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## Surprise Pressure From Myanmar's Neighbors

By [WAYNE ARNOLD](#)

SINGAPORE, Nov. 19 — An emerging rift among Asian leaders over [Myanmar](#) burst into the open at a regional summit meeting on Monday when the Philippine president suggested that her country might not ratify a new regional charter unless Myanmar committed to democratic reforms and released the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Myanmar, because of its violent crackdown on a domestic uprising in September and stubborn resistance to democratic reform, has become a major stumbling block at the 13th summit meeting of the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#).

Originally scheduled as five days of polite ceremonies commemorating the group's 40th anniversary and the signing of a new charter binding Asean into a European-style community, the meeting has become mired in the question of whether Asean can make progress as an institution without the ability to influence a member whose brutal behavior violates the group's central principles.

At an informal dinner between heads of state Monday night at the five-star Shangri-La Hotel here, President [Gloria Macapagal Arroyo](#) of the [Philippines](#) directly addressed the problem.

“The belief of the Filipino people and the Philippine Congress, as well as my own, that those who will sign the Charter agree to the objective, spirit and intent of establishing a human rights body — the full protection of human rights within Asean,” she said, reading out a prepared statement, a copy of which was forwarded to reporters. “With this in mind, the expectation of the Philippines is that if Myanmar signs the Charter, it is committed to returning to the path of democracy and release

Aung San Suu Kyi. Until the Philippine Congress sees that happen, it would have extreme difficulty in ratifying the Asean Charter.”

The issue had already surfaced during a working lunch of trade ministers and the United States trade representative, Susan Schwab, who said the situation in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was holding up negotiations for a United States-Asean free-trade agreement.

“It is impossible to imagine an F.T.A. in the near term under the current political circumstances,” she said afterward. “The reputation and credibility of Asean as an organization has been called into question because of the situation in Burma.”

Asean members have rejected calls to impose sanctions on Myanmar or expel it from the group. On Monday, they went so far as to oppose a proposal by Singapore to invite Ibrahim Gambari, a [United Nations](#) envoy to Myanmar, to give them a special briefing, according to The Associated Press.

Many analysts predict that Myanmar’s prime minister, Thein Sein, will persuade other Asean members that the military junta is changing, allowing Asean to fall back on its longstanding policy of noninterference in each other’s affairs. The junta has allowed Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi to meet with some of her opposition colleagues, and on Monday, Reuters reported that state television showed her meeting with a junta member, Aung Kyi, for the third time since the junta crushed the popular protests.

Thus far, Asean has preached the virtue of “constructive engagement” with Myanmar as preferable to isolation.

Yet as Mrs. Arroyo demonstrated so dramatically, pressure is building in the organization. Though they are conflicted by their own human rights problems and their lucrative economic ties with Myanmar, Asean members may ultimately be forced to take a stand, analysts said.

This is not only because Myanmar has become a diplomatic liability, but also because its military appears to have lost the ability to prevent the exodus of political refugees and economic migrants, which long served as tacit justification for its rule.

“It’s a time bomb,” said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies in Bangkok. “The regime is creating these displaced people. The repression within Burma is having adverse consequences.”

Established in 1967 as a bulwark against communism, Asean was composed originally of the region’s more developed and democratic states: Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Since the end of the Cold War 15 years ago, it has carved out a new a role as a nonpartisan agent of economic development, admitting smaller neighbors with less democratic governments such as Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and, in 1997, Myanmar.

None of the group’s members have a spotless record on human rights. Vietnam and Laos are notorious for their intolerance of dissent. Mrs. Arroyo’s own government faces criticism over extrajudicial killings.

Last week, the Malaysian police used fire hoses to quell political protests in the capital. And Singapore has rejected requests to stage an anti-Myanmar rally in keeping with its ban on public gatherings of more than four people without a police permit.

Asean also has a vested interest in Myanmar’s status quo. Roughly 75 percent of Myanmar’s exports flow to fellow Asean members. Thailand depends on Myanmar for natural gas, an industry in which Malaysia also invests.

Singapore has stakes in Myanmar hotels, aviation and ports.

“You can’t overestimate how much politics in these countries is driven by business interests,” said Karim Raslan, a Malaysian lawyer, columnist and author.

Still, while Asean members like Laos and Vietnam have defended Myanmar and condemned Western sanctions, others have been gradually losing their tolerance.

The clearest sign of a shift under way was Asean’s public reaction to the crackdown in Myanmar — it demanded a stop to the violence, expressed its revulsion and called for the release of political detainees.

“It was very un-Asean-like language,” said Dave Mathieson at [Human Rights Watch](#) in Thailand.

Even Singapore, which has perhaps the most extensive trade and investments with Myanmar of Asean’s members, has begun debating its relationship with the junta. Singapore’s foreign minister was even obliged recently to explain the country’s trade ties with Myanmar to the country’s Parliament, where he dismissed Singapore’s arms exports to Myanmar as “insignificant.”

It was Singapore that invited Mr. Gambari, the United Nations envoy, to give a briefing on the situation in Myanmar on Wednesday afternoon. After Myanmar expressed its objections, The A.P. reported, other Asean members — including Malaysia and Indonesia — rejected the briefing as inappropriate.

Earlier in the day, Mrs. Arroyo met one-on-one with Myanmar’s prime minister and read him her statement.

The new Asean charter commits members to strengthening democracy and protecting human rights, and calls for the establishment of an Asean human rights body. But the draft also reaffirms the principle of “non-interference in the internal affairs of Asean

member states” and critics of the charter say it has been watered down to exclude any enforcement mechanism.

Despite the new Philippine challenge that Mrs. Arroyo laid down Monday night, constructive engagement appears likely to remain the basis of Asean’s approach to Myanmar. And many analysts agree that Asean can exert more leverage over Myanmar as a fellow member than as a former one. “Expelling them would be a mistake,” said Mr. Mathieson. “It would actually encourage their intransigence.”