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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Myanmar & ASEAN Community 2015: Are Member Countries Prepared?**

By Yang Razali Kassim

### **Synopsis**

*Myanmar is preparing for its role as ASEAN Chair next year as the regional grouping faces a growing urgency to meet the goal of an ASEAN Community by 2015. Are the member countries prepared, and is Nyapyidaw ready to take the lead?*

### **Commentary**

THE 20th ASEAN Summit held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, earlier this month ended with an apt reminder by the host that the grouping was just three years away from its deadline of forming an ASEAN Community by 2015. ASEAN members, Prime Minister Hun Sen said, must maintain their focus on the agreed roadmaps to that important goal. The Phnom Penh Agenda issued at the end of the leaders' summit underscored this urgency in half of its nine points. There were exhortations to "intensify all efforts" to implement the various plans to realise the ASEAN Community. The related goal of a connected ASEAN - as one region integrated by identity and key physical links such as roads, rail and air - must also not be delayed, it stressed.

Such a reminder must be taken seriously, coming from one of ASEAN's less developed members whose state of readiness, it was feared, could slow down the 2015 plan. Unless Hun Sen was just paying lip-service, the Phnom Penh Agenda should allay concerns that Cambodia would drag its feet on the integration agenda, notwithstanding the additional time it gets as one of four newer members. Phnom Penh's commitment to realise the ASEAN Community should set an example for the other ASEAN members. The hard part, however, is implementing it.

### **Myanmar's turn**

The momentum that has been generated under Cambodia's chairmanship – remarkably without a major hitch - must be sustained over the next three years. Brunei, as the next chair of ASEAN, is expected to do so with no problem in 2013. It has hosted ASEAN summits before and is used to steering the ASEAN agenda of regional integration and cooperation. The question is whether in 2014, the year before the launch of the ASEAN Community, the final touches will be put in place and all kinks resolved - with last-minute trouble-shooting by the chair. That responsibility will rest with Myanmar.

Indeed, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan said as much when he was in Nyapyidaw ahead of the

recent summit. He told Myanmar's leaders: "Myanmar's chair in 2014 will be a critical landmark in the history of ASEAN, as you will be the one responsible for wrapping up, and tying the loose ends, before handing over to Malaysia - the transit from your chair, which ends on 31 December 2014. There will be a lot resting on your shoulders."

Assuming that all the members fulfil the requirements of the ASEAN Community, will Myanmar be able to lead the grouping in 2014? There are two opposing views. The first is a sceptical one, held by those who worry about Myanmar's many years in isolation. They argue that Myanmar has been too long on the fringe of the region to be at ease within ASEAN - let alone lead it. The Myanmarese bureaucracy is also not likely to be equipped with the experience and expertise to be on top of the various intra-ASEAN issues.

Besides having to organise and host myriad meetings of ASEAN ministers and officials, will Naypidaw be able to relate with the world beyond ASEAN, especially the region's key dialogue partners, who include the world's major powers? The hardline critics do not have much faith in the country's ability to find its place in the mainstream regional community. A big factor behind such scepticism is Myanmar's perceived record of violations of human rights and civil liberties.

The more positive perception of Myanmar, which takes the long view, is held by those who believe that the country should be given a chance to prove itself. The chief proponents are the ASEAN states. Not that they are tolerating Myanmar's domestic political suppressions just because they have a more accommodative stance towards a fellow member. Behind the scenes, ASEAN leaders are known to have been forthright and critical with their Myanmar counterparts. ASEAN's long view reflects a quiet confidence that Myanmar will eventually rise to the occasion.

### **Turning around**

Internationally more parties are coming round to the view that things are changing for the better in Myanmar. The pivotal actor, of course, has been Aung San Auu Kyi. Her more conciliatory attitude towards the regime in support of the reformist President Thein Sein has had a tectonic effect; it influenced the West, beginning with the United States, to be just as conciliatory. Washington's cautious rapprochement and relaxation of its sanctions, albeit for its own strategic reasons, has been followed by Britain, once Europe's staunchest critic of Myanmar's human rights record. Now Australia is also joining the bandwagon. These have boosted Myanmarese leaders' confidence in Nyapyidaw's future role in regional affairs.

Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin assured the visiting ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan that Nyapyidaw was ready and willing to cooperate with the rest of ASEAN in meeting its commitment to the region. The ASEAN Secretariat noted the foreign minister's reminder that lifting of sanctions by some countries would help a great deal. "Myanmar is keen to create employment and jobs to help its people. Many countries also said they are keen to help us. Statements and pronouncements have been made, but actual changes are needed now," he was quoted as saying.

Myanmar is now speaking ASEAN's language of development. President Thein Sein told Surin that he visualised the Irrawaddy Delta as the "next Rice Bowl of the world". Myanmar needs to create jobs for the millions of Myanmarese struggling to catch up with the rest of the region. Foreign investments are needed to fuel economic changes as well as political reforms to provide the overarching umbrella. An economically vibrant and stable Myanmar will be good for the stability of ASEAN and the wider Asia Pacific. A Myanmar that is more confident of itself will also be less susceptible to external power-play.

If Myanmar pulls through as ASEAN chair in 2014, the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015 should be assured. The next thing to watch is whether the ASEAN Community will live up to expectations.

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