

## **The Role of ASEAN in Resolving the Myanmar Crisis**

The current crisis in Myanmar directly challenges the universal values of human rights and social justice enshrined in the ASEAN Charter<sup>1</sup> (ASEAN, 2020). Since the February 1 coup, more than 850 people have been killed as of June 10 as security forces continue to crack down on anti-coup protestors (Aljazeera, 2021).

With the five-point consensus formulated at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting held on April 24 in Jakarta, ASEAN has finally laid out a foundation to resolve the crisis in Myanmar. There are many ways to resolve the current situation but key aspects concerning the cultural and political differences in Myanmar and the reality on the ground must be acknowledged for any peaceful resolution to succeed in the long run.

Firstly, ASEAN must defuse the tensions between all parties involved and secure their solid commitment towards the five-point consensus particularly on the immediate cessation of hostilities before the situation further deteriorates. Meanwhile, ASEAN should call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and a dozen of her top government officials and National League for Democracy party members who were arrested on February 1 to allow them to participate in the peace initiative, as protests are likely to continue if they remain imprisoned.

As the cessation of hostilities will most probably be fragile and temporary, ASEAN must seize the opportunity to facilitate constructive dialogues between the parties involved to openly discuss and resolve their differences as the first step towards a long-lasting resolution. The resolution must also include the creation of a permanent channel of dialogue between all parties where open discussions regarding issues of contention can be held at any time when required in the future. This mechanism will help prevent future outbreaks of violence.

In order to gain trust from all sides, ASEAN must present itself as an honest peace broker that does not take sides and the special envoy who is tasked with finding peace in Myanmar must uphold his neutrality at all times. Simultaneously, ASEAN should also facilitate the shipment of humanitarian aid to regions facing scarcity in basic supplies such as food, water and medicine. These shipments should also be strictly supervised by ASEAN to ensure that it

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The ASEAN Charter is a constituent instrument of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which was adopted in the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in November 2007. The charter was ratified by all of the 10 ASEAN member states including Myanmar in 2008.

reaches the people of Myanmar. Upon reaching a peaceful settlement and the restoration of the civilian government, ASEAN should establish a Myanmar-based delegation headed by the special envoy to oversee the peaceful transition back to civilian rule and to ensure that all parties comply to the negotiated settlement.

In this process, ASEAN must recognise that Myanmar has never been a truly unified nation as reflected by the endless armed conflicts between various ethnic armed organisations (EAOs)<sup>2</sup> and the Tatmadaw<sup>3</sup> since the independence of Burma<sup>4</sup> in January 1948. Throughout their decades-long struggle for self-determination, EAOs and their respective ethnic minorities living at the country's periphery have been resisting Burmanisation which are efforts by the ethnic Bamar-dominated government to forcefully assimilate them into the cultures of the majority Buddhist Bamars by erasing their ethnic minority cultures, languages, religions and territories (Gray, 2018). The resolution must also acknowledge and openly address the aspirations of Myanmar's different ethnic groups. Taking into account the escalating violence between the various EAOs and government forces following the collapse of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and the Myanmar Peace Process since the February 1 coup, there is now an urgent need for ASEAN to include all of the EAOs in upcoming negotiations to ensure Myanmar's future stability when civilian rule is restored.

Furthermore, ASEAN should also include the Tatmadaw in dialogues as any effort to immediately uproot them from politics is unrealistic due to their vast economic and political interests in Myanmar (Stokke et al., 2018). Any attempt to remove them from their privileged position enshrined in the 2008 Constitution<sup>5</sup> will only result in civil war which will further destabilise the country. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the Tatmadaw will forever hold sway in Myanmar's politics, they will eventually be willing to step back from politics through

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) are ethnic minority-based armed insurgent groups fighting against the Tatmadaw since the country gained independence from Britain in 1948. They have been calling for greater autonomy, self-determination and independence since the beginning of the insurgency. There are around 20 EAOs up to date.

<sup>3</sup> Tatmadaw is the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1948, they have been viewing themselves as the 'vital protector' and 'guardian' of the nation's independence and sovereignty.

<sup>4</sup> Burma was the official name of the country before it was being renamed by the military junta as Myanmar in 1989. Presently, the country is known officially as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

<sup>5</sup> The 2008 Constitution was drafted by the military junta in 2008 and guarantees the leading role of the armed forces in national politics by guaranteeing the special privileges of the armed forces including 25% of the parliamentary seats that are reserved for the army and control over the Defence, Border and Home Affairs ministry.

mutual trust and reconciliation with the civil society which can be fostered via dialogues with future civilian governments. Before this can be achieved, however, it is best to include them as a party in the state-building process.

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