

Engaging Burma: The ASEAN Experience

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Speech delivered by Akbayan Representative Mario Aguja at the Hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee on Burma, Danish Parliament, 6 April 2006

Mr. Chairperson, fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen:

Allow me to express my gratitude for this opportunity to share with you my hopes for democracy in Burma. I sit here before you, in behalf of the ASEAN legislators who also dream for development not only in our respective countries but also in our region, particularly in our ailing neighbor Burma.

Imagine a country where over 2,500 villages have been destroyed, where a military regime has more child soldiers than any other country in the world, and where millions of refugees have fled the country and continue to flee. Does this sound like a country in modern-day Asia? It does not, but it is. And that country is Burma.

First, allow me to share with you first a few facts about our region and a brief history of ASEAN's relationship with Burma.

The ASEAN has a combined GDP of \$685B and total trade of \$ 758.7 B. It is home to a population of diverse religions and multi-faceted cultures. It also has a political history of democratization where dictatorship is a thing of the past, except in Burma.

The ASEAN was formed in 1967 by five Southeast Asian states - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The basis of their union was concern over security threats from internal communist insurgencies, which plagued all of these countries, and regional threats such as the Indochinese conflict and the People's Republic of China's support for revolutionary communism in East Asia. The leaders hoped to form an alliance to represent their presumed mutual interest and strengthen their role against external threats.

ASEAN and Burma had little interest in each other then as ASEAN focused on its own internal issues, while Burma retreated into isolation. The changing political and economic landscape in the 1990's tipped the attention of the ASEAN for Burma's membership. Since the 1988 popular uprising in Burma, it has shifted to an open economic policy catching the interest of the global world for its vast natural resources, including China and the ASEAN. Burma formally became a member of the ASEAN in 1997. While some member countries continued to have doubts about the wisdom of admitting Burma into the ASEAN, the support of three of the association's most influential members helped Burma to secure a seat in the ASEAN — Malaysia and Indonesia with interest in protecting the Muslims in the predominantly Buddhist country, and Singapore whose interest was access to Burma's natural resources and market for weapons.

Policy of Constructive Engagement

Although Burma's inclusion in the ASEAN was criticized by the international community, members defended the decision by arguing that a human rights-abusing state should not be left alone to behave unchecked but should be influenced for change by using economic ties as bargaining chips. Then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed was quoted saying "If Burma is outside, it is

free to behave like a rogue or a pariah, while if it is inside, it would be subject to certain norms of behavior". This policy of "constructive engagement" operated on the assumption that Burma's immersion to the ASEAN would influence Burmese government towards democratic reforms. ASEAN Governments and parliamentarians used this policy to pressure, if not to criticize, the junta.

In the spirit of "constructive engagement", ASEAN ministers urged the military government to allow the entry of UN Special Envoy Razali Ismail in 2002 to facilitate dialogue among various groups in Burma and call for the release of political prisoners, particularly Nobel Peace Prize Winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The ASEAN ministers also pressured the government of Burma to relinquish its post as Chair of the ASEAN for 2006. Stepping up further, the ASEAN recently sent its special envoy, Syed Hamid Albar, Foreign Minister of Malaysia to conduct a fact-finding mission in Burma. However, what was supposed to be a three-day trip became only a one-day visit with Albar meeting up only with Prime Minister Soe Win and Foreign Minister Nyan Win and denied access to NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Lopsided Partnership

Despite transforming the policy of non-interference to "constructive engagement", and "flexible engagement" of "strong advising" (as proposed by Thailand), Burma has failed to show genuine reforms. On the contrary, the military regime intensified its repression against pro-democracy opposition and ethnic groups, apparently assuming that admission into ASEAN was a sign of approval for its previous policies. The situation in Burma continues to worsen with no degree of measurable improvement. Burma has trampled on democracy and continues to commit humanitarian and human rights violations. Burma likewise threatens the security of its neighbors with the substantial outflow of refugees, rampant drug trafficking, spread of HIV/AIDs and more recently the uncontrolled spread of the avian flu virus.

Moreover, several ASEAN members have found Burma's membership in the association only as a means to utilize Burma's natural resources. While the ASEAN publicly condemns the human rights violations of the Burmese government, its members have unwittingly supported the government by entering into trade negotiations with Burma, thereby still financing its military government.

Joining the ASEAN, the Burmese junta has gained everything but has given nothing in return even when the international community, not only the ASEAN has been demanding for reforms.

