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Asean in a fix

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is right in pointing out that the arrest and continued detention of Nobel Peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has put Asean in a quandary.

It is on the basis of Asean's appreciation and genuine belief in the efforts of the Government of Myanmar to promote peace and development in the country and region that led to its inclusion in the regional organisation. As much as Asean remains faithful to its principle of non-interference, it recognised the wisdom in the politics of inclusion rather than exclusion.

However, there are indications that Asean's belief and show of good faith in the Myanmar Government seem to have been betrayed by its reluctance to consider the views of fellow Asean members over the detention of Suu Kyi. Her arrest since May 30, after the bloody clashes between her supporters and pro-junta groups - which Myanmar described as "protective custody" - indicates that the nation's effort at reconciliation may be defeated by what appears to be the ruling group's reluctance to commence a political dialogue with Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

Earlier, Asean had been reassured by Myanmar that the post-May 30 security measures were temporary and the restrictions placed on Suu Kyi would be lifted soon. But now, there is no indication of any readiness to break the impasse and release her. Asean's concern is justifiable for this situation contradicts Myanmar's earlier pledge to start "a new page for the people of Myanmar" when Suu Kyi was released on May 6 last year after 19 months under house arrest. Myanmar must play its part in justifying its political legitimacy to continue to be part of Asean. That would mean a serious consideration of Asean's views and a clear demonstration of political will to restore democracy and achieve national reconciliation.