

The heads of state and foreign ministers at the 16th annual Asean summit in Hanoi issue statements calling on Burma to hold credible and fair elections, but take no actions that help to ensure the outcome.

Heads of state and foreign ministers gathered in Hanoi at the 16th annual Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) summit issued strong statements calling on Burma to hold credible and fair elections, but they failed to take any collective or individual action to help ensure this outcome.

The Burmese military regime has announced that an election will be held this year but have not yet set a date. Under the regime's election laws, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Burma's main opposition group, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and other political prisoners are banned from participating in the election.



Top level officials from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines all urged Burmese Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein, who is attending the summit, to hold a fair and all-inclusive election, according to reports from Hanoi.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung said, “[Burma's elections] should be fair and democratic, with the participation of all parties.”

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa said, “We want very much to see an election that is going to obtain international recognition and credibility.”

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told reporters, "The important thing is for the process itself to be a very sound process, a credible process, and to be free and fair so that it will enhance Burma and Asean, particularly with the world community."

But despite these statements, observers said the repeated calls for free and fair elections make little difference without constructive engagement, and Asean's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries, along with divisions within the Asean bloc on how to handle the Burma issue, have allowed the Burmese military junta to repeatedly escape formal censure.

Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo said Asean cannot lecture or tell Burma what to do. "We are not in a position to punish Myanmar [Burma]," said Yeo, while allowing that the months leading up to the election will be critical for Burma. "In the end, what happens in Myanmar is for the Myanmar people to decide. We are outsiders...we hope that they would make progress quickly," he said.

Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, who once referred to the Asean bloc as a "wheel of change," told Agence France-Presse that Burma appreciates that, "... Asean has been seized with this issue for a long, long time and would like to see an end to this issue so that Myanmar itself and Asean can move on to a closer cooperation."

Pitsuwan also said that Asean gives full expression of support to Burma, but that the ruling generals were aware that their rights record continues to be a problem for Asean.

At the end of the summit, the 13-page formal statement by the Asean leaders included only a short reference to Burma.

"We underscored the importance of national reconciliation in Myanmar [Burma] and the holding of the general election in a free, fair and inclusive manner, thus contributing to Myanmar's stability and development," the statement said.

Some Asean members are reportedly pushing for Asean to act as an observer in Burma's election, but no official statement has been issued and Burma has not agreed to Asean observation.

Agence France-Presse issued a report on Friday that analyzed some of the factors that hamper Asean's response to Burma.

The report noted that Asean's diverse membership ranges from one of Asia's poorest nations, Laos, to the westernized city-state of Singapore, the absolute monarchy of Brunei and the vibrant democracy of Indonesia.

The report concluded that although the summit's slogan is "from vision to action," Asean is hampered by wide development gaps within the region, entrenched domestic interests and the shortcomings and instability of some members.