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Myanmar Crisis and ASEAN: What's Really at Stake

By Naoko Kumada

SYNOPSIS

The political crisis in Myanmar results from fundamental historical issues that remain unresolved. The best partner for a political solution to Myanmar's crisis now is ASEAN.

COMMENTARY

ON 8 AUGUST 1988, I witnessed mass anti-government protests break out on the streets in Yangon. As the protests escalated in the following weeks, all foreigners were required to leave the country, except diplomats and their family members like myself. The date left a permanent mark in Myanmar society and in my consciousness.

Today, Myanmar is undergoing yet another crisis. This situation is *deja vu* in Myanmar's post-independence history. General Ne Win overthrew U Nu's civilian government in 1962 and led the country for the next 26 years. These events reflect the difficulties of governing a complex nation whose very sovereignty remains a troubled work in progress.

Issues of Sovereignty and Nationhood

They result from historical issues left over from more-than-a-century of colonial capitalist exploitation followed by internal and external threats to its integrity during the Cold War. Myanmar's proud and ancient tradition of sovereignty was not simply suspended, it was wiped out entirely when the British dethroned and led its last King, Thibaw, out in humiliation on a bullock-cart in 1885.

"Burma" was annexed and made a province of British India. This loss of monarchy and sovereign statehood led to a near total breakdown of Myanmar's social, religious, and political order over the following decades. Burmans, subdued by British Indian

troops, were excluded from the new military and administered by transplanted Indian officers. Burmese peasants, thrown into the global capitalist economy, were dispossessed by money-lenders and displaced by farmers and indentured labour from India.

Soon after Burma declared independence in 1948, its sovereignty and basis as a nation over the tangled lines of empire were fought over as mutinies and civil war broke out. From 1949, the country was invaded and partially occupied by Kuomintang (KMT) troops.

In this Forgotten War they were backed by Washington as part of “a grand strategy to contain the People’s Republic of China [...] to utilise the remnants of Chiang’s forces for the purpose of harassing and weakening the Peking government from bases wrested from the Burmese [...]” in the words of George McTurnan Kahin, the late renowned scholar of Southeast Asia.

US arms airdropped into the region were also diverted to Shan and Karen rebels. These forces profoundly destabilised the Myanmar government and created a continuing basis for the frontline mobilisation of the Myanmar military.

Myanmar’s Challenges Post-Cold War

Like Iraq, Libya and Syria, Myanmar continues to struggle with the aftermath of empire and the Cold War. The Tatmadaw (The Armed Forces of Myanmar), and its predecessors the Burma National Army (BNA) and the Burmese Independence Army (BIA), has played a central role in Myanmar’s history, fighting British and Japanese forces to obtain independence, then rebel armies and a Cold War invasion.

It sees itself as the champion and guardian of Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It remains, for all its issues and wrongs, an indispensable institution in a country beset with armed conflict. Myanmar’s highly strategic location makes it a tempting target of foreign intervention.

Today’s crisis is familiar because fundamental issues of sovereignty remain unresolved in a state still in the making. A solution to the current crisis must therefore respect both the democratic will of its people and the role of the military in a nation that has, since 1947, suffered the modern world’s longest running civil war.

Both principles are written into the 2008 Constitution, as is respect for the self-determination of Myanmar’s indigenous peoples. The solution will not come from former and current imperial powers using it as a platform to showcase 'values-based diplomacy' while ignoring their complicity in the violently fractured reality of Myanmar today.

Myanmar and ASEAN at the Heart of Asia

ASEAN is the best partner for a political solution to Myanmar’s crisis. ASEAN’s commitment to ‘respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations’ and ‘abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country’

express anti-colonial principles that are also foundational to Myanmar's political culture.

Given its centrality in East Asian multilateralism, ASEAN leaders and diplomats can work with those of neighbouring countries such as China and India and key economic partners such as Korea and Japan to create a framework for reconciliation and development within a context of East Asian multilateralism. Its oft-lamented weaknesses belie its strength in positionality, equality in dignity, unique diversity of political experience and capacity for quiet diplomacy exercised in a framework of open regionalism.

Myanmar did not join ASEAN until 1997, but it was ASEAN's patient engagement and respect for Myanmar's conduct of its internal affairs, rather than moralising and threats, that helped move Myanmar's military leadership towards a democratic transition that, while dependent on the charisma of Aung San Suu Kyi, and thus of Aung San himself, was also orchestrated by certain members of the military leadership.

Western sanctions contributed only to the isolation and suffering of the people of Myanmar, and the habit of portraying the struggle as a Manichean contest between a sainted figure and a monolithic evil may actually have retarded the path to democratic transition from the moment in 1988 that so struck me.

While each day the situation grows more dire, more tragic, ASEAN must redouble efforts to play the principal mediating role in helping envision and agree, with the military government, some path of return to civilian-led rule and development.

ASEAN is at the heart of an independent, confident, and interconnected Asia to which Myanmar is joined, and for which Myanmar is itself a strategic connector, between India and China, South and East Asia, and the Indian Ocean and continental Asia.

ASEAN also has the most at stake, for what is at issue in Myanmar isn't merely the integrity of this past election. It is the very viability of Myanmar as a state. If that fails, then the forces and interests unleashed, as in Iraq and Libya, threaten to spill over Myanmar's territorial borders to the entire region.

Naoko Kumada is a faculty member at Bard College, New York, an Associate on Buddhist Studies at Columbia University and an adjunct fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Her doctoral dissertation from the University of Cambridge was on "In the World of Rebirth: Politics, Economy and Society of Burmese Buddhists."
