

A Historical Approach to Myanmar's Democratic Process

Mohamad Faisol Keling, Universiti Utara Malaysia (Kedah, Malaysia)

Assoc. Prof Lt. Col Dr. Mohamad Nasir Saludin, National Defense University of Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Nova Southeastern University (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)

Mohd Na'eim Ajis, Universiti Utara Malaysia (Kedah, Malaysia)

Md. Shukri Shuib, Universiti Utara Malaysia (Kedah, Malaysia)

Abstract: *Myanmar or 'Burma' is a country which has a long history of colonialism by foreign powers. Before Myanmar achieved its independence in 1948, it was ruled by two prominent foreign powers that are Britain and Japan. Both countries had created the political scene of Myanmar. After achieving independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar became an independent country that practiced the democracy ideology under the ruled of General Aung Sann. However, its democracy system faced problems when a coup d'état happened in 1962. Since that year, the efforts to regain the democracy system in Myanmar faced a lot of obstacles. Thus, this paper will explain the process of democracy development since 1948 until the present days of Myanmar.*

Keywords: *Myanmar, Burma, Democracy, Historical Approach*

1.0 Introduction

From a geographical point of view, Myanmar is a country in Southeast Asia bordering with India and Bangladesh in the Northwest, China in the Northeast, Laos and Thailand in the East and Straits of Bengal and Andaman's Southeast Asia in the West. Myanmar falls into three main parts, East, West and central region. On the East part, it separate Myanmar from Thailand, Laos and China. This region includes the coast of Tenasserim, Andaman Southeast Asia, bordering peninsular Shan to the North part of Myanmar (Sunil Kumar Pokhrel, 2008:1). Myanmar is one of the British colonies and was invade by Japan in 1942 until 1945. The invasion of Japan (1942 1945) in Myanmar had opened the awareness level of the nationalism and independence in Myanmar. The

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idea of awareness in independence was fought by nationalist under the leadership of General Aung San who stimulated nationalism in pursuing independence (Josef Silverstien, 2004:70). After the World War II, Myanmar faced political instability from groups of communist rebellion and other ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. However Myanmar succeeded in achieving independence from the British Empire on the 4th of January 1948 and became a republic. Since Myanmar's independence, the country adopted the parliamentary democracy system (Clerk D. Neher, 1994: 949).

Implementation of the parliamentary democracy system had survived for 14 years until a coup d'état erupted by General Ne Win on 2 March 1962. The appearance of a military power in Myanmar's politics disrupted the implementation and consolidation of democracy process in Myanmar. A military government in Myanmar's political system have stripped a new era in its political arena when Myanmar ruled by military power which practicing a socialist system (Josef Silverstien,2004:73). Consequently the event of 1962 had caused Myanmar to force the closed door policy towards foreign countries and self imposed isolation policy from the rest of the world. Since 1974, the government Myanmar reinforced the socialist system by employing the socialist economic system or Burma's way to socialism. That state of affairs contributed to Myanmar's instable economic situation although several changes in leadership have occurred. The previous economic and development backwardness comprising political stresses implemented on the society had propelled the people to rise and opposed against the military government in Myanmar. The people's rise was vividly seen between 1988 to 1989, when demonstrations took place and the society rebelled against the Junta military ruler.

After the couple of decades practicing isolation since 1962, Myanmar started experiencing a vast political, social and economy change from late 1980s. These alterations not only challenged the existing military regime (Tatmadaw) which has been in power since 1962, it also has changed the people's perception and awareness towards to Myanmar military government. To restore the people's belief, the

military attempted to bring certain changes in the economy and political system of Myanmar. However, the government's restoration in politics, economy and social failed to achieve public support and trust. On the other hand people became increasingly audacious in their demand for justice and rejected the military government in Myanmar. This objection was distinctly visible in 1988 when the people of Myanmar demonstrate and paraded along the street demanding for the rights of election and a reformation of government through the people choices (Josef Silverstien, 2004:77-80).

