



Advancing Myanmar's Peace Agenda: Initial Updates Under Laos Chairmanship 2024

By

Hitomi Alexandra

Intern at The Habibie Center
hitomialexandraaa@gmail.com

The Five Points Consensus (5PCS) was agreed as a framework for resolving the crisis occurring in Myanmar.¹ Moreover, the prospects for a peace settlement in Myanmar through ASEAN mediation will depend heavily on its leadership. Despite inheriting ongoing initiatives and facing challenges from all aspects of regional issues, effective leadership from ASEAN's annually rotating chair is crucial in balancing intra-ASEAN relations to facilitate consensus on Myanmar policy, as Brunei has demonstrated in the chairman's term of office in 2021.

At the ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, Indonesia showed good leadership under the guidance of President Joko Widodo, who emphasized that significant efforts had been made to overcome the crisis in Myanmar, as evidenced by 180 engagements involving 70 stakeholders including interlocutor and the authorities.² Some of the parties he met were the National Unity Government (NUG), which was a shadow government formed by the opposition to Junta; the State Administrative Council (SAC), a military-formed body; Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs); and civil societies. However, more concerted efforts and more time are needed to overcome the situation's complexity.

In her capacity as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi articulated that the duration of a country's chairmanship alone in one period cannot serve as a panacea to resolve the ongoing crisis in Myanmar.³ As a result, a troika was set up to address the matter. The mechanism is set to commence implementation in 2024, as Laos assumes its mandate following Indonesia's tenure in the leadership relay. This transitional period will see Indonesia as the outgoing chair and Malaysia as the incoming chair, alongside Laos, collectively ensuring the continuity of addressing the Myanmar issue through implementing the agreed-upon 5PCS.⁴



Upon examining the actions undertaken by the leadership of ASEAN member states in extinguishing the lingering embers in Myanmar, several consistent statements emphasizing three core pillars emerge. These pillars underscore the utilization of the 5PCS as a foundation for addressing the complexities of the situation; the collective acknowledgment of the significance of extending humanitarian aid to Myanmar, mainly aimed at alleviating the suffering of those affected by violence and displacement; and a steadfast commitment to supporting stability and developmental trajectories in Myanmar, encompassing the promotion of dialogue, reconciliation, and the advancement of sustainable development initiatives. These efforts are geared towards aiding and fostering regional peace and stability.

For three years, ASEAN has consistently endeavored to adhere to its core principles, yet there are notable differences in the approaches each ASEAN chairmanship takes in their statements. In the 2024 Lao Chairmanship, they announced the appointment of a Special Envoy to Myanmar, signaling a novel development in ASEAN's approach to addressing this crisis. This initiative was not explicitly mentioned in the Chairman's statements of 2022 and 2023. However, during the press statement regarding Lao's initiatives under its chairmanship, there was no new direction for problem resolution; instead, it appeared to be a continuation of initiatives initiated by the previous chairmanship.⁵

Alounkeo Kittikhoun, serving as the ASEAN Envoy for Myanmar from Laos, did not waste time following the leadership change, promptly visiting Naypyidaw in January. The action underscores Laos' commitment to engaging with the Myanmar military government, which is the SAC. It signals a promising development that the SAC may even seek representation from various ethnic armed forces and political party leaders to meet with the Special Envoy, likely in response to battlefield setbacks since late 2023 against the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of three armed ethnic organizations.

One remarkable advancement amid The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat (AMM Retreat) was the participation of Marlar Than Htike, a senior bureaucrat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, checking the primary occasion of the military government sending a non-political agent to an ASEAN high-level meeting.

Compared to other ASEAN member states, Laos' relatively subdued criticism of the Junta might have facilitated Myanmar's participation in the retreat. This move could empower Vientiane as the chair to guide ASEAN in increasing the involvement of the SAC and other factions in Myanmar. However, it remains unconvinced to what extent ASEAN, under Laos' leadership, can persuade the SAC to take





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further actions, given the Junta's persistent resistance against its opponents. This resistance is evident in the extension of the state of emergency in Myanmar for six months and the implementation of mandatory military laws.

