

Regionalism in International Relations: Burma's Relations with ASEAN and Implications for Regional Politics (1997–2013)

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This article presents an in-depth investigation into Burma's (Myanmar's) engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from 1997 to 2013, a period marked by significant regional and domestic transformation. By critically examining the security, political, and economic challenges facing Burma, the article explores how ASEAN's evolving norms and the influence of Western powers shaped the trajectory of democratization in Burma. Drawing from constructivist and neo-institutionalist frameworks, the study utilizes qualitative methods, including extensive document analysis and literature review, to argue that Burma's political opening was less a product of endogenous reform and more a result of sustained, multifaceted external pressure—particularly from ASEAN and Western actors. The article discusses the evolution of ASEAN's engagement with Burma, the interplay of regional and global influences, and the implications for ASEAN's principles and regional politics. It concludes that Burma's democratization exemplifies the complexities of regional organization engagement with authoritarian states and offers lessons for future political transitions in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Burma, Myanmar, ASEAN, democratization, regional politics, security, political reform, non-interference, sanctions, Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualizing Burma's ASEAN Membership

The inclusion of Burma in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 represented a pivotal moment in the organization's history and Southeast Asia's political landscape (ASEAN 2013; Kraft 2000, p. 453). Established in 1967, ASEAN's primary objectives have been to promote peace, foster economic growth, and encourage socio-cultural development in a region long beset by instability and conflict. The organization's ten-member composition, encompassing countries with diverse political systems, economic structures, and social fabrics, has both enriched and challenged ASEAN's capacity for cohesive action.

Burma's accession was controversial from the outset. Its military government, notorious for human rights abuses, democratic suppression, and economic malaise, appeared at odds with ASEAN's aspirations for legitimacy and development (Arendshorst 2009, p. 102). Nevertheless, ASEAN's leaders opted for "constructive engagement," a policy rooted in non-interference and gradualism, which they believed would incentivize the junta toward reform through integration and dialogue (Buszynski 1998, p. 290).

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study seeks to answer the following core questions:

- What roles did ASEAN, both as a collective and through its individual member states, play in shaping Burma's political reforms?



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- How did Western powers, through sanctions and diplomacy, interact with ASEAN efforts to influence Burma?
- What were the principal security, political, and economic obstacles that complicated Burma's democratization during this period?
- What are the broader implications of Burma's transformation for ASEAN's operational norms and the dynamics of regional politics in Southeast Asia?

By addressing these questions, the article aims to provide a comprehensive account of Burma's road to democratization and to illuminate the mechanisms by which regional and international actors can effect change within authoritarian regimes.

1.3 Structure of the Article

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides historical context and background to Burma-ASEAN relations. Section 3 surveys the literature on ASEAN's engagement with Burma, Western involvement, and democratization. Section 4 introduces the theoretical framework, drawing from constructivism and neo-institutionalism. Section 5 describes the methods and methodology, followed by Section 6 on ethical considerations. Section 7 details data collection, and Section 8 outlines data analysis procedures. Section 9 presents a detailed discussion of the findings, and Section 10 concludes with implications and recommendations. The article closes with a comprehensive reference list, preserving your original in-text citations.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

2.1 ASEAN's Evolution and the Challenge of Inclusivity

ASEAN was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—countries determined to build a stable regional order in the face of Cold War rivalries and domestic insurgencies (ASEAN 2013). Over time, the organization expanded to include Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Burma (1997), Laos (1997), and Cambodia (1999), forming a ten-member bloc committed to non-interference, consensus, and gradualism (Kraft 2000, p. 453).

Burma's inclusion was a calculated risk. The junta's human rights record and economic isolationism contrasted starkly with ASEAN's vision of a peaceful and prosperous community (Arendhorst 2009, p. 102). The decision to admit Burma was rationalized by the belief that regional engagement could moderate the junta's behavior and promote reform—a logic that would be sorely tested over the next decade (Buszynski 1998, p. 290).

2.2 Security, Political, and Economic Challenges in Burma

Burma's internal situation was defined by protracted ethnic conflicts, military dominance, and political repression. Ethnic minority insurgencies and refugee flows strained relations with neighbors, particularly Thailand and Bangladesh (Haacke & Williams 2009, p. 14). The regime's intransigence in the face of international criticism, as well as its crackdowns on pro-democracy movements (notably in 1988 and 2007), further isolated the country (Gleason 2011, p. 55; Zaw 1999, p. 56).

