

Chapter I

The Land and Its History

*“For forms of Government let fools contest;
Whatever is best administered is best.”*

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man: Epistle III*

Objectives

- ✓ Point out the similarities and differences among Southeast Asian countries.
- ✓ Describe the geographical attributes of the region.
- ✓ Highlight the common colonial past.
- ✓ Explain the motivation behind the formation of ASEAN.
- ✓ Identify potential challenges to the region.

Introduction

Scholarly interests in Southeast Asia increased after World War II. This is reflected in the proliferation of published works on the area. Several factors contributed to the lack of interest before the Second World War. The minimal role Southeast Asia played in world affairs in the past is one explanation. Another reason is the lack of economic development in the region. The colonisation by the Western powers is another *raison d'être*. Interests in individual countries were confined to the colonising powers, as other countries had no incentive to contribute

to the knowledge of these colonies. However, all these are fast changing. Brunei, the last colony in Southeast Asia, achieved Independence from the British in 1984. The market-oriented economies in Southeast Asia were turning in spectacular economic performances. For decades, economic growth rates of these economies have been much higher than those achieved by developed nations. Furthermore, some countries in the region are taking on more and more international responsibilities. Besides, during the Cold War era, Southeast Asia was a hotbed of struggle for supremacy and dominance between anti-communist and non-communist forces on the one hand and communist forces on the other, with the Western powers deeply involved against the spread of communism.

Southeast Asia, which is located south of China and east of India, can be divided into two main sub-regions, mainland Southeast Asia which comprises Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam and insular Southeast Asia which comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Such a categorisation although simple is at times useful. The classification can be used as a dividing line to separate Southeast Asia physically and culturally, if not also economically. While mainland Southeast Asia is contiguous, insular Southeast Asia is fragmented. Indonesia, for example, is made up of more than 13,000 islands, while the Philippines has over 7,000 islands. Most of the world's great religions are found in Southeast Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia is dominated by Buddhism. On the other hand, Islam found its way to some of the countries in insular Southeast Asia, namely Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia as early as the 13th century. In the Philippines, Catholicism was introduced to the Filipinos by their colonial master, the Spaniards, in the 16th century. Notwithstanding the presence of a dominant religion, small pockets of followers of other religions exist. For example, in the southern islands of the Philippines, there is a large Muslim community. Similarly, in Irian Jaya and Bali, two of the many islands in the Indonesian Archipelago, Christianity and Hinduism are the principal religions respectively. Economically, mainland Southeast Asia has a weighted-average GDP per capita of US\$700. In contrast, countries in insular Southeast Asia have a weighted-average GDP per capita of US\$1,200.

Other significant differences among Southeast Asian nations include population size and political system. Southeast Asia houses one of the

most populous countries in the world. With a population of 204 million, Indonesia is just after China, India and United States of America in terms of population size. Interestingly, one of the smallest countries on earth can also be found in Southeast Asia. With a population of only 314,000, Brunei is thus considered to be small. The political system differs greatly among the Southeast Asian countries. For example, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore are republics, Laos and Vietnam are communist states, Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand are constitutional monarchies. In Myanmar, a military regime is running the country.

Diversity juxtaposes with commonality. Anthropologists segregate human race into three distinct groups, namely Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid. Under this system of classification, all the people in Southeast Asia fall under the category of Mongoloid, which in anthropological jargon, refers to the group of people native to Central and Eastern Asia. However, such a classification is now outdated and has condescending connotations. The term Mongoloid has come to mean demented physical and mental developments, features similar to the Asiatic race. A more appropriate, modern term would thus be the East Asian race, from Mongolians, Koreans and Japanese in the North to Vietnamese, Thais and Indonesians in the South.

Southeast Asia, because of its geographical proximity, has similar climatic conditions. All the countries, partially or wholly, lie in the path of the monsoons. As Southeast Asian countries are mainly agricultural-based (except for Singapore), the cultivation of wet rice is a common sight when travelling in the region. Countries in Southeast Asia also have a part of their history in common. All the countries except Thailand, were not too long ago colonies of the Western powers. Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore were colonised by the British, Indonesia by the Dutch, the Philippines by the Spaniards and later by the Americans. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were colonised by the French. Although Thailand was not colonised, it lost some of its territories to the Europeans. The present states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu in Peninsular Malaysia were ceded by the Thais to the British in 1909.

Another commonality observed in Southeast Asia is the emancipation of women in the region. Over the years, the status of women has improved, most noticeably in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and

Thailand. Progress in woman's education has been substantial. The closing of the adult illiteracy gap between the sexes in most Southeast Asian countries signifies equal educational opportunities. The employment prospects for women are also better and more numerous. This is exhibited in the increase in female participation rate in the labour force.

A milestone achieved in the history of Southeast Asia is the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. The original motive was political. However, over the years, ASEAN has evolved into a more economic-oriented organisation. In 1999, ASEAN admitted its tenth and final member, Cambodia; a wish longed to be fulfilled by its founding fathers finally materialised. Southeast Asia has indeed come a long way. However, a more meaningful exercise would involve finding the answer to the question of what lies ahead. What are the challenges Southeast Asia will face and must overcome to achieve greater prosperity and at the same time to be a more cohesive region? The road for Southeast Asia to catch up with the developed economies is still a very long one.

Geographical Attributes

Southeast Asia, which spans from 29°N to 11°S latitude and from 92°E to 141°E longitude, covers a total land area of 4,500,000 square kilometres. Lying within the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn (except for a small portion of Myanmar), the region has climatic conditions similar to those in tropical countries. Temperatures vary slightly, both across the region and throughout the year, although differences in altitude can result in great climatic disparity. Southeast Asia experiences two periods of monsoon each year.

From November to March, the North-East monsoon prevails. High atmospheric pressure caused by the winter season in the northern hemisphere forces cold, dry air to flow towards the Equator, which at that time has a lower atmospheric pressure. As the cold, dry wind blows across the South China Sea, it absorbs moisture along the way. When it reaches insular Southeast Asia, the moisture-laden air results in heavy rainfall. On crossing the Equator, the wind is deflected to the left as a result of the Earth's rotation. So, the wind arrives as North-West monsoon