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SOUTHEAST ASIA

## **Ubon is in Asean, Obama is not**

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With the hope and hype about Asean integration and community-building going strong and, hopefully, on top of the agenda of member states' governments, I wondered what all this would mean to those in provincial Asean.

After I accepted an invitation to share my views on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at Ubon Ratchathani University late last year, I realised that the question was about those living in capital cities - in Bangkok, Jakarta, Hanoi, etc. My session didn't cause much excitement among the students. But they asked, "What is the single most important benefit we get from Asean?", "How can we build a community when there are still disputes with neighbouring countries that are closer to us than our capital?", and "Will integration bring more growth to Asean as a whole but at the cost of widening urban-rural disparities?"

I should not have been, but indeed I was, surprised at the level of awareness about Asean at a southeastern Isan public university. If I understood correctly, my audience at Ubon was saying that for Asean integration to be most effective, perhaps it should also look into a form of micro-integration, meeting the immediate needs of local provincial communities, rather than only on a macro-integration of political, economic and social structures and pillars. It seems that those living in Ubon, less than 100 kilometres from the Lao border, and in other corners of Asean want the plans for increased connectivity to truly engage them with the rest of Asean as well.

When the Asean Community comes into being in 2015, cities like Ubon should be able to benefit in a different way than Bangkok. This is the provincial dimension of Asean growth and integration. All in all, this exercise reminded me that every Asean member state has its own version of "Ubon" that is indeed a part of Asean.

Earlier this month, I was again invited back to the university, this time to join a panel of experts on United States affairs. The conference, a successful collaboration between Chulalongkorn University's American Studies

Programme and Ubon's Political Science Department, was well attended by American and Thai experts and local university students. It was themed "The Obama Presidency: One Year On."

I shared my views on how the Obama administration can change Southeast Asian perspectives on democracy and human rights. Of course, I apologised for the trick headline, because this may not be on the radar of the Obama administration at all in the first place. And who wants to change perspectives? But as democracy is the core of US foreign policy, and the Obama administration has embarked on a re-interest away from the focus on bilateralism, sentimental idealism and general reactivity as characterised by the Bush presidency, there is an opportunity for the US to set its own standards to apply in its relations with countries that do not share its belief in free and open political systems. This is under the assumption that US interest in the region is sustained and not one of benign neglect or episodic attention.

I discussed the need for the US to adapt its own perspective and projection of democracy when abroad first, and that democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia is about awareness and education, not about condemnation. To promote democracy in the region, country-specific programmes are more practical. Democracy in the region is development-led and one and the same with the struggle with elective politics and national reconciliation. It will work hand in hand with strengthening discipline and, starting with shared values like anti-corruption, may go a long way.

But after my talk this time around, the only question posed to me was not on Obama or perspectives on democracy. It went back to the topic of my session last year, on Asean. The student asked if Asean's many efforts on democracy and human rights are nothing but vague ideas. Indeed, that student wants to be a part of Asean. Living in Ubon, he wants to see Asean progress and its mechanisms work for him - way before he faces someone who may try to change his perspectives on democracy and human rights.

Not counting my usual chit-chat with airline cabin crew on the flight back to Bangkok - during which I learned how to prevent the spread of infections like tetanus or bathayak in Thai on an aircraft - the sessions during my two trips to Ubon were most enlightening.

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- ***The author was the first Fulbright-Asean Visiting Scholar at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University in 2009.***

## **About the author**



Writer: [Natapanu Nopakun](#)  
Position: Reporter