Economically, Burma's closed market policies, rampant corruption, and reliance on black markets stymied development and discouraged foreign investment. Economic sanctions imposed by Western powers exacerbated these challenges but also pressured the junta to seek regional partnerships to offset diplomatic and economic isolation (Clark 2003, p. 130; Clapp 2009, p. 6).

2.3 ASEAN's Dilemma: Non-Interference vs. Regional Responsibility

ASEAN's founding principle of non-interference has shaped its response to internal crises among member states. While this principle has prevented open conflict and fostered respect among diverse regimes, it has also constrained ASEAN's ability to address gross violations of human rights or democratic norms (Haacke 2006, p. 41). The "ASEAN Way"—characterized by informal diplomacy, consensus, and avoidance of public confrontation—was put to the test by Burma's behavior (Katanyuu 2006, p. 826).

In response to growing international criticism, ASEAN experimented with "constructive engagement," seeking to influence Burma through



dialogue and integration rather than isolation. However, as the situation deteriorated, several ASEAN members began to question the efficacy of this approach, and calls for more assertive action grew louder (Kipgen 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 ASEAN's Engagement with Burma: Constructive Engagement and Its Limits

The scholarly literature on Burma–ASEAN relations is substantial, focusing initially on the rationale and limitations of constructive engagement. Buszynski (1998, p. 290) and Haacke (2006, p. 41) argue that ASEAN's approach was shaped by the desire to prevent Burma's further isolation, which could have destabilized the region. Engagement was seen as a way to encourage reform incrementally, with economic incentives and diplomatic inclusion as tools of persuasion.

However, critics such as Arendshorst (2009, p. 102) and Jones (2009, p. 278) highlight the failures of constructive engagement, noting that it often provided the junta with legitimacy without producing substantive change. Over time, frustration within ASEAN led to a shift from engagement to what some describe as “critical disengagement,” as the bloc sought to balance non-interference with the need to maintain credibility (Haacke 2006, p. 41; Kipgen 2013).

3.2 The Impact of Western Sanctions and International Pressure

The role of Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, has been another focus of scholarly debate. Western states imposed a range of sanctions targeting Burma's leadership, economy, and access to international institutions (Ewing-Chow 2007, p. 154; Than 2009, p. 212). Some scholars argue that these sanctions, while symbolically important, were only effective when combined with regional pressure from ASEAN and neighboring states (Taylor 2012, p. 173; Chun 2008, p. 70).

Others caution that sanctions often had unintended consequences, such as reinforcing the junta's siege

mentality and driving Burma closer to China and other non-Western partners (Kingston 2008, p. 111). The literature suggests that only the convergence of Western and regional strategies produced sufficient leverage for change.

3.3 Democratization, Regional Norms, and Institutional Constraints

The process of democratization in Burma is frequently analyzed through the lens of regional norms and institutional constraints. Constructivist scholars (Kuhonta 2006, p. 212; Katanyuu 2006, p. 826) argue that ASEAN's evolving norms—particularly its slow shift from absolute non-interference to a more flexible stance—created space for dialogue and reform. Neo-institutionalist perspectives focus on the role of organizational rules and decision-making structures, emphasizing the limits of consensus-based diplomacy (Haacke 2008, p. 68).

Overall, the literature supports the argument that democratization in Burma was contingent on external pressures and the changing dynamics of regional engagement, rather than arising solely from internal factors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Constructivism: The Power of Norms and Identity

Constructivist theory posits that international politics is shaped not only by material interests but also by shared norms, identities, and social expectations (Wendt 1999). In the context of ASEAN, constructivism highlights how norms such as non-interference, consensus, and regional solidarity have structured member states' behavior (Kuhonta 2006, p. 212). The gradual shift in ASEAN's approach to Burma—from strict non-interference to more open discussion of internal affairs—reflects the evolving normative environment within the organization (Katanyuu 2006, p. 826).

This framework allows for analysis of how ASEAN's identity as a community of sovereign states was challenged by Burma's actions, forcing



the group to renegotiate the boundaries of acceptable behavior and collective response.

