VIEWING ASEAN THROUGH A GOVERNANCE AND CORRUPTION LENS: REALIZING MALAYSIA AND ASEAN'S SHARED FUTURE

Opinion

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Since its origin in 1967, member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have progressed significantly in many aspects aimed especially at motivating economic synergies. However, much of the progress has been overshadowed by political instability and a weakened anti-corruption drive. Corruption amongst ASEAN member countries is definitely a major issue as evidenced in various indexes and reports as well as the increasing number of cases.

A significant event under the Malaysian ASEAN 2025 chairmanship was the 21st Principals Meeting of the ASEAN Parties Against Corruption (ASEAN –PAC). Focusing on the key values of unity, integrity and accountability among ASEAN members, the meeting convened under the theme of "Strengthening ASEAN Unity: Public – Private Collaboration in Combating Corruption". Malaysia is the ASEAN-PAC Chair for 2025 – 2026, and has aimed to ensure continued regional cooperation and policy alignment in advancing governance, integrity and anti-corruption objectives.

The focus on the public-private collaboration is definitely recommended and is a much needed perspective. It reflects the perspective that combatting corruption is the collective effort of the government, businesses and society. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has pledged to increase engagement with the private sector to address corruption issues across Malaysia and ASEAN, aiming to enhance governance and to ensure that every member country can adopt common principals in transparency, integrity and accountability.

Within this, many challenges are anticipated due to the deeply rooted corruption culture in political and business dealings globally especially when it is embedded within the "legal corruption" environment and involving highly influential or Politically Exposed Persons (PEP).
The impact of corruption is well known. It is included in many national and international agendas and is also part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda that acknowledges the role of good governance and rule of law being essential for sustainable development

The ground reality is that corruption remains a major issue globally, especially when it is seen as a normal way of life and doing business.

The Trillion Peso March in the Philippines earlier in 2025 reflects the frustrations of the public in being caught in the crossfire of corruption and climate change. Similar cases have been recorded across ASEAN where climate related funds have been misused significantly amidst the natural disasters that have plagued the member countries.

An Analysis of ASEAN's Performance in Governance and Corruption

The Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perception Index (CPI) provides some insight into this phenomenon. A widely accepted and used index internationally, the CPI ranks and scores 180 countries and territories worldwide by the perceived levels of public sector corruption. Referring to Table 1, one significant point is that (with the exception of Singapore) all members of ASEAN are ranked above 50 across the 180 countries, having a score of 50 or less , indicating that corruption is a major issue in these countries and across ASEAN. Corruption is systemically embedded in most of the ASEAN cultures, and normally revolves around "grand corruption" which TI defines as the abuse of high-level power that often goes unpunished, especially with the collaboration of the public-private entities. This phenomenon is aggravated with the pumping of new funds in terms of sustainable development activities, clearly impacting the sense of urgency in combatting climate and other sustainable development issues. This has also been highlighted as part of TI's 2024 report.

Table 1: Corruption Perception Index, Score and Rank, ASEAN, 2024

COUNTRY	SCORE 2024	RANK 2024
Brunei Darussalam	-*	-*
Cambodia	21 (9)	158
Indonesia	37 (5)	99
Lao PDR	33 (7)	114
Malaysia	50 (2)	57
Myanmar	16 (10)	168
Philippines	33 (7)	114
Singapore	84 (1)	3
Thailand	34 (6)	107
Timor - Leste	44 (3)	73
Vietnam	40 (4)	88

Note:
1)*Brunei last appeared in the CPI 2020 where it scored 60/100, ranking 35 out of the 180 countries surveyed.
2) Figures in parentheses refer to rankings based on ASEAN member countries score
Source: Transparency International (2024)

Another widely used indicator is the World Governance Indicator. It consists of six (6) dimensions covering over 200 countries. The six (6) dimensions include Voice and Accountability (VA), Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (PSAVT), Government Effectiveness (GE), Regulatory Quality (RQ), Rule of Law (ROL) and Control of Corruption (COC). The table below reflects the percentile rank for 2023.

Table 2: World Governance Indicators, ASEAN, 2023

COUNTRY	VA	PSAVT	GE	RQ	ROL	COC
Brunei Darussalam	28.9 (7)	96.7 (2)	90.1 (2)	80.7 (2)	79.2 (2)	88.7 (2)
Cambodia	12.7 (9)	47.9 (6)	38.2 (8)	25.5 (9)	23.6 (8)	9.4 (11)
Indonesia	52.5 (2)	28.9 (9)	69.8 (4)	60.8 (4)	46.7 (6)	36.3 (6)
Lao PDR	5.4 (10)	75.4 (3)	28.3 (9)	17.9 (10)	22.6 (9)	19.8 (9)
Malaysia	51 (3)	50.7 (5)	79.7 (3)	73.1 (3)	67.5 (3)	61.8 (3)
Myanmar	2.5 (11)	4.7 (11)	3.8 (11)	7.1 (11)	6.1 (11)	11.8 (10)
Philippines	46.6 (4)	23.7 (10)	58 (6)	57.5 (5)	37.3 (7)	32.5 (8)
Singapore	43.6 (5)	97.2 (1)	100 (1)	100 (1)	98.1 (1)	98.1 (1)
Thailand	35.8 (6)	36 (8)	58.5 (5)	57.1 (6)	57.5 (4)	35.8 (7)
Timor - Leste	61.3 (1)	54.5 (4)	20.8 (10)	34.4 (8)	21.7 (10)	47.6 (4)
Vietnam	15.2 (8)	45 (7)	56.1 (7)	38.2 (7)	50.5 (5)	38.7 (5)

