

## 2016 Asean Economic Community: Opportunity or Challenge

Written by Mudjia Rahardjo

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The year 2015 has left us and will never return back forever. For those who were successful in their business or career, 2015 was the year full of golden memories, and on the other hand for those who failed it was considered as a dark year. However, whatever is the memory in it, 2015 has gone and there is no need to discuss it further, except for those who will take the lesson learnt from it. When 2015 has left, a new year, that is 2016 has come. For Asean nations, 2016 is noted as the beginning year of Asean Economic Community, where the free market system among ten Asean countries is started. Through this system, people in all Asean countries will freely come and go to work or do business. Whether we like it or not, we cannot deny the fact that MEA will run because it is already approved as a commitment of all 10 Asean country leaders.

MEA is not a sudden event, because it was already started in 1993 as the beginning of the so-called "ASEAN Free Trade Area" or AFTA where regulations of free trade and business among all Asean nations were made. The result of this regulation is considered effective, shown by the number of trade and business among people in this region which has increased significantly.

Different from AFTA which only covered free trade and business, MEA is much wider than that because it covers other aspects, such as services and work forces. Under MEA, every person of Asean community has an equal opportunity to work and do business in all Asean countries. We will Vietnamese engineers, doctors, dentists, architects, teachers, nurses etc. will work in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and other Asean countries. On the other hand, Indonesian engineers, teachers, managers, and other professionals, etc will work in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, etc. This situation needs a standardized competence and skill needed by the community.

Then there is a question to be answered, "Is MEA an opportunity or challenge"? The answer might be both. For those who have been well prepared to face it, MEA is a big opportunity to do or develop their business. While, for those who are not, MEA is just like a nite mare. Why so? Because they will not be able to compete with their neighbouring nations and finally will only become onlookers. It must be noted that a free market system is basically a free competition. And in every competition there is always a winner and a loser. Those who have better competence, skills and preparation will finally win, and those who do not will lose. Of course, nobody wants to be the loser. Every body wants to be the winner.

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As a country belonging to this community, Indonesia has become a special attention for other Asean countries. It is because Indonesia is the largest archipelago country with the biggest number of population (around 250 million people at present). With this great number of population, economically, Indonesia is the best market place for trade and business. Therefore, I believe that a lot of people will take this opportunity as well as possible to do their business in the global market.

MEA is also the moment for all Asean nations, around 600 million people, to develop in all aspects of life. Every Asean people must develop their skills and competence to be able to compete themselves with their friends from other Asean countries. Besides, as stated by the Secretary General of Asean, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, there must be a sense of belonging of Asean Community without losing their sense of belonging of their own country. Sense of belonging among people in Europe as members of European Union can be taken as a good example. All Europeans can unite in a strong unity when facing the problems, such as terrorism, extremist groups and other forms of crime. Economically, European Union is also very strong because they are in good unity.

MEA can also be a very strong zone like EU if all Asean people have something in common to understand what MEA is. To reach this, efforts must be done intensively to transform any information about MEA to all Asean nations. This is very important because not all Asean people know and realize that they are now living in a new life order, namely a new situation where all nations in ten Asean countries can come and go very easily to do their business, to develop their career, to find jobs, to develop their business, to sell their products etc. Some surveys announce that less than 70% of Asean nations know what MEA is. It is not an easy job to overcome it. If not all people in this region know and understand MEA, how can they have a feeling of belonging of Asean Community?

Though competition in the MEA era cannot be denied, let us see it from the positive perspective that MEA will give a better opportunity to all Asean nations to be better. Let us make MEA as a comfort zone for all Asean nations to live and work together. Through competition, they can still work together for mutual benefit. Being Asean nations means being able to live together with other nations of this region. Therefore, Let us welcome this moment with a great optimism and enthusiasm. Of course, followed by working hard!

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