The pressure from the people of Myanmar has prompted the government to implement an open election system called The Democratization of Myanmar in 1990. Hence, in 1990, various election parties were held to form a government through the process of democracy. In this election, the people's group known as National League of Democracy' (NLD) lead by Aung San Suu Kyi won the election by obtaining the majority of Southeast Asia contested. The humiliated defeat of the military disgraced the government that has reigned for almost 30 years (1962-1990). This defeat shows the people's rejection of a military power in Myanmar political arena. Hence, this public victory however did not survive practically after the military arrested Aung San Suu Kyi for misbehavior as an unacceptable reason and had denied the party's victory during the election. Therefore the military government came back to power in Myanmar and the democratization process of Myanmar was slightly hindered. The military action against the results of the General election in 1990 confirmed its denial for Myanmar's process of democratization (Junhan Lee, 2002:821). Since then, Myanmar has been facing sluggish economy, facing national unity issue, severed from external relations either with regional countries and lost their identity to the rest of the world. In other words, military politics in Myanmar have placed Myanmar's democratization process at bay. The failure of democratization process in Myanmar was triggered by the refusal of the military regime to hand their power to the people. The governments were not only reluctant to listen towards peoples demand but have also taken action to imprison pro-democracy and NLD (National League of

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Democracy) members including the leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

2.0 The Southeast Asia Democratization Concept

The word democracy derives from an ancient Greek word *demos* which mean 'people' and 'kratos' which means 'rule'. Hereby, democracy means 'people rule'. It is also definable as a political system which gives opportunity to the people to form and control the government (J. Roland Pennock, 1979:3). People will manage the government through a representation system where they will choose the leader amongst them during the election process to represent the people's voice in the house of representative (legislative) (C.F Strong, 1972:173-174). The ideology classification can be categorized into levels. There are five categories mentioned by Fred R. Von Dev Mehden in his book entitled "The Politics of Developed Countries" known as individual democracy, collective democracy, proletariat democracy, guided democracy and elitist democracy. Robert A. Dahl (1983) argues that the democracy that is being applied now is actually are the combination from four sources, which is the ideology of Greek democratic, republic tradition, government representation and political equality (Robert Dahl, 1983:34-35).

Overall of the Southeast Asia countries are a region which was colonized by the western empires. The colonization contributed to the acceptance and absorption of the government system influenced by the west. However, these government systems do not employ the real democratic practices (Junhan Lee, 2002:821). Hence, after the Cold War, Southeast Asia countries underwent a democratization process towards a more effective democratic practice.

Schedule 3: Country and Government Style

Type of rule	countries
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Totalitarian (Communist)	Albania, Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, German, Hungary, Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos, Poland, Rumania, Russia and Yugoslavia.
Totalitarian (Fascist)	Italy (Mussolini), Nazi Germany (Adolf Hitler)
Military	Algeria, Bolivia, <u>Burma</u> , Burundi, Bangladesh, Republic of Zaire, Mahoney, Ecuador, El-Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nicaragua, Pakistan (till Feb 1986), Peru, Panama, Republic of Dominique, Republic of south Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Thailand.
Guided Democracy	Egypt (during Colonel Nasser's rule), Guinea(during Secom Toure's rule), Indonesia (during Sukarno's rule), Pakistan (during Ayub Khan's rule), Tanzania (during J Miserere's rule)

Source: Modified from K. Ramanathan Kalimuthu (1987). *Asas Sains Politik (The basic of Political Science)*. Kuala Lumpur:Sdn Bhd Charity's Dawn.p. 306.

The majority of countries in Southeast Asia although practicing democracy in the government system, but they are still clouded by the autocratic style such as Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippines. This government style indirectly makes the democratic system practice in Southeast Asia where is highly debatable (Clerk D. Neher, 1994:949). Furthermore, government involvement in economic activities have successfully controlled people's welfare and moving towards a democratic society without economic prejudices.

The end of Cold War in 1991 indicated that the victory of democratic power has led to the democratization process spreading to numerous nations worldwide. These phenomena also plagued communist countries in Indochina and Myanmar. Hence, the democratization process of Southeast Asia included the communist countries. The transition process has been accepted as a democratic way in a government and leading towards to the implementation of capitalist system in country's economic activity (Clerk D.

