Burma as ASEAN Chair in 2014: Interests, Agendas and A Road to Redemption

By Pavin Chachavalpongpun

With Burma chairing ASEAN in 2014, the country will finally become a full member of the alliance it joined uneasily in 1997. For both ASEAN and Burma, writes Pavin Chachavalpongpun, the decision to invite Burma to the chair is a matter of self-interest: Burma gains international legitimacy and ASEAN is vindicated for its go-soft policy on Burma in the past.

IN 2011, SEVEN YEARS AFTER it voluntarily gave up its turn at the helm, Burma, also known as Myanmar, was granted the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for 2014. Despite the current round of political reforms in Burma, critics continue to wonder whether the changes are real or just cosmetic. These same doubts surround Burma’s role as ASEAN chair.

This essay seeks to engage two key arguments. First, Burma needs the ASEAN chairmanship to supplement its ongoing democratization and as part of the regime’s search for a fresh source of legitimacy by reaching out to its neighbors. More importantly, it hopes the progressive reforms it has undertaken will ultimately lead to the permanent abolition of decades-old sanctions imposed by the West on human rights grounds, a process already well under way. But one crucial question remains: Will this translate into Burma behaving according to regional norms in the future?

Second, for ASEAN’s part, putting Burma in the chair is a strategic move because it will vindicate its past Burma policy, centered predominantly on engagement and not punishment. Yet, how Burma fulfills ASEAN’s obligations toward community-building remains unanswered. It appears that the much-anticipated chairmanship is primarily designed to legitimize Burma rather than to promote a true sense of regionalism, which now depends on the realization of the ASEAN Community by the end of 2015.

A DECADE OF TRANSFORMATION
At the 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali in 2011, leaders of ASEAN announced that they had unanimously agreed to give Burma the chairmanship of the regional bloc for 2014. Burma was originally scheduled to take the rotating chairmanship in 2016, but had requested to move the date up after it was pressured to relinquish its turn in 2006 because its repressive military regime damaged ASEAN’s reputation.

2014 will be a crucial year for both Burma and ASEAN. For Burma, it comes in advance of general elections scheduled for 2015, just the third national elections since 1990 and the first since significant reforms began.1 Serving as ASEAN’s chair will give the regime in Naypyidaw much needed political legitimacy. The government will be responsible for organizing hundreds of ASEAN meetings during the period of its chairmanship, which will further expose Burma to the regional community, bring in more investments from ASEAN countries and their dialogue partners and allow the government to exercise its leadership by working closely with ASEAN to reaffirm the members’ obligations toward community-building in 2015.

The chairmanship of ASEAN, therefore, could become a fundamental factor in shaping Burma’s internal politics in favor of the ruling elite, to a certain extent even influencing the general election results the following year. As for ASEAN, Burma’s chairmanship had become inevitable, although it is still a risky gamble. The decision can be seen as ASEAN trying to vindicate its past policy of engagement with Burma. That policy was often criticized by Western governments for tolerating the repressive behavior of the Burmese junta. Burma is still the only ASEAN member never to have served in the alliance’s chair. In approving Burma’s request for the chairmanship, ASEAN once again legitimized the Burmese regime, just as it did in 1997 when Burma was admitted into ASEAN despite protests from the international community.

FINDING A ROADMAP
Some ASEAN members, including Indonesia and Singapore, were behind a regional effort to persuade Burma to give up its chairmanship for 2006. That pressure primarily stemmed from outside the region, particularly from the United States and the European Union, both of which were maintaining strict sanctions against Burma for its human rights violations and lack of progress on political reforms. The immense pressure on the Burmese regime was partly in response to the junta’s 2004 decision to extend the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which immediately stirred up a wave of protest worldwide. The news of Suu Kyi being re-incarcerated infuriated ASEAN’s dialogue partners, some of whom threatened to boycott the 2006 summit if it was convened by the Burmese junta. The condemnation of Burma’s regime was also a condemnation of ASEAN for doing virtually nothing to prevent gross human rights abuses in Burma. As one of the most powerful ASEAN members, Indonesia was eager to please Western governments by expressing its serious concerns about the devastating impact on ASEAN’s credibility and reputation should Burma become the chair. Under these circumstances, and especially being faced with possibly harsher sanctions from the West, Burma agreed to postpone its chairmanship until it felt that it was more ready. At the ASEAN summit in Laus in 2004, Burma’s delegation announced that it was in ASEAN’s interest that Burma skip the 2006 chairmanship.

