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Passing the solidarity test as a 10-member Asean grouping

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WHILE the Asean secretariat and Wisma Putra officials are setting the stage for the grouping's most important meeting since its inception 30 years ago, the European Union is making last-minute efforts to convince it against accepting Myanmar.

The Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur from July 21 to 29 will formally usher in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, making it a grouping which represents all 10 Southeast Asian nations.

The Asean 10 dream was only realised at a special meeting in Kuala Lumpur on May 31 when Foreign Ministers unanimously decided to accept the three into the fold.

"The decision is firm and irreversible," Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also chairman of the Asean Standing Committee, had said after the meeting.

But despite that, Asean solidarity is again being put to the test.

The United States had announced economic sanctions against Yangon, which includes a ban on US investments in its oil and natural gas development. It also expressed regret over Asean's acceptance of Myanmar.

Early this week, the EU insisted that Myanmar should be left out because of its so-called violation of human rights.

The EU Foreign Ministers, meeting in Luxembourg last week, warned Asean not to press for Myanmar's participation in the EU-Asean Co-operation Agreement and said Yangon would not be allowed to take part in the second Asia-Europe meeting (Asem) in London next year.

The first was in Bangkok last year. The 15 heads of Government and State from EU and 10 from Asia had met to decide how to enhance trade, cultural, political and social relations between the two continents.

The Asian heads included the Asean Seven as well as China, South Korea and Japan. This is the first time a formal link was established between the EU and Asean.

But with the latest EU statement on Myanmar, Asean diplomats wonder whether the Bangkok meeting last year would be the first and the last.

In the strongly-worded statement, the EU voiced its "serious concern at the deteriorating human rights situation" in Myanmar and said the military Government in Yangon should release all pro-democratic activists.

It said Myanmar would not be allowed to attend any forthcoming EU-Asean co-operation meetings.

Malaysian officials have reacted strongly.

"Why should the EU call the shots?" said an official. "The EU is the one who initiated Asem because it believes that Southeast Asia is growing rapidly and will be a good place to invest."

Another felt the question was whether the EU was in a position to talk about human rights when for centuries and through the two World Wars, the British, Portuguese and Dutch plundered lands in Southeast Asia, brutally breaking up and dividing people, stripping valuable mining resources and interfering in long-held religious and socio-cultural traditions.

At the turn of the century and towards the 1950s, European domination of the Far East began to taper off and as the resources were depleting, they left people broken and disunited with no hope of recovering from economic ruins.

But the Southeast Asian countries, despite the humiliation, recovered from the doldrums through their own will and nationalism.

Today, the East Asian countries, subscribing to their mellowed and polite traditions, have re-accepted the former "masters" as trading and dialogue partners.

A consultant on foreign affairs said the EU should not dictate whom Asean should pick as members of its grouping.

Asean, he pointed out, had never tried to influence the EU into accepting any country as its member, noting that Turkey had still not been admitted into the grouping simply because it was a Muslim country.

And Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

"It is most unlikely that Asean will isolate Myanmar to satisfy conditions of the EU. Asean, after all, does not depend on Asem for survival," said the consultant, adding that EU's latest stand was totally undiplomatic.

The EU believes that by isolating the junta, it will force it to improve its behaviour, but Asean members favour a policy of "constructive engagement" combining quiet diplomacy with growing trade and investment.

By engaging Myanmar in talks and economic activities, Asean will be able to show that principles of democracy and the free market economy need not necessarily fail. As a group, Asean would be able to monitor closely and influence the situation in Myanmar better, especially when it is already a member.

This has been reaffirmed many times by Asean leaders including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but it appears that their explanation has fallen on deaf ears. It is as though Asean does not have the right to an opinion.

The EU has already cut off high-level contacts with Myanmar and withdrawn its system of trade preferences for Myanmar exports. The EU Foreign Ministers have also decided to impose additional measures against Myanmar when they meet again in September.

This then will be the first test of Asean solidarity as a 10-member group when it meets at the Post-Ministerial Meeting which also includes the EU, US and other dialogue partners.

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