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"UUM : UNIVERSITI PENGURUSAN TERKEMUKA"
(THE EMINENT MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY)

ASEAN Community and the Malaysian Youth

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It has been argued that ASEAN is an elitist and state-centric organization. It lacks public involvement in the process of regional identity formation. There is also a huge gap between the public and the elite in terms of decision-making process especially in regards to the formation of the ASEAN Community. The European experience, for instance, has clearly shown that public opinion needs to be gauged and attended to for the success of the integration and for making effective decisions. Theories of regional integration have also shown that opinions and participation of the public determines the success of such efforts. Furthermore, given the current plurality of political, economic and social systems in the region, it is difficult to determine public opinion through a direct voting mechanism similar to that of the European.

The ASEAN Community, which also consists of the Community blueprints - ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC), was finally launched in 2016 after years of conceptualization, discussion, and debates about the viability of regional community formation in Southeast Asian. Yet, critics argue that the Southeast Asia's regional formation is a top-down process, where the idea of community identity is not shared by the majority of people. What's more important is, whether the younger generation could understand and even aware about the impending establishment of ASEAN Community.

Between 2005 and 2016, a survey study was conducted to ascertain the Malaysian youth perception on the regional community building by testing four major variables: understanding, attitudes, awareness, and preparedness. The survey was conducted on 5,032 Malaysian youths in six different zones: the north, south, central, and eastern region of the peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak.

The survey reveals some important findings. It was found that the knowledge and understanding of the ASEAN Community among the Malaysian youths are still minimal. Malaysian youths exhibit weak awareness on the ASEAN Community and understanding on its three pillars. The majority of them did not have clear picture of the ASEAN regionalism initiatives. The study also found that the awareness, attitude, and preparedness are generally higher in urban compared to that of rural areas. It can be concluded that the differences in perceived relevance, support, and preparedness may be attributable to the difference level of awareness between the Malaysian youths in urban and rural areas.

Secondly, Malaysian youths have a good perception on the relevancy and benefits of the ASEAN community. Although their level of awareness was low, they show some supports to the Community formation. Finally, Malaysian youth felt that they are in fact not ready for the ASEAN Community. They felt that they could be in the disadvantageous position given the strong competitive edge from other ASEAN countries in terms of language proficiency, small and medium enterprises competition, and government support. The reluctance may be attributed to the lack of exposure to the regional community idea by the government.

What we can learn from the study is that the Malaysian youths are not ready to face with the challenges posed by the formation of the ASEAN Community. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the government especially for the responsible ministry to undertake all necessary strategies to ensure Malaysian youths' readiness and preparedness to the regional community building. More inclusive programs for the youth need to be planned to expose them with the challenges and opportunities of the ASEAN Community. Information should be continuously relayed through various means of information services, such as electronic and social media, socializing process of the ASEAN Community among the Malaysian youths



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