

ASEAN destroys its own credibility

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The publicity over ASEAN's failure of nerve about Burma obscures other troubles with its new charter.

While international organizations and regional blocs like the European Union are trying so hard to stay relevant, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seems not to be bothering.

First was the disastrous and disgraceful climbdown at the recent 13th ASEAN summit in Singapore, when the organization bent to the demands of Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein in refusing to allow United Nations Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to brief leaders and their dialogue partners from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea on Burma's crackdown on Buddhist monks and civilian protesters — forcing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, which now chairs ASEAN, to scrap the meeting.

Worse yet is the ASEAN Charter, which confirms that the principle of non-interference will remain unchanged. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, herself mired charges of corruption and a domestic mess last week with an attempted coup, at least stood up and said she wouldn't sign the charter unless the long-confined Nobel laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Ky is freed and Burma agrees to some degree of human rights liberalization.

Leaders from the 10 member countries ended up signing a charter that aims towards comprehensive integration, but that has significant problems that certainly render the charter problematical, if not meaningless. On the economic front, the charter contains the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint that was adopted at the summit. Similar to — if not inspired by — the European Economic Community, the AEC Blueprint aims for complete economic integration among 10 member countries by 2015.

For a group as diverse as ASEAN, whose members are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, the AEC Blueprint is, indeed, a bold and encouraging vision. But at the same time, the very diversity of or imbalance among the 10 members' economies makes it very difficult to realize the AEC Blueprint by 2015 as planned.

At the heart of this plan is the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT), which ultimately targets a zero tariff rate among the 10 members. While this goal is easier to reach for advanced economies in ASEAN, namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, it is more difficult for their less developed fellow economies, namely Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam. The main reason is that the latter group, as do most developing countries, tends to have high tariff rates as a way to maintain or improve their terms of trade (prices of a country's exports over its imports).

Understandably enough, ASEAN's less-developed economies are given a later schedule for tariff reduction. But for the AEC vision to be realized, it will require a strong political will, discipline and leadership from them and the rest of ASEAN.

Put differently, what happens if any member — regardless of its economic stage — which does not

respect and meet the deadline of tariff reduction and other requirements set out by the AEC Blueprint? Is there some sort of punishment for those that don't do their parts and, thus, fail the whole AEC vision altogether? And may other members have any say?

Sadly, the answer to these questions is negative. The cause of this is nothing other than ASEAN's fundamental principle of non-interference.

Forty years ago when ASEAN was founded, its founding fathers — some of whom are still alive — agreed that all ASEAN members would not interfere with matters considered to be a fellow member's domestic affairs. After the Cold War, this principle seemed to work well for ASEAN, whose members then were Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

As the group grew larger and inducted Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam in the early 1990s, however, the political structure changed. Indeed, the new four members' political systems and ideologies were, and still are, very different from those of the original six. Nevertheless, ASEAN's political culture, or the principle of non-interference, stayed the same.

To be fair, ASEAN did surprise the world in 2003 when it urged Burma's military rulers to free Ms Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy secured a landslide, but unrecognized, victory in a 1990 election. Last year, an ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus was even established, with the primary aims of pushing democracy in Burma and helping free Ms Suu Kyi. To ASEAN's credit, the pressure it exerted in the past led to Burma giving up its scheduled turn as the chair of the association last year (the Philippines took the position, as it was next in line).

And at first in September, when the Burmese junta cracked down brutally on protestors, ASEAN initially showed that it was breaking away from its excessively polite political culture and the principle of non-interference. Singapore's Lee, who currently chairs the group, said ASEAN cannot "credibly remain silent or uninvolved in this matter."

"National reconciliation means opening of meaningful dialogue with Aung San Su Kyi and the NLD (National League for Democracy); (it) means releasing political detainees, including Aung San Su Kyi; (it) means moving forward to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy and to address the economic hardships of the population of Myanmar," he said.

But, alas, ASEAN is not in favor of sanctions or dismembering Burma, as the US Senate and the Human Rights Watch Group have urged, although during the summit, ASEAN did make its position clear that Burma cannot go back to the status quo — a position obscured by the cave-in on Gambari's briefing. By all accounts, ASEAN is the loser, having first attempted to discipline Burma and then being forced to back away. In addition, international outrage over Burma's military crackdown is stalling ASEAN's trade negotiations with the United States and causing serious diplomatic difficulties with the European Union

This is no way for ASEAN to maintain its credibility. Now that it has broken its premise of non-interference through its statements and actions towards ASEAN thus far, maintaining the principle, if anything, will make ASEAN hypocritical.

Burma, as a consequence, will get spoiled again, as it knows that it can continue to keep Aung San Suu Kyi under arrest and suppress democracy and ASEAN won't do a thing since it is considered an internal matter. Not only has ASEAN continued to back the wrong horse, but it has lost its face in the international community.

P.S.

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