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Neher, 1994:956). It is distinctly visible in Cambodia's society which accepting the democratic system after the conflict and Civil War in 1979-1994. The conflict and coup d'état in Cambodia was resolved successfully by organizing an open election supported by countries from a Southeast Asia, United Nations and superpowers. It is a proven fact that the acceptance of such enables to resolve various problems and gave the people the right to fairly be involved in the national affairs. The adoption of a democratic system is also visible in Myanmar, when people were awoken in 1988 and fought against the autocratic socialist state of Myanmar. This process successful provided the opportunity to the people to practice democracy after being ruled under a military government from 1962-1990 (David Martin Jones, 1998:148). The acceptance on such a democratic system was proven by the victory of NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership in the 1990 elections.

What is important here is the implementation and practice of a authentic democracy could only be suitable in the west. This is because their experience and understanding of democracy compared to countries in Southeast Asia. The reason being is that Southeast Asia countries have merely achieved independence in around 1940s and 1950s. As such, a democratization system in Southeast Asia could not be applied completely like in western world. Therefore, the democracy in Southeast Asia is a democracy which is assembles with Southeast Asia values and societal needs (Junhan Lee, 2002:833-835). Democratic countries divide jurisdiction in the government into three major fractions, known as parliament (legislation), administration (executive) and judiciary (Amitav Acharya, 1999:421). Democratic countries perform the elections by integrating people power in choosing a leader which is lead by the Prime Minister or President (Leon P. Baradot, 1979:121). Presidential democracy employs an assembly where members are directly chosen by voters. Country applying the system of parliamentary democracy in Southeast Asia, the parliament constitute of two assemblies known as people's Assembly and the Senate. Both members are picked by the people through an election system to act as representative committing on conveying opinions, problems

and proposal to the government (Barry Holden, 1974:33). Ultimately, it leads to government formation which is selected through the people power and responsible for the public interest (Lipson Leslie, 1969:20).

3.0 The development and practice of democracy in Myanmar 1948- 2004

3.1 *The development of democracy and leadership of Prime Minister U Nu*

After achieving independence in January 4th 1948, General Aung San had form a self styled government and immediately flew to England to declare his refusal in joining the Commonwealth countries (Allen R., 1970:316). Consequently, he was assassinated in 1947. Myanmar political development rapidly grew with the emergence of numerous political parties such as Anti Fascist People Freedom League (AFPFL) which was practicing democratic liberal in nature. This party was led by U Nu who was appointed as Myanmar's Prime Minister in 1948 until he was stripped from power by the 1962 coup d'état led by General Ne Win. General Ne Win found the policies which was practiced by U Nu posses a weak position and has fuelled dissatisfaction among the people especially in terms of development and the eradication of poverty. As a result, the rebellion start to demonstrate their frustration through demonstration by minority group rebellions, such as the ethnics groups Karen, Pa-O, Rohingya and Mujahid, launching attacks and sabotage against U Nu government.

As a result of the pressure and demands, in October 1958 U Nu surrendered the post to General Ne Win to restore the stability of the state and national peace. This resignation had open the opportunity for elections in June 1960. General Ne Win claimed the democratic system practiced by U Nu is incompatible for Myanmar. General Ne Win's appointment in a whole has brought about a few changes in Myanmar's political and economy arena, amid his failure to achieve public support. Therefore he successfully

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reinforced military power and was able to control the people's resistance by implementing politics and economy sanctions. Although regarded as a success by the ruling party but it has in other way stimulated the maturity of people's thinking to stand up and fight against Myanmar's autocratic government. In the election of 1960, U Nu won by a landslide, thus obtaining the majority number of Southeast Asia contested. U Nu's victory was due to his use of religion (Buddha) as major issue throughout the election campaign. He promised to make Buddhism the official religion and as way life in Myanmar. According to Van De Mehden (1968:101) :-

“Victory of U Nu and his party at the polls was overwhelming. They won better than 60% of the Southeast Asia in parliament and so effective was Nu's campaign that the stable faction emerged with an elected minority barely large enough to form a token opposition. Clearly the religious issues were a primary importance and the following year Nu fulfilled a campaign promise to make Buddhism the state religion”.

