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ASEAN : TIME TO SUSPEND MYANMAR

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The forthcoming ASEAN Summit in Singapore in November 2007 should agree on the suspension of Myanmar's membership of ASEAN. As long as Myanmar is part of the highest councils of ASEAN, the region will have a credibility problem when it seeks to address issues of humanitarian concern elsewhere around the globe.

LAST WEEK'S crisis in Myanmar (Burma) makes it imperative that ASEAN moves beyond statements to action. The 1997 ASEAN decision to admit Myanmar under the current military leadership without any conditionality was a mistake. Myanmar took shelter under ASEAN's wings but there was no commitment by the Myanmar junta to open up the economy or to restore its fledgling democracy. Frankly, Myanmar has been an albatross around ASEAN's neck over the past decade.

ASEAN broke new ground on 27 September when the ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to a statement by the current ASEAN chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo, stating that they were appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used to quell the demonstrations in Myanmar and demanded that the Myanmar government immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators. They strongly urged Myanmar to seek a political solution, to work towards a peaceful transition to democracy and called for the release of all political detainees including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The ASEAN Ministers recognized that what the Myanmar junta has done is unacceptable. ASEAN should now go further. It is time that Myanmar is suspended from the privilege of ASEAN membership.

Need for clear standards of behaviour

As ASEAN's leaders will be adopting the ASEAN Charter to give the organization a legal personality when they meet in Singapore on 18 November, ASEAN needs to adopt clear standards of behaviour for its members. Key provisions of the Charter will call for the promotion of democracy, human rights and obligations, transparency and good governance and strengthening democratic institutions. But ASEAN needs to agree on what it will do if a member blatantly flouts these conventions.

Previously, ASEAN had adopted the practice of raising its discomfort with developments in Myanmar (Burma) privately at meetings with Myanmar leaders and in the confines of informal retreats of ASEAN ministers, where no official records were kept. Since its founding, ASEAN's formal position

was that every member had the right to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another. This principle of non-interference and non-intervention helped each ASEAN state to develop its own identity in the first years of ASEAN's existence.

The primary concern of each member from 1967 was that it should be allowed to forge its own post-colonial identity. Memories of Indonesia's Konfrontasi policy towards Malaysia and hostility to post-independence Singapore, the bitter Singapore separation from Malaysia, the Philippines claim to Sabah and Thai fears of spill-over from the conflicts in Indochina shaped ASEAN's handling of domestic developments in the region. An emphasis on developing mutual confidence, understanding the different perspectives of each member and creating an awareness of the regional environment and regional sensitivities marked inter-actions in the early years of ASEAN's evolution. In 1967, ASEAN leaders and policy makers were more attuned to the political environment of the former metropolitan countries and needed to become familiar with their neighbours.

This process of developing cohesion and the habit of cooperation received a sharp boost by the challenge posed by the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978. ASEAN's resolute response to the invasion and ability to build an international coalition opposed to the intervention marked a high point for the policy of non-interference. It meant supporting the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia but it led to international credibility and recognition for ASEAN as the only third world regional organization able to influence UN debates and shape the conflict negotiations process.

In 1967, a policy of non-interference and non-intervention also made sense to the post-colonial regimes in Southeast Asia as they were faced with domestic insurgencies by communist revolutionary movements assisted by Chinese support amidst China's own mayhem as it underwent the Cultural Revolution. As the ASEAN states sought improved ties with China after the historic Nixon visit to China in 1972, calls for an end to Chinese support for the communist parties of the region were coupled with the need to uphold the principles of non-interference and respect for the sovereignty of the states of the region.

Changed geopolitical realities

Forty years later, geopolitical realities have changed. The end of the Cold War undermined the logic of the policy of non-intervention and non-interference. Doctrines of humanitarian intervention and 'the responsibility to protect' are increasingly the basis of decision making in the UN Security Council, especially as the impact of bloodshed and the consequences of riots, revolution and bombings are covered hour by hour on television screens and in widely circulated blogs and on the internet. In 1988, the scale of the much larger crackdown by the Myanmar military only became known several weeks later. Today, these images are transmitted instantaneously around the world by mobile phones and You Tube.

As long as Myanmar is part of the highest councils of ASEAN, the region will have a credibility problem when it seeks to address issues of humanitarian concern elsewhere around the globe. Not only is the junta a failure as far as ensuring Myanmar's economic development, it has failed to build a cohesive society or ensured a political transition from military rule. The pauperization of Myanmar is evident to anyone who travels through Myanmar.

At the same time, Myanmar does not play an effective role within ASEAN. When Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad succeeded in getting ASEAN approval for Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997, it was believed that Myanmar's participation would lead to learning by example. As Myanmar interacted with ASEAN states, Myanmar would realize that outward looking policies, increased foreign investment and expanded trade, tourism and other exchanges would lead to Myanmar moving in the direction of a more open society increasingly integrated with the rest of Southeast Asia. These hopes were soon dashed. As the Singapore co-chair of the Singapore/Myanmar

senior officials working group on economic issues, I realized in 1998 that we were going nowhere. As we were pre-occupied with the Asian financial and economic crisis, we decided not to proceed with these meetings as our hosts were more interested in bringing us on a week long jaunt to gem mines and to places of tourist interest rather than engaging in serious exchanges on policy issues.

As ASEAN moves towards the establishment of an ASEAN Community based on the three pillars of a Security Community, a Socio-Cultural Community and an Economic Community, can ASEAN afford to have a member seen regionally as well as by the internationally as having a government that has failed to ensure the well being of its people not just recently but since it joined ASEAN. Old ASEAN hands will say that Myanmar is part of ASEAN and should be a member. Yes, but only when Myanmar can uphold its commitments. Until then, the forthcoming ASEAN Summit should agree on the suspension of Myanmar's membership of ASEAN.

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