



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 28, 2022

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



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The Dilemma of Upholding ASEAN's Principle of Non-Interference in the Case of Myanmar Political Crisis

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Abstract. The political crisis that has happened in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup has not ended and has even caused social unrest and casualties. ASEAN is faced with a difficult dilemma, particularly on the implementation of the principle of non-interference. It was noted that ASEAN decided not to invite Myanmar representatives, but only non-political representatives, to the ASEAN Summit. The decision is quite surprising given that ASEAN has always prioritized the principle of non-interference in the member countries' domestic problems and makes ASEAN was seen as having reneged on its principles that have been upheld since its formation. The paper argues that the principle of non-interference is not abandoned, but ASEAN rather puts forward other principles to help resolve the problems of one of its family members. This paper also examines how ASEAN copes with the political crisis in Myanmar, including whether the decision not to include Myanmar from the ASEAN Summit is effective. ASEAN needs to urge Myanmar to immediately implement the Five-Points Consensus that has been mutually agreed upon, and Cambodia has the opportunity to show the world that its chairmanship for 2022 will provide a legacy in resolving the Myanmar political crisis.

Keywords. ASEAN Chairman's Statement, Five-Point Consensus, Myanmar Political Crises, Non-Interference

1. Background

The political crisis that has happened in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup has not ended and has even caused social unrest and casualties. Data from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoner Burma as of January 20, 2022, shows that as many as 1483 people have been killed and 11,583 arrested and detained (AAPP January 2022). This condition is a concern of the international community and ASEAN as a regional organization in which Myanmar is a member. To address the development of the situation in Myanmar, ASEAN decided not to invite Myanmar representatives, but only non-political representatives, to the ASEAN Summit that took place virtually on 26-28 October 2021 in Brunei Darussalam.

The decision was taken after the ASEAN Foreign Ministers held a special virtual meeting on October 15, 2021, to discuss the peace process related to the political settlement after the military coup. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers also noted that there was no progress in implementing the Five-Point Agreement, which the Myanmar Military Leaders have approved to resolve the political crisis. The decision not to invite the Myanmar leader to the ASEAN

Summit is a decision that is quite surprising considering that so far, ASEAN has always prioritized the principle of non-interference in the domestic problems of each member. The decision makes ASEAN was seen as having reneged on its principles that have been upheld since its formation. The question is whether ASEAN is abandoning the principle of non-interference in member countries' internal affairs? Or whether it is no longer relevant to the current situation. The paper argues that the principle of non-interference is not abandoned but rather puts forward other principles to help resolve the problems of one of its family members. This paper also examines how ASEAN copes with the political crisis in Myanmar, including whether the decision not to include Myanmar from the ASEAN Summit is effective.

2. ASEAN's principle of non-interference

Association of South East Asian Nations, known as ASEAN, is a regional organization in the Southeast Asian region that has existed since its formation and has become one of the important entities in the study of International Relations. ASEAN was initially founded by Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines on August 8, 1967, to promote economic growth, social progress, and cultural development. Since its establishment, ASEAN has expanded to include other Southeast Asian countries to join, namely Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). The formation of ASEAN started from creating a peaceful, safe, stable, and prosperous Southeast Asia region.

More than a decade earlier, the formation of ASEAN, the world constellation, was marked by the Cold War due to the end of the second world war. During the cold war, the United States of America and the Soviet Union were considered major powers that continue to influence other relatively small countries in various regions, including Southeast Asia. The two major powers were also known as the Western and the Eastern Bloc, and they were known to compete against each other to spread their ideology and attain their geopolitical interests around the world. Maizland and Albert stated that formed in 1967, ASEAN sought to create a common front against the spread of communism and promote political, economic, and social stability amid rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific (Maizland and Albert, 2020).

When the two major powers continue racing to achieve ideological and geopolitical interests, Asian countries are trying to break away from their competition to sphere their influence. These countries' position can be reflected from the growing idea of holding a series of meetings conducted by Asian countries which led to the convening of the Asian-African Conference, which took place in Bandung on 18 - 24 April 1955 and was attended by 29 developing countries. The Asia Africa Conference showed that Asian countries were part of internal regional forces that had their independence to determine their future development without being bound to the two major powers. Other than that, it also shows that the two major powers shall abide by the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members as stipulated within Article 2 of the United Nations Charter. The Asian countries' vision of advancing sovereign equality is reflected in the ten-point declaration of the outcome of the Bandung Conference, which is to "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations." Acharya emphasized that one of the legacies of the Bandung Conference was the rise of Southeast Asian regionalism, excluding India and China. "...the real winner at Bandung was neither China nor India, but the future of ASEAN. Bandung paved the way for a regionalism of smaller nations to emerge in Asia...this was realised with the establishment of ASEAN in 1967" (Acharya 2016, 349). Leaders of non-Communist Asia share many of the same hopes. "They believe that by removing the remaining bonds of colonialism, by raising the standards of living of the masses, by greater experience in self-government, and by self-help and mutual

help, they will be able to stand on their own feet, resist the tides of communism and divert the demands for social change into the constructive channel. They also believe that Asia has much to offer to the Western world and to humanity" (Palmer, Perkins 2010, 464). "Accordingly, ASEAN can be understood as a regional cluster of "internationalist" coalitions that cooperate with one another to advance their grand strategy, encompassing domestic, regional, and international objectives" (Solingen 1999, 31).