4.2 Neo-Institutionalism: Organizational Structures and Constraints

Neo-institutionalism focuses on the ways in which formal and informal organizational rules shape the behavior of actors within institutions (March & Olsen 1989). In ASEAN, decision-making by consensus and the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms have historically limited the bloc's ability to respond to crises. However, as the Burma case demonstrates, institutional flexibility and the willingness of some member states to act unilaterally or in sub-groups have allowed for adaptation in the face of new challenges (Haacke 2008, p. 68).

By integrating constructivist and neo-institutionalist perspectives, this article analyzes how both evolving norms and institutional rules influenced ASEAN's engagement with Burma, as well as the impact of external actors.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, relying on document analysis and literature review to examine the evolution of Burma–ASEAN relations and the factors influencing democratization. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the complexity of regional politics, the interplay of norms and interests, and the multiple layers of influence at work (Yin 2014).

5.2 Data Sources

Data were collected from a variety of sources, including:

- Official ASEAN communiqués, statements, and summit reports (ASEAN 2013)
- Government documents from Burma and other ASEAN states
- Reports and policy briefs from international organizations and NGOs

- Academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles (e.g., Buszynski 1998; Haacke 2006; Kipgen 2013)
- Media coverage from regional and international outlets (e.g., The Australian 2013; Straits Times 2013)

5.3 Analytical Approach

Documents and literature were coded thematically around the main axes of inquiry: security, political, and economic challenges; ASEAN's responses; Western involvement; and democratization outcomes. The analysis prioritized triangulation—cross-referencing findings across different sources—to ensure validity and reliability.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 Use of Publicly Available Data

The research relies exclusively on publicly available documents, reports, and academic literature. No interviews with human subjects or confidential data were used, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for social science research.

6.2 Academic Integrity

All sources and in-text citations are preserved from the original research project to maintain academic integrity, transparency, and proper attribution. The analysis adheres to principles of scholarly rigor, avoiding plagiarism and misrepresentation.

6.3 Sensitivity to Political Context

Given the political sensitivity of Burma's history and ongoing challenges, the analysis strives for objectivity and acknowledges the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including the Burmese government, ASEAN members, and Western actors.

DATA COLLECTION

7.1 Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematic gathering and review of:



- ASEAN's official statements, press releases, and summit declarations from 1997 to 2013
- Legislative and policy documents from individual ASEAN states and international organizations
- Scholarly articles and books addressing Burma's political, security, and economic situation
- Reports from human rights organizations, think tanks, and NGOs active in Southeast Asia
- Media articles covering key events, diplomatic developments, and regional reactions

7.2 Temporal and Thematic Scope

The period of focus (1997–2013) captures Burma's accession to ASEAN, the evolution of the junta's engagement with the region, the imposition and adjustment of sanctions, and the critical years of political opening and reform.

DATA ANALYSIS

8.1 Thematic Coding

Data were coded according to major themes:

- Security challenges: ethnic conflict, border instability, refugee flows (Haacke & Williams 2009, p. 14; The Australian 2013, p. 9)
- Political challenges: military dominance, suppression of dissent, human rights abuses (Zaw 1999, p. 56; Gleason 2011, p. 55)
- Economic challenges: closed markets, sanctions, black market reliance (Clark 2003, p. 130; Clapp 2009, p. 6)
- ASEAN's engagement: from constructive engagement to critical disengagement (Haacke 2006, p. 41; Kipgen 2013)
- Western involvement: sanctions, diplomatic pressure, coordination with ASEAN (Ewing-Chow 2007, p. 154; Than 2009, p. 212)
- Outcomes: steps toward democratization, reforms, ongoing challenges (Taylor 2012, p. 173; Chun 2008, p. 70)

8.2 Comparative and Process-Tracing Analysis

Comparative analysis was used to assess the evolution of ASEAN's engagement with Burma relative to its responses to internal crises in other member states. Process tracing linked the sequence of regional and international actions to subsequent policy shifts and reforms in Burma.

