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The EU's Approach to Burma: How to Get Back into the Game

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The transition process in Burma has taken everybody by surprise. The November 2010 elections were easily 'won' by the USDP, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which represents the former junta. This triggered the usual criticism from Europe, which condemned the elections as 'an attempt to consolidate authoritarian military rule in a civilian guise'. But since then, Burma's military regime and elite have—without bloodshed—adopted a radical path from military dictatorship to democratization. Thein Sein, the once n° 4 apparatchik who became president in March 2011, recently vowed 'to root out the evil legacies deeply entrenched in our society'. Needless to say, this dramatic transformation is as welcome as it has been unexpected. Trapped by more than 20 years of criticism, human rights rhetoric and persistent doubt, the European Union was slow to recognize the reality of the departure from authoritarian rule. What the EU should do now is abandon its dogmatic stance and take steps to show that it is committed to supporting the reform process.

No Mere Cosmetic Changes

Since the November 2011 elections, important steps and reforms have been adopted. It is crucial that international actors support Burma's government in implementing these reforms. The behaviour of the Burmese regime is dictated by its interests: because of its strong need of foreign assistance, it no longer wishes to be considered as a rogue state but rather as a state that is 'in the process of normalization' and as a decent chair for the Association of South-East Asian Nations in 2014. The transformation is therefore marked by decisions that are not merely cosmetic but that thoroughly modify the rules of the game. These include the release of Aung San Suu Kyi on 13 November 2010 after seven consecutive years of isolation under house arrest, the release of political prisoners, improvements towards freedom of expression and meetings, the legalization of labour unions, the reregistration of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, as a political party—meaning that the NLD will present candidates for the by-elections scheduled for April 2012—and reconciliation dialogues with ethnic minorities. On 8 September 2011, a Commission of Human Rights was established 'to promote and guarantee the fundamental rights of the citizens', a few days after the creation of the parliamentary Committee for Ethnic Affairs and Domestic Security. These are concrete grounds for optimism even if the process is still reversible. Indeed, the key issue is to make the changes irreversible, to contribute to the transformation of the costs/earnings ratios for leaders and the people as well. Will Europe be a player in this sensitive game?

The EU's Delicate Position

The European Union is in a delicate position for several reasons. First, Brussels is still dubious about the junta's potential for transformation and does not consider the change of military uniform to *longyi* (Burmese traditional dress) as a change of political culture. Mistrust and suspicion prevail. Catherine Ashton, Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, has recently applauded the current effort made by the Burmese government, including the release of political prisoners, but still expects more reforms before all the sanctions can be lifted. This seems to suggest that the EU intends to keep in place its list of conditions until it considers the process to be irreversible.

Second, European diplomacy carries a heavy past with its diplomatic snubs and colonial resentments. And nowadays, the EU's foreign policy organization and its internal divergences and divides make the whole approach very complex and confusing. Some countries, including Italy, Denmark, Spain, Austria and Germany, are publicly calling for a more productive discourse and the lifting of economic sanctions. France is not party to such enthusiasm, while Britain, through the voice of William Hague, who visited Burma at the beginning of January 2012, declared that much more reform was needed before the EU would be ready to lift sanctions.

Third, so far the EU's capacity to exert influence has been marginal. Blame and condemnation, sanctions, and pressure on multinational corporations to leave the country have had minimal effect in delivering change and, conversely, have produced irritation. Yet once again, as the Burmese transition is considered by ASEAN members to be a common challenge, to contribute actively to its settlement would certainly send the right message not only to the Burmese people but also to ASEAN. It would therefore also help the European Union to regain some influence in the region, as ASEAN is itself undertaking a strategic deepening with the launch of the ASEAN Community (in 2015).

Last but not least, since December 2011, the old and new capitals—Rangoon and Naypyidaw—have been the scenes of an intense diplomatic ballet. Several European representatives visited Burma, including David Lipman, Head of the EU Delegation to Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma, and Andris Piebalgs, the European Commissioner for International Development, who announced a 150 million euro aid package. A visit by Catherine Ashton, however, following on from Hillary Clinton's visit in December 2011, would have had a tremendous impact and would contribute to the emotional charge of the transition process. Instead, Europe sticks to its reserve and principles, while Burma is calling into question many conventional ideas about democratization and the transition process.

A Triple Challenge for Europe

The challenge for Europe is three-fold: (i) to come back into the game and to prove that it can initiate policies to engage Burma; (ii) to be considered by Burma as a strategic partner on its own merits rather than as a complementary element in a US foreign policy that is perceived to be aimed primarily at competing with China for regional influence; and (iii) to take advantage of the Burmese transformation to demonstrate the validity of its values and basic principles. In order to meet these challenges, the EU should consider several concrete steps.

To begin with, supporting the implementation of the ASEAN Charter—which sets benchmarks for democracy and human rights—and proposing an open consultation and debate on effective ways to manage the multidimensional challenges caused by the ASEAN Community without setting preliminary conditions could improve mutual understanding and trust. Moreover, the review of EU sanctions in April 2012 will be perceived as a test of the direction in which the European Union wants to proceed. Finally, Catherine Ashton's visit to Brunei at the end of April 2012 for the ASEAN–EU Ministerial Meeting, where the European Union will sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, will be a major opportunity to reaffirm European commitment and vision to the region and its future.

The European Union has a role to play in a regional space that is undergoing structural transformations. As Myanmar's former Ambassador to the EU and now visiting researcher at ISEAS (Singapore), Thuang Tun, put it, 'it is time for a paradigm shift to restore mutually beneficial relations and turn a new page'. The EU has to deliver in order to further the transformation process in Burma as well as to strengthen its own interests.

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