

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 18 Mar 2013

Myanmar and the 2014 ASEAN Chairmanship

By Moe Thuzar

MYANMAR AND ASEAN: THE ROAD TO REFORMS

Meetings of the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have always been assured of attention-grabbing headlines since Myanmar joined the Association in 1997. ASEAN has faced much criticism on its decision to admit into its ranks a country still in the grips of a military dictatorship, which showed no sign of reform towards the democratic transition promised by the junta when it staged a bloody coup in 1988; which overturned the results of what the international community acknowledged were free and fair elections in 1990; and, which up to May 2008 showed no signs of relaxing its paranoia over oft-repeated emphases on national security and stability above all other considerations.

ASEAN's lowest point with its difficult member was in 2007. Its exasperation was reflected in the statement issued on the junta's repression of peaceful demonstrations by monks (later joined by civilians). Hope dimmed that Myanmar would ever fulfill the commitment it had expressed upon joining ASEAN, that as "a responsible member of the Association, Myanmar understands the responsibility [...] as a part of the family, part of the team".

A small window of hope, however, opened in the wake of Cyclone Nargis which devastated the country's lower delta areas in May 2008. Over the looming humanitarian crisis in the country, ASEAN brokered what was considered a breakthrough in coordinating the entry and operation of aid workers "regardless of nationality"¹, a promise that has been kept

¹ Myanmar's military supremo, Senior General Than Shwe, agreed on 23 May 2008, to allow all humanitarian workers into the country, regardless of nationality, in response to diplomacy efforts by the UN and

to this day and one that created opportunities for non-governmental organisations in the international humanitarian aid community to operate in Myanmar. The tripartite mechanism for cyclone relief and rehabilitation by the United Nations, ASEAN and the Government of Myanmar opened new vistas for different interest groups to work together on a shared objective.

Still, the path to reform was murky. The seven-step roadmap to democracy that Myanmar announced in 2003 inched at a painstakingly slow pace toward the holding of “free and fair elections”. Elections were held in November 2010 but the restriction placed on the participation of the National League for Democracy (NLD) – its iconic leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi then still under house arrest – rendered the elections anything but free and fair in the eyes of many.

The “civilianised” government took office in early 2011 amid considerable scepticism that it would undertake the much-needed and long awaited reforms. Scepticism mounted when Myanmar put in a bid to resume its turn to chair the ASEAN Summit in 2014, a turn that the country had forgone in 2006.

Myanmar has not lost the knack of getting everyone’s attention. This time, it is over the series of measures oriented towards reform, undertaken by a country that as recent as 12 months ago was known as the “problem child” of ASEAN.

The pace of reforms took the world by surprise. The reforms themselves also generated increasing excitement as the government in Myanmar progressively announced measures for economic renewal and poverty alleviation, freedom of expression, human rights and good governance, an inclusive political process, and a determination to resolve the long-standing ethnic conflict in the country.

Starting with the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010 after the elections, the new government went about diluting the military’s omnipresent role in the country’s daily life; relaxed the tight controls over the local media, including announcing that the censorship board should be abolished; started regular dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, also including her in discussions on reforms; and, for the first time in a quarter-century, acceded to popular demands by halting a controversial hydro-electric dam project (valued at US\$1.6 billion, financed by China) at the confluence of the two rivers forming the Irrawaddy.

Within the span of a little more than a year, the world has witnessed Myanmar abolish press censorship, promulgate laws allowing demonstrations and for workers to organise and strike, progressive releases of political prisoners and the establishment of an Amnesty Commission, the freedom of movement and speech of Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy rejoining the political process and sweeping the majority of seats in the historic by-elections on 1 April 2012, the stabilisation of the country’s currency, and perceptible shifts in attention paid to development of agriculture, health and education sectors. The reforms initiated in 2011 are now in their third phase, focusing on corruption.

