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Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship: Challenges and Opportunities

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

Myanmar has assumed the chair of ASEAN for 2014. What challenges and opportunities are there for Myanmar?

Commentary

FOR THE first time, Myanmar will lead ASEAN in 2014. The country will also host the 2014 ASEAN summit, in addition to over 240 regional meetings - drawing thousands of diplomats, leaders and journalists to the country throughout the year.

2014 is also an important year for ASEAN as it is the penultimate year before the inauguration of an integrated ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. What are the challenges and opportunities facing the country - and ASEAN - as Myanmar assumes this critical role?

Main challenges facing Myanmar

The most obvious test for Naypyidaw is its infrastructural deficit: unreliable power supply; limited Internet connectivity; chronic shortages of hotels; and poor transportation linkages are some of the problems that continues to plague Myanmar. The South East Asian (SEA) Games that Myanmar hosted in 2013 were an early test of its capabilities. While it performed creditably on safety and security, it was found lacking in others - lack of accommodation and poor transportation were common complaints. Notably, the Ministry of Sports resorted to using power generators to supply electricity during the games because it did not trust its own power network.

Questions also remain as to whether it has the 'soft' infrastructure and capacity to manage its chairmanship. Myanmar scholars note that managing the ASEAN chairmanship will impose extra burdens upon a narrow cohort of able people managing the reform process, but who are already greatly overworked. To that extent, the chairmanship could be an unwelcome distraction.

Secondly, as China continues to be more assertive in South China Sea, President Thein Sein would need to deftly manage ASEAN-China relations. The recent decision by Beijing to issue new fishing regulations requiring foreign vessels to seek prior permission to fish or survey in disputed waters in SCS has already drawn rebukes from Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and the U.S. The need for ASEAN unity has never been stronger especially with the goal of an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) near. It would do well to display independent-minded

leadership while ensuring ASEAN solidarity.

Thirdly, the plight of the Rohingya and Myanmar's human rights record will come under increased international scrutiny as Myanmar plays host to the region and the world. In 2006, Myanmar gave up its chairmanship under pressure from ASEAN and the United States owing to its appalling human rights record and its oppressive political regime. If Myanmar does not deal with its ongoing internal religious-ethnic conflict comprehensively, there is a risk that Myanmar's chairmanship will be overshadowed by its human rights failings.

Opportunities for Myanmar

Economically and politically Myanmar has made great strides in opening up while its assumption of the chairmanship will allow Naypyidaw to open up further to the outside world. The Myanmar Government has affirmed its readiness to benefit from the experience of previous chairs and others in ASEAN.

For example, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs has asked a Singapore think-tank for advice on its ASEAN chairmanship role. Its willingness to learn, coupled with the inflow of people, ideas and practices that comes with the chairmanship will further socialise Myanmar into developing sets of 'best practices' enabling it to build up its educational, socio-political, diplomatic, bureaucratic and human resource nous as it grapples with its role as an actor on the world stage.

Secondly, Myanmar also happens to be the coordinator of the ASEAN-US dialogue. This gives Myanmar the unique opportunity to elevate its relations with the US and benefit from the immense rewards that can be reaped from a deeper relationship. Investments by American businesses hit US\$243 million as of August last year, according to the Myanmar Investment Commission. But this sum is paltry compared to the \$43 billion dollars in total foreign direct investment in the same period.

Increased investment from the US will diversify Myanmar's economy making it more resilient, reduce reliance on Chinese investments, thus making it more geopolitically balanced and attracting further investments from the western countries that still take the lead from the US.

Impact on domestic reform

Thirdly, being the chair of ASEAN - and with national elections looming in 2015 - there is strong political impetus to push through urgently-needed reforms in several areas. It has already made some progress in this regard. For instance, during the SEA Games in Myanmar, high-speed 4G mobile Internet network was installed (albeit only for the Media and VIPs) in various venues in a relatively short period of time. Additionally, Myanmar has given the 'go ahead' for an ASEAN People's Forum (APF) in Naypyidaw.

The APF is a set of civil society meetings held in the ASEAN Chair's country each year. The green light by Myanmar stands in stark contrast to Cambodia's actions when it was chair where it sent government-only representatives, meddled extensively in proceedings and even shut down meetings and kicked out activists. These show the willingness and ability to tackle some of the pertinent problems facing Myanmar especially when under pressure to perform globally.

Myanmar's chairmanship will be closely watched by South East Asian neighbours for it is a momentous year not only for Naypyidaw but for ASEAN as well. Myanmar has the backing and the support of its fellow ASEAN members to pull off a successful chairmanship. It would be in the interest of Myanmar and ASEAN to grab this opportunity to open up more quickly domestically and integrate further with the international community.

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