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Asean bares its fangs

BRITISH Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's statement on Myanmar was either meant to flex the new foreign policy muscles of the UK's Labour Government or hurt the feelings of Asean's leaders. Any member of the British mission could have told him that neither would go down well with Asean, and certainly not with Malaysia. While the UK is not the only European country to have discussed the possibility of barring Myanmar from the Asia-Europe meeting (Asem) in April next year, Britain spoke as the host of that meeting. In this context, Cook's remarks carry much weight and many implications. Cook did not just accuse the junta in Myanmar of repressing democratic aspirations, but said that Yangon was barred from the Asem because its Government profited from the dadah trade. Another reason why Myanmar cannot be invited, according to Cook, is because Europe has decided to deny visas to any senior government official from that country.

What hurts is that Cook spoke so casually of the eligibility of an Asean member during his stay as a guest of another Asean member. What especially hurts is that Cook has not given Asean a fair chance to prove what the grouping can do for Myanmar and its people. Cook has also not given Myanmar any time at all to get used to being a part of the dynamic regional economic grouping. While Asean certainly does not expect Europe to accept its decision to include Myanmar with open arms, the least Europe could have done is to have aided Asean in its desire to see Myanmar progress. As a long-standing trade and dialogue partner, Britain should have understood why Asean needed to draw Myanmar into the grouping. By prospering all its neighbours, including Myanmar, Asean will also prosper. Britain and the other European countries have benefited greatly from trade with a prosperous Asean.

It is unfortunate that the statement had to come from Cook at a point when Asean is just beginning to exert an influence on its latest member and, more importantly, when Yangon is starting to show signs of wanting to seriously "act" like an Asean member. Cook's remarks came just after Myanmar and the other Asean members had formally decided to work together in finding mutually beneficial solutions to their problems. This is not a beginning per se. Asean has been carrying out its constructive engagement approach with Myanmar for some time now and has had to contend with measures - including embargoes - imposed by Western nations that have threatened to derail the delicate process of drawing Myanmar into the sunlight.

If Cook's objective in making the statement was to provoke a response from Asean's leaders, he succeeded instantly. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean might decide to boycott the second Asem summit if the European Union barred Myanmar. If there is discrimination against Myanmar, he said, there is also discrimination against Asean.

Cook's remarks are a slap in the face for Asean. As an influential partner in the Asean-Post Ministerial Conference and a major trading partner and investor in this region, Britain's stand on Myanmar - an Asean member - is hard to fathom. It sounds as if Cook is not convinced that Asean is doing something positive for Myanmar. Or, even if he is convinced, he does not believe that Asean can succeed. One wonders if Cook has been informed that Asean governments are among the strictest when it comes to battling the dadah menace. Or, if he is aware that dadah is legal in one of Europe's greatest cities, a fact which did not stop that city

from attending the first Asem in Bangkok.

As the new British foreign secretary, Cook may have also underestimated the usefulness of the Asem in trying to resolve Myanmar's economic backwardness and social problems. Barring Myanmar from attending such an auspicious dialogue, would only be seen as an attempt to bar Myanmar from accessing opportunities that could aid its development efforts. Such can only be seen as an attempt to undermine not only Asean, but Asem as well.

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