

ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Islamic Universities Network: An Appraisal

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INTRODUCTION

ASEAN Economic Community just started in the end of 2015. The AEC project's integrated ASEAN economic region was built on four pillars of integration: a single market and production base; a competitive economic region; equitable economic development; and integration with the global economy. The *AEC Blueprint* (ASEAN Secretariat 2008), signed by the ASEAN leaders on 20 November 2007 during the 13th ASEAN Summit, serves as its road map. The AEC Scorecard was formulated to track the progress of the members in implementing the plans for the AEC.

Among the changes and challenges that face Islamic universities and higher learning institutions are Islamic university education and the issues of quality and accreditation from an Islamic perspective; Islamic university education, sustainable development and the labour market; the patterns of new universities and the knowledge society; means to upgrade the capacities of scientific research institutions; the optimal use of educational technology in Islamic university education; university competences and the requirements of Islamic civilizational revival; Furthering interactions between academia and industry; university education in the service of the issues of the Islamic Ummah; university education and contemporary problems: towards an authentic Islamic vision; developing and updating funding sources and means in Islamic university education; University scientific research: development sources and tools; towards an efficient methodology for teaching Arabic for non-Arabic speakers; Quranic script and university education: the civilizational and cultural role and the scientific and technological challenges; challenges of university education in the third millennium; globalization, cultural diversity and dialogue among cultures and civilizations: action and interaction; and towards a contemporary Islamic enlightening discourse in university education.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the existent of Islamic universities and higher learning institutions in the region and their role as well as ASEAN Economic Community in the making. When we realize this fact we may make a step forward to gather those institutions in a vast in order to make them a giant higher learning institution in the region.

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

Overview

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), now in its late-forties, was created to address mainly political and security issues. Using flexibility and consensus — the *ASEAN Way* — it helped move the region from conflict to cooperation. Over time, the economy has taken center stage and today the association has reached a critical juncture. In 2015, its members will be launching the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). This initiative, which is part of a broader “ASEAN Community” including political-security and socio-cultural pillars, will be taking shape just as the center of global economic gravity is shifting toward Asia.

While the AEC is a milestone in ASEAN's journey toward closer integration — and in maintaining its centrality in Asia's architecture for cooperation — it alone is insufficient to retain relevance in an increasingly multipolar global landscape.

To strengthen their competitiveness and role as a hub of Asia's dynamism, ASEAN countries must also introduce deep structural reforms nationally. A proper combination of domestic reforms and initiatives for closer integration that complement and reinforce one another are needed to promote the region's equitable and inclusive development, strengthen its macroeconomic stability, and protect the environment. ASEAN countries must build their unique brand of integration — to close development gaps and maintain identity.¹

Signed by the ASEAN Leaders at the 13th ASEAN Summit on November 20, 2007, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint lays the foundation for realising the goal of ASEAN as an integrated economic region by 2015. The AEC is characterised by four pillars: single market and production base, highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region that is fully integrated with the global economy. In each of the four pillars are the various measures and initiatives that are being implemented to achieve the goals of the AEC.²

Principles of the ASEAN Economic Community – AEC

The ASEAN countries are engaged in a process to transform ASEAN into a real economic community by the end of 2015. Originally built as a political alliance to limit the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, ASEAN gradually became a diplomatic organization to manage regional issues and expand trade with the inclusion of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and their opening to a market economy.

Having stood on a minimalist “smallest common denominator” approach that emphasized harmonious relations and respect of national sovereignties, ASEAN countries nonetheless also came to greatly develop trade through quite ambitious economic treaties and free-trade agreements for Southeast Asia.

ASEAN leaders have now embarked the Southeast Asian association to the next step of economic development, which will also ultimately bring the Southeast Asian peoples closer. They have engaged since 2007 towards the integration of ASEAN into an ASEAN Economic community based on 4 economic pillars:

¹ See: Asian Development Bank Institute. (2014). *ASEAN 2030: Toward a Borderless Economic Community*. (Japan: IDBI), p. xxi.

² ASEAN Secretariat. (2012). *ASEAN Economic Community: Scorecard*. (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat), p. 1.

