

Victory for the Asean way
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The approach taken by Asean has helped bring about positive political change in Myanmar

THIS week, Phnom Penh is hosting the Asean summit, with 10 heads of state gathering to analyse some of the biggest challenges facing our region.

Over the past four decades, Asean has been widely credited with helping its member nations boost trade, investment and growth, but it has also been criticised in foreign policy circles for doing too little to promote democracy and human rights.

I would argue that Asean has been instrumental in driving both economic growth and political development, and that there can be no clearer example than its relations with Myanmar.

For many decades, Myanmar was on the receiving end of very public diplomatic scoldings, often backed up by sanctions. Implicit in this stance was the idea that democratic nations such as Malaysia should shun their less-free neighbours, and that the only way to bring about improvements was to economically cripple those who had not yet embraced the ballot box.

But Asean members took a more nuanced view, believing that constructive engagement and encouragement were just as effective, if not more, than sanctions and isolation in creating positive change. As such, Asean admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997 and extended an open hand of friendship.

For many years, Myanmar's leadership was largely shut out from the world of international diplomacy. Thankfully, Asean's approach left the door ajar for reform-minded leaders.

After a quarter of a century of isolation, Myanmar is starting to head back into the democratic fold. Last week, I met [President U Thein Sein](#) to congratulate him on the steps he has already undertaken and encourage him to continue this historic journey.

And Asean also plays an important role in gently encouraging peace and democracy in other member nations.

Prior to Cambodia's enrolment in 1999, Asean helped bring an end to the Cambodian conflict, sponsoring resolutions to the UN General Assembly and supporting the dialogue that eventually led to the Comprehensive Political Settlement produced in Paris in 1991. Political reform is helped along by Asean's ability to foster trade, growth and development between member states.

After the creation of the Asean Free Trade Area in 1992, trade between Asean countries grew to more than US\$500bil in 2010 from US\$44.2bil in 1993. The Asian economic miracle has lifted tens of millions of people out of poverty.

Sustained economic growth has created new middle classes across the region, fuelling calls for more political representation and greater freedom.

Moreover, as the open economies of reform-minded Asean nations like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia race ahead, the leadership in countries such as Myanmar recognise they are being left behind. They also understand that political reform can create a huge economic windfall. So by encouraging trade, growth and development, Asean helps establish the conditions necessary for fundamental freedom to flourish.

As the leader of South-East Asia's oldest democracy, I am always keen to share our experiences. In the half-century since independence, we have found that steady reform is the best way to secure lasting stability. It is a process that continues in Malaysia to this day.

Three years ago, I became prime minister, and since then I have never wavered in my commitment to deliver real change across all fronts, with lasting prosperity, security and democracy for all Malaysians regardless of race or religion. To that end, I have worked to transform our economy to make it fit for the challenges of the 21st century, increasing competitiveness, raising incomes and cutting unemployment along the way.

I have repealed oppressive colonial-era legislation and replaced it with modern, progressive laws that protect both the lives and rights of all Malaysians. And I have listened to calls for greater transparency in elections, establishing a bipartisan commission to look at the voting process and introduce measures such as the use of indelible ink to reduce the possibility of fraud at the polls.

It is a process of evolution rather than revolution, and that process can best be supported and encouraged by a tight-knit family of nations working together to help each other. That is why, at this week's Asean summit, we will be putting the final touches on a declaration titled "One Community, One Destiny".

It is a very real acknowledgement that our future lies in closer, warmer relations, speaking with one voice and with one goal in mind: the continued development of our economies, our societies and above all our democracies. It is, in short, a very Asian, very Asean approach.

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