From that point forward, Burma embarked on its roadmap toward democratization. Although the reforms started slowly, in 2010 Burma showed the world that it was at least somewhat serious about some form of democratization when it sponsored its first general election in 20 years. At first, the election was heavily criticized...
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A VARIETY OF RESPONSES
ASEAN’s unanimous decision to grant the chairmanship signified that all ASEAN members agreed there were more benefits to be gained from Burma’s chairmanship than disadvantages. It is only logical to assume that ASEAN seemed to have no choice on the issue simply because rejecting Burma’s request would have been a rejection of ASEAN’s past policy, including the admission of Burma into the club in 1997 and the unflagging support for Burma’s roadmap toward democracy. Moreover, in the context of politics à la ASEAN, political developments in Burma appear “impressive,” “admirable” and “unprecedented.” For a country dominated by a military regime for so long, where the people’s freedom was largely constrained and the political space had long been closed, the current pace of Burma’s political reforms should be viewed as triumphant. Journalists even compared events in Burma with events in Thailand, saying Burma was becoming “civilianized” while Thailand was becoming militarized.

In short, the positive evolution of the political process in Burma has helped redeem the down-beat reputation of ASEAN as the past shield of an illegitimate regime. In any case, ASEAN argues that the chairmanship should propel the reforms forward, since being the chair requires Burma to accept certain responsibilities and to manage ASEAN’s relationship with its dialogue partners.

The West initially responded somewhat ambivalently to the changes, but actions such as the recent visit by US President Barack Obama — the first ever to the country by a sitting US president — have done a lot to signal growing enthusiasm for the reform process. The US, Canada and the EU have all begun easing sanctions. Burma had done what it needed to do to earn sympathy from its critics in the West. The elections, the release of Suu Kyi and some political prisoners, the suspension of construction on the controver-
sial China-financed Myitsone dam project (supposedly for the sake of local livelihoods) and steps toward reconciliation with the opposition have all helped the Burmese government to improve its relations with Western governments.

And indeed, political changes in Burma have had an impact on the policies of some Western and Asian governments. For example, the EU suspended most sanctions on the country in April 2012. Similarly, the Obama administration announced in September it would ease most com-
cercial sanctions, while some will have to wait for Congressional action.

In Asia, Japan has approached a watershed in its policy toward Burma. The Foreign and Trade ministries planned to launch a major economic surge but were held back by the fact that Burma owes Japan $6 billion from previous loans. They
are currently considering working with international financial institutions to arrange bridging loans and other mechanisms to get around this. Recently, the Japan Bank for International Co-operation sent a delegation to Burma to see if there would be any other potential financial schemes they could work closely together on.

Much skepticism has had to be overcome. The continued human rights abuses in Burma, especially in ethnic areas, and the fact that a large number of political prisoners have not been released, left some Western government initially ambivalent. Obama, in a speech to the Australian parliament ahead of the 2011 East Asian summit in Bali, said, “Some political prisoners have been released. The government has begun a dialogue. still, violations of human rights persist. So we will continue to speak clearly about the steps that must be taken for the government of Burma to have a better relationship with the United States.” 2

A year later, however, he visited the country ahead of the East Asia Summit. In his visit to Burma on Nov. 19, 2012, he praised Suu Kyi for her courage, but he also made the symbolically important gesture of calling the country by the government’s preferred name, Myanmar. Obama had an hour-long meeting with President Thein Sein and lauded the “incredible development opportunities” in Burma. “The flickers of progress that we have seen must not be extinguished,” Obama said in a speech at the University of Rangoon. “Reforms launched from the top of society must meet the aspirations of citizens who form its foundation.” 3

But drug trafficking and Burmese refugees, especially the beleaguered Muslim Rohingya, still pose a threat to Burma’s neighbors and a continuing source of unease. Some Western nations expressed their disappointment with the decision of ASEAN to grant Burma the chairmanship for 2014, saying it would have been less risky to make the offer conditional and to postpone a final decision to 2013. This would have allowed NGOs and civil society organizations to expand their engagement to help Burma prepare for its enhanced ASEAN role. This could have helped minimize the risk of failure and increase the prospect of success. 4

Meanwhile, the reaction from some ethnic groups to the chairmanship decision was largely disapproving. For example, the Burma Partnership, a Burma rights advocacy network throughout the Asia-Pacific region, criticized the ASEAN action, saying the bloc should have used its position to influence the regime to take more meaningful steps toward democratic transition. 5 In other words, critics view ASEAN’s move to celebrate Burma’s political transition as immature and worry that the political elite could change their mind in the future if they feel that democratization will erode their political authority.

Earlier, there was a call for the Burmese government to meet three important benchmarks before an ASEAN chairmanship was to be granted to Burma: first, immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners; second, a declaration of a nationwide ceasefire with ethnic armed groups and cessation of attacks on ethnic communities; and third, inclusive political dialogue with ethnic nationality representatives, including armed groups, and the pro-democracy movement, led by Suu Kyi and the NLD. 6

WHY DID NAPPPYDAW BUDGE?