Four (4) pillars of the ASEAN Economic Community

- Single Market and Production Base
- Competitive Economic Region
- Equitable Economic Development: to receive the benefits of the AEC, the people and businesses of ASEAN must be engaged into the integration process of the AEC
- ASEAN's integration into the globalized economy

Through the implementation of these 4 pillars for economic integration, stability, competitiveness and dynamism, ASEAN is bound to realize the principles of an Economic Community, inspired by the model of the European Union.

Five (5) core principles of the ASEAN single market and production base

- Free flow of goods
- Free flow of services
- Free flow of investment
- Free flow of capital
- Free flow of skilled labor

ASEAN countries form a market of over 600 million consumers and combined GDP of almost US\$3 trillion, with a vibrant and growing economy that presents fantastic economic perspectives for the future of ASEAN.

ASEAN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES: AN APPRAISAL

The development of Islamic education in Southeast Asia is tremendous and receiving an overwhelming support from the community. Many governments support the establishment of Islamic educational institutions both financially and administratively.

No-one would deny that in recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the study of Islam worldwide, both within the Muslim community and outside it. Islamic education and the burgeoning field of Islamic Studies in Southeast Asia are no exception. Such interest is contributing to significant changes in the way that the study of Islam is both conceptualized and taught in the region. Once dominated by scriptural interpretation and exegesis, for some years there has been a growing trend towards the use of new disciplinary approaches in the understanding of various religion-influenced phenomena in Muslim societies.

University education is more than the next level in the learning process; it is a critical component of human development worldwide. It provides not only the high-level skills necessary for every labor market but also the training essential for teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, and a myriad of other personnel. It is these trained individuals who develop the capacity and analytical skills that drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions which affect entire societies.

An educated populace is vital in today's world, with the convergent impacts of globalization, the increasing importance of knowledge as a main driver of growth, and the information and communication revolution. Knowledge accumulation and application have become major factors in a nation development and are increasingly at the core of a country's competitive advantage in the global development.

When we look at Islamic higher learning institutions and Islamic education in the region, we can observe a fascinating dualism: in many areas, Islamic education is the poorest in quality and serves the poorest demographics; at the same time, there are Islamic institutions that are centers of excellence, which function as a bridge or vehicle for lifting the human development indicators of entire communities around them. We know that in the

predominantly Muslim areas of Southeast Asia — Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao, and Southern Thailand, the vast majority of Muslim students attend public universities — nevertheless, significant percentages of the population do not.

There are some wonderful success stories of model Islamic universities and higher learning institutions in all of the countries of this region, that do receive government and private sector support, that produce test scores much higher than public universities and higher learning institutions scores, and that are extremely competitive nationally.³

We are confident that test scores from public Islamic higher learning institutions in the region are no worse, and in some cases a little better than the standard public higher learning institutions test scores. So we see that Islamic universities and Islamic education in Southeast Asia represent both challenges and opportunities for human development among Muslim communities and the others as well.

Historical Background

About knowledge and scientific activities relating to Islamic education in ASEAN, MB Hooker in his article titled “Introduction: Islamic Law in South-east Asia” said: “Islam in what is now Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines dates from the 15th century. It has left an extensive legacy in literature, philosophy and law. The key notion to keep in mind in assessing this legacy is the idea of *selection*. As with other Muslim lands outside the Arab heartland, the recipient cultures selected from the classical heritage that which they found useful or appropriate.”⁴ This means that education activities were reasonable thorough such period in which Muslim communities in this Southeast Asia have written many Islamic literatures.

To summarize what is happening in Southeast Asia countries relating to Islamic Studies and Islamic Education, *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in Contemporary South East Asia*, provides: “Outside of Islamic Studies scholars in these disciplines are also turning their attention to the study of issues pertaining to Muslims and Islam. The topics which such scholarship seeks to understand in Muslim societies are also increasingly diverse, and include democracy and political pluralism, secularism, gender, law, human rights, ethics, economic development, the environment, popular culture, consumerism, Islamic finance, even management and organizational theory.