The implementation process of Myanmar's democratic system was however stormed by the military interference in the political system. The military interference was performed through a coup d'état headed by General Ne Win, which abruptly vanquished democratic system by introducing the socialist system. General Aung San has once declared that to maintain political stability in Myanmar is by placing the military as a professional body and with no involve what so ever in the political arena. This is because politics involvement of the military will jeopardize the political stability of one country (Myanmar). This is particularly visible during Myanmar's 1960 election, although U Nu was elected, General Ne Win led a coup d'état to end U Nu's leadership alleging that the democratic government failed to unite the people and eradicate poverty.

3.2 The Hindrance of Democracy During the Era of General Ne Win

General Ne Win is the comrade-in-arms of General Aung Sann and one of the most significant person in designing Myanmar politics. General Ne Win introduced the socialist democracy system influenced by the communist development which was happen in Vietnam and China. In March 1962, he replace U Nu's democracy system and installing a military ruling policy (Clark D. Neher, 1994:166-167). He erotized U Nu's system claiming that U Nu government's actions have the tendency to gave prioritize of the western influence and that the system is irrelevant to Myanmar. In line with his system, the parliament was abolished, political parties were banned and people's rights tighten. He introduced a radical base politics and economy known as "Burma Way to Socialism". To control Myanmar's political system, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was introduced and changed to National Unity Party (NUP) in 1988 as a way to attract people' support on his leadership. General Ne Win adopted the policy of isolation (close door) to the entire world. The isolation policy implementation is aimed to unite the people and prevent conflicts trigger by western influence (Clark D. Neher, 1994:167).

To obtain support from the people in 1971, General Ne Win reassured the people by revamping his image to become a better leader. He did want to be known as a military leader but he tried to portray himself as a Prime Minister in the eye of the people. In January 1972, Myanmar became Socialist Republic with the reformation of the constitution. Ne Win leadership raised political instability with the oppression and repression towards minority groups. Consequently, Ne Win administration faced the objection when the people commenced demonstrations demanding for justice in 1962 and 1974. Following the opposition and people's demands, General Ne Win resigned in 1981 in BSPP. However, he remained as Myanmar's Prime Minister and assisted by several leaders including General Sein Lwin, Dr Maung Maung and General Saw Maung (Clark D. Neher, 1994:169). However, General Saw Maung's influence became more apparent with the established of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), as the purpose to control anarchy and wining people's support. These efforts were failures; as a result people rose in rebellion and opposed the

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military government of Myanmar. This is clearly illustrated by the people of Myanmar society carrying out demonstrations in 1988 opposing and proving that Myanmar's military government as a failure. The government responded such actions by throwing people in jail, torturing and killing. Clark D. Neher (1994:167-168) emphasized that:-

“In the summer 1988 hundreds of thousands of farmer's urban workers, students, monks and civil servant took to the streets of Burma's, major cities to demonstrate agonist their government leader. This revolt was the culmination of years of frustration disgust at the failure of the military government to bring development to Burma”.

The mass murder of demonstrators in Myanmar in September 1988 stained the credibility of Ne Win's government (Clark D. Neher, 1994:167-168). Not only he has invited international criticism causing by his way of administration, it has also awoken the nationalist movement of Myanmar to fight against and highly demanding the General's resignation. This situation aroused the awareness of people in Myanmar to unite and oppose against the military based government. For the military ruler, if their administration failed to unite the people, it will lead to the unstable condition which is a situation that cannot create peace and develop the country. As such the situation increased alertness among nationalist leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, petitioning for justice to be brought through the election in 1990.

