



Expecting a New ASEAN Milestone: Assessing the Progress and Solutions of the Myanmar Crisis Under Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship

By

Luthfy Ramiz and Marina Ika Sari

Researcher at The Habibie Center

luthfy@habibiecenter.or.id, marina@habibiecenter.or.id

Background

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw) overthrew the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military's takeover came months after the NLD's landslide victory during the November 2020 election, winning 396 of the 476 parliamentary seats.¹ The Tatmadaw opposed the election results on suspicion of election fraud and demanded a re-vote. State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other NLD leaders were arrested and placed under house arrest and General Min Aung Hlaing took control of the country's leadership roles.² Myanmar's state of emergency was enforced for one year, then extended until August 2023. The Tatmadaw stated that it would hold a free and fair re-election once the state of emergency was over.³

The coup sparked a wave of massive protests from various sections of the Burmese community, rejecting the coup and demanding the restoration of democracy. To quell these demonstrations, the Tatmadaw implemented a curfew, cut off internet access to limit information sharing, restricted crowds, deployed armored vehicles, and used violence, such as rubber bullets, tear gas, and live ammunition to disperse crowds.⁴

Domestic political issues have developed into a humanitarian crisis a year after the coup. Protests over the coup have resulted in approximately 1,500 people deaths and 11,838 opponents being arrested by the Tatmadaw, 405,700 people have been displaced since February 2021 to January 2022, and a total of 6.2 million people are expected to need emergency humanitarian assistance this year.⁵ The humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by the difficulty of accessing and distributing humanitarian



aid, as the Tatmadaw blocked the distribution of humanitarian aid and imposed a number of restrictions that had an indirect impact on aid distribution.⁶

The reaction of the international community to the issue of the coup in Myanmar has varied. The United Nations and a number of countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, and the European Union, have condemned the coup and imposed economic sanctions to the Tatmadaw, as it is considered to have damaged democracy, the rule of law, and violated human rights.⁷ On the other hand, China and Russia urged the United States to stop unilateral intimidation, not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and to abandon confrontation in the region.⁸ At the regional level, ASEAN's voice is divided as each ASEAN member country has different views in responding to the Myanmar coup. Several ASEAN member countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, considered the coup and crisis in Myanmar as an issue of internal affairs and therefore believe that ASEAN should not intervene. Meanwhile, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia expressed deep concern over the political upheaval in Myanmar and called on relevant parties to exercise restraint and resolve disputes through peaceful dialogue.⁹

Analysis: Prospects of Cambodia's Approach as ASEAN Chair 2022 in the Myanmar Crisis

As ASEAN Chair in 2022, increasing ASEAN's role in resolving the Myanmar crisis has undoubtedly become one of Cambodia's priority tasks. The Cambodian chairmanship is aiming to improve the situation in Myanmar, based on the guiding principles of the Five-Point Consensus and the ASEAN Charter.¹⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Cambodia in December 2021 emphasized that the Cambodian leadership will highlight ASEAN's centrality in building an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and creating trust among various parties to reduce violence and deliver humanitarian assistance.¹¹

So far, Cambodia's approach to the Myanmar crisis can be seen in Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar on January 7, 2022. This State Visit is the first instance that a head of government visited Myanmar since the military coup. During his visit, Prime Minister Hun Sen, together with the ASEAN Special Envoy for Myanmar, Prak Sokhonn, met with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and Tatmadaw officials in the State Administration Council (SAC).

Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar for two days sparked various responses within ASEAN body and triggered the postponement of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' retreat meeting that was eventually





The Habibie Center

THC INSIGHTS

No. 33 / 25 March 2022
www.habibiecenter.or.id

held on February 17, 2022 instead of the intended dates of January 18 – 19, 2022.¹² Cambodia initially intended to invite the leader of the Tatmadaw to the ASEAN meeting on the condition that progress would be made during the meeting on the Five-Point Consensus, which indicate their desire to involve the Tatmadaw in the ASEAN forum and not isolating it. However, Cambodia, under pressure from several ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, did not give in to the Five-Point Consensus supported by the United Nations and the United States.¹³ Under this pressure, Cambodia decided to invite only non-political representatives from Myanmar to the meeting instead of the leader of Tatmadaw. Myanmar responded by not participating or sending non-political representatives.

