22/02/2004

Myanmar's potential held hostage by political woes

Zainul Ariffin

THE Malaysian presence looks set to continue in Myanmar despite snail-pace reforms and other uncertainties. ZAINUL ARIFFIN, who covered the Prime Minister's recent visit to Yangon, writes.

GLOBALISATION has not reached Myanmar, at least not the US version. There are no billboards for McDonald's or Coca Cola or Calvin Klein or IBM.

The US and EU sanctions, in place since 1998, have seen to it that there shall be no investment or trade of substantive nature with the two.

It is, incidentally, quite a relief. These American symbols of commerce have spared no country - there are, after all, Starbucks clones in Hanoi, communist Vietnam.

But that is not to say that Myanmar is free of foreign influence. There is, but it has been largely Asian.

These companies are trying to gain footholds in anticipation of a better future for the country. Among them are national oil company Petronas and rice trader Bernas.

First-time visitors to Yangon may be in for a surprise. What they are seeing is not what they have been accustomed to reading.

It does not look like what it should be - a country in a death grip of a military junta. It looks like any other country in Indochina, in fact, better than some.

In some ways downtown Yangon today looks like 1970s Penang, with its colonial-style buildings, the Pitt Street-like hustle and bustle, and the unhurried urgency of its residents.

For a so-called Big Brother state, satellite dishes seem to be everywhere. Probably they are in the homes of the well-to-do or well-connected, but they are nevertheless easily spotted. Hotels rooms provide unregulated round-the-clock international news channels like CNN, and even music channel MTV.

Those who visited Myanmar several years ago recall the dearth of foreign influence and the endless propaganda from the local television station.

Foreign newspapers are also now readily available, at least in hotels which, incidentally, are frequented by locals. These print and television media have, at one time or another, been critical of the Government.

The Internet, too, is available, though access is closely monitored. Many websites are blocked, and it is said that for some services one's password must be given to the authorities before access is allowed.

There also seems to be endless entrepreneurial enthusiasm in downtown Yangon.

All kinds of wares, from pirated VCDs of Hindustani or Thai movies, to smuggled Coca Cola, to counterfeit David Beckham's Real Madrid strip are on sale.

Surprisingly, too, at least in Yangon, there are few beggars pestering tourists, unlike in Cambodia or Vietnam, and not many street kids loitering. Perhaps they may have been rounded up by the authorities but, obviously, they are conspicuous by their absence.

For sure, such a description of Myanmar, an international pariah to many, may not go down well with the opposition or parties aligned to it, be they at home or abroad. But these are what one could get from a cursory observation.

Nevertheless, there is an underlying tension between some of its citizens and the Government led by Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt.

Since 1988 Myanmar has been under the military rule of the State Law and Order Council, now refashioned as the kinder and gentler State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which is chaired by Senior General Than Shwe.

An election in 1990, which was won by the Opposition, was declared null and void, and several crackdowns, suppression of dissent, hauling of political prisoners to jail have made Myanmar's generals very unpopular at home and abroad.

The idea of a military government in any country just doesn't fly in this day and age, and it is especially so in a country that pitted its generals against celebrated dissident Aung San Suu Kyi.

The on-and-off house arrests of Nobel Prize winner Suu Kyi have ensured that the Government will constantly lose in the court of international opinion.

A businessman who owns a chain of restaurants is quite critical of the Government." The generals will only rule Myanmar to ruins," says the man who, like most people spoken to, declined to be identified.

He furtively glances over his shoulders every few minutes, as he speaks to a group of Malaysian journalists having lunch at his restaurant.

"We hope Suu Kyi can do something when she is released," he tells this journalist in Yangon during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahamd Badawi's visit to the country.

Chief among his complaints, however, is not about the right of political representation via the democratic process, but the ineptness of the Government in handling the economy.

The trade and political boycott by most of the West means that Myanmar is cut off from major economic sources. The Asian financial crisis hurt it too, for its Asian neighbours have been its greatest supporters, diplomatically as well as economically. Investments dried up, and it has yet to recover from the double blow.