3.3 The Revolution of Democracy in Myanmar

The National Democratic League (NLD) was officially established in September 1988. This party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi is an opposition party against SLORC. The membership was believed to achieve 1-3 million members in 1990. Aung San Suu Kyi was assisted by several prominent figures such as Aung Gyi, a military General during Ne Win's reign, who once criticized the government stand on human right issues and was the chief of NLD. In addition, NLD is joined by a famous figure named Tin U, who once held the post of Myanmar's Minister of Defense. He then joined NLD

in 1988 to oppose against the military government implementation in Myanmar. NLD's objective was to demand human right, implementation of a democratic system following the resolution by the United Nations and justice for minority groups. NLD urged the observation of a parliamentary democracy system to end the military power which ruled the government. They also called legislation, executive and judiciary system remain as intact and insisted that the military should not be part of them. The principle proposed was that each ethnic minority group should be given the right to make their own laws (in particular area) or promulgate laws for its own region in matter to pertain the administration of politics and economics (*Massa*, Jun 2001:45). NLD struggling hard as a way to attract people's support. This was proven based on the election result in 1990, NLD victoriously grabbed 392 of 485 Southeast Asia, which is more than 60% of the Southeast Asia contested (*Josef Silverstien*, 1990:1007-1019).

4.0 Government Resistance

SLORC denied NLD's victory in the election of 1990; in fact the military government accused Suu Kyi as a traitor (*Noor Azam Shairi*, 2002). Because of this event numerous senior leaders of NLD were arrested, including 2000 civilians and democrats throughout May to December 1990. In 1991 more than 25 parliamentarians was arrested and imprisoned falsely accused of threatening Myanmar national security (*Chee Soon J.*, 1998:82). The military even hunt down government opponents who especially forced minority groups to escape to border areas like Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia. Following this incident, the refugees founded the Democratic Alliance for Burma (DAB) and established interim government to challenge the SLORC. DAB together with Suu Kyi have been fighting to claim democracy in military occupied country, Myanmar. The struggle received support from foreign countries such as the United States America, the United Nations and Southeast Asia countries (*Amitav Acharya*, 2001:108-115). To preserve the military

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power, the government imposed house detention and jail sentence on Suu Kyi to prevent her to give a talk and organize political campaigns. Even though Suu Kyi's struggle is supported by the international community and superpower, she was sentenced to 6 years of house arrest.

5.0 The Roles of International Institutions

Following Myanmar crisis and arrest of several Myanmar nationalists, the internal politics in Myanmar has invited tremendous attention of the international community. For example 1989, the American criticized Myanmar's military government policies and they sent humanitarian aid to the country. Besides that, the European Union (EU) give a pressure the United Nations to take notice of Myanmar crisis and that it be placed beneath the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in 1998. While on the other hand, ASEAN took the stand not to alienate Myanmar, due to ASEAN's policy not to interfere with the members internal affairs. ASEAN received significant opposition from international organization such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) which urged ASEAN to reject Myanmar participation in ASEAN. Thus, Myanmar still was accepted as a member and Thailand was the first country to tie formal relationship with Myanmar after 1990 crisis.

5.1 Myanmar's Democracy Development

To restore confidence and people's belief on SLORC, Myanmar's military government changed the name of SLORC to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, however SPDC still failed to achieve people's support. Suu Kyi's release in 2000 a rose the spirit of the people to revolt and demand democracy implementation in Myanmar. In May 2002, international community gave a pressure the United Nations to interfere in Myanmar's affair. The international community pressured and criticized Myanmar's military administration and prompted the military government to take positive approaches to decrease international pressure.

This situation influenced Myanmar's Prime Minister Khin Nyut to employ a more positive approach especially in implementing a democratic system that protects human right in Myanmar. He was responsible of General Swa Maung's removal in 1992 supported by General Than Shwe. His appointment as Prime Minister paved the way to democracy, rebuilding the international community, UN and ASEAN confidence through his presentation of a "Democracy Plan", but the reform has not doing well when Khin Nyut has to step down after facing serious health problems (Utusan Melayu, 20 Oktober 2004). Khin Nyut resignation jeopardized the government's capability to continue the implementation of the "Democracy Plan". This is because his resignation includes the release of Suu Kyi and Myanmar becoming the chairman of ASEAN in 2006. General Soe Win was then designated as Prime Minister to replace General Khin Nyut and emphasized that the implementation process democracy follows the "Democracy Plan". However the process towards "Democracy Plan" has been disturbingly slow and required to go through certain stages (Utusan Melayu, 22 Oktober 2004).

