MALAYSIAN CHAIRMANSHIP OF ASEAN 2025:
THE DOUGHNUT OR THE HOLE?

Opinion

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Malaysia held the ASEAN chairmanship for 2025 and will pass it to the Philippines in 2026. Since the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, it is the fifth time Malaysia has assumed the role. There are several notable achievements throughout. Key milestones include the peace accord between Thailand and Cambodia, named the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord, which was signed on 26 October 2025 during the ASEAN Summit.

Another significant achievement is the inclusion of Timor-Leste in ASEAN. Timor-Leste officially became the 11th member of ASEAN during the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. It is important to note that Timor-Leste has officially applied for ASEAN membership since 2011. The acceptance of Timor-Leste demonstrates the expansion of the regional strength and inclusivity to include every sovereign country in South East Asia into the ASEAN bloc.

In addition, many trade agreements have been signed between ASEAN and/or its member countries with major powers in the world, including the USA and China. For example, the Asean-China Free Trade Area Upgrade, Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) between Malaysia and the United States and many other documents. The establishment of the FIFA Asean Cup marks another milestone and extension in ASEAN, with significant collaboration with the international football governing body, FIFA. It is reported that the ASEAN summit has established 80 outcome documents.

Since the beginning of this chairmanship, as early as January 2025, there have been significant concerns and reservations over Malaysia holding the title (Welsh: 29 January 2025). Raised concerns about it have revolved around it being too much about the prime minister, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and not enough about ASEAN. These claims have been evidently refuted through the action and leadership of the Prime Minister himself, with many success stories throughout the year and at its peak with the highly praised ASEAN Summit, themed "Inclusivity and Sustainability".

A notable criticism that attracted substantial attention that was consequently discussed in the Malaysian Parliament (Parliament Malaysia: 27 October 2025), was the visit of President

Donald Trump. It was deemed as inappropriate, and both the visit and the reception were questioned, especially since it is common knowledge that Malaysia is a staunch supporter of Palestinian Statehood whilst Washington not sharing the full sentiment.

It is useful to recognise that the invitation was from ASEAN to President Trump and not Malaysia in its capacity as a nation. Rather, the role of the host country had to extend an invitation through the ASEAN secretariat, thus it being an exercise of leadership through the chair of ASEAN. Another point was the reception held for President Trump. With his polarising visit, there was much criticism about his reception and what it entailed, although this was debunked and referred to as a 'basic' welcome and not the full state reception (Malay Mail: 30 October 2025).

Objectively, in March 2025, it was reported that the United States had overtaken China to become the largest export market for Malaysia in terms of export volume (Bernama: 21 March 2025). A visit by the head of state from the major trading partner should be welcomed and not prohibited. If the visit is not permitted, it could show adversity in Malaysia being ready to cut ties with said country. A risky move as the basis to defend that position ends in the court of public opinion. In other words, it is self-contradicting in these aspects to uphold such a stand to prevent the visit.

These criticisms demonstrate the bias and immaturity in critics that focus on little things that have no impact at all and neglect the more impactful achievements. It is a choice of what we choose to see or care about. In a simple example for us to reflect on, when we are given a doughnut, do we see the hole that has no substance, or do we see the doughnut? This reflection draws on the ability to think through how easily it is to give up our rationale if they are overpowered by emotion and sentiments.

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