What will Burma gain from hosting the ASEAN summit in 2014? In a word, legitimacy. Legitimacy has become fundamental to ensure continued progress and ensure that sanctions do not return. And the quickest route to legitimacy is to exploit the ASEAN platform to enhance the growing view that Burma deserves to be supported and endorsed.

It is rather complicated to understand why the Burmese junta finally agreed to step down to pave the way for the progressive faction to transform Burma into more of a civilian state. There are a number of reasons behind the unexpected political changes. First, prior to the election of 2010, pressure within the country had built up to such a degree that the ancient regime was forced to look for a way to open up if the political elite were to survive. At the same time, the regional and international environments have changed tremendously. Almost all ASEAN members have been concentrating on accelerating their economic growth and building the region as a community. This has taken place alongside changes inside Burma. The new generation in the army — the turn of the generals — is less conservative. It is likely that there was an agreement among the elite on the need to transform Burma before it was too late and all would be lost in a chaotic — and likely bloody — transformation. For the Burmese leadership, opening up was constructive and essentially strategic, and it allowed political leaders to cling to power while promoting a more liberal economic strategy.

Since the first roadmap to democracy appeared in 2004, until the 2010 elections, the political elite in Burma had heavily invested themselves in the transition, even at a risk to their own positions. But this seeming political sacrifice was somewhat inevitable in the context of the changing regional and international environment. They knew that they had to eventually step down, but somehow wanted to remain politically dominant. Thus, a new political structure was created, with the military controlling 25 percent of the parliametary seats in the new government.

The investment was a big gamble. To ensure that they would not lose out eventually, the political elite needed the international community to sign off on the changes. This explains the release of the junta’s former No. 1 enemy, Suu Kyi; the relaxation of draconian controls over the media; legalizing trade unions and inviting the NLD to return to politics. 7 The ASEAN chairmanship was needed so that Burma could continue to fulfill its own agenda. In the meantime, Burma has readjusted its diplomatic tactics. Not only has it deepened involvement in ASEAN, it has reached out to the US, through the visits of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December 2011 and Obama’s a year later. It welcomed UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and British Prime Minister David Cameron in April 2012. The message has been that it wants to engage the world and be recognized as a responsible member of the global community. The new diplomacy is meant to earn legitimacy for President Thein Sein’s government.

The ASEAN chair will further solidify Burma’s position. Within ASEAN’s dialogue-partners system and its many co-operative frameworks, members work closely on a variety of issues. But as chair, Burma will have an excellent opportunity to co-operate with non-ASEAN dialogue partners. In other words, the ASEAN chair role will complement national efforts to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations. With sanctions on the way out, more direct and more frequent contacts between the Burmese government and foreign investors will result. The economic livelihood of the Burmese will improve, allowing the regime to earn even more legitimacy.

Early on, Thai Foreign Minister Surapong Towa-jakchaikul said that Burma’s progress warranted a positive response from the West. “They should ease sanctions,” he said after the chairman decision was made. “We believe that with the positive improvements in Myanmar right now, this has shown that Myanmar would like to come back to the democratic way,” he said. 8

Finally, those who stand to benefit most from a sanctions-free Burma will likely be the generals

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6 Ibid.


8 Rondonuwu and Szep, “ASEAN Gambles on Myanmar’s Regional Leadership.”

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who may have left the political scene but are still in control of big business in Burma. This helps explain why they were willing to give up a portion of their power to support democratization.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR ASEAN?
The next question is why ASEAN went along with Burma’s ambition to host the summit two years before its turn came up in the rotation. ASEAN has consistently been reproached since the day it offered membership to the junta — a decision that was irreversible. Through the years, Burma has never behaved according to the expectations of its ASEAN fellows and instead has tested the limits of ASEAN and often put the bloc’s reputation at risk. In the meantime, the ASEAN norms of consensus and non-interference acted as a great barrier to influencing the Burmese regime.

But the organization was never ready to admit that adding Burma in 1997 was a mistake. Owing to this dark paradox, ASEAN was handcuffed by its own policy as much as by its own rules and regulations. As a consequence, the only time ASEAN spoke with one voice was when it initiated a policy of constructive engagement in dealing with Burmese issues. Briefly put, this policy preferred dialogue to sanctions. But friends of ASEAN criticized it as ineffective and weak.

The desire of ASEAN members to compete against other regional powers like China and India to gain a foothold in resource-rich Burma represented another reason why a soft approach was preferred. Given this dilemma, ASEAN was waiting for the right moment to justify its past policy, and to reaffirm that the “ASEAN way” of consensus-based constructive engagement was the right approach from the beginning.