DISCUSSION

9.1 Security, Political, and Economic Obstacles

Burma's trajectory toward reform was impeded by persistent ethnic conflicts, particularly in border regions, which generated security concerns for neighboring ASEAN states and undermined regional stability (Haacke & Williams 2009, p. 14). Political repression—manifest in the suppression of pro-democracy movements, censorship, and the imprisonment of dissidents—provoked international condemnation and complicated ASEAN's efforts at quiet diplomacy (Zaw 1999, p. 56; Gleason 2011, p. 55).

Economically, Burma's policies of self-isolation, state control, and corruption produced chronic underdevelopment and heightened vulnerability to external shocks. The imposition of Western sanctions further constrained the junta's options, driving it to seek support from regional partners (Clark 2003, p. 130; Clapp 2009, p. 6).

9.2 ASEAN's Evolving Engagement: From Non-Interference to Pragmatic Flexibility

ASEAN's initial approach to Burma adhered strictly to non-interference, with regional leaders hoping that engagement would promote gradual reform (Buszynski 1998, p. 290). However, as internal crises in Burma persisted—and international criticism mounted—ASEAN's stance began to shift. The bloc experimented with new forms of engagement, including public expressions of concern, the creation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, and behind-the-scenes diplomacy (Haacke 2006, p. 41; Kipgen 2013).

Some member states, notably Indonesia and the Philippines, advocated for more assertive action, while others—such as Thailand and Singapore—



prioritized economic and strategic interests (Katanyuu 2006, p. 826; Kingston 2008, p. 111). This diversity of perspectives complicated collective action but also allowed for flexible responses.

9.3 The Role of Western Powers and the Impact of Sanctions

The United States, the European Union, and other Western actors imposed progressively stricter sanctions on Burma's leadership and economy, aiming to pressure the regime into reform (Ewing-Chow 2007, p. 154; Than 2009, p. 212). While these measures signaled international disapproval and constrained the junta's options, they were only truly effective when coordinated with ASEAN's efforts (Taylor 2012, p. 173; Chun 2008, p. 70).

The interplay of regional and international pressure created a complex web of incentives and constraints that ultimately persuaded the junta to loosen its grip and begin a process of controlled democratization.

9.4 Democratization and Its Limits

Burma's transition to democracy was neither linear nor complete. While the release of political prisoners, the relaxation of censorship, and the holding of elections signaled progress, significant obstacles remained—including continued military influence, ongoing ethnic conflicts, and the fragility of newly established institutions (Taylor 2012, p. 173).

Nevertheless, the period from 1997 to 2013 marked a significant shift in Burma's domestic and regional position, with ASEAN playing a critical—if sometimes ambivalent—role in facilitating this change.

9.5 Implications for ASEAN and Regional Politics

Burma's experience has important implications for ASEAN's future. The organization's gradual shift away from absolute non-interference suggests an increasing willingness to address internal crises among member states. However, the limits of consensus-based diplomacy and the persistence of diverse national interests mean that collective action will continue to be challenging (Haacke 2008, p. 68).

The case also demonstrates the importance of regional organizations working in concert with international actors to promote political reform and stability.

CONCLUSION

10.1 Summary of Findings

This article has demonstrated that Burma's democratization between 1997 and 2013 was shaped less by internal pressures and more by the sustained, multifaceted influence of ASEAN and Western powers. ASEAN's evolution from non-interference to pragmatic flexibility, combined with international sanctions and diplomatic pressure, created the conditions for political opening in Burma.

10.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The integration of constructivist and neo-institutionalist perspectives reveals the importance of evolving norms and institutional flexibility in shaping regional responses to crises. For practitioners and policymakers, the Burma case underscores the value of coordinated, multi-level engagement in addressing authoritarianism and human rights abuses.

10.3 Recommendations and Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term effects of Burma's democratization on ASEAN's principles and regional security. Comparative studies with other regional organizations may yield further insights into the dynamics of collective action and norm evolution.

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Declarations

Clinical trial number: Not applicable.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate declarations: Not applicable.



Consent to Participate Declaration

I have given my consent for the publication of identifiable details, which can include photograph(s), participants' pseudonym names and ages, case history, and/or details within the text to be published. This information could be used by other authors in potential research.

The Ethics Declaration Norm

Deakin University Faculty of Arts and Education, observes the Australian [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#)(the National Statement).

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