The 2nd ASEAN Reader

Compiled by Sharon Siddique and Sree Kumar

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003

The first ASEAN Reader was published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in 1992: ten years later the Institute’s director was convinced that a second reader would be appropriate and timely because of the many events that occurred within Southeast Asia during the decade following the initial reader’s publication. Drs. Sharon Siddique, a former Deputy Director of ISEAS and Sree Kumar, a former Institute Fellow, accepted the director’s invitation to compile materials to include in a second reader. As a consequence, they were able to gather 105 short essays written by well-known scholars whose expertise covered a broad gamut of disciplinary foci both on The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an institution and on its individual member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

The result of Siddique and Kumar’s work is a superb collection of information, ideas, and concepts that will assist teachers of courses that include a focus on Southeast Asia. The volume can either stand alone in a course that deals exclusively with Southeast Asia or contribute to a broader classroom experience that includes a focus on the countries that make up the membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The book covers general topics organized and structured on the foundation of introductory chapters that examine the institutional dynamics brought about by substantial changes throughout the region, and in ASEAN’s organizational structure, its programmatic initiatives, and the Association’s evolution from six to ten member nations. The book’s contents focus on the increasing number of participants in the Association, a fact that has caused it to come to grips with a more complex mosaic of member countries. Members now differ widely in the stage and level of their economic and political modernization and development as well as their social, cultural, and religious belief systems. However, despite their differences, a number of essays focus on the fact that the ten countries that make up the Southeast Asia region tend to share geopolitical defense and security issues, and the members all opt for multilateral relations that involve multilateral institutions, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and bilateral agreements. Multilateral initiatives include the ASEAN Dialogue Partnership System that provides ongoing contacts between Association members and a number of their key global partners on economic and commercial issues. The ASEAN Regional Forum was created to minimize conflict and resolve it when it occurs because of political and strategic differences of opinion. In effect, they serve to lessen the likelihood that economic and financial as well as political and strategic conflicts will arise, and will help ensure that if they do emerge, the conflicts can be resolved with a minimum of friction.

With over 100 essays, the book is not an easy one to review because of the magnitude of topical diversity. However, essays are clustered around topic areas. An example is reflected in the compilers’ grouping of the rich religious and social principles of Islam and, at the same time, the threats to peace and security posed by Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda-like entities within Southeast Asia. For example, Rohan Gunaratna’s essay “Asia: Al Qaeda’s New The-
The result of Siddique and Kumar’s work is a superb collection of information, ideas, and concepts that will assist teachers of courses that include a focus on Southeast Asia.

ROBERT CURRY is Professor Emeritus in Economics and International Affairs at California State University Sacramento. He currently teaches part time at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa and the Institute for International Studies, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, Thailand. He recently taught short courses at Vietnam’s University of Agriculture and Forestry.