5.2 Entrance of Myanmar in ASEAN

Myanmar's entry into ASEAN had caused various doubts and challenged the non-intervention principle of ASEAN. Heavy pressures imposed on ASEAN by international human rights and western power so that ASEAN rejects Myanmar's entry as member an ASEAN member. This is related to State Peace And Development Council's action (SPDC) that denied Aung San Suu Kyi's victory in election of 1990 and Myanmar government's oppression towards basic human rights. Amid the pressures from United States and European Union to sanction and break economic ties with Myanmar, ASEAN ministerial meeting in 1991 decided to carry on and arrange peaceful agreement with Myanmar. Kamarulnizam Abdullah (2001:43) explained:-

"Myanmar problem is the country's regime has practice the isolation concept and close door policy. The people have no freedom. Universities are close and open based on the regime's wish. Freedom of expression has obstructed".

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Thailand expects the decision achieved in the agreement can improve and resolve security problems especially border crisis with Myanmar. Even though there are opposition and criticism on Myanmar entrance into ASEAN, Myanmar became a member in August 1997 in Kuala Lumpur. ASEAN decision to received Myanmar's membership as ASEAN member in 1997 had raised great criticism from the international community especially in the west. The choice of ASEAN to receive Myanmar was seen as an act legitimizing the military regime. On contrary, ASEAN view its choice in allowing Myanmar to participate as member is that it would open the way to build a better relationship that could lead to a peaceful political transition and make its way towards a democratic country. SPDC action, formerly known as SLORC, by intimidating political parties, torturing minority groups and refusing the results of the election of 1990, received great opposition from the international community since late 1980s. The military crackdown in its effort stamp out democracy movement in 1988 not only has contravened human right, but also has brought criticism and suspension by several countries such as United States, Japan and European Union to Myanmar. In fact numerous western countries have passed a number of laws barring companies from investing in Myanmar.

6.0 Conclusion

Myanmar is a multi racial county with ethnic groups like the Burman, Karen, Shan, Rohingya, Chinese, Mon, and India. The ethnic conflicts occurring in Myanmar are because the differences and life lifestyles. Ultimately, it has unnecessary tension and unity issues between the ethnic groups. After the independence in 1948, Myanmar also faced the revolution of separatist movements demanding autonomy or demonstrating protest to the government. These issues is perplexed the government for it would contribute to internal political instability of the nation. Hence, in 1998, Myanmar held a ceasefire agreement with 16 separatists. Kamarulnizam Abdullah (2001:43) explained that:-

“Political repression is reality. No doubt that a few ethnic minority groups which refuse peace with the government were brutally terrorized than the Muslim Rohingya group in western Myanmar bordering Bangladesh”.

In 1989, Myanmar start cultural campaign in effort creates unity and understanding between ethnic and ethnic form of government. However these efforts overall had not achieved success. This is because minority classes often oppressed by majority group and government side. The ethnics such as Rohingya, Karen, Mon and Shan which account ethnic minorities often become victims suppress by government side. The discrimination and government injustice on this group is had caused they carry out activity to government opposition. This issue is clear are perceived in election 1990, where minority classes has lent a hand powerful ones to public party (NLD). Yet, minority classes in Myanmar still being entertained as ethnic 'second class' by Myanmar's military government. The resignation of General Khin Nyut or called as a “Democracy Plan Architect Myanmar” and his reins replaced by General. Soe Win had aroused concern by PBB, ASEAN and international community especially in continues democracy plan was drafted. The Khin Nyut's resignation has hindered UN's efforts to resolve Aung San Suu Kyi detention's problem. Yet movement process towards democracy plan (although have been planned since 1993) still no implemented fully. Apart from that, in ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM's meeting (ARF) To 11, In Jakarta Convention Center (JCC) in 2 July 2005, also debated and discuss on democracy process in Myanmar. This conference is attended by 24 domestics including United States foreign minister, Collin Powell and Pakistan right foreign minister (Aung San Suu Kyi stayed away because is in detention). In this meeting, ASEAN has expressed confidence that political problems in Myanmar solvable with the best way. This is because, ASEAN trusts that this issue solvable with make ASEAN moderating like success had been reached in settling Cambodia problem.

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