A major factor impacting upon this enlarged field of Islamic Studies is the rapid growth in the number of scholars who are working in it, and in particular those who come from outside the Islamic religious tradition. The influence of the latter, working as they often are in prestigious academic institutions with abundant scholarly resources, using the latest methodologies, and in conditions of academic freedom, is in many cases significant. Yet their status as scholars who have grown up outside the Islamic tradition, who may live and work in non-Muslim countries, and who may lack a profound knowledge of Islamic scripture or a personal religious commitment to Islam, surely colours their interpretations. This dialogue between “insiders” and “outsiders” is one of the defining characteristics of Islamic Studies in Southeast Asia – one which, in fact, has a long tradition in Muslim scholarship.

While it can, of course, be said that the study of Islam in Southeast Asia has a long history of being “globalized”, it is clear that the educational networks and scholarly pilgrimages in Islamic Studies are also changing significantly. For some years the universities of McGill, Temple, Leiden, Chicago, and the Australian National University (for Islam in Southeast Asia) have been competing with the traditional centres of Islamic Studies, such as Al Azhar or the Islamic University of Medina, for influence over a much more broader field of Islamic Studies. Globalization has given unprecedented opportunities to greater numbers of young Southeast Asian Muslims to study overseas than ever before, whether it is in the Middle East, Iran, South Asia, Europe, the UK, North America, or Australia. Student mobility, scholarly exchange, international conferences, joint research projects, the setting-up of Islamic Studies centers in Western universities, international benchmarking and quality assurance among universities in Muslim countries, the increasing use of English as a medium of academic discourse, and not least of all the

³ See Robin Bush. (2008). “Islamic Education as a Vehicle for Human Development”, Human Development and Social Change Dialogue at the 2008 U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴ In *Asian Law Journal*, vol 4, 2002, p. 216.

communicative revolution made possible by the Internet and email, are all impacting upon the nature of the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. They are increasingly drawing it into a single, globalized academic landscape.

The expansion of material resources available for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia is a further crucial factor in the development of the field. The unprecedented interest in Islam has also attracted the attention of scholarly foundations and funding agencies globally – both in the Islamic world and the West. While the flow of Middle Eastern oil wealth into Islamic schools and education institutions worldwide is well-known, less attention has been given to how non-Muslim funding agencies are also impacting upon studies of Muslims and Islam. Some of these funding bodies may reflect the political agenda of the governments with whom they are affiliated (e.g. combating terrorism or promoting democracy), or at least concerns that are more prominent in the West: e.g. in the case of Europe, the integration of Muslim minorities into European mainstream society, or the promotion of a democratic, ‘liberal’ Islam. In the case of Southeast Asia, international funding agencies have long been active in funding local scholars and projects in the field of Southeast Asian Studies within the context of promoting economic and social development. Local funding sources should also not be overlooked. The relatively successful path to economic development of Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Brunei, and to a lesser extent Indonesia, has enabled the governments of these countries to provide greater resources for the study of Islam in their schools, colleges and universities.

Evidently the September 11 2001 attacks and the ensuing “war on terror” have affected the public image of Islamic educational institutions. The education of Muslims in Southeast Asia has become an object of international attention, in particular since a spate of bomb attacks in Indonesia, a resurgence of violence in the Muslim regions of the southern Philippines, and especially the bloody separatist uprising in Thailand’s southern border provinces since 2004. The rhetoric of the militants involved in these incidents is couched in religious terminology. Governments (not only Western but also of countries in the region itself), intelligence organizations, security analysts, the mass media, and scholars in diverse fields studying Islam have sought to explain the ideology behind the violence by examining the education that young Southeast Asian Muslims receive. One of the results of this politicization of Islamic education has been the drowning out of the voices of the teachers and administrators as public discourse focuses on the presumed links between Islamic education and the global political situation – particularly the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism. It has also contributed to the mistaken view that recent developments in Islamic education are due purely to outside political pressure – especially that of Western governments – while underplaying the internal dynamics of Islamic educational reform that have been at work in Southeast Asia and elsewhere decades before 2001.

