



The Way Forward: ASEAN Unity for Myanmar

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In the aftermath of the February coup, ASEAN stands as one of the few actors Myanmar maintains close communications with, putting pressure on it to play a central role in solving the human rights crisis. ASEAN has put forward a ‘five-point consensus,’ calling for (1) a cessation of violence; (2) commencement of constructive dialogues; (3) appointment of a special envoy; (4) provision of humanitarian assistance; and (5) a planned visit (ASEAN, 2021). However, these deliverables have not yet been achieved – the envoy that was high on ASEAN’s agenda has not been named, and the violence continues, indicating a stark gap between what ASEAN committed to achieve and what it can actually deliver.

The above situation can be attributed to a lack of consensus on the amount of pressure ASEAN member states seek to exert on Myanmar. While Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have been staunch advocates for human rights, vocally condemning the use of force against civilians and demanding an end to the junta’s cruelties, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have preferred to maintain ASEAN’s traditional institutional processes. As such, they have requested member states adhere to the principle of non-interference, thereby respecting Myanmar’s *fait accompli* to restore stability and decide their future (The Straits Times, 2021). This mirrors a split on the level of commitment between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore and their counterparts.

Although non-interference is indeed important for ASEAN—given its strong historical roots (Emmers, 2018)—and constructive dialogues have proven workable in the past (such as occurred during the conflict in Cambodia (Amer, 1999)), Myanmar’s crisis is of a different ilk. As of now, ASEAN is in a race against time and momentum. First, the lives of Myanmar people continue to be put in danger. Some have been unfairly persecuted, while others are vulnerable to violence. This calls for serious action in the name of human rights. Second, sluggish and

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uncertain conflict management could sway military authorities to drift further away from peaceful solutions. Thus far, the junta has taken an indifferent approach to international affairs as per usual (Financial Times, 2021; Reuters, 2021) as a way of seeking international legitimacy and to cling onto power. Third, the longer the process takes, the bigger the sense of normalcy that will emerge. Already, the divergence between ASEAN members states is apparent, but it will become even more so when they decide their national interests (the ones in which Myanmar play a part) should be paramount.

ASEAN must do two things. First, it should set a limit on issues or matters it chooses to return to national governments; and as all member states have pledged to respect, promote, and protect human rights (ASEAN, 2013), this crisis should be understood as a collective interest which not only jeopardizes regional peace and stability, but contradicts ASEAN's very cornerstone. It should also be made clear to all member states that ASEAN's purpose is to "strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms" (ASEAN, 2008). This must be reinternalized to ignite the already dulled spirit of member states to bring about peaceful resolution.

Second, ASEAN must take a step beyond symbolic concerns on the crisis and define clearer goals with specific time-frames – not only for Myanmar but the Association in general. When should a total cessation of violence be actualized? What are the alternatives if juntas show noncompliance? If hard measures like sanctions, suspension of privilege and/or legitimacy, and intervention are seemingly too deviant from ASEAN's *modus vivendi*, other methods should be adopted to preserve control: dialogues should be continuous, monitoring tangible, and envoys should be quickly appointed. Echoing Indonesia's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marty Natalegawa, elevation of noncompliance to an ASEAN Summit—as outlined in Article 20 point 4 of the ASEAN Charter—can also function as non-coercive political pressure (The Jakarta Post, 2021).

ASEAN's strength lies in its internal unity. Hence, consensus between member states must be forged. A wider game plan must be set, embraced, and operationalized by all. In other words, ASEAN should not stay put.

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