TIMOR-LESTE JOINS ASEAN - WHY NOW?

Opinion

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With tears rolling down the face of Timor-Leste Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, flanked by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn, the accession of Timor-Leste into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) marked a historical, long-winded journey to enter the 11-member regional bloc by the 23-year old country. Timor-Leste (also known as East Timor) is not unfamiliar to lengthy struggles, having long been a point of contention among Southeast Asian states, which have offered varying levels of support for its bid to join the bloc.Situated on the eastern half of Timor Island near the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago, Timor-Leste has always been geographically-challenged and isolated from the rest of Southeast Asia.

Until its decolonisation in 1975, Portuguese Timor, outside of its capital Dili, received little funding from Portugal despite having been under its colonial rule since 1702. This scarcity of external investment, coupled with years of political turmoil, led to Timor-Leste having the lowest Gross Domestic Product of any Asian country post-independence in 2002. As of today, it still holds the title at 1.881 billion USD in 2024. Demographically, Timor-Leste's 1.4 million citizens have a median age of 21.7 years, building a solid foundation for a growing workforce, however scarce opportunities have led to many Timorese to seek employment abroad. In these extreme circumstances, although independence was gained, its continued economic difficulties exacerbated by its harsh past has prevented true autonomy.

In March 2011, hoping to bolster its economic legitimacy and its regional belonging, Timor-Leste officially announced their interest in joining ASEAN as a next step in their pursuit of actual self-determination. Before becoming a full fledged member state, prospective members are required to fulfil Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter; components of which include, 1) being physically located within Southeast Asia, 2) having unanimous recognition by all ASEAN member states, 3) agreeing to the ASEAN Charter as a whole, and 4) carrying out obligations of membership, such as attending summits, opening embassies in all ASEAN states, and acceding to all ASEAN treaties. Drafted in 2007, Timor-Leste became the first prospective member to undergo Article 6.

Instead of an approval, the unique structure of ASEAN proved to be a stumbling block to aspirations of quick integration into the organisation. First, the three pillar model (Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-

Cultural) that comprises the ASEAN Community must be satisfied appropriately, in ambiguous terms by the applicant state. In the case of Timor-Leste, a fact-finding mission was deployed by ASEAN in 2019 to screen for this applicability. Secondly, the consensus-based decision-making framework which prioritises harmony and non-interference, also enables bureaucracy and disagreements to drastically protract the timeline. Essentially, without unanimous support from all existing ASEAN members, Timor-Leste would be unable to join the bloc. These two main factors have caused Timor-Leste's ambitions to be delayed.

One of its most outspoken opponents for ASEAN membership was Singapore, who, in particular, pointed out Timor-Leste's weak economy and lack of human capital as the main reasons for its objection. Unwilling to deal with "another Myanmar" (having the lowest GDP per capita in ASEAN) and with fears of hindering regional stability, as the leader in the Economic Community pillar of ASEAN, Singapore's reluctance was grounded by doubts of Timor-Leste's ability to contribute significantly to the bloc.

The formulation of a roadmap by ASEAN in 2023 called on Timor-Leste to align its institutional frameworks with ASEAN standards, continue infrastructure upgrades, and prepare itself to host future ASEAN summits. These steps, viewed as the final measures to formalise its membership, are indicative of ASEAN's preparedness to accept Timor-Leste in the near future.

Malaysia and Timor-Leste have had historically friendly relations dating back to the occupation era. Malaysia was one of the top contributors of United Nations peacekeeping troops during the 2006 Timorese Crisis, and its UN prosecutor for crimes against humanity during the 1999 Timorese Crisis was a Malaysian. Spurred on by Malaysia's consistently supportive stance of Timorese membership since 2011, Malaysia's positive involvement in Timorese affairs led to negotiations being increasingly streamlined, enabling Timor-Leste to self-advocate to a party with ears of intent. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, emboldened by his role in mediating peace between Cambodia and Thailand, may have been incentivised to get Timor-Leste membership across the line during its tenure of ASEAN, as Malaysia seeks to present itself as a regional arbitrator in Southeast Asia, enhancing its diplomatic influence.

As a non-aligned member, Timor-Leste has also attempted to balance U.S-China relations, refusing aid from China and committing itself to neutrality. Its strategic location bridging Oceania with Southeast Asia makes it desirable for ASEAN to affiliate itself with Timor-Leste, surrounding itself with friendly nations rather than losing it to Chinese or American influences and interests. The antagonisation between China and the U.S has heightened worries of interference; with ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste is able to balance both ties and remain steadfast in its non-aligned mission.

The presence and continuation of military rule in Myanmar poses a threat to ASEAN's credibility, therefore by admitting a vocal member immensely critical of the regime (being the only country in the world to actively call on ruling Tatmadaw soldiers to defect to the National Unity Government in 2023), ASEAN can signal to the international community its commitment to democratic rule-of-law and reinforce regional opposition to the Tatmadaw .

President Ramos-Horta had once claimed that it was easier to get into heaven than ASEAN, and now in 2025, its 14-year journey has finally ended. The benefits of ASEAN accession must not only be symbolic but must generate actionable impact. On paper, Timor-Leste will be integrated into ASEAN value chains, free trade agreements, and its citizens will be able to travel Southeast Asia visa-free. Increased FDI, tourism, and the diversification of its economy hinges on the governance and persistence of the Timorese government in its previous efforts.

The establishment of a timeline, Malaysia's cordial relationship, and the current circumstance of geopolitics playing a marked role in Timor-Leste's membership, have made key developments in Timor-Leste's modern history. With the current affairs of democracy, Timor-Leste's accession arrives at a time of global backsliding of democratic and human rights. The circumstances collectively create the conditions for a more assertive Timorese role in regional affairs, finally positioning the nation to exercise genuine agency - something it has long been denied.

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