

# How a Morning Coffee Changed the ASEAN Regional Infrastructure

## The story of ALTSEAN–Burma

**By Debbie Stothard, ALTSEAN-Burma and Marte Hellema, FORUM-ASIA**

On a July morning in 1996, Somchai Homlaor, the then Secretary General of FORUM-ASIA, and Debbie Stothard, met in Bangkok. While they had heard of each other, it was the first time they met in person. Debbie pitched an idea to Somchai about setting up an alternative Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) movement on Burma. Just a few months later the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma) was born. A network that would not just play a role in Burma, but would indirectly play a role in changing the regional infrastructure for human rights in Southeast Asia.

### Context

In 1948 the Union of Burma became independent from the United Kingdom (UK). The first decades after independence saw a lot of socio-economic unrest, as well as the beginning of several of the ethnic and political conflicts that still terrorise the country today. It can be said though that the country had and has never been as democratic as in those first years.<sup>12</sup>

This all came to an end with the military coup, led by General Ne Win, on 2 March 1962. All of the Governments that have ruled the country since have been either directly or indirectly controlled by

the Military. From the beginning, this military take-over resulted in the serious repression of dissent. Protests were responded to with force and violence. The economic policies of the Junta caused decline in development, and particularly in the 1980s the country became so impoverished that the United Nations (UN) added it to its list of Least Developed Countries.

In 1988 the economic mismanagement and political repression resulted in the most widespread pro-democracy protests that Burma had ever seen. The 8888 Uprising – named after 8 August 1988 – started with a group of students in Rangoon and spread across the country in the form of marches, demonstrations and riots. However, the Uprising, which also saw the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi as a symbol of the resistance, was ended brutally after the Military retook power by staging another coup on 18 September 1988. Martial law was installed and implemented unremorsefully. By the end of the year an estimated 10,000 people had been killed, among them both protesters and soldiers, while many more were missing.

In May 1990 the first free elections in

<sup>12</sup> At the time of writing, the elections of 8 November 2015 had not taken place yet.

over 30 years were held. The National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, won around 80 percent of the votes. However, the military regime refused to concede power and stayed firmly in place till 2011. This period saw an almost complete repression of any form of dissent, and was known for widespread violations of human rights.

The crackdown on the protesters in 1988 was strongly condemned internationally, particularly in the West. In the years to follow this resulted in a series of sanctions from the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU), as well as in the relative global isolation of the regime. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 was a further recognition of the injustice taking place in her home country.

The countries surrounding Burma were largely quiet though. Under the guise of non-interference and respect for sovereignty the Southeast Asian neighbours stayed silent. Many people believe that if the neighbouring countries would have condemned and refused to recognise the coup of 1988, the regime would have not lasted so long and would have collapsed much sooner. Contrary to that, the Southeast Asian countries refused to intervene and in 1997 Burma was even accepted as a member of ASEAN.

## **ALTSEAN–Burma**

During that early morning meeting between Debbie and Somchai in 1996, Debbie raised the paradoxical concern that the Burmese human rights movement had better contacts in the West than in its neighbouring countries. She suggested it was high time to organise a regional network of human rights organisations to counter the lacklustre stance of the ASEAN Member States. The proposal was motivated by the understanding that to be able to truly pressure the Burmese regime, it was needed to convince the Southeast Asian neighbours to get on board.

Not only did Somchai immediately recognise the value of the proposal, he suggested to go right ahead and start planning the meeting. Where new plans and ideas are normally slowed down by long-winded fundraising processes, this turned out not to be necessary this time. Incidentally the year before, FORUM-ASIA had conducted its first ever mission to Burma. 1996 was declared the Burma campaign year for FORUM-ASIA and a regional consultation was already in the plans. Debbie's proposal was a perfect fit with what was already in the pipelines.

So just a few months after their initial meeting, in October 1996, the Alternative ASEAN Meeting on Burma was held in Bangkok, Thailand. While originally intended to have some 35 participants, eventually around 70 civil society representatives, Parliamentarians and other interested individuals showed up. The enthusiasm and interest in the

meeting was so great that quite a few of the participants covered their own costs. It was during that meeting that the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma) was established.

ALTSEAN-Burma was set up to become a network of organisations and individuals based in ASEAN Member State countries that would work to support the movement for human rights and democracy in Burma. The network comprised human rights and social justice non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political parties, think tanks, academics, journalists and student activists.

ALTSEAN-Burma started an aggressive media campaign blaming ASEAN countries for the deteriorating human rights situation in Burma. Every time something happened – whether it was the arrest or harassment of Aung San Suu Kyi, an attack on ethnic minorities or mass-displacement of people – ALTSEAN-Burma would highlight this in the regional press to remind ASEAN Member States of what the Burmese regime had done since it had been allowed to join ASEAN in 1997.

## **The Rangoon 18**

One of the more known examples of the kinds of projects that ALTSEAN-Burma has undertaken is that of the Rangoon 18. On 19 August 1998 a group of 18 people from the USA, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia took to the streets of Rangoon to hand out leaflets to commemorate ten years after the 8888 Uprising. They

were arrested, detained for five days, sentenced to five years of hard labour and subsequently deported to Thailand. Upon their arrival in Bangkok they were welcomed by many as heroes.

