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COMMENTARY

Timor-Leste's bid for Asean membership

By Harsh Mahaseth and Vishnu Bandrupalli October 29, 2021

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TIMOR-LESTE is the only Southeast Asian nation that is not a part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). Asean includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The 11th meeting of the Asean Coordinating Council working group on Timor-Leste's application for Asean membership was held recently via teleconference. The meeting reviewed the application of Timor-Leste to join Asean based on the three pillars of the Asean Community, namely politics-security, economy and socio-cultural cooperation.

Timor-Leste had submitted an application to join Asean in 2011 when Indonesia was the chair for Asean and since then, it has been making multiple attempts to become a member of the bloc.

Why is it important?

There are several reasons for Timor-Leste's persistent efforts to become a part of Asean.

Timor-Leste will benefit from the Asean economy, which is valued at more than \$3 trillion and has a customer base of over 600 million people. Asean organizes programs such as the Initiative for Asean Integration aimed at reducing the development gap between its member-states. This program will give Timor-Leste significant access to funds for national development if it becomes a member.

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Asean membership will enable Timor-Leste to have a stronger and more significant presence on the international and global political stage. The Bali Concord III of 2001 seeks a "more coordinated, cohesive, and coherent Asean position on global issues of common interest and concern." Therefore, it would become easier for Timor-Leste to protect its national interests and concerns by joining Asean. These benefits assume significance in light of Timor-Leste's turbulent struggle for independence and its traumatic nascent years of nationhood. Hence, Dili views the membership as an important opportunity for furthering national reconciliation and peace consolidation.

Abstention on Myanmar vote



On June 18, 2021, Timor-Leste abstained from voting on a resolution in the UN General Assembly condemning Myanmar's military junta. It also abstained from voting in another resolution that called for a ban on weapon sales to the junta. This abstention has been interpreted in international political circles as a desperate move by Timor-Leste for Myanmar's support to become the 11th member of Asean.

The former president of Timor-Leste, Jose Ramos-Horta, apologized for the country's actions and described the abstention as a "vote of shame." He further said that the move only distanced Timor-Leste from Asean. The former president described the abstention as an "abstention on a violent military coup, abstention on the murder of more than 800 civilians, on the incarceration of the elected national leaders, on the targeted assassination of youth, artists, writers, singers, dancers." Timor-Leste's political strategy of abstaining from the vote to gain Myanmar's support backfired as several Asean members, such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam supported the UN resolution. This move by Timor-Leste may make these countries reconsider their support for its entry into Asean as the abstention can be interpreted as a lack of conscience and sovereignty for a supposedly democratic country. Moreover, Singapore, which voted for the resolution and has opposed Timor-Leste's entry into the bloc several times, will take serious objection to its stance at the UNGA.

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The way forward

As a young nation, Timor-Leste has the vast economic potential to contribute to the overall economic development of the Asean region. Besides extensive oil and natural gas reserves, Timor-Leste has a significant untapped resource base in fisheries, agriculture and tourism. With relatively low corporate taxes, it can establish several opportunities for foreign private sector firms to make it an attractive investment destination. The nation must understand that its economic potential is its best bargaining power. Therefore, it needs to re-envision its purpose and approach toward becoming a part of Asean.

Moreover, Timor-Leste must understand that joining Asean is not the ultimate goal, but rather one of the primary means to develop itself socioeconomically and thereby improve the standard of living of its citizens. This approach will encourage the country to strengthen its economy, invest in developing human capital, and consolidate its democratic values to become a member of Asean and achieve the development envisaged in its Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030.

By abstaining from the vote, Timor-Leste violated its principles "to fight all forms of tyranny, oppression" and "to respect and guarantee human rights and the fundamental rights of the citizen," which are stated in its constitution. These principles are deeply associated with its historical struggle to become a free nation. Therefore, it is very crucial for Timor-Leste to understand that it must not lose its identity for the sake of joining Asean and instead focus on its socioeconomic growth and development.

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