

OPINION
Time for Asean, China to act on Myanmar

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Unanimity of purpose across the region, argues MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS, is the best way forward towards the future of Myanmar

THE announcement of a Constitutional Drafting Committee in Myanmar may look like another step along the military junta's seven-step road map, but in fact it is more bad news for the international community's determined effort to encourage a peaceful political transition to democracy in the country.

The appointment of the 54-member committee appears to close off the possibility of making the process more inclusive, and denies the fledgling dialogue process between the junta and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi of a major area of compromise.

The junta appears to be doing just what everyone feared; closing ranks and resisting pressure to make concessions to the domestic opposition and concerned members of the international community. This makes it all the more important for Myanmar's neighbours, big and small, to agree on a strategy involving political and economic aid and assistance.

The military regime may now be talking to UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari, but the absence of regional accord on the way forward ensures that Myanmar's generals can play divide and rule, however loud the calls for change, however strong the threat of sanctions.

There have been calls for Myanmar's powerful neighbours, China and India, to take the lead, but a paucity of constructive advice about how to change the status quo. One idea gaining currency is a core group based on the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Norway, Japan and Singapore as Asean standing chairman.

While such a configuration may send the right message in terms of global concern, it may be the wrong way to persuade China and India to change their views as it smacks of great power arm-twisting. Myanmar's military rulers will also be able to spout the usual rhetoric of neocolonial conspiracy.

Far more effective would be a core group or mechanism anchored in the region, rather than in New York. China, in particular, needs cover from regional neighbours before breaking with the long and now outdated tradition of non-interference. Therefore, support from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian nations, of which Myanmar is a member, is critical.

If Asean can agree to support a peaceful transition, with appropriate measures of carrots and sticks, there is no question that major powers like India, China and Japan, upon which the Myanmar authorities depend for vital trade and aid, will have to follow.

The question is how. Asean's track record on Myanmar isn't all that consistent. For years since admitting Myanmar as a member in 1997, the regional grouping has made ineffectual attempts to influence the regime, never quite able to confront the repression

and isolation that has kept the country one of the poorest in the region, with close to 60 per cent of the population living on an average income of below US\$100 (RM350) a year.

The screws started to turn after the latest outburst of protests and the brutal crackdown that followed. Singapore, the current chairman of Asean, wrote to the government expressing the group's "revulsion" at the violent repression of demonstrators. There followed a chorus of disapproving comments from other Asean capitals. But alas, almost a month after the crackdown began, no one can agree on a plan.

Time is running out. If nothing concrete is proposed once Asean heads of government gather in Singapore for a summit towards the end of November, the generals in Myanmar will correctly conclude that they have been given a pass again.

Most Asean leaders have expressed full and unqualified support for Ibrahim Gambari's mediating mission in Myanmar. But they should go further and seek a high-level consultation with China and India. Such a move would indicate an emerging regional consensus for political reconciliation and transition in Myanmar and further strengthen Gambari's hand.

Next, Asean and China should agree on a mechanism to facilitate aid and assistance to Myanmar. For all of its strategic clout, China will not want to take the lead. Such a working group might be composed of Asean's immediate past chairman (the Philippines), the current chairman (Singapore) and the incoming chair (Thailand) as well as China and possibly India. Indonesia will ask for a role and should be given one in the form of a high-profile convenor or envoy to lead this group, which might be dubbed "Friends of Myanmar".

Once established, the working group could be placed at the disposal of the United Nations and support internal dialogue brokered by Ibrahim Gambari. It is not enough for Asean to simply support Gambari's mission with words; there must be action and a plan to contribute aid, investment and technical assistance to help the Myanmar achieve comparable levels of prosperity in the region.

As usual, however, Asean is divided. Malaysia's Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar sees no need for Asean's active involvement. Thailand is in favour of a working-group mechanism. Indonesia appears to place trust in its own ties to the junta in a vain hope that Myanmar's generals will follow the example of Indonesia's generals a decade ago and go quietly into political retirement.

There is an urgent need for Asean to end its disagreements and dithering, and work as one with China to shape a regional consensus. Myanmar has made it known that it will only speak to Gambari, so Gambari must go with the full backing of the region. Other major powers may want a role, but experience suggests that interventionist diplomacy is best managed within the region.

In the 1980s, Asean broke all its rules and backed a mechanism for bringing the warring Cambodian factions to the table. Cambodia was subjected to more than a decade of interference and intervention; it has emerged a strong, sovereign state. Its democracy may

be imperfect, but a robust civil society keeps its strong leadership playing by basic democratic rules.

No one in Asean wants to see Myanmar destabilised, but Asean, in concert with China, must send a strong signal of concern about the road map since it is now becoming clear that there is no willingness to include the opposition in the process and there is no intention to start a real dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Constructive change and stability will only flow from a more inclusive political process; only Myanmar's regional friends and neighbours can effectively deliver this message.

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