

SOUTHEAST ASIA BULLETIN



CSIS SOUTHEAST ASIA INITIATIVE

The CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative is a project of the International Security Program, Asia Group. CSIS launched the initiative in January 2008 to provide a venue for greater focus, examination, and analysis of Southeast Asian affairs within Washington’s policy community. The initiative includes regular roundtables, conferences, studies, and forums to spotlight developments in the region. CSIS will also seek to partner with other interested organizations and individuals within and outside Washington to maximize the flow of information, analysis, and outreach on Southeast Asian affairs in the United States.

An important component of the initiative is the monthly *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, which provides a timely overview of key developments, events, and facts about the region and offers a forum for short essays by official and unofficial commentators on regional affairs.

Derek Mitchell, director, Southeast Asia Initiative, and Brian Harding, research associate, welcome your feedback on the *Southeast Asia Bulletin* at dmitchell@csis.org and bharding@csis.org respectively.

Other projects & reports from the International Security Program’s Asia Division can be found at www.csis.org/isp/asia.

Feature Article

MYANMAR (BURMA), THE PEBBLE IN ASEAN’S SHOE

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Indonesia Member of Parliament and Chair of its Myanmar Caucus

For the last decade, Myanmar has been regarded as the pebble in ASEAN’s shoe. As a troubled country with so many violent practices and abuses of power, Myanmar has cast a negative image on ASEAN and its future prospects. Many initiatives by ASEAN members and its partner countries to mediate the ongoing political crisis have yet to show results.

Why would the other members of ASEAN, particularly Indonesia, be irritated with the state of Myanmar? The answer is that many initiatives for the common benefit and the common interest of ASEAN have stalled on the issue of Myanmar. The establishment of an ASEAN-EU free-trade agreement was derailed because of it. While other ASEAN members have shown progress and development in good governance, Myanmar has instead shown a tendency to move backward, which disappoints international observers of ASEAN.

The worst practice by the military junta in Myanmar, which is widely unpopular among ASEAN member states as well as the international community, was its policy of preventing international aid from reaching its people in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which left thousands dead and Myanmar’s infrastructure devastated. As soon as the international community became aware of the impact of the cyclone, many nations, including regional partners, rushed in to offer humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, their decent intentions were perceived as a threat by the military junta, which initially insisted it needed no outside assistance. This foolish policy increased the suffering of thousands of people and likely led to unnecessary deaths.

(continued on pg 2)

What can we offer for the future development of Myanmar? ASEAN members, including Indonesia, currently cannot provide assistance to the people of Myanmar because of the principle of nonintervention. When Myanmar's turn to assume the chairmanship of ASEAN came in 2006, Indonesia and other ASEAN member states urged Myanmar to cede this leadership position. Myanmar eventually submitted to the pressure and gave up the position. However, now that Indonesia has ratified the ASEAN Charter, the daunting task of circumventing the nonintervention principle to aid the people of Myanmar is even harder because the ASEAN principles are embedded in that legally binding document. The human rights mechanism in the Charter, to some extent, gives a warm blanket to the military junta.

What more can we offer? The best thing that Indonesia can offer is the example of its own transition toward more democratic systems and practices, which was achieved while implementing security sector reform. From 1966 to 1998, Indonesia was under the authoritarian regime of Suharto, which meant not only oppression whereby the military was used as a political instrument to preserve the power of the regime but also the emergence of artificial wealth and economic indicators that blinded the people of Indonesia to the true condition of the country. Since Indonesia has shifted to a democratic system, although it has never been easy, Indonesia has managed to survive and to improve its citizens' lives without the artificial indicators initiated by the authoritarian regime. Currently, Indonesia is under the power of the people as enshrined in its democratic constitution.

Previously, the military was an instrument for political ends instead of a professional defense force. Most of the violence against the people was committed by military units. It was also involved in business activities. Now, despite criticism of the implementation of security sector reform (SSR) in Indonesia, which is seen as not yet fully completed, the military is no longer involved in Indonesian politics, military representatives no longer sit in Parliament, and the military has taken numerous steps to reform internally. Surely, security sector reform requires time to be fully implemented, but the military has demonstrated its intention to be solely a professional force.

