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ASEAN's unchanged melody? The theory and practice of 'non-interference' in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is widely supposed by theorists and commentators of many persuasions to have elevated the principle of absolute non-interference in the internal affairs of states into a central pillar of Southeast Asian regionalism. Non-interference is also criticised for retarding ASEAN from taking meaningful action over economic crises, problematic members like Myanmar, and transnational security threats. This article critiques this consensus, arguing that the norm has never been absolute, but has rather been upheld or ignored in line with the interests of the region's dominant social forces. While the principle formally remains in place despite such challenges and serious instances of violation, it is now subject to competing demands and contestation.

Keywords:

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Lee Jones is a lecturer in International Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. His research focuses on questions of state-society relations, governance, political economy, sovereignty and intervention, particularly in post-colonial countries. He has recently completed a book manuscript on sovereignty regimes in Southeast Asia.

Notes

1. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand joined in 1967; Brunei Darussalam, in 1983; Laos and Myanmar, in 1997; and Cambodia, in 1999.
2. B. Kausikan, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
3. B. Desker, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
4. Kraisak Choonhavan, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 2008.
5. Ali Alatas, interview with the author, Jakarta, February 2008.
6. J. Asda, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 2008.
7. B. Kausikan, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
8. ASEAN Secretariat Official, interview with the author, Jakarta, February 2008.

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