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to rankings based on ASEAN member countries score
Source: World Bank - Kaufmann D and Kraay A (2023)

Voice and Accountability (VA) captures the perception to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting the government, freedom of expression and association as well as a free media. One observation of Singapore is that it excels in five (5) out of the six (6) dimensions, where it is the first, with the exception of the area of VA, coming in at number five (5) out of the eleven (11) ASEAN countries. Brunei also has the same vulnerability considering it comes in second in the other five (5) dimensions.

Timor-Leste comes in first for VA in ASEAN with a strong margin as compared to Indonesia, which comes in second. Lao PDR and Myanmar score the lowest. The low score for VA across ASEAN countries is indicative of weak political, civil as well as human rights practices. There have been many reports and indicators that have condemned ASEAN member countries for violations as well as the control of media, biased investigations and political persecution for those that have openly criticized the person(s) or parties in power.

Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (PSAVT) measures the perception of the likelihood of political instability or politically motivated violence, including terrorism. Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Lao PDR score the highest in ASEAN. This is the only indicator that Lao PDR scores remarkably high as compared to other countries and indicators. This could be caused by restricted political diversity that could lead to compromises caused by influence and power. Significant reforms have been noted in Lao PDR but due to the one party control, there is limited possibility to challenge policies and decisions. Philippines and Myanmar score the lowest.

The Government Effectiveness (GE) assesses the perception of the quality of public services, civil service and the level of its independence from political pressures. Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia take the top three (3) positions with Myanmar and Timor-Leste taking the lowest two positions.

Regulatory Quality captures perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development. Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia take the top three (3) positions with Myanmar and Lao PDR taking the lowest two positions
Rule of Law (ROL) captures perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, police, and courts as well as the likelihood of crime and violence. Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia take the top three (3) positions with Myanmar and Timor-Leste taking the lowest two positions.
Control of Corruption captures perceptions of the extent to which the public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as the "capture" of the state and private interests. Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia take the top three (3) positions with Myanmar and Cambodia taking the lowest two positions. However, the percentile rank margin between Singapore and Brunei is 9.4 and Singapore to Malaysia is 36.3, which reflects the significant gap even between the top three countries.

The CPI score seems to be somewhat consistent with COC rank in WGI. Singapore and Malaysia take the top two (2) positions within the ASEAN perspective. Although Brunei has not been included since CPI 2020, its results if it had remained consistent would have resulted in the third place. However, this is in close competition with Malaysia since in the COC, Brunei holds the second position. Myanmar and Cambodia are at the bottom of the list, consistent as well with the WGI

The involvement of the members of the public in key decisions, institutional changes as well as enforcement and monitoring would also add value in combatting these issues. This has been amplified by the use of e-participation platforms that are believed to boost good governance and transparency. One index that is useful to supplement this discussion is the E-Participation Index (EPI), which is a supplementary index to the United Nations E-Government Survey (Online Services Index – OSI) consisting of three components i.e. e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making. The e-information component aims to provide citizens with access to public information without or upon demand; e-consultation engages citizens to provide their views on public policies and services and e-decision-making empowers citizens to co-design and produce policy options and service components. This survey is carried out across the 193 United Nations member countries.

Table 3: E-Participation Indices, ASEAN, 2024

COUNTRY	SCORE 2024	RANK 2024
Brunei Darussalam	0.4658 (7)	94
Cambodia	0.3151 (9)	127
Indonesia	0.7945 (2)	35
Lao PDR	0.2877 (10)	137
Malaysia	0.6986 (5)	53
Myanmar	0.1644 (11)	166
Philippines	0.7260 (4)	49
Singapore	0.9589 (1)	7
Thailand	0.7534 (3)	42
Timor - Leste	0.3288 (8)	120
Vietnam	0.6027 (6)	72

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to rankings based on ASEAN member countries score
Source: UNDESA (2024)

The analysis from the E-Participation context reflects the top positions that are held by Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines. Singapore's rank is consistent even with the overall WGI score.

Although there may be a link to Indonesia's and Philippines ranks with their VA scores as well as their slightly higher scores for GE and ROL, Thailand's focus seems to be more consistent with only its GE and ROL rank. Timor-Leste, however, does not seem to share this pattern to justify the reasoning behind this as it is ranked first in VA for ASEAN but eight (8th) for e-participation. Brunei scores low in e-participation. This is surprising considering that Brunei was one of the pioneers to champion e-government initiatives in the 1970s and also ranks number two in five out of six dimensions of the WGI.

