

Burma's Asean Solution
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Written by A. Lin Neumann - The Jakarta Globe

The generals move toward acceptable authoritarianism -- just like most of Southeast Asia.

When I first visited Burma, on Sept. 17, 1988, it was to report on a massive popular uprising and what I thought would be the advent of democracy in a country that even then had been under the heel of the military for 26 years.

Instead of democracy, the next day a faction of the military brutally seized power and ushered in a period of even greater isolation that has lasted for 23 years.

But it now looks as if Burma has learned its lesson. Having installed a military-approved government through controlled elections in 2010, Burma is coming out of its cocoon and the international community is getting ready to accept one of its most errant members back into the fold. The process will get a big boost next month when Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa visits to assess whether the country is ready to take its turn in 2014 as the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Almost certainly the answer will be yes.

Opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest for most of the last two decades before being released by the new government, has been in talks with President Thein Sein and has said she is cautiously optimistic.

"I think there have been positive developments," the Nobel Peace Prize laureate said in an interview with Agence France-Presse this week.

Burmese exiles have been invited home and some are beginning to accept.

"We are getting ready to go home," a Burmese journalist who fled Rangoon in 1988 told me recently. "We do not know what to expect but the time is coming."

So what can we expect of a semi-free Burma ruled by former generals in civilian attire?

I suspect it will be just a classier form of political repression, minus the military boot openly on the neck of the nation. The country already has a freer press than it did even a year ago by most accounts, and Facebook and Twitter are growing. There is less fear of being snatched off the street and thrown into prison just for voicing a contrary opinion, recent visitors say. It is repressive, but "better."

In short, Burma seems ready to adopt Asean-style authoritarianism.

For all the world's insistence that Burma become democratic, that was never in the cards. The generals have spilled too much blood and have had their hands on too much money to allow for a free-wheeling democracy.

Given the current setup, where the military's ruling party is guaranteed to win any election and can pass any law it wishes, the country is moving rather quickly toward the kind of non-democracy found in most Asean countries. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos are under the firm control of one party. Brunei is a sultanate. Malaysia and Singapore, despite recent gains by the opposition, have been virtual one-party states since their founding. Only Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia buck the trend.

Burma's mistake has been its inability, until recently, to recognize that unapologetically shooting people in the streets or using truncheons on peacefully protesting monks, as it did in 2007, is too much even by Asean's mild standards of human rights.

Telling outrageous lies in government-controlled newspapers in a tone reminiscent of the Stalin era in the Soviet Union is laughably counterproductive. China, India and a handful of other countries have ignored the outrages and pressed ahead with investment in Burma, but a somewhat more open climate is necessary if the enormous untapped potential of what was once the wealthiest economy in Southeast Asia is to be realized.

And perhaps the Burmese people understand that they will only get so much.

Suu Kyi spoke this week of reconciliation, saying "both sides have to be prepared to compromise and give and take." My Burmese exile friend said there was no need for retribution and that he and his allies just wanted to be part of their country again.

In short, Burma has to allow its people enough freedom that it will no longer be an embarrassment to its neighbors, while remaining repressive enough to keep the generals secure.

It is not a perfect arrangement, but it is a start and probably the best anyone can hope for. **-The Jakarta Globe**

(A. Lin Neumann is a senior adviser to the Jakarta Globe and a co-founder of Asia Sentinel.)

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