The birth of ASEAN essentially responded to its environment's internal and external challenges. These challenges turn out to be a collective strength to deal with regional and extra-regional forces that would jeopardize the existence of countries in the region. Moreover, these challenges generated shared views among Southeast Asian leaders of achieving common interests based on the need for further strengthening existing ties of regional solidarity and cooperation. The landscape was characterized by several territorial disputes among countries within the region, such as the dispute of Sabah between the Philippines and Malaysia (1962), the dispute of Batu Putih Island between Malaysia and Singapore (1976), the border disputes between Malaysia and Thailand, and the case of Sipadan and Ligitan between Indonesia and Malaysia. In the case of Spratly Island, the dispute is among Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, China, and Taiwan. Outside the region, the major powers, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, kept maintaining their existence in the region both before and during the Cold War. The USA and the Soviet Union rivalry was also part of the region's characteristic and global politics. Therefore, ASEAN is frequently considered the most successful regional organization in terms of promoting regional peace and stability.

The principle of non-interference was considered one of the underlying successes of ASEAN, which has been stated in the Bangkok Declaration from the beginning of its formation as a manifestation of rejection of the intervention of major powers in the region. Preambular paragraph of the Bangkok Declaration stated that:

"CONSIDERING that the countries of South-East Asia share a primary responsibility for strengthening the economic and social stability of the region and ensuring their peaceful and progressive national development, and that they are determined to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples."

The phrase "security from external interference" is the central vision to create a peaceful and safe area to realize regional prosperity by fostering good relations between countries in the region's major powers and including building regional identity without leaving the ASEAN member country's socio-cultural background. Therefore, the Bangkok Declaration underlined the aims and purposes of the Association as follows:

1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations;
2. To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.
3. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative fields;

4. To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical, and administrative spheres;
5. To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilization of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communication facilities, and the raising of the living standards of their peoples;
6. To promote Southeast Asian studies;
7. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.

The founding father of ASEAN cannot separate the regional identity factor from the vision of building ASEAN considering the historical and cultural differences of ASEAN countries, apart from the common fate once colonized by Europeans, since it can strengthen the organization that just formed at that time. Almost all countries in Southeast Asia have been colonized by Europeans, except Thailand. Indonesia became a Dutch colony, Malaysia became a British colony, Singapore became a British colony, the Philippines became a Spanish colony, Brunei Darussalam, a British colony, France and the United States colonized Vietnam, France colonized Cambodia, Britain colonized Myanmar, France colonized Laos. They were underlying the formation of ASEAN on a sense of solidarity and the same feeling because Europeans colonized it. By the signing of the Bangkok Declaration, the unity of the Southeast Asia nations was born under the name of ASEAN.

ASEAN sees the importance of drafting a constitution to strengthen the organization facing various challenges in its journey. The initial discussion process was at the 9th Summit in Bali in 2003, forming the ASEAN community and developing *the ASEAN Charter*. It was then decided at the 11th Summit in Kuala Lumpur to develop the Charter. The following process is then discussed by creating *the Eminent Person Group (EPG)*, *the High-Level Task Force (HLTF) on the Drafting of the ASEAN Charter*. Until the 13th Summit in Singapore on November 20, 2007, *the ASEAN Charter* was officially ratified by the ASEAN Leaders.

In *the ASEAN Charter*, the principle of non-interference is reaffirmed in the preambular paragraph, which reads, "RESPECTING the fundamental importance of amity and cooperation, and principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, **non-interference**, consensus, and unity in diversity." Furthermore, Article 2 of the Charter states that "ASEAN and its members shall act in accordance with the following Principles....**non-interference** in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States." The ASEAN Charter was officially effective on December 15, 2008 after all ASEAN countries had ratified the document. The ASEAN Charter is the primary basis for realizing regional progress and stability. Supported by the principle of non-interference, the ASEAN Charter has also become the basis for maintaining harmony and as a guideline for steering internal affairs of regional countries.

