

## **Battle for the Soul of the ASEAN Community**

### **Searching for the "ASEAN Way" in Saving the Golden Land**

For more than five decades, Myanmar underwent a military rule after it failed to establish a civilian government after the Second World War. It has been a familiar sight for Burmese to see the military in their everyday lives since then. Censorship is in its strictest form as possible. Most of the industries across the country are either owned or operated by the military. The economy is staggering, while starvation is rising. During those years, Burmese are left helpless but not hopeless with the situation around them. They thought it was the end of their lifetime. It was in 2008 when the government called out a referendum, where voters have the power to change the way their politics should be for the better. Two years following the referendum, Burmese were able to vote for the very first time, electing Thein Sein as its leader. Like any other newly independent country, Myanmar tried its best to uphold the democratic values that are beginning to flourish in the motherland. Its youth were among its biggest force in ensuring that they will never fall back again from the misery it once had. They knew the threat is still present, but they did not hold themselves back.

Politics truly is a misery business. We do not know what will happen within midnight. A change could happen at any moment without one's notice. On 01 February 2021, Burmese woke up with news saying that their democratically-elected leaders were arrested by the military, apparently due to their violations of the country's election law. They knew their world is once again falling back. Just after the announcement was made in the country's state media, protests began on the streets across Myanmar. People from all walks of life defied the government even though they knew their lives are at stake. At first, it was just a peaceful demonstration, but later on, things started to turn bloody and violent. Day after day, a group of Burmese were reportedly died from the attacks made by the military. As things worsen, they seek their friends' help on social media, calling for an international response to the political crisis.

This crisis serves as a wake-up call for the ASEAN. Being the primary institution responsible for maintaining peace and security across the Southeast Asian region, it is reasonable to think that it must exert its effort to manage the conflict in Myanmar. For more than fifty years, ASEAN has already adopted numerous agreements, built new partnerships,

and established institutions vital to the region's development. It has to enhance its communication to both the state and non-state actors in the country and recognize the need for adopting a local conflict resolution model, as there are no two similar approaches in resolving a political crisis. Further, it must also seek help from relevant agencies such as the Network of ASEAN Defense and Security Institutions (NADI) to facilitate the decisions leaders will make should an ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) be conducted in response to the crisis. Once the crisis has been settled, stakeholders must ensure peace and stability in the country by promoting confidence-building measures, introducing preventive diplomacy within the region, and initiating a thorough elaboration of approaches in addressing any future conflict. Trust is one of the fundamental critical aspects in ensuring that the talks between the ASEAN and the Burmese military will be of success. The organization must consider this as if this is their battle for upholding the soul of the entire community. For decades, they have been practicing the "ASEAN Way" in resolving conflicts throughout the region, but as history told us, it has led us to a dead end. They must recognize these failures in the past and stand up for the rights of the people, as the people themselves make what ASEAN truly special. They may be resilient amidst the storm, but the ASEAN has a shared responsibility in ensuring that their rights are being met.

It took them five decades. It's never too late to save them once again in the near future.