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## **The Way Forwards: ASEAN Unity for Myanmar**

In the aftermath of the February coup, ASEAN has been one among a very few actors that Myanmar maintains a close communication with—putting leverage on ASEAN to play a central role in solving the human rights crisis. ASEAN has put forward the ‘five-point consensus,’ which called 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, the deliverables are still in question—the envoy that was high on ASEAN’s agenda has not been named, and the violence continues on, indicating a stark gap between what ASEAN committed to achieve and what it can deliver.

The situation can be attributed to the lack of consensus on the amount of pressure that ASEAN Member States want to exert on Myanmar. While Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have been the staunch advocates for human rights—vocally condemning the use of force against civilians and demanding the junta to end cruelties; Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos preferred to maintain ASEAN’s traditional institutional processes—requesting Member States to adhere to the principle of non-interference; respecting Myanmar’s *fait accompli* to restore stability and decide their future (The Strait Times, June 2021). This mirrors a split on the level of commitment between the third and their other counterparts.

Although non-interference is indeed important for ASEAN—given its strong historical roots (Emmers, 2018)—and that constructive dialogues was proven to be workable in past cases—say, the Cambodia conflict (Amer, 1999), Myanmar’s crisis is different. 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 a serious action in the name of human rights. *Second*, a rather sluggish and uncertain conflict management will stray the military authorities further away. Thus far, the junta has started to conduct their international affairs as per usual in an indifferent manner (Financial Times, 2021; Reuters, 2021)—a way of seeking international legitimacy and to cling to power. *Third*, the longer the process takes, the bigger the sense of normalcy that will emerge. The divergence between ASEAN Members States are now apparent, but it will stand out even

more the moment they decide that their national interests—the ones in which Myanmar play a part—should be put up front.

I argue that ASEAN must do two things. **First**, it should set a limit to what it chooses to return to national governments; and as all Member States had pledged to respect, promote, and protect human rights (ASEAN, 2013), this crisis should be understood as a collective interest. It is a conflict that not only jeopardizes regional peace and stability, but goes against ASEAN's very own cornerstone. It should also be made clear to all ASEAN Member States that ASEAN purpose is to "strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms" (ASEAN, 2008)—it must be reinternalized to ignite the already-dull spirit of ASEAN Member States in bringing about peaceful resolution.

**Second**, ASEAN must take a step beyond symbolic concerns on the prolonged crisis and define clearer goals with specified time-frame—not only for Myanmar but also the Association. When should a total cessation of violence be actualized? What are the alternatives if the junta shows noncompliance? If hard measures like sanctions, suspension of privilege and/or legitimacy, and intervention are seemingly too deviant from ASEAN's *modus vivendi*, ASEAN should opt into other ways to preserve control in the proceedings: dialogues should be continuous, monitoring should be tangible, the envoy should soon be appointed. Echoing Indonesia's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa, elevation of noncompliance to an ASEAN Summit—as referred in the Article 20 point 4 of the ASEAN Charter—can also function as a non-coercive political pressure ASEAN can resort to (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 Member States. All in all, ASEAN should not stay put.

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