3. Political crisis in Myanmar

The current political crisis in Myanmar began when on February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military, Tatmadaw, announced the takeover of the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) as the ruling party. After that, acting President Myint Swe promulgated a year-long state of emergency for the country and declared power had been transferred to Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Min Aung Hlaing. This situation was also known as the February Burma military coup. Since then, Myanmar, a

Southeast Asian nation famously known for its ancient temples and the dominance of Burmese culture, has been struggling to revive democracy and is facing one of the most devastating political crises.

During the coup, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and members of the Central Executive Committee of the NLD, as well as civilian activists, were detained. Local media reported that the State Counsellor had to face various charges, including violating the country's official secrets act, possessing illegal walkie-talkies, building a house, and publishing information that may cause fear. "The leader Aung San Suu Kyi faces a total of 11 charges that could see her handed a decades-long sentence" (Myanmar Now, 2021). The media also reported that the coup was carried out under Section 417 of Myanmar's Constitution to investigate alleged fraud during the country's last general elections. "The military alleged discrepancies such as duplicated names on voting lists in scores of districts and was unhappy with the election commission's response to its complaints" (Reuters, 2021). Political tensions in the country rose when the Union Election Commission rejected the fraud allegations at the end of January 2021. After a period of uncertainty, the situation culminated in the coup. "The armed forces had backed the opposition, who were demanding a rerun of the vote, claiming widespread fraud. The election commission said there was no evidence to support these claims" (Cuddy, 2021). "The NLD led by Suu Kyi, a former political prisoner and figurehead of Myanmar's long struggle against dictatorship, won 83% of available seats in the November 8 election seen as a referendum on her fledgling democratic government" (Reuters, 2021).

Right after the coup, the Tatmadaw says the state of emergency will last until a new election is held one year from now (Diaz, Chappel, 2021). But then General Min Aung Hlaing, who has assigned himself the role of Prime Minister in the new Government, said that "the junta would hold elections by August 2023 and that it was ready to work with a future ASEAN-appointed envoy on Myanmar" (Strangio, 2021). The people of Myanmar have responded to this coup by protesting against the military rule and demanded the full restoration of the democracy Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Thomas H. Andrews, stated..."In the seven months since Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his accomplices in the Myanmar military violently overthrew the Government in an illegal coup d'état, the people of Myanmar have endured widespread, systematic attacks at the hands of the Myanmar police and military. This includes the murder of more than 1,000 people, the arbitrary detention of over 7,000 and the displacement of over 200,000" (2021, 3/22). The report also mentioned that "the junta's human rights and humanitarian law violations among other are consist of murder, torture, large-scale attacks on civilians, internally displaced persons and humanitarian access, arbitrary detention and access to justice" (Andrews 2021, 4-14/22).

Numerous countries have condemned the military takeover and subsequent crackdown. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has accused the security forces of a "reign of terror" (Cuddy 2021, BBC News). Other countries such as the US, UK, European Union also gave a similar reaction. Secretary-General António Guterres strongly condemns the detention of Suu Kyi and other elected leaders Guterres and "called on the military leadership to respect the will of the people of Myanmar and adhere to democratic norms" (Diaz, Chappel, 2021). Southeast Asian countries had also expressed their concern. "Indonesia urges all parties in Myanmar to exercise self-restraint and put forth dialogue in finding solutions to challenges so as not to exacerbate the condition" (Foreign Ministry of Indonesia, 2021). Other countries responded by encouraging dialogue between the civilian government and the military.

4. **Five-point consensus as ASEAN's response**

Southeast Asian countries have been continuing diplomatic efforts to end the current crisis. Three months after the coup, through a consultation process among fellow members, ASEAN decided to hold the special ASEAN Leaders' Meeting (ALM) on April 24, 2021, in Jakarta. One of the discussion agendas at ALM is regional and international issues which include the issue of Myanmar. At the one-day meeting chaired by Brunei Darussalam as the Chair of ASEAN, ASEAN Leaders, including General Min Aung Hlaing, reached an agreement on the issues discussed and stated in the Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting. The Chairman's Statement specifically contains points regarding Myanmar:

"We, as an ASEAN family, had a close discussion on the recent developments in Myanmar and expressed our deep concern on the situation in the country, including reports of fatalities and escalation of violence. We acknowledged ASEAN's positive and constructive role in facilitating a peaceful solution in the interest of the people of Myanmar and their livelihoods, and therefore agreed to the "Five-Point Consensus" attached to this Chairman's Statement. We also heard calls for the release of all political prisoners including foreigners" (ASEAN.org, 2021).

On the situation in Myanmar, the ASEAN Leaders reached a consensus on the following (Five-Point Consensus):

First, there shall be an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.

Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence seeking a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.

Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN.

Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre.

Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

The "Five-Point Consensus" was welcomed as a solution mechanism to resolve the crisis in Myanmar, although some parties were also skeptical of the consensus given that the consensus "short on condemnation and long on vague promises of engagement and the consensus is glaringly out of step with what many in Myanmar are demanding" (Mathieson, 2021). Hence, the "Five-Point Consensus" is an extraordinary achievement, as the ASEAN Leaders are calling for the immediate cessation of violence, the start of the dialogue, and access to humanitarian assistance for the people of Myanmar. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, when interviewed by the Bangkok Post on the General Min Aung Hlaing formal statement, stated that "...he was not opposed to ASEAN playing a constructive role, or an ASEAN delegation visit, or humanitarian assistance, and that they would move forward and engage with ASEAN in a constructive way," (Bangkok Post, 2021).

Four months after the special ALM, Foreign Ministers from ASEAN have appointed Brunei's Second Minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, as a special envoy to Myanmar. Erywan has been assigned with ending violence in Myanmar and opening dialogue between the military rulers and their opponents in the crisis-torn country. "The appointment of an envoy was central to those efforts but was delayed for months amid deep divisions within ASEAN" (Reuters, 2021). Unfortunately, the plan of the ASEAN special envoy to visit Myanmar could not be realized. Myanmar's Foreign Ministry said, "As Myanmar has been prioritizing peace

and tranquillity in the country, some requests which go beyond the permission of existing laws will be difficult to be accommodated," (Asia News, 2021).

The failure to carry out the planned visit sparked deep disappointment and even irritation from ASEAN member countries. Myanmar's military leaders have put aside the agreed-upon "Five-Point Consensus" and tarnished the ASEAN family relationship that has been built for more than fifty years. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, in an emergency meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers virtually on October 15, 2021, underlined that "there was no significant progress in implementing the five-point consensus to help resolve the crisis in Myanmar" (Antara News, 2021). ASEAN, therefore, needs to act to maintain its credibility and family values. A unanimous firm decision was then agreed, namely, not to invite Gen. Min Aung Hlaing of Myanmar to the ASEAN Summit. Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin said, "This is a matter of the life and death of the credibility of ASEAN," (Asia News, 2021).

History records that this is the first time that ASEAN has taken a decision not to invite one of its member countries due to not implementing the Five-Point Consensus that has been mutually agreed upon and leaving Myanmar's seat vacant. The assertiveness of ASEAN's stance does not mean abandoning the principle of non-intervention but rather putting forward other principles that are also the foundation of the ASEAN organization. This is clearly reflected in the last paragraph of the Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits: "While respecting the principle of non-interference, we reaffirmed our adherence to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government as well as the need to strike an appropriate balance to the application of ASEAN principles on the situation in Myanmar." ASEAN will never abandon the principle of non-intervention given that this is the basic value of the organization that must be maintained as a hallmark of ASEAN, which also includes principles, beliefs, and philosophies rooted in the socio-cultural background of the people of Southeast Asia. This principle remains relevant to the current situation.

In the case of Myanmar, the principle of non-interference is not abandoned, but ASEAN needs to put forward other principles to help resolve the problems of one of its family members. These principles are the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy, and constitutional government. Accordingly, ASEAN "remain committed to support Myanmar in its efforts to return to normalcy in accordance with the will of the people of Myanmar" (ASEAN Chairman's Statement, 2021), given that the "Five-Point Consensus" calls for constructive dialogue among "all parties" in pursuit of a peaceful solution.

5. Conclusion

The ASEAN principle of non-intervention has played a vital role in maintaining the stability of the region. To a certain extent, it hinders flexibility in efforts to resolve internal problems in a member country that has the potential to delay ASEAN from advancing the region. Responding to the political crisis in Myanmar, ASEAN may not directly intervene to restore the situation, but that is not a barrier to contributing and finding the best solution. ASEAN still has the authority to use other principles stated in the Charter into Myanmar's political situation. Accordingly, the principle of non-intervention needs to be maintained to realize the ideals of building peace and security for the benefit of the Southeast Asian nation. ASEAN needs to urge Myanmar to immediately implement the Five-Points Consensus that has been mutually agreed upon. After all, "Myanmar remains a member of the ASEAN family and recognised that Myanmar needs both time and political space to deal with its many and complex challenges" (ASEAN Chairman's Statement, 2021).

As a family, Myanmar has an opportunity to correct its "attitude" to still live together in a safe and peaceful atmosphere under the big house called ASEAN. Hopefully, this optimism can be materialized when Cambodia holds the chairmanship of ASEAN for 2022, which carries the theme "Addressing Challenges Together." Cambodia has the opportunity to show the world that its chairmanship will provide a legacy in resolving the Myanmar political crisis. However, Cambodia needs to collaborate with Indonesia to pave the way for settlement even though it has appointed the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Prak Shokonn, as a special envoy who may be more acceptable to Myanmar to follow up on the implementation of the "Five-Point Consensus" and uphold the principles outlined in the ASEAN Charter.

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