



# Navigating Religious Harmony: A Case Study of the ASEAN Youth Interfaith Camp (AYIC)

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## Abstract

*This paper serves as a narration of Indonesia's contribution in concretising the ASEAN Declaration on Culture of Prevention (CoP) for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy, and Harmonious Society through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Pillar. To that end, Indonesia assigns the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (SOMY) as the appropriate lead sectoral body to advance the ASEAN CoP and its practical platform for the ASEAN youths to play a significant proactive role in propagating tolerance on religious diversity towards social harmony. With this in mind, it is hoped that the ASEAN Youth Interfaith Camp (AYIC) can give a meaningful contribution in supporting the regional efforts to enhance religious tolerance and the value of moderation at all levels. Furthermore, AYIC may contribute towards alleviating the emergence of new geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geostrategic challenges through its post-event initiatives that have a direct impact towards building community characteristics that is ingrained with tolerance and deference towards religious diversity. In light of the incoming Indonesia's Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023, this paper attempts to chart the policy prospect that Indonesia should take in fostering interfaith tolerance and harmony amongst youth across ASEAN so as to support the regional efforts to enhance peaceful co-existence in Southeast Asia.*

*Keywords: ASEAN, Culture of Prevention, Interfaith, Youth*

## **AYIC: From Declaration to Action**

AYIC is an annual event initiated by Indonesia to strengthen the culture of peace, the value of respect for all, and moderation in the ASEAN Community. The initiative is a strategic follow-up action from the ASEAN Declaration

on Culture of Prevention (CoP) for Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society which was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 31st ASEAN Summit in November 2017. The ASEAN CoP promotes and embeds a culture of preventive mindset

at all levels to address the root causes of human and sustainable developmental issues so as to uplift the quality of life of ASEAN people. In the ASEAN socio-culture front, AYIC is recognized as the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (SOMY) flagship project under its sectoral work plans (2016-2020 and 2021-2025). The initiative is specifically meant to be a platform that propagate tolerance on religious diversity in the ASEAN region.

As of 2017, this recurring initiative has brought together young citizens from ASEAN Member States to learn about the importance of fostering greater religious tolerance in light of the rapid spread of disinformation and disruption in social cohesion. (AYIC, 2017) The achievement of AYIC is ASEAN youth's commitment for concrete actions in supporting the realization of a constructive and prosperous ASEAN Community through the enhancement of interfaith dialogue and partnership at both the national and regional level. The inaugural AYIC held in 2017 resulted in the adoption of the Jombang Declaration. (Kuntjoro-Jakti, 2020) Two years later, the 3rd AYIC came up with the adoption of the Lombok Declaration to strengthen the principles contained in the previous Declaration. (Otmar, 2019) These two deliverables reflected the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of the ASEAN youth to foster peace with the spirit of mutual respect, solidarity, and

unity in diversity.

Noting the importance of AYIC, and how the above-mentioned Declarations complement the efforts of Indonesia in advancing the implementation of ASEAN CoP at the practical level, the 4th AYIC (October 2020) was convened in a hybrid format carrying the theme on "Translating Interfaith Dialogue into Concrete Outcomes". The COVID-19 pandemic did not deter the youth participants to discuss and come up with practical guidelines that is applicable to foster greater religious tolerance and to enliven the value of moderation towards social harmony. Initially, it is highly recommended to be applied at the community level, with the intention of giving a direct impact towards building community characteristics that is ingrained with tolerance and deference towards religious diversity. The said practical guidelines contain the following: (ASEAN, 2021)

Youth can maximise the use of digital platforms for the purpose of fostering tolerant behaviour and the value of moderation so as to boost sustainable interfaith harmony.

Interfaith dialogue should be able to formulate concrete solutions in preventing intolerance and radicalism.

The values of mutual understanding and religious tolerance among youth can be instilled through youth-friendly mediums/platforms, such as arts, sports, entrepreneurship, and volunteerism.