Responses by the Governments whose citizens were among the 18 varied greatly. The USA and the Philippines condemned the actions of the Burmese regime as an example of the severe restrictions on the Freedom of Expression (FoE) in place, while Thailand and Indonesia only reluctantly spoke out to support their people. The Malaysian Government on the other hand criticised the action of the Rangoon 18, but grudgingly collaborated in the attempts to free the Malaysians involved.

Media coverage of the action was significant in all six countries where the 18 came from. It undoubtedly raised Burma on the political agenda in most of them. While opinions differ on what the direct effects were of the action beyond the media attention, in the long-term it contributed to change the way the region dealt with the regime in Burma. It forced at least four ASEAN countries to negotiate directly with the military regime in Burma, making it harder for them to deny the reality of what was going on in this country that had been so warmly welcomed among their midst just a year before.

## **Lessons Learnt**

Over the years ALTSEAN-Burma undertook many other activities and projects that pushed ASEAN, Governments in the region, as well as

media and civil society organisations (CSOs) to change the way they perceived and dealt with the regime in Burma. It gained insights and lessons based on their experience which include the following:

- *Be creative in the use of different and unconventional strategies*

ALTSEAN-Burma always tried to push the limits of what it could do and accomplish. In doing so, at times it was criticised by people that did not agree with their strategies or doubted their results. However, by keeping on doing the same thing, you will always get the same results. Particularly when it came to the Burmese regime, which for such a long time was completely closed off and seemed utterly unwilling to change, only by trying different and unconventional strategies was ALTSEAN-Burma able to contribute to change.

This does not mean that other human rights organisations or movements should just blindly copy the activities ALTSEAN-Burma did in the past. Times have changed and people have changed. Instead in every situation human rights activists need to think critically and creatively what options they have at their disposal and what opportunities there are to push forward.

*'People's concept of human rights changes according to their situation, and instead of restricting what is our understanding of human rights, we must be more broad and inclusive so that more people start to understand that human rights is the norm for them.'*  
*Debbie Stothard*

- *Importance of media*

Another lesson that can be learnt from ALTSEAN-Burma, something which the network embraced from the beginning, is the need to realise the importance of the media. Many of its activities contributed to changing the way ASEAN media reported on Burma. The activities helped to make human rights and democracy 'sexy' topics, at least within the context of Burma. This involvement of media contributed to pushing the human rights and democracy agenda forward, and eventually aided in making it part of the ASEAN agenda.

- *For every step forward there will be some steps back*

Yet, ALTSEAN-Burma also learnt that for every step forward there will be some steps back. While much has changed in Burma over the last years, at times these changes have been more impressive in words than in reality. There is no time to celebrate when it comes to working on human rights. They are not a final stage or station that can be reached, but require constant and persistent monitoring and vigilance.

*'[as young human rights activists] keep on understanding that your existence is in itself a victory. Keep on understanding that every victory must be fought for. And remember that the empire always strikes back. So whenever we win something we already have to plan for what the backlash is going to be.'*

*Debbie Stothard*

## Long-term changes

ALTSEAN-Burma undoubtedly contributed to the changes in Burma itself. Many of its activities forced ASEAN Governments to change the way they engaged with the Burmese regime and pushed them to become more critical and involved in addressing the repression and human rights violations.

However, some of the outcomes of its work were unexpected and altogether of a completely different nature. As the activities of ALTSEAN-Burma started to have an effect on ASEAN, other CSOs and human rights activists took notice. For a long time, ASEAN's disinterest in human rights and its insistence on non-interference had resulted in disillusionment with the institution from the regional human rights movement and a belief that it was futile to engage with ASEAN. Slowly this perception started to change.

In 2004 a group of CSOs met with ALTSEAN-Burma to discuss its strategies and progress. Inspired by this engagement, as well as other developments in Asia, a regional consultation was organised, among others by FORUM-ASIA, just a few months later which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA) in 2006.

One of the most active groups of SAPA was the Task Force on ASEAN. Right from the beginning it set out to influence the development of the ASEAN Charter. In 2006 alone it made three different submissions with recommendations related to the Charter, which was eventually adopted in 2007.

While by no means to the satisfaction of many of the organisations involved, human rights were referred to in the ASEAN Charter. More importantly, the Charter paved the way for the establishment of an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, specifically of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009 and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and the Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) in 2010.

The importance of strong and coordinated input coming from civil society in the region to ASEAN cannot be underestimated. This has been proven over the years, not just when it comes to changes in the institution itself, but also related to particular Member States. When only one organisation is speaking out on an issue or if the criticism is merely coming from one country, it is easy to be ignored, but if a network of CSOs speaks out collectively and consistently with time it becomes very hard to deny.

*'Dealing with ASEAN leaders can sometimes be like trying to wake up a man that is pretending to be asleep. They do not want to know, they do not want to hear, they might just selectively listen. (..) but in doing this, in trying to push for these changes ASEAN civil society has become much more coordinated, we have strengthened our regional identity, we have become more cohesive.'*  
Debbie Stothard

Over the years in pushing for change, ASEAN CSOs have become much more coordinated and cohesive. ALTSEAN-Burma played and continues to play its part in these efforts. Its activities and projects, while at times controversial, have contributed to change in Burma and in the region. Who would have thought that an early morning coffee in 1996 would lead to that?

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This story was written based on an interview with Debbie Stothard, Founder and Coordinator of ALTSEAN-Burma, by Marte Hellema, FORUM-ASIA Information, Communication and Publication Programme Manager