

Regional solutions: ASEAN's role in Myanmar's humanitarian crisis

In light of the February 2021 coup, Myanmar's hope for a people's government had once again been crushed by the military as the Tatmadaw took hold of the nation, resulting in a democratic clampdown. The nation's tumultuous plight with military rule has a long-standing reputation of brutality and human rights violations not only limited to the current civil unrest but also involving persecution of ethnic groups such as the Rohingya in Rakhine State. As Myanmar sinks further into disarray, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a critical role in reinstating democracy and confronting the various crises its member state currently faces. Being the primary intergovernmental body in the region, ASEAN's firm intervention and humanitarian aid are of essence during this period when the Golden Land is at a fragile turning point.

Since its independence from British colonization in 1948, the Tatmadaw has been the dominant institution in Myanmar, constitutionally legitimized to assume power and restore order once a state of emergency has been declared (Maizland, 2021). Military rule and vestiges of colonialism subjected the country to an isolationist foreign policy and infringement of democratic mandate, causing a lag in economic growth and enabling atrocities towards ethnic minorities. While the international community applauded Myanmar's installment of a quasi-democracy in 2011, it also stood witness to the stateless Rohingya's exodus towards Bangladesh and other key Southeast Asian locations in 2017 (Albert & Maizland, 2020). As continued resistance to the junta presently unfolds along with ongoing ethnic conflicts, military violence and a looming civil war have placed the country in a humanitarian crisis that posits international and regional mediation.

As a member state of ASEAN, Myanmar's dire situation demands a unified regional response to uphold human rights and honor democratic freedoms of the nation. During the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, the Association's most recent move was to adopt a Five-Point Consensus together with humanitarian assistance and repatriation processes for displaced Rohingya groups (ASEAN, 2021). While this move is in accordance with the Association's multilateral diplomatic approach, ASEAN's principle of noninterference weakens its ability to hold the Tatmadaw accountable for Myanmar's internal matters. Moreover, member states stand divided on the issue as the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia refuse to

criticize the coup while Indonesia and Singapore condemn the military's actions (Head, 2021). Arriving at a crossroads, ASEAN must realize that this is a crucial time for unanimity where lives and freedoms are at stake.

In line with the Five-Point Consensus, the appointment of ASEAN's special envoy holds great potential for engaging necessary parties in conflict resolution. However, the Consensus did not include the release of political prisoners which was a pivotal requisite for the democratic-led parallel government's involvement in mediation efforts (Lee, 2021). Such shortcomings present an opportunity for ASEAN to provide a stage to Myanmar's democratic movement and ethnic minorities, which could lead to inclusive civilian representation to the Association in the long run. The existing conflict also highlights a need to develop an ASEAN Court of Justice which can pass jurisdiction for pressing matters such as allegations of crimes against humanity versus the Tatmadaw. Perhaps it is also time to reconsider ASEAN's non-intrusive approach and operate with collaborative accountability for all member states.

As for humanitarian aid, ASEAN must reassess repatriation agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar for displaced Rohingya while the situation in the latter country remains uncertain. The lack of political will on Myanmar's side to provide citizenship and freedom of movement to the ethnic group does not ensure a safe and humane environment for repatriation. Limited by each member state's economic capability, ASEAN should cooperate with international humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross and assist in providing aid to both the Rohingya and civilians affected by military violence.

Regional security, peace-building, and social justice will not be achieved successfully unless fundamental human rights and peace are reinstated in all member states. Arrival at a resolution to the many conflicts in Myanmar is reflective of the ASEAN's commitment to creating a harmonious region; human rights should come first before volatile political interests.

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