



CSIS POLICY BRIEF

On November 9, 2021, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia held a Webinar on “**the Myanmar Crisis and the Future of ASEAN**”. This webinar brought together Cambodian and Indonesian diplomats to discuss ASEAN's options for Myanmar. The discussion offered a variety of insights for ASEAN's next moves in addressing the Myanmar crisis under Cambodia's new chairmanship. It also highlights how ASEAN leadership and member states' unity are critical to the ongoing struggle to address the Myanmar crisis.

Myanmar Crisis and the Future of ASEAN

CSIS Policy Brief

Department of International Relations, CSIS Indonesia.

After nine months since the military coup that precipitated the crisis in Myanmar, ASEAN has yet to make a tangible contribution to alleviating the humanitarian needs of the Myanmar people. The regional organisation has made strides by reaching a five-point consensus on the situation in Myanmar and successfully appointing an ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate communication with all parties involved. These initiatives, however, have not resulted in considerable improvement on the ground. Consequently, ASEAN's credibility and relevance in resolving its own regional issue are called into question.

Cambodia is anticipated to lead the region in restoring trust in the region in delivering concrete actions to Myanmar as the next ASEAN chairman. As Cambodia prepared to take ASEAN chairmanship in 2022, the country faced three challenges: advocating for the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, restoring ASEAN's credibility, and gaining support for ASEAN from a broad variety of stakeholders. Thus, the ASEAN Chairman holds a critical position in setting up the agenda and strategy for dealing with the Myanmar crisis. Cambodia could be capable of leading ASEAN due to the potentials gained from its past experiences and recent eagerness in making a concrete move toward easing the Myanmar crisis.

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Problem Identification

Myanmar is a critical test for ASEAN that the regional organisation needs to act cohesively, given the fact that the crisis is now considered as both a regional and international concern. The escalation of the political coup in Myanmar has harmed Southeast Asia's democratization process. Along with the crisis, ASEAN's credibility began to be questioned in solving the crisis in their own region. The scepticism remains that the region could not go beyond making lengthy dialogue and consensus.

Despite this "bumpy" situation, an ASEAN-led mechanism is imperative to maintain Southeast Asia's people-centred peaceful processes. Although ASEAN has been criticized for being too slow, developing a dialogue is still a process that the region must go through in order for Myanmar to progressively open up. ASEAN's role in finding a solution and supporting its community, notably the people of Myanmar, is still being anticipated by its discussion partners. It is a constant struggle for ASEAN to remain engaged and central as the leading actor in assessing Myanmar's political turbulences' reconciliation process.¹

Engagement and dialogue are critical for ASEAN to deal with the Myanmar crisis. Unfortunately, when it comes to delivering assistance for the Myanmar people, the Five-Point Consensus has not been much help since it has not scrutinized the modalities on how to do so. The AHA Centre, despite having the resources, does not have the mandate and authority to operate in an internal conflict setting. ASEAN expects that the Myanmar military regime would cooperate with the region rather than alienate its people. It would, however, be futile if the region relied solely on the Junta's willingness to open the door to dialogue.

Cambodian Chairmanship

The Brunei chairmanship period in 2021 served as the foundation for ASEAN to take substantive steps to address the Myanmar crisis. Despite the fact that the pandemic has impeded ASEAN's diplomatic efforts conduct, under its chairmanship, Brunei managed to eventually hold the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on Myanmar in April 2021, mainly pushed by Indonesia, as well as established the Five-Point Consensus, and appointed an ASEAN special envoy. However, the recent refusal of Myanmar's Army Chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing to connect ASEAN's special envoy to meet with all parties, including the ousted civilian leader's Aung San Suu Kyi has complicated ASEAN's current effort. Eventually, ASEAN "expelled" Myanmar from this year's ASEAN Summit, citing the country's unwillingness to cooperate in regional democratic processes.

The summit's portrayal of ASEAN seemingly "abandoning" Myanmar has emerged as a major concern for Cambodia's government. The country considers that Myanmar is the one who has abandoned the rights and responsibilities that were committed upon by the ASEAN chair. With the present situation, constructive engagement with Myanmar is critical for Cambodia's perspective on the crisis. Consequently, trust and confidence-building between ASEAN and Myanmar have been identified as one of the key priorities for the next chairmanship period.

From the webinar, the Minister Delegate Attached to the Prime Minister on ASEAN and Foreign Affairs, H.E. Kao Kim Hourn, mentioned among others the top three priorities for Cambodia's Chairmanship. First, Cambodia will strive to enhance regional unity and solidarity in light of COVID-19, as well as to save people's lives and achieve economic recovery. Second, the country is concentrating on reuniting ASEAN post-COVID-19, particularly in terms of delivering humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. Third, given that the Declaration of Conduct for the South China Sea will be 20 years old next year, Cambodia emphasizes the necessity of assessing progress with China and finalizing the drafting of the Code of Conduct in order to implement solutions in a timely manner. With such focus on pandemic recovery and issues related to major power tensions, the question remains as to what extent facilitating the cessation of violence and dialogue process in addition to delivering humanitarian assistance into Myanmar will become the priority agenda as well.