ASEAN Secretaries-General. See “Burma grants all UN visa requests” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7425130.stm>, 29 May 08

Regional and world leaders have welcomed these changes and are seeking closer engagement with the Thein Sein administration. Encouragement and support from the international community is necessary for Myanmar to achieve her reform goals, to complement the strong commitment of the Myanmar government of “not turning back” on the reform process. ASEAN has called for immediate lifting of the sanctions to “contribute positively” to development and the democratic process.

At the same time, the different interest groups are each seeking to influence the reform process. This is taking place as Myanmar opens up to the world, with the world’s attention focused on her every move. World leaders, although stating their support for the reform measures, also have caveats on monitoring the further implementation of reforms.

On the optimistic side, the pace of reforms set into motion the process of increasing engagement by the international community, including the United States (US), European Union (EU) and other individual western countries. The gradual easing of sanctions imposed on Myanmar by these countries has started. Landmark high-level visits have been made to Myanmar from ASEAN countries and the international community, culminating – in November 2012 – with the first ever visit of a sitting US President to the country.

Lifting or easing sanctions is seen as necessary to help accelerate economic and political reforms. However, the dismantling of sanctions applied reflexively – especially those enacted into law – will not be as reflexive, nor will the process be as “immediate” as ASEAN members have called for.

Still, it is significant that the countries that led the imposition of the sanctions regime on Myanmar for the past decades are now also at the forefront in easing the sanctions and readily admitting that sanctions alone did not work in moving for change in Myanmar.

Myanmar today highlights a situation where, for the first time in decades, a convergence of interests between the government, the polity, the opposition, the private sector, and the international community is beginning. At the same time, there are obvious mismatches in the high expectations of the polity with the implementation of reforms. Voice and accountability issues are being played out in open media, and the pressure from various interest groups and stakeholders is intense. The peace negotiations with ethnic armed insurgent groups – most notably the Kachins, Shans and Karens – are continuing. The Peace Donor Support Group, which is assisting this process, also provided assistance for the establishment of the Myanmar Peace Centre. This Centre, inaugurated in October 2012 in Yangon, is to serve as a “platform for dialogue” between government and ethnic groups, and to provide secretariat support to the ongoing peace negotiations.

The communal violence in Rakhine State that flared in June 2012 is still simmering. A harsh crackdown on protesters – including monks – over the Letpadaung copper project (a joint venture between the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and China) in November 2012 has caused uneasy reminders of the past military junta’s attitude towards protests and demonstrations. The silver lining is that independent inquiry commissions have been appointed for both situations, to probe into the causes and main actors responsible. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi heads the inquiry commission for the Letpadaung case, in her capacity as chairperson of the parliamentary committee on the rule of law.

This is all taking place as Myanmar prepares for hosting the 2013 Southeast Asian Games and assuming ASEAN Chair responsibilities in 2014. In addition to these key regional events, Myanmar is also hosting the World Economic Forum on East Asia in 2013 and undertaking a long-overdue nation-wide census in 2014.

PREPARING FOR 2014

Some see ASEAN's agreement to Myanmar taking the chair in 2014 as a carrot for inducing change over time. It is more a blend of incentive and monitoring. With Myanmar taking up ASEAN chairmanship, there can be no backtracking on the reform process. There is also no turning back for ASEAN. To effectively assist Myanmar on her new path towards change, ASEAN must now step up its strategy of enhanced interaction with that country. Through regional collaboration mechanisms, ASEAN members can help rebuild Myanmar's human capital by assisting the resuscitation and strengthening of the country's civil society, and assist dialogue with the ethnic nationalities.

This will be most needed in the next few years leading up to Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship. At the helm of ASEAN in 2014, Myanmar will chair – in addition to the two ASEAN Summits – important high-level meetings with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and Post-Ministerial Conferences, and the individual summits with Dialogue Partners including China, the United States and the United Nations. The Summits are preceded by meetings of senior officials and ministers. ASEAN's internal coordination meetings also involve ministerial level coordinating councils for each of ASEAN's three community pillars.

