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Burma: Still an Unknown Quantity for ASEAN 2014 Chair

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While Burma's military-backed regime should be commended for their efforts and willingness to steer the country towards democracy, the decision by the other nine countries of ASEAN to award Burma the rotating ASEAN chairmanship for 2014 may be premature and should have been conditional. But now that the decision has been made, the world cannot afford to see Burma fail. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the country is a significant step in probing the Burmese government's commitment to reform.

Fuadi Pitsuwan, Adjunct Research Scholar in the Asian Studies Department at Georgetown University, argues that "It would have been more appropriate and less risky for ASEAN to grant Burma this request as a conditional offer and postpone their final decision to 2013."

A year ago, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a military-backed party, won almost 80 percent of the parliamentary seats in what was deemed at the time to be a seriously flawed election. As the leader of the USDP, General Thein Sein, who served as the prime minister under the military regime, assumed the presidency as a civilian. Very few people were optimistic that this would lead to change in Burma at that point, even Burma's neighbors in ASEAN.

However, Thein Sein and his government then embarked on a series of surprising reforms. They ended the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest, and she has recently announced that her party, the National League for Democracy, will now join the political process. In addition, labor unions and strikes are now legalized, and the prospect for press freedom appears more hopeful after the government's censorship chief, Tint Swe, came out to advocate for the dissolution of his own agency, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department. The US\$3.6 billion China-backed Myitsone dam project has been halted after the Burmese government heard concerns from the local population opposing the construction. In other signs of change, more than 6,000 prisoners, including 200 political detainees, have recently been released.

ASEAN leaders have recognized these changes, and the United States along with its Western allies welcomed the reforms. But everyone is calling for more democratic moves to take place, as military campaigns and human rights abuses against ethnic minorities are reportedly ongoing and more than 2,000 political prisoners are still in jail. In addition, drug trafficking and refugees emanating out of Burma remain a concern for neighboring countries.

ASEAN leaders seem more hopeful of the prospect of continuing reforms, while the United States and others remain skeptical of the military-backed government's commitment to democracy. In reality, no one really knows what will happen. ASEAN's decision to award the military-backed regime the Chair of ASEAN for 2014 is therefore premature. ASEAN will be in a very difficult position if Thein Sein backtracks on the current democratization and civil liberties process. Moreover, ASEAN is practically barred from renegeing on its offer to Burma since that would be tantamount to an embarrassment and an admission of failure.



“As Burma opens up more, there could be calls for more demands for change, which could be destabilizing. This will make Burma extremely volatile during the next few years. If the state is unable to manage calls for reforms properly, it could crumble.”

ASEAN is also risking the future of the new regional architecture, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and therefore the notion of “ASEAN Centrality”—a term used to describe ASEAN’s belief that it is in the driver seat for the EAS. The East Asia Summit, comprised of 18 countries, has the ten ASEAN states as its core. The meeting is held annually in the ASEAN state that holds the chair that year.

If Burma backtracks on its commitment to democratic reform or does not show sufficient progress between now and 2014, it will be difficult for the US President to attend. Indeed, it would be a political suicide for the US President—the leader of the free world—to visit Burma if the country is plagued with internal government brutality against ethnic minorities, domestic armed conflicts, and lack of civil liberties. Without the presence of the United States, the EAS could turn into an ASEAN-versus-China battleground. ASEAN risks losing its “centrality” and instead giving way to Chinese dominance.

Even if the Burmese government keeps to their reforms, committing the bloc to be led by Burma in 2014 is still risky. Ongoing turmoil in Egypt, where the military has had a strong role in the state apparatus, should teach Southeast Asians some important lessons. The Egyptian revolution occurred not when authoritarianism was at its most repressive, but when there was sufficient space for citizens to express their political opinions and assemble. Technology and social media has made such freedom of assembly and civil organization much easier to coordinate. Furthermore, there were smaller versions of organized movements starting around 2004 that actually encouraged more citizens to express their discontent with the political process. This in turn cumulated into a snowball effect—which finally resulted in the eventual ouster of Mubarak’s regime—that is still nowhere near conclusion. In the case of Burma, even though the 2007 Saffron Revolution ended in a brutal and violent suppression of the dissidents by the ruling junta, that protest movement seems to have acted as a catalyst for more frequent incidents of civil disobedience. As Burma opens up more, there could be calls for more demands for change, which could be destabilizing. This will make Burma extremely volatile during the next few years. If the state is unable to manage calls for reforms properly, it could crumble.

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Leaders at the 2011 ASEAN Summit agreed on the recommendation of Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa to let Burma chair ASEAN in 2014. It would have been more appropriate and less risky for ASEAN to grant Burma this request as a conditional offer and postpone their final decision to 2013.

But now that Burma will hold the chair in 2014, and therefore host the EAS, the world should not leave the “risk” to ASEAN alone. If ASEAN fails in solidifying political and economic development in Burma, the international community will also have some shared responsibility. The international community should do what it can, within a limited but expanding space, to engage Burma across the spectrum of issues to ensure that the fragile positive progress underway does not stall, or worse still, reverse. The decision by President Obama to send Secretary Clinton to Burma—the first US secretary of State to visit in 50 years—is a promising start that will, according to Secretary Clinton, “test what the true intentions are and whether there is a commitment to both economic and political reform.”

To abandon ASEAN and Burma to proceed alone to 2014 is to guarantee a failure of the entire experiment. The UN, the EU, and the ADB, along with other international civil society organizations, should also be encouraged to initiate and expand their engagements on appropriate issues to help prepare Burma for its ASEAN leadership role in two years. Together it is possible to minimize the risk of failure, and increase the prospect of success. For if Burma succeeds the international community together can claim credit rather than blaming a few for failure.

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