

Asean must get tougher on Burma
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The extension of the imprisonment of Burma's pro-democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, on May 27, 2007 was a widely expected move by the country's military government, which has already kept her under detention for most of the 17 years since her party won the national elections by a landslide in 1990.

While Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia (and occasionally Singapore) have voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of democratic progress in Burma, there is still a lot more that the countries of Asean can and should do to push the regime towards the path of democracy.

Asean's continued reluctance to take concrete action against Burma has only served to embolden the generals' sense of invincibility and reinforce the commonly held view that Asean is a "toothless tiger".

Burma was admitted as a member of Asean in 1997 with the support of the grouping's most influential members — Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. This was despite protests from Western governments and Suu Kyi herself that admitting Burma was tantamount to endorsing the junta's despotic ways. However, Asean had its reasons for admitting Burma, despite the latter's dismal human rights record.

Firstly, Asean governments saw the expansion of the grouping from six original members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) to 10 members (with the addition of Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam) as a way to increase its attractiveness as an investment destination. With over 567 million people and a combined gross domestic product of over US\$1 trillion, "Asean-10" is trying to make itself an attractive alternative to China and India.

Secondly, Asean felt it was imperative to engage Burma to prevent it from drawing too close to China, which Asean countries have always been wary of. China views Burma as a country of strategic significance, providing it with much needed access to the Indian Ocean.

For Singapore, which pooh-poohs abstract notions of human rights and democracy in favour of hard-nosed economic pragmatism, Burma provides a sizeable export market, particularly for its military equipment and ordnance. (Singapore has long been a major supplier of arms to Burma.)

Asian vs alien values

Some analysts have speculated that the admission of Burma was the Asean leaders' way of asserting the supposed superiority of "Asian values" and a rejection of Western governments' attempts to impose "alien" values of liberal democracy on the region. At that time, Southeast Asian economies were brimming with confidence and optimism on the wings of phenomenal growth rates over the previous decade. In an almost Titanic-like turn of events, however, all this came crumbling down just a few weeks after Burma was admitted to Asean. The sudden devaluation of the Thai baht led to a regional economic meltdown known as the Asian Financial Crisis.

To garner support for Burma's admission, Asean governments promoted the idea that so-called "constructive engagement" of the regime rather than isolation and sanctions would be a more effective way of prodding the generals to behave according to internationally-accepted norms. Ten years on, constructive engagement of Burma has proven to be an abject failure. The level of oppression of the opposition and people in Burma has increased, rather than abated, since its admission into Asean.

Since coming into the Asean fold, Burma has been a thorn in Asean's relations with its major trading partners, the European Union (EU) and the US. Because of Burma's membership in Asean, a number of Asean-EU ministerial meetings have been cancelled or downgraded. These were lost opportunities for Asean as the meetings could have further enhanced Asean's political and economic relations with the world's most important trading block.

Burma has also proven to be an impediment to talks on an Asean-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA). It is virtually impossible for the EU to consider an FTA with Asean while maintaining trade sanctions against Burma for human rights abuses.

Meanwhile, a trade and investment pact with US was postponed several times because of Washington's reluctance to have anything to do with Burma's generals. Eventually, the US did sign a watered-down Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) with Asean.

In 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice broke with tradition and skipped the annual Asean-led security meeting known as the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), signalling Washington's displeasure over the lack of democratic progress in Burma.

Perhaps the biggest threat that Burma poses to Asean is its potential to derail the grouping's bold plans to achieve regional economic integration by 2015. With its moribund economy and lack of progress on almost all aspects of development, Burma is likely to be a huge stumbling block to economic integration, which requires a minimum degree of parity in economic development between member states in order to be successful.

Wake up call for Asean

Rice's snub of the 2005 ARF was a wake up call for Asean governments, as it dawned on them how much of a liability Burma was turning out to be. The leadership of Asean is rotated annually among its 10 members. The most important responsibility of the Asean chair is to host all the major Asean meetings, including the Asean ministerial meeting, the Asean summit, the ARF and the East Asian summit (which involves Australia, New Zealand and India).