It was with these issues in mind that an international workshop was held at Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat, southern Thailand, in January 2006, on the theme, “Voices of Islam in Europe and Southeast Asia”. The aim of the workshop was to gather leading scholars from Southeast Asia and Europe from various disciplinary backgrounds, to discuss the diversity of perspectives within this rapidly developing field of Islamic Studies. The timing and venue of the workshop were prompted by a more immediate factor: the outbreak of violent conflict in southern Thailand. This development, which received great attention in both the local as well as the regional media in Southeast Asia, obscured the more far-reaching changes already taking place in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia – including in Thailand itself. While papers presented at the workshop covered a wide range of areas including radicalism, gender, migration, identity and conflict resolution, the theme that almost all papers touched upon – and for many was the focus – was education.⁵

Could Islamic universities and higher learning institutions in this region have their own Islamic identity? This question is a reflection of what has been observed by scholars in their findings about Islam in Southeast Asia: What Should US Policymakers Know? These findings were recorded in *Policy Bulletin* issued by Stanley Foundation in November 18-19, 2004. It stated: “Despite the awkwardness of defining Muslim identities, Southeast Asians and Americans alike view the great majority of Muslims in the region to be moderate in their orientation and practice. On a policy level, this would seem to give Southeast Asia the potential to play an important role in the Muslim world. Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy, and Malaysia stands out as an example of a

⁵ (2011). *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in the Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Ed. Kamaruzzaman Bustaman-Ahmad & Patrick Jory, Kuala Lumpur: Yayasan Ilmuwan, p. v-vii.

modern Muslim state. But is Southeast Asia positioned to play such a demonstration effect in the global Muslim community?

Scholars point out the need to separate theology from culture in the Islamic world, and point to six major cultural zones in the global Muslim community: Arab, Persian, Turkish, sub-Saharan, Indian, and Malay. Each of these zones has a distinct religious identity, forged by theology, legal frameworks, and interaction with other religious and cultural groups. Malay Islam, the result of voluntary rather than forced conversion and filtered by passage through India, has historically differed from Muslim cultural zones farther away.

At the same time, this distance has narrowed in recent decades, particularly with the influence of petro-dollars from the Middle East. At the present time, in both theological and economic dimensions, the influence of the Middle East over Southeast Asia is essentially a one-way street. Prior to the 1970s, many Southeast Asians went to Cairo, Jordan, and Baghdad for education and were exposed to different theological strains. Today the educational flows to Saudi Arabia are far heavier.”⁶

Thus, to gather and strengthen the existence of Islamic universities and higher learning institutions in this region for the sake of Islamic regional identity, this paper proposes the establishment of ASEAN Islamic universities network which aims, objectives, function, form, etc are highlighted in next sub-topic.

⁶ Page 2.

PROPOSED ASEAN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

If public universities in ASEAN have their own vast in the so called ASEAN University Network (AUN), here we suggest the following for the network of Islamic universities in ASEAN.

Name: ASEAN Islamic Universities League (AIUL)

رابطة الجامعات الإسلامية في دول جنوب شرقي آسيا

AIUL is an independent legal entity made up of national Islamic universities in the ASEAN countries, whether public or private. It specializing in supporting Islamic universities and higher education institutions of the same level in ASEAN countries and encouraging cooperation between them.

The objectives of the AIUL include the following:

- Upgrading and developing higher education to address the needs of Muslim societies and benefit by the scientific and technological new developments in line with the Islamic Ummah's civilizational constants;
- Furthering cooperation in such a way as to enhance the exchange of experiences, studies, programmes and visits in the fields of education, science, culture and technology;
- Enhancing the level of scientific researches in all fields, exchanging their findings, and linking them with the developmental and civilizational requirements of the Islamic Ummah in the region;
- Stepping up the efforts of higher education institutions to address the current issues and entrench the values of understanding, coexistence and peace among the peoples of the Islamic Ummah and the world as a whole;
- Upgrading member universities' knowledge and human capacities;
- Caring for the Islamic heritage by publicizing, translating and authenticating it, and shedding light on the contribution of its scholars to human civilizational building;

AIUL is established in order to help hasten the solidarity and development of an Islamic regional identity through the promotion of human resource development so as to further strengthen the existing network of leading Islamic universities and institutions of higher learning in the region.