From the progress observed in Laos over recent months, one can discern the incremental steps Laos can undertake and the type of diplomacy the country can employ through its special envoy approach this year in addressing the crisis in Myanmar. In my estimation, by reviewing Indonesia's utilization of non-megaphone diplomacy or quiet diplomacy, perceived as lacking confrontational pressure, insights can be gleaned into potential strategies Laos may adopt.

It is too early to assert that Laos will prove inadequate in its chairmanship this year. Despite regional and international concerns rising about Laos' perceived lack of capability and capacity, many overlook that this is not the first time Laos has led ASEAN. Presently, they have the opportunity to demonstrate their mettle, showing that a small country can lead if they are willing to try. Laos might even gain an advantage from trust-building with the military regime in Myanmar, as the latter is unlikely to take harsh actions that could jeopardize regional peace and stability. By engaging diplomatically and fostering relationships with Myanmar's military regime, Laos may be able to influence their behaviour in a way that promotes peaceful coexistence within ASEAN.

Despite existing differences in approaches, ASEAN reiterates its commitment to unity, non-intervention, and adherence to ASEAN principles such as the rule of law, good governance, democracy, and constitutional governance through these three previous chairman's statements. This continuity underscores ASEAN's comprehensive approach to addressing this crisis while respecting the sovereignty of its member states.

Laos must also carefully consider the challenges faced in distributing humanitarian aid in the future, especially in light of the previous chairmanship. During an aid convoy intended for refugees in Southern Shan State in May 2023, terrorist attacks targeted representatives from the AHA Center, along with the Indonesian and Singaporean embassies in Myanmar. While fortunately, there were no casualties, this incident underscores the significant obstacles encountered in delivering humanitarian aid amidst security threats. The Myanmar Junta quickly blamed "terrorists" for the attack, but the Junta could not evade responsibility because the humanitarian trip could have only happened with its approval. Although some ASEAN members support the initiative on Myanmar, others see the situation as internal and show different perspectives within the bloc, which includes Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.





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In response to the incident concerning terrorist attacks in Myanmar targeting representatives from ASEAN bodies and member countries, Laos has likely maintained a balanced stance. Despite the involvement of several ASEAN representatives as victims of the attacks, Laos probably upheld its principle of non-intervention in Myanmar's internal affairs and respected the country's sovereignty. It is important to note that those targeted in Myanmar were engaged in humanitarian efforts, intending to distribute aid through a convoy.

Considering the events during Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship last year, Laos must maintain cooperation and prioritize bilateral and multilateral efforts. Additionally, in light of the tragic events of last May, ASEAN should also focus on coordinating humanitarian efforts to ensure that aid effectively reaches those in need, even amidst security challenges. This coordination may entail close collaboration with relevant authorities, international organizations, and local communities to overcome obstacles and deliver assistance efficiently.

Given Laos' proclivity to engage the Junta during its chairmanship tenure to negotiate and resolve the crisis, it becomes imperative to underscore the pivotal role Laos must play as the incumbent chair of ASEAN in advocating for accountability and transparency in investigating pertinent incidents by avoiding bias. Moreover, given the historical continuum of similar events and in anticipation of forthcoming developments, Laos should heed the precedence set by Cambodia's Chairmanship, which underscored the prioritization of diplomatic initiatives and transparent handling of pertinent issues.





Endnote

- 1 ASEAN, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," 24 April 2021. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>
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- 3 Mahdi Muhammad, Luki Aulia, & Kris Mada, "Troika ASEAN untuk Penyelesaian Isu Myanmar [ASEAN Troika to Resolve the Myanmar Issue]," *Kompas.id*, 6 September 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/internasional/2023/09/05/troika-asean-untuk-penyelesaian-isu-myanmar>
- 4 Office Of Assistant To Deputy Cabinet Secretary For State Documents & Translation, "43rd ASEAN Summit Retreat Session Produces ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on Implementation of 5PC," *Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia*, 6 September 2023. <https://setkab.go.id/en/43rd-asean-summit-retreat-session-produces-asean-leaders-review-and-decision-on-implementation-of-5pc/>
- 5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lao PDR, "Press Statement By the Chair of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat," 29 January 2024, https://laoschairmanship2024.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ENG-AMM-Retreat_Press-Statement-by-the-Chair-2024.pdf





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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