The latest AYIC in 2021 was also convened in a hybrid format under the theme, “Championing Youth as Agents of Interfaith Harmony”. It was meant to be a platform that built the capacity of youth participants to strengthen interfaith harmony in their respective communities through youthful and innovative actions. Overall, the 3-day event resulted in the formulation of five post-event initiatives prepared by the youth participants based on the practical guidelines that was agreed to in AYIC 2020. The follow up to the post-event initiatives will be reported at the next AYIC in 2022.

Through the above-mentioned post-event initiatives, it is hoped that the ASEAN youth will try to have a common point of view in fostering interfaith tolerance and harmony, and support efforts in countering violent radical discourse, together with faith-based organisations and religious leaders. It is against this background that AYIC served as a valuable opportunity for the youth to translate interfaith dialogue into concrete outcomes. It is also an excellent outreach activity that contributes towards ASEAN awareness among young people.

#### Challenges and Prospects

Religious intolerance is one of the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century. It breeds suspicion and hatred of a particular ethnic, culture, religion, and at a later stage it goes far beyond

national domains. This threat is current and global in nature. In today’s age of uncertainty, its concrete solution must be implemented in a manner where the various stakeholders are mutually reinforcing, the timelines are realistic, and implementation is well-resourced and receives high-level political support (at all levels).

ASEAN is a huge region with diverse cultures and religious beliefs, for which a peaceful co-existence requires mutual tolerance and respect. It is currently home to 213 million youths (aged 15-34 years), constituting the largest portion of ASEAN’s citizens.(ASEAN, 2021) They are best understood as ASEAN’s greatest assets and one of the more important groups in ASEAN that will contribute to the realization of an ASEAN Community with shared values and future for all mankind. The engagements with them are therefore seen as an essential step to deepen and broaden the inclusion of a culture of peace towards regional stability, which in turn will contribute to the region’s resilience against peace and security challenges.

Given the foregoing, the courage, and the role of youth in upholding the values of diversity and mutual respect are the main assets to achieve a harmonious religious society and a better future ASEAN region. It is undeniable that the young generation has a critical role in implementing the principle of unity in diversity, in

which values of mutual respect, peace, solidarity, and unity are embedded. Hence, strengthening the commitment of youth in safeguarding interfaith harmony at the regional level can help the region successfully address religious intolerance and its derivatives that may add complications to the contemporary global challenges. The following are the global issues that can jeopardise the efforts to strengthen peaceful co-existence, where at the same time they may instigate tension among local communities and can turn into interreligious frictions and violent conflicts:

1. Growing diplomatic tiffs, secret defense, and security policies, as well as increasing territorial disputes, among countries.
2. The deployment of economic power by the world's major economies to achieve strategic goals in foreign policy.
3. Transnational organised crime of terrorism, drug, small arms and light weapons trafficking.

To some extent, interfaith tensions can compromise solutions to the evident geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geostrategic challenges. To prevent this spillover effect, there is an urgency for developing a strategic approach towards measurable regional efforts to re-enthuse youth to take part in and contribute towards combating religious intolerance and ignorance. Concretely, there are several strategic advantages

of fostering interfaith harmony among youths across ASEAN in order to support the regional effort to promote peaceful co-existence in Southeast Asia. They may seem simple, yet they have significant effects towards fostering sustainable peace as well as development.

First, strengthening interfaith tolerance and harmony among the ASEAN younger generation will support the region's efforts to increase the values of ASEAN identity. Furthermore, it will also support the region's efforts to advance the implementation of ASEAN CoP, which focuses on fostering greater religious tolerance and the value of moderation at the grassroot level. If done properly, embracing religious diversity towards greater regional awareness on strategies to combat religious intolerance, stigmatisation, and persecution will also possibly strengthen the region's efforts to nurture the notion of positive peace. Not only based on the absence of conflict or war, but sustainable investment in stable nations and institutions, as well as societal attitudes that cultivate peace. Such endeavour should prioritise (a) enhancing education innovation on a culture of peace and moderation from early age, (b) engaging with community, faith, and youth leaders, as well as both higher education and religious communities, and (c) augmenting constructive dialogue to deepen a

profound understanding on what each world religions hold in common.