AIUL aims at facilitating Islamic universities and institutions of higher learning cooperation in developing:

- Islamic studies interdisciplinary academic programmes;
- Islamic Post Graduate programmes to be undertaken as cooperative academic programmes, each involving courses offered by institutions of higher education in more than one member institution;
- Islamic regional research projects to be undertaken jointly by scientists/scholars of institutions member;
- Visiting students programmes to enable students from one member institution to study for a given period of time at an institution of higher education of another member;
- Visiting Professors programmes to enable academics from one member institution to lecture for a given period of time at an institution of higher education of another member; and
- Visiting Administrators programmes to enable administrators from one member institution to acquire administrative experience for a given period of time at an institution of higher education of another member.

There are four key areas of AIUL as follow:

- student, faculty and administrator exchanges;
- Islamic studies;
- information networking, and

- collaborative research.

AIUL will conduct programmes and activities to encourage and promote Islamic higher education cooperation and development to enhance Islamic regional integration in achieving global standards.

AIUL activities may be categorised into five areas:

1. Youth Mobility,
2. Academic Collaboration,
3. Standards, Mechanisms, Systems and Policies of Islamic Higher Education Collaboration,
4. Courses and Programmes Development, and
5. Islamic Regional and Global Policy Platforms.

AIUL strategic focus to facilitate regional cooperation in developing:

- To strengthen the existing network of cooperation among Islamic universities and higher learning institutions in ASEAN;
- To promote collaborative study, research, educational and administrative programmes in the priority areas identified by AIUL;
- To promote cooperation and solidarity among students, scholars, academicians, researchers and administrators in the AIUL Member institutions; and,
- To serve as the policy-oriented body in Islamic higher education in the region.

AIUL will be made up of the **General Conference** which shall be made up of the rectors, the vice chancellors and presidents of universities and similar higher education institutions, or their substitutes. The General Conference shall meet in a regular session as determined by internal regulation, and may meet in a special session.

AIUL will have the **Executive Council** which shall be made up of certain members proposed by their universities and elected by the General Conference.

And AIUL will have the general secretariat which shall be made up of a Secretary General assisted by an administrative and technical setup in accordance with an organization chart proposed by the Secretary General and adopted by the Executive Council. The General Secretariat shall be headed by a Secretary General, whose election is endorsed by the General Conference for a three-year renewable term.

The Secretary General shall be the head of the administrative setup of AIUL and shall be accountable to the Executive Council and the General Conference. In addition, he shall have direct authority over the entire staff of the General Secretariat.

The working languages of the AIUL shall be Malay/Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and English.

In order to achieve its goal, AIUL will adopt the following means:

- Preparing studies, documents and reference guides to promote university education;
- Working towards the creation of specialized universities or institutions;
- Assessing universities' performance to upgrade their quality and accreditation standards;
- Helping find scholarships for the students of Member Universities;
- Holding sessions, symposia and workshops for continuous training in Member Universities.

AIUL shall be open to all Islamic national universities and similar higher education institutions in ASEAN which are eligible for membership.

The Executive Council shall consider the applications for membership, take the appropriate decisions regarding these applications and submit them to the General Conference for adoption.

All members shall enjoy the same rights, and shall have the same obligations.

The Member Universities pledge to work for the achievement of the AIUL's objectives and to settle their financial contributions.

The university or similar higher institutions applying for membership in the Federation must fulfill the following conditions:

- To be recognized, along with the degrees they award, by the higher education authorities of the country in which they operate.
- The students applying for enrolment therein must hold the General Certificate of Education (GCE), or its equivalent, and those applying for enrolment in higher studies therein must hold the first university degree, or its equivalent.
- The term of study therein must correspond to the university term of study recognized worldwide. (4 years of study, or 120 credit hours or their equivalent)

CONCLUSION

The AEC project has been crucial for moving ASEAN from its beginnings as a political grouping in 1967 to becoming one of the most dynamic regional economic blocs in the developing world. The solidarity and enthusiasm shown by ASEAN members in trying to meet the AEC goals are notable.

It might be said, then, that Islamic education in Southeast Asia remains an unfinished project. Within each state there have been intense struggles over what an education in Islam should mean. At the international level there are diverse forces each seeking to influence the paradigm of Islam in its own way. The establishment of the Network will ease the process.

Besides the establishment of ASEAN Islamic universities network, it is also suggested that an ASEAN Islamic University to be established in collaboration among the members of ASEAN countries. If al-Azhar University stands proudly in the Middle East, we hope also ASEAN Islamic University stands proudly in Southeast Asia.

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