Implications and Recommendations

VA remains a weak link across ASEAN. Critical institutional and legal reforms are a must across the ASEAN perspective to ensure that this becomes a core focus area. However, in order to effectively manage corruption and promote governance, a collective effort of robust institutions as well as active citizen engagement and participation is required. This should be done as a matter of urgency. Protests across ASEAN have become more rampant with the members of the public voicing their frustrations on the street, mostly citing the rising cost of living and widening income inequalities as the main cause of discontent. Considering the perceived notion that Asians have a somewhat high tolerance for corruption, patience is wearing thin.

In 2025, protests were seen in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines and Timor-Leste. Civil society and independent media continue to face increasing repression especially those that attempt to expose corruption; this makes protests seen as public demand for accountability. Therefore, it is crucial that ASEAN leadership advance civic space by promoting public participation in decision-making and legislative processes, as well as increasing public access to information - Malaysia has made headway in terms of this. Previously, the e-participation sites were mainly to provide information making it a one-way communication but now there are evident changes of public consultations, special task force set up and other two way communication platforms via the online public consultation or "Seranta-Awam-Atas-Talian". However, having more digital transformation and online platforms does not guarantee that corruption can be minimized. ASEAN also needs to consider the move from traditional types of corruption to more digitally enabled types of corruption, as well as a hybrid possibility. It is important to note that corruption can happen across any platform especially when persons of influence are involved. Each country is facing its own challenges. Thailand's faltering economy, changes in government and border war with Cambodia has weakened its position considerably. Although the peace accord has been signed, the underlying issues remain unchanged. Indonesia is also facing its own challenges although it has stepped up considerably its engagement with international institutions. Both Indonesia and Thailand are currently the only two countries from ASEAN in the accession process for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) membership which requires a country to meet the requirements of the OECD standards and best practices. The OECD also supports ASEAN's policy reforms through its programs like the OECD Southeast Asia Regional Program even though currently no ASEAN country is a member of the OECD.

It would also be challenging to manage the circumstances in Myanmar. It remains the lowest scoring country in ASEAN in almost all indicators or dimensions reported above, with the exception of COC where Cambodia is placed last and Myanmar is 10th out of the 11 countries. Myanmar is struggling after the catastrophic earthquake earlier in 2025 in addition to the impact of the brutal civil war.

Whilst Malaysia has pushed forward certain reform agendas and initiatives, it would be interesting to see it unfold in the near future. Institutional reforms covering significant topics such as the Freedom of Information (FOI), Political Funding, Ombudsman, Whistleblower Protection Act as well as the separation of powers between the Attorney General and the Public Prosecutor have been explored and are expected to be tabled in Parliament next year. There has been visible engagement with stakeholders such as the Bar Council and Civil Society Organizations (CSO) for the above topics. Malaysia has to set the pace being the ASEAN-PAC Chair for 2025-26 but faces their own ghosts as well. The effectiveness of the Ultimate Beneficial Ownership platform has not shown strong results where it matters and the Government Procurement Act 2025 has also faced criticism from many parties. The nation has also faced its own set of high profile cases, with recent weeks having seen growing scrutiny in the Malaysian FIFA scandal, as well as the alleged awarding of parking concessions to a company with links to a member of the royal family, amidst other emerging corruption related cases.

The Philippines scandal has also surfaced at the worst possible time, putting them in a vulnerable position as they are set to assume the ASEAN Group Chairmanship in 2026. Having this dark cloud overhead would mean disaster. The government would need to react quickly and decisively as any delay would impact Philippines and ASEAN negatively. It is also important that ASEAN learnt lessons from Thailand's 2009 ASEAN Summit disaster when the public frustrations from the political crisis caused chaos and disrupted the conference, forcing leaders to evacuate by helicopter.

Lessons can also be learnt from Singapore. Although Singapore has had its fair share of high profile cases, it has contained corruption to a large extent. It has also improved its position in the TI CPI for 2024, climbing to number 3 worldwide, and also having consistent results across the WGI and E-Participation, with the exception of VA.

The considerations of legal loopholes and the corruption of the judiciary is definitely necessary. It is necessary to possibly wield the "stick" more than the "carrot" if corruption is to be taken seriously, both from the public and private sector perspective. The Deferred Prosecution Agreement (DPA) may be popular and relevant when looking at the economics of crime but it also motivates a lack of an effective deterrence.

ASEAN has a lot to offer. However, it is at a crossroad where crucial decisions need to be taken to enforce the legitimacy of its judiciary, rule of law and overall good governance. Having various acts, bills, frameworks and guidelines look great on paper, but if it lacks enforcement or has too many vulnerabilities and gaps that provide the perfect defense for the corrupt, it is conforming to the "legal corruption" debate – a risk that can negatively impact ASEAN's political, social and economic position.

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