In return, people will value unity in diversity as a great wisdom, in which interfaith harmony is a fundamental requirement for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural society. These premises will support and encourage the region's authorities to engage in a natural process of peace and security through political dialogue to alleviate tensions and maintain the path of peacebuilding and development. Hence, the constructed values of ASEAN Identity that are related to the above-mentioned endeavour are respect, peace, and security, which they are clearly reflected in the Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter. In retrospect, strengthening interfaith harmony among the youth is a tool the region can harness to resolve differences and disputes by peaceful means, which is not only beneficial for the people of ASEAN but also contributes towards the stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Paving the Way for an Inclusive ASEAN**

The formal establishment of the ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015 heralded a reinvigorated commitment to a more cohesive, healthy, inclusive, peaceful, resilient, and harmonious society that contributes towards building a region of lasting peace. To that end, the advancement of ASEAN CoP focusing on a culture

of peace and a tradition of supporting the values of moderation, need to be further cultivated across the region, in particular targeted towards younger generation. In a continuously changing world, fostering greater religious tolerance and the value of moderation should be considered as a collective effort. Consequently, multi stakeholders' partnerships are certainly required to streamline tolerance on religious diversity into all aspects of life so as to empower the individuals to apply holistic moral values.

ASCC, as one of the pillars of ASEAN Community, can be considered as a significant platform to enhance innovative and responsible youth behavior to manifest interfaith harmony and goodwill towards building a prosperous region of lasting peace. Such effort should be endowed with the adherence of inclusive policies and procedures that would bring positive impacts on strengthening religious harmony and partnership at all levels. The full development of young people in ASEAN, as well as promoting closer understanding and friendship among them (not only within ASEAN, but also along with other regions) has been coordinated by SOMY since 2002. Based on the new ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021-2025, SOMY focuses not only on promoting ASEAN awareness among its young people, but also on preparing them for an active role towards peaceful societies. In

view of this, the youth should be put at the center of efforts in propagating tolerance on religious diversity in the ASEAN region.

As Indonesia will be chairing ASEAN in 2023, AYIC should be used as a strategic keystone for Indonesia to strengthen the role of youth in achieving religious harmony and partnership. To move forward, Indonesia may undertake the following:

In the spirit of cross-sectoral coordination and synergy among the concerned parties, all relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies (among others culture, education, information, sports, women and children) and entities associated with ASEAN, should be pro-actively engaged to participate in, and to play an active role in manifesting interfaith harmony and goodwill into new realities.

AYIC should be an inclusive dialogue that will form partnership and implementation actions among relevant stakeholders represented by influential figures and experts on interfaith partnership and community development from all layers of society. State actors and non-state actors, along with other related parties that have interest in promoting culture of peace should also be part of the collaboration.

AYIC should be transformed into a knowledge driven platform that would have the ability to build the capacity of both ASEAN youth and youth sector organisations (YSOs) to strengthen

interfaith harmony through community-based projects. It should be plotted to promote excellence among youth and YSOs in the region and inspire them to be role models in the community.

If these thoughtful approaches are implemented holistically, where all relevant stakeholders and policy-makers are bonded by strong commitments to honour and implement decisions, agreements, and timelines, consequently it can enrich the advocacy to create practical behavioural change at the grassroots level. Additionally, what had been agreed and adopted in the ASEAN regional framework should correlate and be translated into sustainable and impactful measures at the national level. In other words, the commitment at the regional level needs to be embedded at the national level and be converted into doable and tangible outputs instead of normative thoughts again.

The above-highlighted recommendations chart the policy prospect that Indonesia should take in as the incoming ASEAN Chair in 2023. Such endeavour aspires to contribute towards the establishment of a resilient community in a peaceful, secure, and stable region. In the long run, the outcome of AYIC will later fully support all efforts of ASEAN, both in the domestic and regional context, in attaining sustainable development in line with global commitments.[]

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