Of these meetings, the ARF is probably the most significant as it involves Asean's "Dialogue Partners", including the US, the EU, China and Russia. It was a no brainer that any meetings held in Rangoon (Burma's capital) would be skipped by the US, the EU and probably Australia and New Zealand.

To stave off this looming crisis, Asean foreign ministers in 2005 took an unprecedented move to strongly hint to Burma that it voluntarily forego its turn as Asean chairman. This was probably the furthest Asean has got to breaking its tradition of "non-interference" in the domestic affairs of member states. Fortunately, Burma got the hint and did give up its chairmanship, although the option still remains open for it to reclaim its turn at a future rotation.

By this time, Asean leaders were starting to openly voice their frustration at the continued recalcitrance of the Burmese junta, and their unpredictable behaviour. On June 1, during the Shangri La Dialogue (an annual security forum held in Singapore), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told the audience, "We (Asean) have exercised our influence, persuaded, encouraged, cajoled the authorities in Myanmar (Burma) to move and adapt to the world which is leaving them behind. The impact has been limited."

He admitted that "Myanmar is a problem. It's a problem for Asean, it's a problem for Myanmar itself". He continued, "We can take a strident position and say well, we will condemn you, we will shut you off, we will embargo you, we will put you in a dog house. Will we make things better? Will we cause things to change? I don't believe so."

These unusually bitter words coming from a Singapore leader were carried by Reuters and Associated Press, but were conspicuously absent from Singapore's newspapers, including The Straits Times.

It is true that Asean's influence over Burma is limited. Even without Asean's support, Burma can still count on the support of its two giant neighbours, China and India, who are competing with each other to give more money, aid and weapons to the regime in order to exercise more influence over that strategically located nation.

It was a colossal mistake for Asean to have admitted Burma into the fold in the first place. Although that is now water under the bridge, Asean's continued reluctance to take concrete action against Burma has only served to embolden the generals' sense of invincibility and reinforce the commonly held view that Asean is a "toothless tiger".

Burma rightly belongs in the dog house. Some parliamentarians from Asean countries have called on Asean to suspend their membership. However, none of the Asean countries appear ready to support this very harsh measure. They would reason that if Burma can be suspended because of foreign pressure, then the same might happen to their own countries in the future.

If Asean stops defending Burma (for example when the EU refuses to give the Myanmar representative a seat at Asean-EU conferences), the generals may realise that they cannot gain anything more from remaining in Asean, and might decide to voluntarily withdraw Myanmar from the grouping. This would save Asean the dilemma of deciding whether or not to suspend Burma.

Bite the bullet

Should Burma remain obstinate, and move even further away from its "roadmap to democracy", Asean should take a bold step to bite the bullet and suspend them, lest Burma becomes a millstone around Asean's neck which eventually drags down the grouping. At a minimum, Asean governments should break their traditional silence and speak more strongly against the behaviour of the Burmese regime.

The Asean Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) has repeatedly called for the release of Suu Kyi and for Asean's ties with Burma to be suspended should they fail to do so. (The AIPMC includes of lawmakers from Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and an MP-elect from Burma.)

Since Asean governments find it difficult to take a more strident tone on Myanmar, the AIPMC provides a good alternative voice of Asean, especially since it consists of elected MPs from

member states. Therefore, the profile of the AIPMC should be enhanced and their statements given more coverage by the media.

However, at the end of the day, Asean governments will see no compelling reason to act against Burma unless their electorates take a keener interest in the issue and call on their governments to stop turning a blind eye to the plight of Burma's suffering people.

Malaysian Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang probably expressed it best, when he once remarked that "Asean cannot be expected to be forced to promote democratisation in Burma until democratisation itself has taken deep and firm root in the majority of Asean nations."

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