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## ***What the Myanmar Crisis says about ASEAN's Challenges and Strengths***

*Henrick Tsjeng*



Recent public demonstrations against the military coup. Photo by Saw Wunna on Unsplash.

### **SYNOPSIS**

*One year since the military coup in Myanmar, there has been little progress towards resolving the crisis. As the ASEAN Chairmanship passes from Brunei Darussalam to Cambodia, it is worthwhile to see how ASEAN has handled the Myanmar crisis to date, and what this means for the bloc. The Myanmar crisis, along with the divergent views*

*and responses within ASEAN, has starkly illustrated ASEAN's challenges, but also highlighted its strengths.*

## **COMMENTARY**

One year since the military coup in Myanmar, there has been little progress towards resolving the crisis. As the ASEAN Chairmanship passes from Brunei Darussalam to Cambodia, it is worthwhile to examine how ASEAN has handled the Myanmar crisis to date, and what this means for the bloc.

ASEAN had, under Brunei's Chairmanship, drafted and agreed to a [Five-Point Consensus](#) during the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting convened in April 2021. However, due to the lack of significant progress by Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw, in fulfilling the Five-Point Consensus, ASEAN took the bold step of [not inviting](#) Myanmar's military chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, to the ASEAN Summit and East Asia Summit held in late 2021. This was an unprecedented move by ASEAN, which has traditionally strictly adhered to its principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of its member states.

### **Cambodia's Approach: Not Everyone's on Board**

Cambodia, as the current ASEAN Chair, appears to be taking a different tack. Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen [visited Myanmar](#) in early January, where he met Min Aung Hlaing. However, some ASEAN members disagreed with this course of action. Malaysia's foreign minister [criticised](#) Hun Sen's visit as unilateral since Cambodia did not consult with any other ASEAN member state before the visit. Both Singapore's Prime Minister [Lee Hsien Loong](#) and Indonesia's President [Joko Widodo](#) reiterated the importance of implementing the Five-Point Consensus, and that, unless there is progress in implementation, ASEAN should continue inviting only a non-political representative from Myanmar to ASEAN meetings — essentially maintaining the snub towards Min Aung Hlaing.

Regardless of the reactions by these ASEAN members, it appears that more direct interaction between Cambodia and the Tatmadaw are on the cards. However, it remains to be seen how much Phnom Penh can drive ASEAN policy towards Myanmar in 2022. What is clear is that the Myanmar crisis, along with the divergent views and responses within ASEAN, has starkly illustrated ASEAN's challenges, but also highlighted its strengths.

### **ASEAN's Challenges**

The difference in ASEAN's approaches between Brunei's Chairmanship and Hun Sen's current course exposes certain structural issues that ASEAN needs to address. First, the annual rotation of the ASEAN Chair means the position will inevitably (?) reflect the national interests or perspectives, and even drive the ASEAN agenda for that year, of the particular country. In the [2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#) (AMM), Cambodia objected to the language used to refer to the South China Sea, and leveraged on its Chairmanship to block the issuance of a joint communique on the issue, then an unprecedented move. Intra-ASEAN differences also became apparent over the Rohingya issue; in 2015, Malaysia used its Chairmanship to include this issue

in the agenda of the Emergency ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (EAMMTC) Concerning the Irregular Movement of Persons in the Southeast Asia Region, even if the issue had to be couched in terms acceptable to Naypyidaw.

The aforementioned apparent change in approaches to Myanmar brings this issue to the fore. Cambodia's current efforts will also not be the be-all and end-all of ASEAN's policy towards Myanmar, as ASEAN's trajectory under Phnom Penh's Chairmanship may once again change when Indonesia — seen as having divergent views from Cambodia on the Myanmar crisis — assumes the ASEAN Chair from Cambodia in 2023. This may result in disjointed policies with each change in the ASEAN Chair, not only on Myanmar, but on ASEAN's broader agenda, possibly undoing the efforts made by previous ASEAN Chairs.

Second, internal division leading to a deadlock is a major risk as ASEAN operates based on consensus. Observers have [noted](#) a divide within ASEAN on the Myanmar issue — one side representing those in favour of more robust action to hold Naypyidaw more accountable, and another side preferring a softer mode of engagement. This not only brings the risk of a stalemate over how to engage Myanmar, but also the likelihood that Cambodia's own unilateral actions, in breaking with the current overall ASEAN approach, may sideline ASEAN from the process of engaging with Myanmar, rendering ASEAN and its efforts like the Five-Point Consensus irrelevant.

### **ASEAN's Strengths**

Yet, it is unfair to dismiss ASEAN based on these challenges alone. First, ASEAN, given its long history of institutional development and peacebuilding, has demonstrated the ability to navigate disagreements among member states and reach a middle ground.

For example, the South China Sea issue is often highlighted as a major factor that has sharpened divisions across ASEAN, and the 2012 AMM is regularly cited as a prime example. Even so, in the wake of the failure, the then Indonesian foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, conducted "shuttle diplomacy" to develop a statement outlining [six principles](#) on the South China Sea. Since then, the AMM has not only issued joint communiques every year, but has in fact consistently acknowledged the concerns by some ASEAN foreign ministers over land reclamations in the South China Sea, even if China is not named.

Where Myanmar is concerned, ASEAN under Brunei's Chairmanship had created the Five-Point Consensus and furthermore disinvited Min Aung Hlaing from the Summits, demonstrating the skill of the Brunei Chair. Nonetheless, if a future ASEAN Chair proves to be less adept, the previous challenges mentioned above will have a greater bearing on ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar crisis.

Second, even with ASEAN seemingly adopting a new approach towards members who flout ASEAN's principles and norms as the Myanmar junta has done, it should be remembered that the bloc remains an organisation that has always kept a door open to any recalcitrant member. ASEAN has not fully barred the Tatmadaw on all engagement platforms, providing possible channels of engagement for the Tatmadaw even as it is blocked from the main ASEAN summits.

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) — ASEAN's platform for engagement among its defence chiefs — and the ADMM-Plus — which further includes the defence chiefs of eight of ASEAN's dialogue partners — are the best examples of this, as the Tatmadaw continues to participate in the platforms' activities. Notably, all regional defence ministers and officials, including western ones, continue to attend the ADMM-Plus activities, knowing well that they would be sitting at the same meeting as the Tatmadaw representative. A recent case was the 12th ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group [meeting on counter-terrorism](#), jointly organised by Myanmar and Russia.

While some may consider this inconsistent with the snubbing of Min Aung Hlaing or yet another example of ASEAN coddling the Tatmadaw, this is preferable to completely shutting out the Tatmadaw, as the latter action would lower the costs for Naypyidaw to simply go its own way, possibly leaving ASEAN altogether and setting an unsavoury precedent of ASEAN members choosing to leave as and when they like.

### **Conclusion: Much Depends on the Chair**

The Myanmar crisis has thrown light on ASEAN's challenges. However, all is not lost. Although ASEAN is routinely criticised for being unresponsive to the shifting geopolitical currents in the region, the bloc does have strengths that are underpinned by its numerous decades of institutional development and peacebuilding. With ASEAN's position on the principles of non-interference appearing to shift, the bloc's strengths and challenges will influence its trajectory; whether these strengths or challenges have more impact will depend on the political dexterity of any sitting ASEAN Chair. How Cambodia this year, and Indonesia the next, handles the Myanmar crisis will have major impacts on the credibility and relevance of ASEAN in the near to middle term.

*Henrick TSJENG is an Associate Research Fellow with the Regional Security Architecture Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), RSIS.*