Although Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar has "split" ASEAN votes, it can provide an opportunity for dialogue with the Tatmadaw. These dialogues include the decision to extend the ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups until the end of 2022, holding a consultative meeting between the ASEAN Special Envoy for Myanmar, the ASEAN Secretary-General, representatives of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, Myanmar National Task Force, Myanmar Red Cross, and special agencies of the United Nations to coordinate humanitarian aid, as well as discussing the peace process that occurred in Cambodia during the past decades. Also, during the visit, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated that the Tatmadaw guaranteed the visit of the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar to meet with relevant parties considering the situation in Myanmar.

The steps taken by Cambodia in response to the Myanmar crisis so far have "thawed" relations between ASEAN and Myanmar which have been frozen since the military coup. The thawing of this relationship has the potential to build elements that were actually "lost" in the process of implementing the Five-Point Consensus in the past year – a situation conducive to dialogue and trust-building.

During his visit to Myanmar, Prime Minister Hun Sen sought to build the trust of the Tatmadaw as the de facto government of Myanmar to discuss matters implicitly related to the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, including access to humanitarian assistance and approval for ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar to meet with NLD party members. With the ASEAN Special Envoy's visit to Myanmar on March 20 – 23, 2022,¹⁴ it is possible that later, Cambodia can involve other parties in the dialogue in accordance with the Five-Point Consensus.

In addition to Prime Minister Hun Sen's state visit to Myanmar, the Cambodian approach to the settlement of the Myanmar crisis was also marked by a discourse on the formation of a tripartite relationship between Cambodia, Brunei Darussalam, and Indonesia. Through his statement, Prime Minister Hun Sen stressed





that the tripartite formation was related to the extension of the ceasefire in Myanmar until the end of 2022.¹⁵ Mediation using the tripartite method itself was one of the practices previously implemented by ASEAN in the Cambodia peace process in 1997.

The process of handling the crisis in Cambodia using the tripartite was based on the principle of non-intervention, according to the mandate in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). The tripartite, which comprises Philippine Foreign Minister, Domingo Siazon, Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, and Thai Foreign Minister, Prachuab Chaiyasarn, was tasked with developing a mediation mechanism and facilitating the peace process in Cambodia. Not only through the role of ASEAN tripartite, Cambodia peace process was also supported by the ASEAN dialogue partners, brought together into the *ad hoc* group of *Friends of Cambodia*, which consists of Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States. The group supported the role of tripartite and encouraged solutions to Cambodia crisis, including the termination of violence, security guarantee, the implementation of a fair election, and guarantees to protect the right of all parties to participate in elections.¹⁶ The peace process in Cambodia through the tripartite mediation method could become a reference and Cambodia, as ASEAN Chair, could develop the method in handling the Myanmar crisis.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the steps taken and the potential actions of Cambodia as ASEAN Chairperson, as well as the attitudes of other ASEAN member countries, Cambodia's success in dealing with the Myanmar crisis still needs to be continuously observed considering the changing regional dynamics. Cambodian's role to deal with the region's internal issues can be assessed after their tenure is completed at the end of 2022. If the Myanmar crisis cannot be resolved this year, this task will be a major issue for Indonesia in their upcoming role as ASEAN Chair in 2023. Therefore, unity and commitment amongst all ASEAN member countries is required to settle the Myanmar crisis.

The authors present four recommendations that can be taken into consideration for policymakers in ASEAN in dealing with the Myanmar crisis, which include:

1. ASEAN needs to examine the implementation of non-intervention principles more flexibly in the Myanmar crisis, by also considering the implementation of other principles that are listed in the ASEAN Charter, including the principle of good governance and respect for democracy and human rights.





The Habibie Center

THC INSIGHTS

No. 33 / 25 March 2022
www.habibiecenter.or.id

2. Cambodia needs to help facilitating ASEAN's Special Envoys for Myanmar to build dialogue and trust in their efforts to establish communication with stakeholders in Myanmar. ASEAN's Special Envoys for Myanmar need to continue to establish communication with stakeholders in Myanmar including the Tatmadaw, NLD, and civil society organizations, to acquire holistic information and views from both parties, directly. Additionally, ASEAN member countries needs to find agreement on a road map to resolve the crisis and create deadlines for the Tatmadaw to fully implement the Five-Point Consensus.
3. Cambodia needs to encourage the formation of a tripartite as part of the process to mediate the Myanmar crisis at the ASEAN level, based on past practices from the peace process in Cambodia. In addition, Cambodia needs to mobilize the support and commitment of ASEAN dialogue partners to support the mediation process.
4. Indonesia needs to play a more active role in supporting the steps and approaches of Cambodia in mediating the Myanmar crisis at the ASEAN level. Should the Myanmar crisis cannot be completed this year, Indonesia should continue and improve the efforts made by Cambodia in 2022, during its time as ASEAN Chair in 2023.