This success story can be a good precedent for progress in Myanmar. In this regard, the message we have to send to the people in Myanmar and the military junta is that Indonesia may serve as an example of successfully moving forward to a democratic system from military authoritarianism. Why go backward?

OCTOBER TIMELINE OF EVENTS

October 1, 2008: Singapore opposition leader and democracy advocate, Joshua B. Jeyaretnam, dies at the age of 82. Jeyaretnam was a member of Parliament from the Worker's Party, which he founded, from 1981–1986 and again from 1997–2001. He was a perennial thorn in the side of the ruling People's Action Party and had planned to again run for Parliament in Singapore's next election, which is due by 2011.

October 2, 2008: Vietnam and Japan agree in principle to an economic partnership agreement. The agreement, which lowers taxes for 86 percent of Vietnamese agricultural exports and 97 percent of industrial exports, will be officially signed by the end of the year.

October 3, 2008: Chaiwat Sinsuwong, a leading member of Thailand's opposition movement, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), is arrested on charges of inciting insurrection. Three days later, Chamlong Srimuan, founder of the PAD, is arrested on the same charge.

October 6, 2008: China's Ministry of Railways, in conjunction with the government of China's Yunnan Province, announces a joint investment plan of \$2.98 billion to build the Yuxi-Mohan portion of the proposed China-Laos-Thailand international railway. This portion extends from Yuxi, China, just outside of the major southern Chinese city of Kunming, to Mohan, on the China-Laos border. Negotiations between Thailand and Laos over the southern portion of this railway hinge on plans to build a rail bridge over the Mekong River at the Thai town of Nong Khai. A feasibility study is to be completed by the end of the year.

October 7, 2008: Violence erupts among protestors and police in Bangkok, escalating the ongoing political crisis. Two protesters are killed, and hundreds of protestors and police are wounded, some seriously. (For more on Thailand's political crisis, see Major Regional Developments in the October *Southeast Asia Bulletin*.)

OCTOBER TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Continued

October 8, 2008: Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia announces his resignation, effective in March. Badawi indicated his support for Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak to succeed him as the leader of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which will lead to his succession as prime minister.

October 8, 2008: Indonesia's House of Representatives (DPR) approves a bill to ratify the ASEAN Charter. Indonesia, which expressed concerns over the Charter's weak provisions for human rights, becomes the final member of ASEAN to ratify the document.

October 10, 2008: Some 140 Indonesian national police officers deploy to Darfur to support the UN peacekeeping mission there. A second group of 140 officers will deploy in December. They will stay for one year.

October 13, 2008: Thailand's Queen Sirikit presides over the funeral for a protestor killed on October 7, which many see as a sign of royal support for the protesters' cause. Previously, the royal family had refrained from commenting on the situations

October 13, 2008: Philippine opposition lawmakers file impeachment charges against President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo for the fourth time. The allegations of corruption and vote rigging come one year and one day after charges were last made, in accordance with a law that dictates a year between impeachment attempts. A successful bid would require support from 80 of the 240 members of the House of Representatives; the attempt is expected to fail as the opposition controls only 28 seats.

October 15, 2008: Cambodian and Thai troops exchange small arms fire near the Preah Vihear temple, killing two Cambodian soldiers. Ten Thai troops are captured. (For more on the Preah Vihear dispute, see the October *Southeast Asia Bulletin*.)

October 15, 2008: Malaysia bans the Hindu rights group Hindraf. Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar calls the group a threat to public order, national security, sovereignty, and racial harmony. The opposition Democratic Action Party condemns the ban, claiming it will aggravate disaffection in Malaysia's Indian community.

October 17, 2008: The chief of the Thai Army, General Anupong Paochind, issues a statement calling for Prime Minister Somchai to resign. However, Anupong reaffirms the army's position that there will not be a military coup.

October 23, 2008: China and Singapore sign a free-trade agreement, China's first such arrangement with an Asian country, effective January 2009. The agreement eliminates tariffs on 85 percent of Singaporean exports to China, rising to 95 percent by 2010. All tariffs on Chinese exports to Singapore will be eliminated in 2009.

October 23, 2008: Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim postpones his bid to topple the ruling coalition by saying that Malaysian leaders should focus on the global economic crisis. Anwar refuses to set a new deadline for his takeover but claims to be pursuing multiple options.

