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Cambodia a litmus test of Asean policy

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IT was lunchtime when Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi agreed to an interview to discuss tomorrow's Asean Ministerial Meeting. It was a short encounter, held in between his other ministerial meetings on Monday.

In fact, he had earlier in the morning addressed the Second Asean Congress organised by the Asean-Institute of Strategic and International Studies. It was also held with the collaboration of several other agencies, all of which are keen Asean watchers in their own way.

The congress was held a few days before the AMM, lending the ministerial meeting additional excitement and input. Abdullah readily agreed that the forthcoming meeting has added significance and importance, especially in the context of the regional association's expansion.

An Asean 10 had been debated about extensively not just across Asean but in other parts of the world as well. While Asean watchers agreed that the CLM (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) issue will dominate this week's meeting, many were more concerned about the association's future in light of recent developments concerning Cambodia.

Cambodia's internal turbulence had caused its entry into Asean to be put on hold for an indefinite period. But key shapers of Asean's policies were quietly confident that Cambodia will form part of the group before the end of the year.

Abdullah accepted that the Cambodian issue is perhaps Asean's biggest test to date. It's not only a test of the group's diplomatic skills but also of its constructive engagement policy. How well this policy can work will partly be assessed by how well Asean tackles the Cambodian issue.

Myanmar's entry is now only a matter of formality, as is Laos. It will take a few years before these two countries are given any leadership role within Asean but their inclusion would be one way of judging whether constructive engagement works or fails.

Asean's vision of a crescent of prosperity includes Cambodia, but withholding its membership is a setback in this grand plan of wealth in the region. How would Asean face this stiff test, Abdullah was asked.

"Well, Asean is big and mature enough. After 30 years of existence, I like to think that Asean has the respect and maturity to handle this Cambodian issue.

"But what is important is this. Asean must first bear this in mind; how does Asean see Cambodia in the future. It has to be related to that.

"Asean has to make a decision, a decision based on how Asean looks at Cambodia in the future, where is Cambodia in the Asean scenario."

As if anticipating the next question - what does Asean want of Cambodia? - Abdullah said: "We want Cambodia to be part of Asean. Personally, I don't think I want to run away from that objective.

"I don't think I want to abandon the vision of an Asean 10. I don't think my friends in Asean are going to do that. The question then is when?"

"The decision (to admit Cambodia) has already been made. I don't think we need to abandon Cambodia now because of the problems we face. Doing that may be a decision that is considered a little too hasty."

The Cambodian issue runs smack into the association's immediate and long-term goals of a region enjoying sustained peace. Realising the full import of this, Asean must "not do things that show we are not able to cope with the situation," Abdullah said.

The ministers attending the meeting cannot help but feel the excitement of the new challenge Cambodia poses. Cambodian Second Prime Minister Hun Sen's rejection of an Asean effort to help seek a solution to its problem did not come as a complete surprise to some.

Questions abound. Would it not have been wiser for Asean to meet Hun Sen first before meeting his fellow Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh? Some Asean watchers thought that if this was done, Hun Sen's response could have been somewhat different.

Another question facing Asean now is - how would it cope with the realities in Cambodia? Abdullah, who appeared to be enjoying the diplomatic mind game, was quick to point out that Asean could not, indeed, must not, run away from the on-the-ground situation.

"This week's meeting must make certain decisions. Some perspectives come into play. We have to look at Asean's strategic interests - regional security and political stability, as well as its economic well-being.

"It has always been Asean's vision that all countries in the region be together. By being together we can help each other prosper...we can enjoy each other's prosperity, which in itself brings us more all-round benefits.

"Of course, we can become strong. To have one country in the region less stable than the others, and to remain poor and alone would create problems.

"As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, it is always better to have a neighbour that is doing well than one that is having all sorts of problems."

Mindful of the fact that the world is watching these developments closely, the minister acknowledges the drama that is unfolding. The 30th meeting is regarded by many as an important source of reference for Asean future conferences and challenges.

"Asean is in a good position - already successful politically and economically. It is now being expanded and is thinking of its future role.

"Asean certainly attracts a lot of interest because it is already a successful regional grouping. Look at its market size alone, look at its market capitalisation possibilities.

"It is not a boast to say that Asean is increasingly seen as more than just an important player on the world stage. For instance, the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) is very much an Asean thing and is regarded as the most important security forum in the region, perhaps the most powerful too."

How would Asean react to comments and remarks by certain sections of the international community that it allows itself to be used as a platform that will give Myanmar and Cambodia the legitimacy and credibility they want, the minister was asked.

Abdullah's response was a typical Asean reaction.

"We are not looking at it from the point of view of giving them legitimacy. We have to deal with a certain group of people who are in charge of these countries.

"If we want to help these countries, (and we certainly do), if we want the people of these countries to share the region's prosperity through our time-tested spirit of co-operation and collaboration, then we have to do it irrespective of who leads the government.

"The Asean approach and style has always been based on Asian values. The Myanmar situation is an example...we don't embarrass and insult people in public. We'd rather talk to them as friends...quiet and earnest talks work for us.

"A lot of things can take place. I feel very positive about this."

There is certainly a lot on Abdullah's plate as current chairman of the

AMM. As a group, the association should also be wary of possible backlash from the more powerful of its dialogue partners.

But Asean appeared unperturbed by this, as seen from Abdullah's next statement. "We've decided to do certain things, we decide the best. We have to face the issue. To be very frank with you, I don't think that all these powerful nations would want to abandon Asean simply because of the admission of Myanmar."

The minister's confidence is not altogether unsubstantiated. There have been reports from some of these countries saying that Asean would be well placed to assert pressure on Myanmar when it becomes an Asean member.

Putting pressure in the definition of these countries may not fall into the Asean agenda, but the association would be able to advance its constructive engagement approach further and on a more structured format.

Asean have frequent and regular meetings at various levels throughout the year and all members are represented. It would probably be years before Myanmar can chair an AMM or be asked to be the liaison chairman with a dialogue partner.

Abdullah's parting shot was clear and simple: "Asean will do something to address the situation in Myanmar. But we cannot achieve this in one day."

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