Endnotes

- 1 Kinasih, S. (2022). *Sejarah Membuktikan Militer Myanmar Memang Gatal Kudeta*. tirtoid. Retrieved 28 February 2022, from <https://tirtoid/sejarah-membuktikan-militer-myanmar-memang-gatal-kudeta-f91X>.
- 2 Kompas.com. (2022). *Awal Mula Kerusuhan Myanmar: Dipicu Kudeta, Militer Berkuasa*. Kompas.com. Retrieved 28 February 2022, from <https://www.kompas.com/global/read/2021/09/17/162024770/awal-mula-kerusuhan-myanmar-dipicu-kudeta-militer-berkuasa?page=all>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 BBC News Indonesia. (2022). *Anak-anak muda di jantung protes Myanmar: 'Kami tak mau kembali ke masa gelap di bawah diktator'*. BBC News Indonesia. Retrieved 28 February 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-56292578>.
- 5 Reuters. (2022). *Factbox: Myanmar's Post-coup Crisis in Numbers*. Reuters. Retrieved 28 February 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-post-coup-crisis-numbers-2022-01-31/>.
- 6 Sullivan, D. P. (2021). *Dire Consequences: Addressing the Humanitarian Fallout from Myanmar's Coup* (p. 8). Refugees International. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/61704056d5c2b338bb5d6744/1634746454791/Dire+Consequences-+Addressing+the+Humanitarian+Fallout+from+Myanmar%E2%80%99s+Coup.pdf>
- 7 Deutsche Welle. (2022). *Uni Eropa dan Inggris Jatuhkan Sanksi Baru untuk Pejabat Militer Myanmar*. DW. Retrieved 2 March 2022, from <https://www.dw.com/id/ue-inggris-jatuhkan-sanksi-baru-untuk-pejabat-junta-myanmar/a-57987340>.
- 8 Republika Online. (2022). *China dan Rusia Dukung Myanmar Cari Solusi Politik*. Republika Online. Retrieved 2 March 2022, from <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/qqgmnp382/china-dan-rusia-dukung-myanmar-cari-solusi-politik>.
- 9 Kapur, R. (2022). *ASEAN and Myanmar: No Sign of Progress*. Lowy Institute. Retrieved 2 March 2022, from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/asean-and-myanmar-no-sign-progress>.
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia. (2022). *Press Release: Briefing on Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2021-12-31-Press-Release-Briefing-on-Cambodia-s-ASEAN-Chairmanship-in-2022-on-29-December-2021--10-53-43>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Republika Online. (2022). *ASEAN Retreat Dimulai, Myanmar Masih Jadi Isu Utama*. Republika Online. Retrieved 12 March 2022, from <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/r7fuc9370/asean-retreat-dimulai-myanmar-masih-jadi-isu-utama>.
- 13 The Jakarta Post. (2022). *Hun Sen Urges Myanmar Junta Chief to Allow Aid, Envoy Visit*. The Jakarta Post. Retrieved 15 March 2022, from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/01/26/hun-sen-urges-myanmar-junta-chief-to-allow-aid-envoy-visit.html>.
- 14 Republic of the Union of Myanmar National Unity Government. (2022). *Press Release on the Visit of Special Envoy of the ASEAN Myanmar*. Republic of the Union of Myanmar National Unity Government. Retrieved 24 March 2022, from <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2022/03/22/press-release-on-the-visit-of-special-envoy-of-the-asean-chair-to-myanmar/>.
- 15 Sochan, R. (2022). *PM Eyes Myanmar Peace Troika*. Phnompenhpost.com. Retrieved 10 March 2022, from <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/pm-eyes-myanmar-peace-troika>.
- 16 Merican, D. (2007). *Cambodia's Engagement with ASEAN: Lessons for Timor Leste*. *CICP Working Paper*, (14), 12-14. Retrieved 10 March 2022, from <https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CICP-working-paper-14-Cambodias-Engagement-in-ASEAN-by-Din-Merican.pdf>.





THC INSIGHTS

THC Insights are timely and policy-relevant analysis of current political, economic and socio-cultural issues affecting Indonesia and the region. The expert observations and recommendations are produced by contributors at The Habibie Center. Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Habibie Center.

The **Habibie Center** was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-government, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values. The mission of The Habibie Center are first, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and second, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

Contact:

The Habibie Center

Jl. Kemang Selatan No. 98, Jakarta 12560

Tel: +62 21 781 7211 | Fax: +62 21 781 7212

Email: thc@habibiecenter.or.id

Website: www.habibiecenter.or.id