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Asean statesmen still deeply divided over admission of Cambodia

Ashraf Abdullah in Hanoi

WHEN Asean Heads of Government met in Kuala Lumpur in December last year, they decided that Cambodia should be admitted into Asean after it had held its elections and when its Government was firmly in place.

In the final Press statement issued by the leaders, the paragraph on the issue of Cambodia's admission reads:

"The Heads of State or Government agreed that consultation should be intensified so as to enable Cambodia to join Asean as soon as possible, preferably before the next Asean Summit."

The "next Asean Summit" referred to in the Press statement begins tomorrow. Asean leaders will arrive today in this Vietnamese capital of Hanoi for the two-day meeting, which coincides with an official visit to Vietnam by the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The Press statement issued at the end of the informal summit in Kuala Lumpur last year effectively means that some progress should have been achieved by today towards welcoming Cambodia into the fold.

But there has been no progress. In fact, Asean Foreign Ministers, or at least the three who were against Cambodia's entry at this point of time, took a step backwards.

Sadly, the nine Asean Foreign Ministers who met over dinner on Friday night to prepare the groundwork for the leaders' summit, did not achieve a consensus on whether to admit Cambodia at this point of time.

While six wanted Cambodia to be admitted, the other three - Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand - voted in favour of a further delay.

Their reason was that Asean may be embarrassed if problems broke out in Cambodia once again after it was accepted.

They feel that the Government is too new and should be given a chance to prove its effectiveness.

They think the senate, which is part of a coalition agreement between Funcinpec and the Cambodian Peoples' Party, should be well in place before it is accepted.

The six other nations feel Cambodia has held a fair election, a pre-requisite for its entry into Asean and has even formed a Government in accordance with its constitution.

Given this theoretical tug-of-war, the leaders will have a tough time deciding on the recommendations made by their Foreign Ministers that Cambodia should not be accepted at this point of time.

The decision will be made tougher because of Hun Sen's presence and a letter written by the president of the Cambodian National Assembly Prince Norodom Ranariddh appealing to Asean to accept Cambodia into the fold.

Diplomats say the Head of State King Norodom Sihanouk will also be writing to Asean leaders to accept Cambodia at this summit.

Cambodia's scheduled admission into Asean in Kuala Lumpur in July last year was deferred after Prime Minister Hun Sen ousted his then co-Prime Minister Ranariddh in a power struggle that led to bloody clashes in Phnom Penh.

The two rivals agreed last month that their parties would form a new coalition. The Government headed by Hun Sen was sworn in last Monday.

"Are the leaders going to ignore the letters sent by Sihanouk and Ranariddh as well as Hun Sen's presence in Hanoi? Will that be an Asean way," asked an Asean diplomat.

Vietnam, the host of the current Asean Summit, is also pressing ahead

for Cambodia's entry. A relatively new member, having joined only in 1995, Vietnam has experienced and reaped the benefits of being a member. It now wants to ensure that Cambodia, with which it once used force to ensure political changes, joins the club. In other words, Vietnam wants to rewrite history and let bygones be bygones.

The other theory suggests that with Cambodia in Asean, Vietnam can rest assured that the Indochinese region will be in peace because new members are required to accede to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Co-operation.

The Treaty prohibits interference and invasion of a member state on another.

Vietnam is particularly concerned about developments in Cambodia because it shares the western border with the latter.

A question many diplomats are asking is whether Asean would be better off with Cambodia or without.

Some argue that if Cambodia is in Asean, it will do its utmost to ensure peace and stability because it will have to subscribe to Asean's cardinal principles and policies.

"The question of Asean being embarrassed may not arise because Cambodia will then respect the grouping's objective of maintaining Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality," said a diplomat.

But if Cambodia is not accepted, then there will not be any multilateral policy or treaty that will anchor it to the ground.

What then? What if problems recur in Cambodia?

At least if Cambodia is in Asean, it will try and contain its problems within its boundaries and protect other Asean partners from spillover effects, especially those in the Indochinese region like Laos and Vietnam.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, undoubtedly, will push for Cambodia's immediate membership in Asean. He will not be alone - at least not this time. He will have the support of other leaders, minus Singapore's Goh Chok Tong, Thailand's Chuan Leekpai and the Philippines' Joseph Estrada. But as it is, the more the merrier seems to be a forgotten phrase.

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