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STRATEGIC CURRENTS

EMERGING TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Yang Razali Kassim, editor



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Preface

Emerging Trends in Southeast Asia



27 JANUARY 2008 must go down as an important date in Southeast Asian history. On this day, one of the two surviving founders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Indonesia's former president Suharto—died.

His passing five months after the 40th anniversary of ASEAN's establishment on 7 August 1967, was symbolic. It drew the curtain on the precursor generation of leaders who had the vision to pave the way for the formation of ASEAN. The demise of Suharto also marked the maturing of ASEAN as a regional organization. The question is whether his death was equally an omen of the region entering a more prosperous phase leading to its rise and glory, or a dangerous one leading to disputes, despair and disintegration.

Suharto's passing in the first decade of the 21st century also underscored the transitional phase that ASEAN is going through, at a time of emerging trends. The first two decades since its founding was a period of confidence-building. The Southeast Asian states had to build trust amongst themselves after Suharto ended his predecessor, Sukarno's adversarial policy of *Konfrontasi* towards Malaysia which then included Singapore. It took another two decades before Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia acted cohesively with other members such as Thailand, the Philippines and, later, Brunei to turn ASEAN into a regional zone of peace, stability and growing prosperity.

Searching for that pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow, they exploited the end of the Cold War to embrace ASEAN's former ideological foe Vietnam, as well as other mainland Southeast Asian states Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, to bring to reality

the founding leaders' vision of a united Southeast Asia in the mid 1990s.

Recall however how soon after the reunification of Southeast Asia, ASEAN faced its first major non-ideological turmoil in the form of the pan-Asian financial crisis in 1997/98. It has taken nearly a decade for the region to get out of this quagmire. Some are still struggling from the political fallouts of the financial and economic crisis.

Stripped off all the diplomatic talk, the turn of the century has actually been a painful one for the region. It is questionable whether the new millennium promises a new era of peace, stability and prosperity. But the first decade of the 21st century appears to be marked by some restiveness and change. The year 2007 saw some developments that underscored this. One example was ASEAN's hardened attitude towards its own member Myanmar. Another was the latent tensions between close neighbours Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia.

This volume reflects some of the issues during this transition period for ASEAN and for Southeast Asia. This is the second issue of *Strategic Currents*, which debuted in 2006 to mark the launch of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). It is based on the writings of invited scholars, academics and analysts who contributed to RSIS either through *RSIS Commentaries* or papers between January 2007 and the first quarter of 2008. We hope it serves its purpose of recording and reflecting some of the major developments and emerging trends in the region during this period.

Yang Razali Kassim

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