The ASEAN Charter provision (Article 31) on single ASEAN chairmanship requires Myanmar to chair not only the ASEAN Summits and their related meetings but also the meetings of key ASEAN bodies, including the three Community Councils, the ASEAN Coordinating Council, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, the ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting² as well as their respective Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs) and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) based in Jakarta.

Myanmar will also be responsible for the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit – where the business leaders meet with ASEAN Leaders – and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) held prior to the ASEAN Summit to discuss and formulate recommendations that are presented to the Leaders³.

² The ADMM-Plus, established in 2010, also falls under single ASEAN chairmanship. ADMM Plus has the same composition as the EAS and will now be held every two years (instead of three). The 2nd ADMM-Plus is scheduled for 2013 in Brunei Darussalam. Thus, Myanmar will not be hosting or chairing the ADMM-Plus. The ADMM, however, holds annual meetings.

³ The ACSC/APF started in 2005 during Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship of ASEAN. The event has since been held annually, prior to the ASEAN Summits, in the Philippines (2006), Singapore (2007), Thailand (2009), Vietnam (2010), Indonesia (2011) and Cambodia (2012). The next ACSC/APF events will be held prior to summits in Brunei (2013) and Myanmar (2014).

Myanmar's preparations for ASEAN chairmanship thus require a whole-government approach. The President has said as much. A deep understanding of ASEAN institutions and the role of the Association in regional and international dynamics is also crucial for Myanmar in leading regional priority-setting as ASEAN chair.

At the same time, Myanmar also needs to encourage and deepen public awareness of ASEAN, so that the citizens of Myanmar can rally around the event as front-line ambassadors of the country. To date, Myanmar's integration in ASEAN has largely been driven at the senior levels of government, and messaging to working-level officials and the general public has been limited in scope and depth.

How will Myanmar's 2014 ASEAN chairmanship be viewed, both from within the country and by external parties?

There are heightened expectations on the part of both the Myanmar people and the international community on the pace, success and sustainability of the reforms. It is thus important to project a sense of hope and change, as many in the country and around the world are scrutinising every move of the government's reform efforts.

Additionally, 2014 is the year before the scheduled achievement of the ASEAN Community. The ASEAN meetings in 2014 under Myanmar's watch should therefore feature some key initiatives that contribute to ASEAN community-building. As ASEAN Chair, Myanmar can certainly take the lead in getting the ASEAN perspective on achieving the ASEAN Community by 2015. To accomplish this, Myanmar needs to be ready to respond to queries on how the commitments in the ASEAN Community Blueprints (which are mainly national responsibilities) are being met. Myanmar will also need to set an ASEAN theme for 2014 that reflects the future focus for ASEAN's work. Another "challenge" Myanmar can take up is to lead the review of the ASEAN Charter and regional cooperation processes. Article 50 of the ASEAN Charter states that it can be reviewed five years after its entry into force or as otherwise determined by the ASEAN Summit⁴.

ASEAN'S UNITY OF PURPOSE⁵

At the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) held in July 2012 at Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ASEAN Foreign Ministers failed, for the first time in the Association's history, to issue its annual Joint Communiqué at the end of the AMM. In the media storm that followed, the cause for this was analysed as ASEAN's inability to reach a common position on the activities of claimant states in the South China Sea⁶. Cambodia, the current ASEAN Chair, was expected to take the lead in working for a negotiated compromise. However,

⁴ *The ASEAN Charter entered into force on 15 December 2008.*

⁵ *This section is based on the author's contribution to the geopolitical overview for ISEAS Monitor 3rd Issue, Sept. 2012.*

⁶ *It is worthwhile to note that the Chairman's Statement of 19th ASEAN Regional Forum, which was held on 12 July 2012 after the 45th AMM, stated the position of the Foreign Ministers attending the ARF on "the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, the continued exercise of self-restraint and the non-use of force by all parties concerned" and calling for "peaceful resolution of the disputes in the area, in accordance with the recognized principles of international law".*

Indonesia (ASEAN Chair in 2011) undertook shuttle diplomacy after the 45th AMM to reach agreement on the issue.

