

***Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia.* By Shaune Narine.**  
Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2002. 237pp.

Much of the extensive literature on Asia's premier regional body is either uncompromisingly critical or advocacy disguised as analysis. This account of ASEAN's flaws and accomplishments is admirably balanced and refreshingly clear in its portrayal of an institution which has lasted far longer than sceptics anticipated but which has clearly reached an important crossroad in its evolution.

Narine addresses three main questions in his book: what accounts for ASEAN's longevity, how has the organization developed in the post-Cold War era, and what are its prospects. These are not new questions but Narine provides some perceptive insights into the dynamics of this unique regional association. He argues that although founded as a security organization, ASEAN's future viability will depend on the capacity of Southeast Asian governments to manage the economic challenges posed by intra-regional growth and globalization.

Much of the book is devoted to a historical analysis of ASEAN and documenting Narine's central thesis that there is an underlying tension between the strong attachment of its member-states to national sovereignty and the creation of a robust regional community. The primary reason for this tension is that "most of the ASEAN states remain deeply engaged in the process of state building; they are trying to create stable national identities out of many disparate domestic factions (p. 3)". Can this tension be resolved? Narine is sceptical. He concedes that ASEAN has been successful in establishing a prototype regional identity and reducing military conflict in Southeast Asia. These are no mean achievements for a region that was synonymous with war and suffering for much of the post-colonial period. Furthermore, ASEAN continues to provide an important forum for Southeast Asians to caucus and project their voice on the international stage.

However, as long as Southeast Asians remain steadfast in their attachment to the dominant norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of member-states, it will be difficult for ASEAN to deepen and intensify regional integration because the amelioration of national sovereignty is a necessary precondition, as Europe attests. Even the organization's much touted success in facilitating a settlement of the long-running Vietnam-Cambodia conflict was a telling demonstration of the region's collective inability to subordinate narrow sectional interests to the greater good. It was also a reminder of the limits of small powers. Vietnam could not have been constrained without the acquiescence and active support of the great powers. A rising China

and more assertive America will reduce ASEAN's capacity for independent action in the decades ahead.

Narine reserves his most trenchant criticism for ASEAN's failure to deal effectively with the 1997 Asian economic crisis and its aftermath. If ever there was a crisis that warranted a collective, regional response this was it. ASEAN was, however, unable to influence events in any meaningful way and simply "fell apart" (p. 166). In a crisply worded summary, Narine argues persuasively that the crisis weakened ASEAN in three ways. It undermined the confidence, born of economic success, which was at the heart of ASEAN's assertiveness on the international stage; it accentuated the weakness of its claims to be a credible economic institution; and it underlined the dysfunctionality of the "ASEAN Way" (p. 167).

Narine has some interesting things to say about the ASEAN way of diplomacy, based upon the Malay cultural practices of consultation and consensus (*musyawarah dan mufakat*). He contends that although this approach to problem solving has helped defuse intramural tensions and contributed to confidence-building, it has limited utility for resolving disputes. In essence, the "ASEAN Way" is about "the management and containment of problems" (p. 31). As others have observed, notably Arnfinn Jorgenson-Dahl, it is difficult to apply Malay rural notions of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* to the task of managing relations between states in a complex and culturally diverse international system.

One of the strengths of the book is the attention devoted to the economic drivers of regionalism and the author's largely successful attempt to synthesize them with political and strategic factors in "explaining ASEAN". There are useful discussions of the region's financial architecture, especially the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), and proposals for an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF), which some believe should "promote and defend a model of 'Asian developmental capitalism' that is more appropriate to Asia than the Anglo-American model promoted by the IMF" (p. 179). Narine, however, sees major obstacles to the creation of an AMF, not least of which is the fact that a successful AMF would weaken many of ASEAN's functions as an economic organization.

Structurally, the book holds together quite well as a coherent whole although the two chapters on the economic crisis could have been incorporated into one, and the sections on the haze problem and East Timor do not sit comfortably in the narrative. The discussion of the regional security environment lacks acuity and focus and tends to stray from the book's basic themes. Readers not familiar with the idea of a security community might find Narine's brief foray into the

conceptual literature somewhat cursory (pp. 71–74). Moreover, it is debatable how relevant Karl Deutsch's euro-centric expostulation of a security community is to Southeast Asia's particular circumstances as an aggregation of mainly developing states. Narine could have been more innovative in developing an alternative set of benchmarks for measuring ASEAN's performance and progress.

That said, *Explaining ASEAN* is strongly recommended for its clarity, fine scholarship, revealing insights and the thoroughness of its research into ASEAN's strengths and weaknesses. It is difficult to dispute Narine's conclusion that ASEAN has run up against its limits as a political organization and that the prospects for institutional reform are not encouraging. Salvation can only come through a greater commitment to regionalism, which will require member states to cede a measure of sovereignty and build a truly Southeast Asian identity. This is the major challenge for ASEAN in the twenty-first century.

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***Malaysia: State and Civil Society in Transition.* By Vidhu Verma.**  
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This book is about the nature and implications of the democratic process in Malaysia. In a more specific sense, it seeks to examine the intricate relationship between civil society and the state to ascertain whether the former has any impact on the latter in developing and sustaining democracy, human rights, and universal values. Of course, the relationship is not sought in a vacuum, but by considering a number of crucial variables, such as the nature and manner of nation-building in Malaysia, how citizenship was restructured under the affirmative action policy, the factors that led to the development of a strong authoritarian state, the oppositional challenge posed by radical Islam and, not least, the focus on current debates about the suitability of universal democratic values to Malaysia.

It is the central argument of the author that while civil society is making its presence felt in the Malaysian political arena, it does not have much impact on determining or influencing the role of the state. On the contrary, the authoritarian state in the country seems to be the