The AIPMC initiatives

In exasperation of Burma's uncooperativeness, and to further maximize ASEAN's potentials, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) formed in November 2004. AIPMC is composed of parliamentarians from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, and members of Burma's government in exile. AIPMC has affiliate members and partners in the form of national caucuses and parliamentary groups outside ASEAN, such as India, Republic of Korea, Japan and countries in Europe. The body also works closely with the civil-society Burma movement and members of Burma's government-in-exile.

One of its initial campaigns was to urge ASEAN to deny Burma its turn at chairing the regional bloc in 2006. Having succeeded in its campaign, members of the Caucus have now further called on ASEAN to suspend the military government's ASEAN membership if it fails to show concrete democratic reforms in the country, such as acknowledging the 1990 national general election results and convening Parliament.

Since its inception, AIPMC has conducted the following campaigns and activities;

- A visit to a refugee camp on the Burma-Thai border housing 20,000 refugees (Feb 2006)
- Conference on 'Good Governance, Democracy and ASEAN' (Dec 2005, Kuala Lumpur)
- Meeting with UN and European Parliament (Oct 2005)
- Suu Ki's 60th birthday celebration/campaign for release (June 2005, Kuala Lumpur)
- National parliamentary caucuses launched in Indonesia (Feb 2005), Thailand (March 2005), Philippines (April 2005), and Singapore (June 2005)
- Constant Press releases/statements and opinion articles

The AIPMC continues to call and support the following:

- Inclusion of Burma in the UN Security Council agenda and a UNSC resolution urging the SPDC to cooperate with the UN to facilitate democratic reforms.
- Unconditional and immediate release of Suu Kyi and all political prisoners
- Urgently convene legitimately elected Parliament/government of Burma based on the results of the 1990 elections per NLD power-sharing transition offer (February 12 offer of NLD)
- End systematic human rights violations in the land
- Declare a nationwide ceasefire to pave the way for a process of national reconciliation that includes ethnic nationality groups and the NLD
- Access into Burma for UN and ASEAN envoys
- Active participation of ASEAN and other stakeholder in resolving the conflict in Burma

Challenges for the International Community

While the Burmese government remains callous to the persistent calls of its people and the international community to institute democratic reforms, external pressure still remains a big potential to spark change in this deteriorating state.

Members of the ASEAN and AIPMC should continue its call for the Burmese government to genuinely initiate reforms towards democratization. However, the membership of Burma in the ASEAN and the policy of 'constructive engagement' should be reviewed since the military government has not, in the last 8 years, shown any substantial reform. It seems that the ASEAN's "strong advising" has not been enough to initiate the changes it had hoped for when it accepted Burma's membership in 1997.

But despite criticisms on ASEAN's current approach to Burma, AIPMC remains confident that it can still be firm and decisive by utilizing principled engagement, diplomacy and pressure.

Moves should also be made to broaden international campaign on Burma outside of the ASEAN. The AIPMC has broadened its network beyond the ASEAN and Asia to Europe and North America. Non-ASEAN neighbors China and India who have been supportive trading partners of Burma should be convinced to join the international community to put an end to Burma's prolonged crisis. Doing so would be more beneficial to their mid and long-term interests.

What Denmark can do

Denmark as the incoming Chair of the UNSC will be in the best position to make a huge difference on Burma by pushing for the formal inclusion of Burma in the UNSC agenda. We are proud to say that in our short term as member of the UNSC, the Philippines supported first-ever discussion on Burma at the meeting of the UNSC on December 16, 2005. Now, we are appealing to the Danish parliament and government to strongly, aggressively and pro-actively seek a resolution on Burma at the UNSC. I ask the Danish members of parliament to publicly call for a binding UNSC resolution urging the SPDC to cooperate with the UN towards meaningful reforms. The groundbreaking report

commissioned by The Honorable Vacláv Havel, Former President of the Czech Republic and Bishop Desmond M. Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, has presented more than enough reasons for the UNSC to take action on Burma.

The Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Helsinki can also be a platform to campaign for Burma by ensuring that the ASEM process includes a face-to-face interaction between ASEM heads of government and representatives of civil society. The progress towards democracy is incomplete if other pro-democracy forces are excluded in discussions.

My friends, Burma has been under military rule since 1962, but the 50 million people of Burma refuse to give up their fight for democracy. And we in the international community cannot and should not give up on them. We can no longer afford to “wait and see” what happens to Burma while the country rapidly deteriorates. Let us continue to be inspired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s appeal to us, “Please use your liberty to promote ours”. Together we can help the Burmese people enjoy the fruits of freedom, justice and peace.

P.S.

* Akbayan Representative Mario Aguja participated in a hearing on Burma held by the Danish Parliament. As one of the keynote speakers invited by the Danish Parliament, he spoke on behalf of the ASEAN Interparliamentary Caucus on Burma.