October 24–25, 2008: The 10 ASEAN heads of state and ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan attend the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Beijing along with China, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, India, Pakistan, the 27 EU heads of state, and the president of the European Commission. **See Major Regional Developments**

October 29, 2008: With political turmoil in Bangkok, Thailand announces that December's ASEAN summit will take place in Chiang Mai rather than Bangkok.

October 30, 2008: The Indonesian Parliament passes a long-debated antipornography bill. The text of the bill is vague, and many groups worry that its provisions will be abused.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

October 6: The United States and Vietnam held their first strategic dialogue on political, security, and defense issues to discuss future military cooperation. The meeting was led by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Mark Kimmitt and Deputy Foreign Minister of Vietnam Pham Binh Minh. They discussed expanding U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation and Vietnam's desire to contribute to international peacekeeping.

October 10: The USS Mustin became the third U.S. naval vessel to visit Cambodia in two years when it made a four-day port call in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. The crew performed medical and humanitarian missions while in Cambodia.

EVENTS TO WATCH FOR IN OCTOBER

Early November: The Indonesian government announced in October that three men convicted of the 2002 Bali bombings would be executed in early November. Indonesian government officials warned of an elevated risk of attacks by sympathizers before the executions, and the U.S. and Australian governments, among others, advised against travel to Indonesia until further notice. [NOTE: The executions took place on November 10.]

MAJOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Southeast Asia at the Asia-Europe Meeting

The seventh Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) took place in Beijing from October 24–25, with heads of state and government of the 10 ASEAN countries in attendance as well as the 27 EU member countries, China, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, India, and Pakistan. In addition to the 43 heads of state, European Commission president José Manuel Barroso and ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan attended, marking the first time the ASEAN Secretariat was represented at an ASEM summit.

Sustainable development was the focus of the meeting, which produced the Beijing Declaration on Sustainable Development. The declaration noted that economic development, social progress, and environmental protection are mutually reinforcing and reaffirmed the importance of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals, tackling climate change, enhancing energy security, and protecting social cohesion. The global financial crisis dominated the meeting, however. The summit's joint statement called for a coordinated international approach, although it lacked specific remedies.

In matters specifically pertaining to Southeast Asia, the joint statement welcomed the signing of the ASEAN Charter, including the proposed creation of an ASEAN human rights body and an ASEAN Economic Community blueprint. On Burma, the statement offered support for the United Nations' efforts to promote political dialogue in Burma and the work of the Tripartite Core Group (Burma, the United Nations, and ASEAN) to deliver relief since Cyclone Nargis. It also encouraged Burma's government to take on a more inclusive political process and to lift restrictions on political parties and to release more political detainees. The statement also called for Laos's early ascension to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and welcomed an offer by the Philippines to hold a conference on development coordination, Brunei's offer to host a conference on the impact of climate change on tropical ecosystems, and Vietnam's offer to host an education ministerial and workshops on climate change and emerging diseases, all in 2009.

MISCELLANEOUS FACTS ABOUT THE INDONESIA

- The Indonesian Air Force was founded with the use of abandoned Japanese WWII planes against the Netherlands during the 1945–1949 independence war.
- After Brazil, Indonesia has the world’s second-highest level of biodiversity.
- Indonesia is the world’s largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, the world’s largest plywood exporter, the world’s second-largest producer of rubber, and the world’s second-largest producer of palm oil.
- Under constant censorship pressures throughout his life, Indonesia’s most celebrated writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006), composed his most important works, the novels in the Buru Quartet, while in prison on Buru Island. Pramoedya kept the novels in his head and was only able to record them years later.
- The Indonesian language, Bahasa Indonesia, became the official language of the entire archipelago upon Indonesia’s declaration of independence in 1945. The decision flowed from the 1928 Youth Pledge that declared there to be one motherland, one nation, and one language, a set of values used to encourage unity against the Dutch.

SOUTHEAST ASIA AT CSIS

The Southeast Asia Initiative of CSIS hosted a major conference on Southeast Asian affairs September 25–26 entitled “The United States and Southeast Asia: Toward a Strategy for Enhanced Engagement.” Eighteen prominent Southeast Asian diplomats and scholars, and several senior U.S. government officials and other specialists, spoke at the event. An agenda and audio from the conference can be found here. A written summary report of the proceedings will be posted to the CSIS Web site, www.csis.org, shortly.

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