

Why Asean should admit Timor Leste

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IN THE span of a decade, Timor Leste has attained independence through democratic self-determination, elected Nobel laureates as its leaders and, through steady economic growth, lifted close to 100,000 of its citizens from extreme poverty. Impressively, South-east Asia's newest state now cooperates on a range of matters with Indonesia, the very country it won liberation from after years of bitter struggle and ethnic conflict.

Yet, Timor Leste's bid for admission to Asean, which Indonesia and Thailand unreservedly support, has attracted resistance from certain quarters, including Singapore, according to reports that have appeared in this newspaper. There is reportedly fear that admitting Timor Leste might "unravel" Asean's plans for economic integration, and that the 10-member regional body may be "squeezed into irrelevance".

Our recent trip to Dili taught us that there is nothing premature, let alone destabilising, about Timor Leste's bid to join Asean. Support for its admission should not be characterised as idealistic, nor should all objections be contrasted as pragmatic. Instead, it is important to first have an accurate contemporary assessment of the country and its place in the region.

Timor Leste has come a long way since its current President Jose Ramos-Horta first suggested that it join Asean in 1974. Despite the global financial crisis, the country has experienced double-digit growth rates for the past three years. In fact, its 13 per cent growth rate in 2009 was the highest in the region, and placed it among the top 10 fastest-growing economies in the world. Analysts expect this trend to continue, and for good reason.

Among other things, Timor Leste is poised to be a regional heavyweight in the natural resource industry. Its well-managed sovereign wealth fund, dubbed the Petroleum Fund, is expected to exceed US\$20 billion (S\$25.5 billion) over the next decade. Asean capitals would do well to look towards the country and explore untapped opportunities there. After all, it is more than 20 times the size of Singapore and 2.5 times that of Brunei, and has immense potential that savvy sover-

eign and business investors from Australia, China and India are actively pursuing.

Thousands of Chinese businessmen have flocked to Timor Leste in the past few years. We were struck that in Dili, the Presidential Palace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other official buildings were constructed and paid for by the Chinese government as gifts to the country. With their distinctly Chinese design, they are a stark reminder of China and Timor Leste's deepening ties - ties that have been reinforced by the US\$60 million in aid that China recently pumped into shaping key sectors of the country's economy, such as construction, mining and defence. From a geopolitical perspective, Timor Leste's Asean membership will serve as a timely counterweight to Chinese dominance in the region.

Predictions that Timor Leste may cause Asean to "unravel" because the country would not be able to cope with its obligations appear to us somewhat far-fetched. Compliance with Asean's economic instruments is a complex process, and it is premature to conclude that it will renege at every turn. With proper technical assistance and advice, Timor Leste can devise a road map identifying primary milestones that it should achieve in priority integration sectors prior to its proposed admission to Asean this year, as well as other secondary obligations that it could undertake to carry out thereafter. Indeed, a national secretariat has been established in Dili, devoted to exploring creative and feasible initiatives such as this, and developing relevant human resource expertise and capacity.

It is always easier to maintain the status quo, and pour cold water on a bold idea. But such an approach is seldom productive. Timor Leste should be welcomed into the fold because Asean is growing into a full-fledged community, and a powerful economic force to be reckoned with. If Asean is serious about achieving its vision of building a unified community by 2015, conservatism should not be disguised as pragmatism. Timor Leste's bid for admission is a rare opportunity for a clear Asean consensus to emerge, placing faith in its own innovative vision and rooted in the spirit of inclusivity.

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