The right moment arrived with the combination of politcal reform and Burma’s request to take the chair in 2014. With his country in the chair in 2011 when the decision was made, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa spoke about the issue in September 2011: “I shall be keen to listen and to hear the voice of civil society, not least the voice of Daw Aung Sun Suu Kyi. We welcome this invitation and take the opportunity we have been offered to present our views on whether Burma should chair ASEAN in 2014.”

Indonesia’s solid backing of Burma’s request was part of Jakarta’s new diplomatic activism.

In addition to backing Burma’s chairmanship request, during 2011, Indonesia came up with a series of “big projects” aimed not only at locating ASEAN on the world map, but also boosting its own image as an emerging democratic state and the leader of ASEAN. Indonesia lent its support to Timor Leste’s so-far frustrated bid for ASEAN membership and invited the US and Russia officially for the first time to the 2011 East Asia Summit (EAS). It also sought an ASEAN role in stopping the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple, thus asserting the alliance’s ability to mediate in bilateral conflicts, a previous taboo.

The message was clear from ASEAN: it could manage its own internal affairs, and granting the chairmanship to Burma was a way of exercising the rights of all members, even in the face of disapproval from some in the world community. ASEAN has always been very protective about its centrality in the region, and this has increasingly become a tenet among its members. Within all co-operative frameworks — ASEAN Plus Three, EAS, ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum — ASEAN has nominated itself as the leader in regional affairs. While powers outside the region went along with ASEAN’s self-appointed role as a driving force in regional affairs, doubts have always remained about whether ASEAN could use its authority when needed.

As mentioned earlier, the only time ASEAN was successful in producing a united stance vis-à-vis Burma was when it formulated the constructive engagement policy. But for most of the time, it was evident that ASEAN could not find a common position to deal with several problems in Burma, from the house arrest of Suu Kyi, to the continued detention of political prisoners and the crackdown on protesters during the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007. ASEAN’s approach has mostly been reactive rather than proactive, contradicting its ambition to be the driving force of the region.

Now that Burma has flirted with tangible democratization, ASEAN celebrated the changes as part of its own success in getting Burma to fit in with others in the region.

For example, when Suu Kyi was released one week after the 2010 election, several state-sponsored media organizations within ASEAN claimed that the endpoint of authoritarianism in Burma had already arrived. From this perspective, rewarding Burma was legitimate. On top of this, ASEAN itself also demanded that the international community recognize its efforts to engage with Burma — this was part of ASEAN claiming to be a serious organization that supported democracy and political dialogue. This vindication of ASEAN’s past policy was indeed behind the offer of the ASEAN chairmanship to Burma. As The Straits Times in Singapore wrote: “ASEAN was right on the money when it called on the West to lift the sanctions on Myanmar” in response to the democratic progress in Burma in 2011.

Meanwhile, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan lent his support for the Burmese chairmanship, saying, “Myanmar’s chair in 2014 will be a critical landmark in the history of ASEAN.”

MANY INTERESTS CONVERGE
At first glance, Burma’s 2014 ASEAN chairmanship appears to benefit a regional agenda. Burma is taking the chair just one year before the 2015 community-building deadline, which is important in both tangible and symbolic terms. It is tangible because Burma might gradually become the “new economic tiger” of the region. Symbolically, Burma will fulfill its dream of hosting the ASEAN Summit for the first time since it joined the grouping in 1997, just before ASEAN crosses another significant threshold of transforming itself into a political, economic and socio-cultural community. For ASEAN, one of the
reasons was to allow a new member, in this case, Burma, to experience the chairmanship. With the new political realities and all the available business opportunities, Burma could represent hope and possibility for ASEAN in the new community era. And more importantly, again in the eyes of ASEAN, Burma’s chairmanship would encourage the country to act more responsibly and accountably not only for the sake of its people, but also for the region as a whole.

However, it would be illusory to examine the Burmese chairmanship only within the above context. As this essay argues, for both Burma and ASEAN the real mission behind the chairmanship was self-fulfillment rather than anything meaningful about the development of regionalism. The real objectives of Burma were clear — to gain international legitimacy as a prerequisite to the lifting of sanctions, something which has already largely been accomplished. For ASEAN, the only goal was to vindicate its past Burma policy even if the Burmese chairmanship may not contribute positively to community building in 2015.

“We must ensure that ASEAN will not make the second mistake — the first was to admit Burma, now we have to make ASEAN chairmanship of Burma work,” said one Singaporean diplomat in an interview. Naypyidaw has not elaborated its vision of how to help enhance the effectiveness of ASEAN and further promote regionalization. Meanwhile, ASEAN has paid too much attention to the unexpected changes in Burma, which is why it rushed to grant the chairmanship to Burma without seriously calculating the impact on the community-building process. Having Burma as a chair challenges ASEAN’s efforts to promote itself as a serious organization.

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