

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## The games nations play

It is now more than a month since disturbing scenes of a violent state reprisal against Burmese protesters were beamed around the world. As the military junta tightens its stranglehold on political freedom, the European Union and the United Nations have stepped up sanctions against the regime.

Closer to home, Burma's neighbours have been far more reluctant to take concrete action. Despite strong criticism of the junta from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the brutal crackdown has barely caused a ripple in regional diplomatic relations. As an EU special envoy urges ASEAN members to put more pressure on the rogue state, the *Report* looks at where Indonesia stands on the issue and what seems to be influencing its position.

Although Indonesia's connection with Burma is nowhere near as close as its links with Singapore or Malaysia, the relationship is surprisingly complex and is frequently commented on.

The two nations' political and social systems have been compared since the mid-1990s when Burmese leaders began making noises about emulating Indonesia's style of development. Superficially, there seemed to be some similarities. Both countries were ruled by military strongmen and made up of a diverse and potentially troublesome mix of ethnic groups. They also had female opposition figures whose fathers were national independence heroes—in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi and in Indonesia, Megawati Soekarnoputri.

Relations between the two countries reached a high point at this time, with a flurry of state visits. In 1997, Soeharto arrived in Burma accompanied by his rapacious children to sign a raft of business agreements. Joint ventures were established in timber processing, telecommunications and cement production. At around the same time, Tommy Soeharto reportedly began to export explosives to the country.

However, rather than representing a deepening of relations, analysts have suggested the period was little more than a cynical ploy by the military junta. Hurt by international condemnation after the massacre of thousands of peaceful protesters in 1988, Rangoon's overtures to Jakarta were calculated to confer a degree of legitimacy on the regime. At the time, Indonesia's liberal economic policy and skyrocketing growth made it the darling of international institutions although it too was ruled by a military strongman.

Burmese officials were also courting Indonesia's support for their country's entry into ASEAN. This was also a success. While some of the groupings' members were initially reluctant to accept Burma into the association, with the support of Soeharto, Burma became a member just five months after his 1997 visit.

This development also benefited the Indonesian dictator and his authoritarian regime. Apart from the business deals, Burma's admittance into ASEAN sent

out the message that human rights issues were not proper topics for discussion between Southeast Asian states.

The relationship between the two countries changed in 1998, when Soeharto was deposed. As Indonesian politicians focused their attentions internally—first on the domestic financial crisis and later on moves toward democracy—regional relations were put on the backburner. Nevertheless, presidents Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati both visited Burma shortly after becoming heads of state - part of their traditional tour of ASEAN countries.

It was around this time that Indonesia began to become more vocal in supporting greater political freedoms in Burma. In 2001, then foreign affairs minister Ali Alatas was appointed by Megawati as a special envoy to help secure the release of Suu Kyi—a position that he continues to hold today. Despite these moves, there is no evidence that such exchanges have made any difference at all to the attitude of the Burmese generals.

Rhetorically, the Yudhoyono administration has been less critical of the junta's recent actions than other ASEAN states like the Philippines and Singapore. While the government here continues to publicly support greater openness in Burma, Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda has emphasised the importance of “stability and security.” Yudhoyono has echoed these sentiments, adding that peaceful dialogue should be encouraged with “all related aspects kept in mind.” Couched within all the diplomatic phrasing is the idea of a phased transition to democracy rather than the kind of “people power” actions that brought democracy to Indonesia itself.

Noted Indonesian scholar, Georges Aditjondro, has recently suggested that the government's accommodating position on Burma could be influenced by economic interests. While there *are* Indonesian investments in Burma, *Report* sources suggest that they are not very significant. As Aditjondro confirms, it is unclear what happened to the Soeharto interests there after 1998. But it seems likely that they would have fallen by the wayside as the Soeharto children focused on protecting core domestic concerns.

Today, Indonesia continues its softly-softly approach on Burma to the chagrin of those who see sustained international pressure as the only way to drive change. In recent weeks, Yudhoyono sent a political confidant to represent him at the funeral of one of the junta's former leaders. In return, the military leadership sent a cordial letter to Yudhoyono, assuring him of their continuing efforts to find a peaceful solution to Burma's problems.

For a long time, many observers characterised the Indonesia-Burma connection as a big-brother's mentoring of a younger sibling. The Burmese generals were once said to have respected Soeharto's economic achievements and his iron grip on politics. Today, President Yudhoyono seems set on continuing this mentoring role, but this time to encourage a political transition.

Can such a tactic influence a regime which is prepared to shoot its own citizens rather than secede power? Many observers think not (see interview below).

While President Yudhoyono may genuinely wish to see a peaceful transition in Burma, he would be advised not to believe too much in his own influence. The Burmese generals have proven again and again how adept they are at playing geopolitics, manipulating both China and India by playing one power off against the other. Before he gets too cosy with Burma, Yudhoyono should ensure the current “mutual understanding” framework is not simply another ploy to gain legitimacy—this time by massaging the national ego of a country which is often, albeit unfairly, seen as a basket case.