The subsequent issuance of the “ASEAN’s Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea” statement by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ on 20 July 2012, was followed a month later by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ statement on recent developments in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, issued on 17 August.

This highlights some key learning points for future ASEAN Chairs.

The first is the importance of ASEAN’s unity of purpose. The 45th AMM experience has shown that external or internal factors may weaken this unity, but it is the political will of key individuals to salvage it. The second is the crucial role of the ASEAN Chair in leading and managing ASEAN’s agenda. To be an effective ASEAN Chair requires a deep understanding of, and commitment to, ASEAN processes and institutions, and to ASEAN’s central role in regional and international dynamics.

The question now is how future ASEAN Chairs will deal with the South China Sea and other contentious issues. Concerns have been openly stated about Myanmar’s ability – taking the ASEAN Chair for the first time – to deal with external attempts to influence the Chair. It is to be hoped that Myanmar – taking the lessons from Phnom Penh – will give importance to the country’s commitment to ASEAN in 2014.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

With ASEAN’s expansion, its regional architecture and central role, and the number of issues it is to address have expanded. So too have the administrative responsibilities of the ASEAN member state taking up the duties of chairmanship.

Hosting and chairing ASEAN Summits is thus an important national undertaking for any member country. Mobilising Myanmar’s people – especially its government officials – around the ASEAN Summit requires a unified and coordinated approach. Myanmar government officials – particularly those in the ministries that are involved in the ASEAN Community Councils – will need support and guidance in improving and disseminating their knowledge and understanding of the ASEAN mechanisms and processes.

The logistics and administrative preparations for meetings in 2014 are equally important. Ensuring the success of hosting ASEAN meetings requires coordination at several levels: regionally with other ASEAN Member States and internally among the key ministries and with the non-governmental sectors and hotels and other services. In this connection, managing media relations is also important. In the months leading up to 2014, Myanmar will need to focus on improving/upgrading existing infrastructure to address the transport, accommodation and communication needs of delegates arriving for the ASEAN meetings in 2014. Myanmar’s hosting of the Southeast Asian Games in 2013 – as well as the World Economic Forum on East Asia in June 2013 – is in a way a “dry run” for 2014.

ASEAN's future is inextricably tied with that of its respective members. Myanmar is no exception. In the run-up to Myanmar's chairmanship year, ASEAN members – individually or collectively – can play a useful advisory role in Myanmar's political evolution. This can be seen as giving substance to ASEAN's policy of engagement towards its member state Myanmar. ASEAN can lead – with interested international partners – a regional initiative to help Myanmar build capacities for change. In addition to the assistance provided under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) programme, ASEAN can work with the UN and interested ASEAN Dialogue Partners to further collaborative partnerships with and for Myanmar. Through the respective bilateral arrangements that support regional commitments, ASEAN members can also assist Myanmar in reform efforts, particularly in restructuring the economy; prioritising social development initiatives in education, health, rural development and poverty reduction; and strengthening institutions and human capacities.

The path that lies ahead for Myanmar and ASEAN is not an easy one. Many compromises will have to be made, internally and with external parties. Myanmar will learn – under the spotlight – the highs of accomplishment and the lows of backsliding (or even signs of it). For now, Myanmar seems to be the test case for setting new benchmarks in living up to the purposes of the ASEAN Charter, especially with regard to democracy, good governance and the rule of law, and human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The work has just begun. But this time, it has begun for real.

* * * * *

Moe Thuzar is an ISEAS Fellow and Lead Researcher (Socio-Cultural) at the ASEAN Studies Centre of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and Coordinator of the Myanmar Studies Group at ISEAS. The views expressed in this paper are her own.

ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.

ISEAS accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.

Comments are welcomed and may be sent to the author(s).

Editor: Ooi Kee Beng

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang,
Singapore 119614
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: www.iseas.edu.sg