been prevalent in the Philippines, with increased unlawful killings of suspected drug addicts amid the pandemic-induced lockdowns (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2021). The Rohingya ethnic minority and civilians suffer from violence under Myanmar's military junta (HRW, 2022; UCA News, 2022). In Laos, activists participating in protest rallies are typically detained, abducted, or killed (Freedom House, 2022a).

Yet these are only some of the AHRD violations, as ASEAN citizens have experienced economic, socio-cultural, and development rights violations in varying ways, which do not align with the AHRD. For example, Cambodia's textile manufacturing factories employ children in bad working conditions (Mezzadri, 2014), which violates their economic right to be free from labor exploitation and fails to foster community development.

These pose a significant challenge for ASEAN leaders and their commitment to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Moving forward with hope

One must realize that championing the principles of the AHRD serve as a strong foundation to achieving the ASEAN Vision 2025 Political-Security Community. As stated in the said blueprint, all member-states must create a “safe, harmonious and secure environment” (ASEAN, 2015).

Therefore, championing the AHRD is not only a win for the victims of human rights violations across the ASEAN region. It serves as the victory of the ASEAN people—as a community with one regional identity, and as ASEAN citizens with one dream.

Ultimately, the challenges that ASEAN members currently face are detrimental to political, economic, and social development. After all, the non-provision of fundamental rights reveals the quality of public goods (e.g., utilities) provided to citizens and impacts business decisions (e.g., foreign investor confidence). In turn, this would cost the ASEAN's growing economy and hamper socio-cultural development.

Hence, it is proposed that the leaders of ASEAN nations address these issues in their respective territories. They must prioritize and ensure the safety and security of their constituents by granting them their fundamental rights and freedoms, rather than prioritizing personal interests. For example, leaders must understand the reason behind activism in their countries. It is possible, after all, that widening social inequality (e.g., lack of basic goods' equitable distribution) motivated activists. Then, they could address these issues at the root cause to ensure political stability and if applicable, even economic development or growth.

Cooperation among all stakeholders is also essential to achieving the AHRD. As leaders push for reforms that grant fundamental human rights, private entities must respect and protect basic human rights. Specifically, individuals must not discriminate, while businesses must not socio-economically exploit laborers for profit.

Other opportunities to promote the AHRD are also available. For instance, ASEAN member-states recently arrived at a consensus to bar Burmese military generals from attending the summit until the Myanmar military shows progress on a 2021 peace agreement that seeks the immediate cessation of political violence after the coup (Al Jazeera News, 2022). Although this action may be viewed as an interference with Myanmar's national sovereignty—therefore violating the ASEAN way of non-interference—it is commendable since ASEAN states have shown concern for protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Burmese citizens. They must act similarly toward other AHRD-related issues.

ASEAN countries must immediately institute significant political reforms to concretize their attainment of the AHRD. Otherwise, the AHRD may not be achieved nor protected, even though it has existed for so long.

(Total 699 Words count)

References:

Al Jazeera News. (2022, August 6). *Myanmar generals banned from ASEAN until peace plan progress*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/6/myanmar-generals-banned-from-asean-until-peace-plan-progress>

- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (2015). *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*.
<https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-final.pdf>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, January 13). *Philippines: 'Drug War' Killings Rise During Pandemic*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/philippines-drug-war-killings-rise-during-pandemic>
- Human Rights Watch. (2022, August 24). *Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/24/myanmar-no-justice-no-freedom-rohingya-5-years>
- Freedom House. (2022a). *Freedom in the world 2022: Laos*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/laos/freedom-world/2022>
- Freedom House. (2022b). *Freedom in the world 2022: Thailand*.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2022>
- Freedom House. (2022c). *Freedom in the world 2022: Vietnam*.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-world/2022>
- UCA News. (2022, February 28). *No ASEAN country ranked free in global index*.
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/no-asean-country-ranked-free-in-global-index/96283>