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Cambodia’s “unwavering support” to Timor Leste’s ASEAN Membership: What is the motivation?

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A half-island nation in Southeast Asia, the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste has applied for its formal membership in ASEAN since 2011. Its journey to be conscientiously accepted by all ten ASEAN member states is a long, bittersweet memory. As a newly independent state with just over a million people, the country faces difficulty in human, social, and economic development with very little to offer and favor the ASEAN members. Nonetheless, under the Kingdom of Cambodia’s ASEAN chairmanship in 2022, Timor Leste became an 11th member of ASEAN in principle and has been granted observer status to attend all ASEAN meetings and other related summits. This paper will demonstrate the potential benefit in terms of political, social, and economic interests that Cambodia could gain from pushing forward Timor Leste’s application.

Cambodia’s political maneuver in Timor Leste

Cambodia’s assistance to Timor Leste, a relatively small country in Southeast Asia, is a soft power expansion in both Timor Leste and ASEAN. Following the 2023 election, Timor Leste swiftly offered congratulations to the new Prime Minister of Cambodia, and its Deputy Prime Minister also reiterated his appreciation for Cambodia’s support during his visit to Cambodia. Cambodia earned itself another partner that allowed Cambodia to strengthen its voice and decision-making power in ASEAN whose one of the principles is based on consensus. Through cultural exchange that is in line with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Timor Leste students are eligible for scholarships to pursue bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Cambodia. Such friendship and support are the first step to strengthening bilateral ties and ensuring that Cambodia has a brother who will likely back its voice in ASEAN’s decision-making process. In this respect, Cambodia likely sees a steady increase in soft power projection to Timor Leste in the future.

In addition, it creates a positive reputation for Cambodia among the ASEAN member states for its effort to bring regional unity which is aligned with Cambodia’s Foreign Policy Direction of maintaining and consolidating ASEAN unity and centrality. Timor Leste and Indonesia have developed their bilateral relations fairly well over the last decade, their conflict in the early 2000s remains a scar and a possible threat to Southeast Asia’s security and stability. If Timor Leste can successfully become an ASEAN member as expected, peace will be ensured between Indonesia and Timor Leste. As a former war-torn country, Cambodia could share its experience with Timor-Leste on national unity and regional integration guided by win-win policy – a policy spearheaded by former Prime Minister Hun Sen. By sharing lessons from its policy,

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Cambodia could provide a blueprint as Timor-Leste seeks to forge unity and regional peace. In this case, Cambodia's unwavering support to Timor Leste will be applauded because it plays a part in bridging relations among the member states

Cambodia's economic gains from Timor Leste's admission to ASEAN

Cambodia would also benefit economically from Timor Leste's admission to ASEAN. It welcomes Cambodia to invest in the garment sector in their country, allowing Cambodia to expand its garment industry in the region further. Given that Cambodia has an advantage over the rice mill industry, tightening relations with the country that face the growing demand for rice such as Timor Leste, who according to The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) imported US\$ 38.1 million worth of rice in 2021 from foreign countries, offers the opportunity for Cambodia to further increase its rice export. For instance, following the memorandum of understanding on rice trade that was signed in 2022, Timor Leste has signed a contract to purchase 4000 tonnes of rice from Cambodia in 2023. This act marks the beginning of rice trade ties between the two, creating opportunities for Cambodia's rice exports to increase substantially in the future. Furthermore, the air service that was signed in 2022 between the two leaders would also create an open room to increase tourism in Cambodia. According to a press release of the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), this initiative was raised further when the Deputy Prime Minister of Timor-Leste expressed the increasing interest of Timorese people to visit Cambodia before signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on tourism between the two countries.

In addition, Cambodia and Timor Leste can cooperate given that they both are rich in natural resources, specifically oil and gas. Cambodian former Prime Minister has called for investment in the oil sector as Cambodia has big potential for oil resources under Tonle Sap, mainland, and in the seabed whereas Timor Leste is more experienced since its petroleum has accounted for over 80% of the state's annual revenue. Therefore, the two countries should learn from each other and strengthen cooperation as small states to attract investors and to gain economic benefits while working to avoid the pitfalls of overreliance on natural resources. In addition, oil spill incidents may produce harmful effects on the maritime environment of the region. Hence, Cambodia which is in the early stage of the oil industry may cooperate with Timor Leste in the future for Research and Development outcomes and effective strategy to implement an action plan for oil spill preparedness.

To sum up, Cambodia's assistance to Timor Leste would reward it with the opportunity to enhance its reputation among all the ASEAN member states and the international community for upholding ASEAN's unity and centrality. It will contribute to peace through the region aligned with ASEAN's principle of promoting peace and stability in the area. It will also strengthen Cambodia and Timor Leste's economic relations by improving Cambodia's investment in Timor Leste and improving our tourism. Cambodia is a small state with a big heart. It will always strive to bring peace and maintain ASEAN centrality as wished by the ASEAN father to achieve a prosperous Southeast Asia. Its assistance to Timor Leste is yet another generous gesture of the Cambodian and it will continue to pursue the blooming of ASEAN within the principle of peace, stability, unity, and centrality.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.