

**Indonesia Puts the Spotlight on Human Rights as ASEAN Chair**  
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In its role chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) this year, Indonesia says it will make human rights its top priority.

At a news event Friday, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa said his country hopes that during 2011, the ASEAN human rights commission will be more effective in fulfilling its mandate to demonstrate the organization's commitment to respect the basic rights of human beings.

Putting the spotlight on human rights in ASEAN is major change from the past, says Pavin Chachavalpongpun, an analyst with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. ASEAN has been successful on issues such as promoting free trade and regional security matters, he says. But addressing contentious issues like human rights may be seen by some as a violation of ASEAN's principle of not interfering in the internal affairs of its members.

"Members are happy to talk about it as long as it does not affect certain interests of their own countries," Chachavalpongpun said. "But when it comes to tough issues like democracy and human rights we have to admit that not all countries in ASEAN are democratic."

Among the 10 ASEAN states, Laos and Vietnam are one-party governments, led by the Communist Party. And human rights groups consider Burma's military government among the world's most repressive.

Last year's election in Burma, also known as Myanmar, brought the issue of human rights within ASEAN to the forefront. Critics of the government say it stage-managed the vote to ensure the military remains in power.

Human rights organizations criticized ASEAN for not confronting Burma about the abuses there.

If Indonesia wants ASEAN to get serious about human rights, Chachavalpongpun says, it needs to abolish its principle of non-interference.

"I also think that maybe it is time for ASEAN to talk about some sort of punishment, maybe not to the point of expulsion [of member states]. There has to be some sort of compliance and what kind of punishment to be caused to certain members in the case that that member obviously do not comply," Chachavalpongpun said.

Natalegawa says the situation in Burma last year did contribute to his country's commitment to emphasize human rights in ASEAN. But he stopped short of recommending specific actions and said the situation there has improved since the election.

He noted, for instance, that opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from detention after the vote.

"Of course, over the past several weeks there have been important developments in Myanmar. The elections are notable," Natalegawa said. "But on top of that we have had the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. So all these two important developments must be digested, must be absorbed, for ASEAN to be able to think ahead. How we can insure the issue of Myanmar or development in Myanmar can have a sense of closure in 2011."

Rather than punish offenders, Natalegawa says Indonesia intends to use quiet diplomacy and consensus building to persuade ASEAN members to respect human rights.

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