

Viewing cable 05NEWDELHI9434, INDIA JOINS ASEAN'S TOUGHER LINE ON BURMA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 009434

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [IN](#) [BM](#) [ASEAN](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA JOINS ASEAN'S TOUGHER LINE ON BURMA

REF: A. KUALA LUMP 4317

[B](#). NEW DELHI 9080

[C](#). NEW DELHI 5397

Classified By: DCM Robert Blake, Jr. for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#). (U) Summary: After many months of wishy-washy Indian posturing on Burma, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called publicly for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and encouraged the GOB to move towards democracy on his return from the East Asia Summit. Speaking after a meeting with Burmese PM Soe Win in Kuala Lumpur on December 14, PM Singh also stated that the GOI ""favors national reconciliation and the movement towards democracy, respect for fundamental human rights and allowing political activities to flourish."" This is a strong departure from New Delhi's recent tactic of downplaying democracy concerns with the GOB in return for greater cooperation in energy and counter-insurgency operations near the shared border, and signals a greater Indian willingness to put public pressure on Burma's military junta. India's increased willingness to advocate for democracy even at the risk of its own security and energy interests in Burma is a welcome development. End Summary.

GOI Calls for Democracy and ASSK's Release

[2](#). (U) Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ended a December 14 meeting with his Burmese counterpart Soe Win in Kuala Lumpur with a strong public statement of support for the democratic movement in Burma. According to a December 15 article in the ""Hindu,"" Singh also called for the release of political dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, respect for human rights and permission for political activities. He couched this statement by saying that it was not his ""purpose"" to advise the military junta on what it should do, and later told journalists on the aircraft returning to New Delhi that it was up to the Burmese people to solve their own problems. On a positive note, Singh also reported that ""our two countries could do a great deal more in developing the transportation and hydrocarbon sectors.""

13. (U) New Delhi-based Burma watchers attributed PM Singh's statements to ASEAN countries' changed attitude towards Burma at the recent Asian meetings in Kuala Lumpur. Manmohini Kaul, a Professor of East Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, commented that she was "surprised and happy" at the PM's statements. She credits the recent statements from ASEAN leaders on Burma (Ref A) for granting greater leeway for India to take a stronger approach. Kaul pointed out that the GOI had to keep in mind the sensitivities of ASEAN countries, who had previously decided not to push publicly for reform in Burma. Preet Malik, a retired Ambassador to Burma, agreed that "the changed environment of ASEAN towards Burma" paved the way for Singh's statements.

14. (U) Kaul also indicated that India's statements show a higher level of comfort and confidence with ASEAN countries. She highlighted the role of the change of leadership in Malaysia, which had previously opposed India in the ASEAN forum. Foreign Minister Syed Hamid has shown himself to be comparatively more open to working with India as well as a stronger advocate for democracy in Burma, she noted. Kaul characterized India as "one of the only truly democratic and powerful players" in the region who can influence Burma.

Same Policy, Louder Noises

15. (C) MEA Desk Officer for Burma Pooja Kapur told Poloff that the statement does not signal any type of change in GOI policy, because Indian leaders have always "made positive noises about the need for democracy in Burma." However, Ambassador Malik commented that the GOI put democracy issues on the backburner because of India's need to match Chinese influence (Ref B), cooperate on counter-insurgency operations along the border and look for new energy sources in the neighborhood (Ref C). Malik stressed that there "is a tremendous amount of feeling among Indians that the GOI has gone too far" in working with the junta and ignoring democracy, but "India's requirements" in Burma prevent them from isolating the leadership. JNU's Kaul added that "having good relationships shouldn't always mean overlooking internal problems." Nevertheless, she predicted that the GOI would be careful "not to act like a big brother" and only promote democracy "up to a point."

Comment: Its About Time

16. (C) India's "positive noises" about Burma have been muffled lately by the anticipated tangible benefits of engagement. The GOI has to balance its policy of democracy promotion with the fear of isolating its neighbor. New Delhi has been aggressively courting better relations and economic integration with ASEAN, so we expect these countries' tougher approach towards Burma to reverberate loudly here. We welcome the PM's statements and will continue to encourage louder noises on the release of political dissidents, respect for human rights and the importance of democracy in Burma.

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