

**Asean Instrumental In Driving Economic Growth And Political Development - Najib
Bernama
April 4, 2012**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 4 (Bernama) -- Asean has been instrumental in driving both economic growth and political development, and in this context, there could be no clearer example than its relations with Myanmar, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Najib said that 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.

In this context, he said that for many decades, Myanmar was on the receiving end of very public diplomatic scoldings, often backed 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," Najib said in his article titled "The Asean Way Won Burma Over" in the Opinion Asia column in The Wall Street Journal Wednesday.

Najib pointed out that 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 and as such, Asean admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997 and extended an open hand of friendship.

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

"Sure enough, 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," he said.

The prime minister said unlike some cultures, where difficult members could be marginalised, ignored or left to be dealt with by others, Asians were proud to take care of their own.

"Writ large at the level of international diplomacy, this approach ensures that countries do not lose face and leaves open the door to leaders who are committed to reform," he said.

He also recalled the important role Asean played in gently encouraging peace and democracy in other member nations.

Najib said prior to Cambodia's enrolment to Asean in 1999, the regional grouping helped bring an end to the Cambodian conflict, sponsoring resolutions to the United Nations General Assembly and supporting the dialogue that eventually led to the Comprehensive Political Settlement achieved in Paris in 1991.

"This in turn paved the way for a new era of democracy and peace (in Cambodia)," he said.

Najib also said that political reform was 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\$500 billion in 2010 from US\$44.2 billion 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, fueling calls for more political representation and greater freedoms," he said in the opinion piece.

Moreover, Najib said that as the open economies of reform-minded Asean nations like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia raced ahead, the leadership in countries such as Myanmar recognised they were 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 freedoms to flourish," he said.

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