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Myanmar a step closer towards Asean standards

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"LET me tell you one thing," began one Myanmar government official a fortnight ago. "The military, after being in power since 1962 - after 36 years - isn't about to give up power that quickly."

He added: "But the policy of constructive engagement, contrary to what the West may say, is working. However, no matter what, Myanmar is not going to have a system like that of Britain or the United States of America."

The talk is that the country is going to be just like most of the countries in Asean, especially Thailand and Indonesia, where the military plays a prominent role.

And the generals seem to have favoured something akin to demokrasi pancasila. There is even talk that a similar set-up as Indonesia's Golkar, an organisation to which all those in the establishment are members, is currently being organised.

That organisation and the political parties will participate in elections with the military playing a supervisory and deciding role. Exactly how this will be depends on a new constitution now being drafted by the Constituent Assembly.

In the 1990 elections, the government party lost against the popular National League for Democracy of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council, which took over the government in 1988, insisted that the elections were for the purpose of filling the Constituent Assembly and not for Parliament.

"This time around you can be certain the government is not going to lose," said the official.

I first met him in 1965 when I visited then Rangoon - but Yangon since eight years ago - as part of a student delegation to present the Malaysian case against the Indonesian konfrontasi to Burmese (now Myanmar) students. So that they in turn would influence their government.

What we did not know at that time was the campuses were closed after students violently opposed the military government under General Ne Win. The student union building of Rangoon (now Yangon) University was burnt to the ground and students were told to go home.

However, we did get to meet some students, unofficially of course, but not as an organised group. We just heard them out but did not really bother to persuade them to push their government to side with Malaysia.

"But, the military too has changed. The present batch of generals are no fools. They are only too aware of what world opinion means and who controls it," said the former student who managed to graduate as an engineer when the campuses were reopened. (In December 1996, these campuses were closed again and have remained so until today.)

To a suggestion by those who are virulently against the regime that the generals are not clever enough to understand hints by Asean leaders and, therefore, they should speak to them more directly, he shook his head and said: "Not true. No, not true. They are very clever people. They understand only too well. And the good thing is they are changing, more so since Myanmar became a member of Asean last year."

Shortly after becoming a member, the ruling military junta changed its name from SLORC to State Peace and Development Council. It was seen as an attempt to make the junta look benign, and probably to distance itself from SLORC's action in not re-convening the Pyithu Hluttaw, the Myanmar

Parliament, in which the NLD would have dominated.

Many Asean officials say that Myanmar had already been making positive changes ever since the regional organisation began constructively engaging Myanmar, after it was nudged by its Western dialogue partners to exert pressure on that country to make some political changes.

"In fact, constructive engagement is more successful now than before," said an Asean official. "Now the other regional leaders, while making trips to Myanmar as part of the Asean protocol to visit its new member, could talk directly to the SPDC and get their response."

And judging by what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told SPDC members when he was there two weeks ago, the Asean heads of governments like Manila President Fidel Ramos, Indonesian President Suharto and Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong must have made similar remarks when they were in Myanmar earlier.

During his meeting with SPDC members, Dr Mahathir advised them that certain international norms, values and standards must be observed by the regime in the interest of the well-being of Myanmar and its people.

He also remarked that the Constituent Assembly, at one time dominated by NLD members, should be asked to speed up its work of preparing the new national charter which would create for the country a new system of government.

While they were in Myanmar, the heads of government were also known to have sent a small delegation headed by a senior official to meet Suu Kyi. In Malaysia's case, the senior official was Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Suu Kyi was accompanied by NLD senior officials Aung Shwee, Tin Oo and U Lwin.

Apparently the message the senior officials of the visiting Asean heads of government gave Suu Kyi was the same: Accept the inevitable - at least for the moment - and participate in the system that is going to emerge.

According to a Myanmar Foreign Ministry official, the new constitution is almost ready. The delay is due to problems related to the position of the various ethnic groups or nationalities as they are referred to in all political documents.

"Once it is ready we shall have elections to fill the Pyithu Hluttaw and Myanmar will be ready to interact with the rest of the world," he said.

The NLD has maintained that it is not going to have anything to do with the document being drafted as its representatives are no longer members of the Constituent Assembly, now made up of others who were elected during the 1990 elections, representatives of other political parties, workers, peasants, the nationalities, government servants, intellectuals and prominent persons.

It claimed that it was barred from returning to the then 702-member assembly after it walked out when it appeared that the emerging document was weighted in favour of the military. The government claimed that the NLD representatives had walked out and had boycotted all further sessions after that.

Asean officials generally disagree with western reports that the military and the NLD are headed for another confrontation. They insist that efforts were being made to get the two sides to meet and with the participation of Suu Kyi.

Meanwhile, Yangon and Mandalay are receiving growing numbers of tourists, especially those from Europe and Japan. Myanmar promoted itself as a tourist destination in 1996 under "Visit Myanmar Year". But though the promotions did not bring in an influx of visitors that year, they helped to promote the country.

"Gradually, they are visiting us now," said an official from the Central

Statiscal Organisation of the Ministry of Planning and Economic
Development.

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