Cambodia is actually known for its experience fostering national reconciliation built on trust as the country experienced an internal political crisis before. This raises the expectation that the country's experience may be shared and used to promote discussion among all parties to resolve all disagreements through dialogue. Despite the stagnant ASEAN negotiation process, the region still must strengthen sincere dialogue engagement, not merely to show commitment but also to find concrete implementation cohesively towards Myanmar. Nonetheless, these initiatives cannot be accomplished just by Cambodia, as they require the participation of all ASEAN member states.

Prospect for ASEAN's role in Myanmar

To make progress on the ground, the regional organisation must persuade all stakeholders to support the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. Given the increasing stakes of the issue, it is incumbent, not only ASEAN but also other dialogue partners, to assess the best approach to mitigating the crisis in Myanmar. ASEAN member countries must reach out to and interact with multi-level actors to deliver ideas and put the consensus into action. This is to align Myanmar's domestic needs with ASEAN charter principles in order to work on peaceful reconciliation.

All ASEAN principles and norms, especially the promotion of democracy and human rights, good governance, and the rule of law, not only non-interference and respect toward state sovereignty, need to be upheld. While consensus remains to be one rule of the game for ASEAN, it is not the only one to be pursued to keep cohesiveness of ASEAN, particularly to achieve its vision of making ASEAN a people-oriented organisation that promote and protect human rights. The role of ASEAN also needs to remain central towards the future of its capacity building. Through this, ASEAN needs the support of all members to be able to move forward with solutions to the crisis. This also means for all members to pursue individual and bilateral efforts to keep open dialogue and engagement with Myanmar and other stakeholders.

Cambodia's chairmanship role would be constructive in engaging with all stakeholders, not only with the Junta, to ensure that Myanmar returns to become a 'normal' ASEAN member state. Along with the special envoy, Cambodia as a chair can focus on establishing an entry point on the ground and engaging with local actors. It is important for the Chair, the Special Envoy, and all the ASEAN members to listen to all different views and ideas from the stakeholders and local actors in Myanmar, especially to socialize the implementation of the Five-Point consensus.

For Indonesia, H.E. Ade Padmo Sarmono noted that the country hopes to see progress in implementing the Five-Point Consensus during this chairmanship period. The Cambodian chairmanship might play a critical role in facilitating discussions among all parties and resolving all concerns. This is a process that Indonesia must address as the next Chair after Cambodia, especially to align the need for reconciliation accordingly to the ASEAN charter and principles. He further stresses that in the future, ASEAN needs to review the charter to work out similar situations that might arise in the future.

Under Cambodia's leadership, ASEAN will focus on ACT (Addressing Challenges Together) as regional collective diplomacy and strategy. Along with the appointed and legitimated ASEAN special envoy, member states will have to bear responsibility for re-establishing regional trust and overcoming existing barriers to the Myanmar situation. The willingness of dialogue partners to engage and assist ASEAN in uniting will also be critical to peaceful reconciliation. ASEAN will be more effective, practical, and resilient in maintaining its centrality if institutionalization is strengthened.

The Way Forward

The development of ASEAN diplomacy in Myanmar has undermined the organisation's credibility and image as a peacemaker. When dealing with the Myanmar problem, the principle of non-interference has periodically been re-calibrated, as it is a critical component that keeps ASEAN together. Engagement as with a family member where pressures and criticisms should be given in addition to support is an effective way toward building trust and confidence between ASEAN and Myanmar.

Myanmar's absence from this year's summit should not be seen as the end of its membership in ASEAN. Myanmar is still a member of the ASEAN family, and it is still hard to see the country out of the crisis without engaging with ASEAN. However, ASEAN's role can become obsolete if it keeps being divided and compromising with the actor that seeks to derogate the organisation's credibility itself.

A stronger and decisive ASEAN is required to rebuke while supporting a member to keep this family thriving.

written by Naifa Rizani Lardo

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For further questions related to this policy brief or the program, please contact Dr Lina Alexandra, the Coordinator for Myanmar Initiative Program at lina.alexandra@csis.or.id



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LEADING IN STRATEGIC THINKING

**Centre for Strategic and
International Studies
(CSIS Indonesia)**

Jl Tanah Abang III No 23-27
Gambir, Jakarta Pusat
10160 Indonesia



CSIS Indonesia
@csisindonesia
csis@csis.or.id
csis.or.id