In the meantime, dissidents like Suu Kyi have been encouraging a boycott of the country, in a move to isolate the generals further and force reform.

The Opposition also discourages tourism for fear that it could lead to a recognition of the junta, but what a pity this is, since Myanmar offers tremendous tourism potential - from exotic historical cities like Mandalay and Bagan, to the gentle river boat cruise down the Irrawaddy.

Nevertheless, more tourists and business people are coming.

To be fair, many believe that the Government is also intent on relaxing its grip to let its citizens enjoy globalisation.

But for many people in Myanmar, and to foreign governments, it should have been done so yesterday.

The problem, says a diplomat, is the military is not sure how to do this and still retain some control of the country. In the meantime, many foreign governments are calling for complete democracy and for the military to drop out of sight.

The generals are trying to meet them halfway by putting in place a much publicised roadmap for national reconciliation. On the cards are elections, slotted for later this year, and less restrictions.

As a sign of good faith Suu Kyi may also be released from house arrest in the coming months.

But being military men, the generals' preoccupation would probably be with law and order, with greater emphasis on order, says a long-time expatriate there.

They see things either as orderly or chaotic, which dissent would be seen as.

Despite its frustrations with Myanmar's snail-pace reforms, Asean, which admitted Myanmar in 1997, is sticking to its guns of constructive engagement.

The Asean way includes a lot of hand-holding. While it offers no guarantee of success, it gives Yangon more breathing room to wriggle than the West's talking down to.

But Yangon's diffidence has irritated many who have fought for its entry into Asean. In the middle of last year, for instance, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad pulled up Yangon for its foot-dragging and questioned its seriousness in living up to the group's political and economic agenda.

Nevertheless, Abdullah, who visited Yangon as part of his courtesy calls to fellow Asean leaders upon assuming office, said in his meetings with Khin Nyunt and Than Shwe, he was informed of Yangon's commitment to the reconciliation process and that things are moving as per the roadmap.

In the meantime, the victims of the sanctions and boycott, as is always the case, are the citizens. Myanmar is deprived of outside technical expertise and foreign investment to function in a globalised world.

While blessed with natural resources and a large market of over 50 million people, foreign investments that are needed in the absence of domestic spendings are very few and very far between.

"There are 400,000 mobile telephone users in Cambodia and only 100,000 here. Why?," asks the owner of a hole in the wall art gallery at the Bogyoke Aung San market.

He does not have to say what he means. The roll of his eyes and the gentle shrug of his shoulder point to the military government, and the sanctions that come because of it.

Surely, he suggests, Myanmar has more to offer than Cambodia. There is a fairly significant middle class, English is widely spoken, and there is no intellectual cleansing like the Khmer Rouge did in Cambodia.

"Before 1998, I was selling artwork at US$100 (RM380) a piece to foreigners setting up offices here. Now I am lucky if I can get US$30 per oil painting," he says.

It is just not art for art's sake that is suffering from the repressive environment, but the business of art as well, it seems.

A banker, from an European investment bank that was the last to close shop in Myanmar, believes that things will get worse before they can get better in Myanmar. Political reform will not immediately bring economic dividends, unless global support is given.

"The International Monetary Fund must come in, or else nothing can be done," he says.

Unfortunately, neither the IMF nor the World Bank can come in without the US okay. As it is, there is no financial framework that is internationally accepted in Myanmar.

For instance, the official exchange rate is six kyat to one US dollar, which incidentally is the currency of choice. Step on the street and the friendly neighbourhood black marketeer will offer as much as 850 kyat to the dollar.

The issue of convertibility itself would stop many would-be investors in their tracks, though a businessman said things could always be worked out with the authorities.

Nevertheless, investors continue to come, and Malaysia now is the fourth largest investor in Myanmar.

Unseen also is the trickle of European companies trying to get a foothold in the country in anticipation of the lifting of sanctions.

Abdullah reminded Malaysan businessmen there that they should continue to invest, for there will come a time when the potential of the country be unleashed.

"Others will come and you will have to be ready to compete."