



Could Indonesia's ASEAN Leadership Solve the Myanmar Crisis?

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Introduction

The instability and conflictual situation in Myanmar have become the center of attention in ASEAN since 2021. Myanmar has sunk deeper than ever into crisis and regression in all aspects of human rights and economy.¹ ASEAN and others have repeatedly urged the military to stop the violence, protect human rights, and respect the democratic process. However, the junta has demonstrated no appetite for political concessions or resolution, though it has been over 2 years since the coup.²

Since this problem could not be resolved by the resolution made by ASEAN on their 2022 summit in Cambodia, the Myanmar crisis has become a challenging homework for Indonesia. The international community is now putting pressure and relying on ASEAN, led by Indonesia, to solve this crisis,³ putting ASEAN's credentials at a high stake. However, it has been several months in Indonesia's chairmanship without any meaningful policy on the Myanmar crisis.⁴ To put pressure on the Myanmar military, in the 42nd ASEAN Summit, Indonesia barred Myanmar's leaders from attending the summits due to their failure in implementing the peace plan or Five-Point Consensus (5PC).⁵ On the other hand, it is crucial to seek an alternative approach to resolve the issues and not relying solely on pressures and sanctions that have been stuck in stalemate until recently. This measure could be effectively done through a bottom-up approach (grassroot) by using existing NGOs or community in Myanmar to build a long-lasting multi-stakeholder network.



5PC: Achievement or Failure?

President Jokowi stressed that as a country that holds the chairmanship of ASEAN, Indonesia continues to push for progress on the implementation of the 5PC. In addition, the President also reiterated the need for dialogue and to end violence in Myanmar. Together with relevant parties, the President added that Indonesia would also continue to facilitate humanitarian assistance for the people in Myanmar.⁶ Last year, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi told the UN General Assembly that Indonesia was deeply concerned by the military's lack of commitment to implement the 5PC, following the military's execution of four pro-democracy activists. The next month, she reported that the situation was "deteriorating and worsening."⁷ For now, it could be concluded that Indonesia's approaches to Myanmar during its chairmanship heavily stick to the 5PC, despite awareness that more concrete, alternative approaches are crucial. Indonesia has shown that improvement is achievable when there is political will and diplomatic tenacity. Crisis diplomacy is a delicate process, and Jakarta's strategy confirms the positive potential of working behind closed doors to forge trust where none previously existed.⁸

Indonesia has quietly engaged with the parallel civilian government and military administration (State Administration Council, hereinafter SAC), as well as China, India, and Thailand, to solve Myanmar's post-coup strife. Marsudi further disclosed that more than 60 "engagements" had been held between Indonesian diplomats and those involved in the Myanmar conflict, such as the military junta, ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs), and the National Unity Government (NUG), which is governed by civilians. The attempts of Jakarta to mediate disputes were described by her as "non-megaphone diplomacy" that aimed to "build trust with all stakeholders."⁹ These efforts aim to provide space for all stakeholders to build trust to be more open in communication, which were welcomed by most parties, including the shadow government of NUG. Nevertheless, the impact is still questionable and unseen.¹⁰

Other efforts such as the Track 1.5 approach have been initiated by Thailand and India. The first gathering was hosted by the Thai government in Bangkok on March 13. The other gathering was hosted by the Indian government and the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) on April 25 in New Delhi. Choudhury and Kharisma assert that ASEAN's 5PC strategy, the Track 1.5 process, and Indonesia's "silent diplomacy" will all have a significant impact on one another and, eventually, the catastrophic situation in Myanmar.¹¹ If all three of them work together, they might complement one another. The processes could, however, wind up sabotaging one another and inflicting more harm than good if they develop in isolation.





Critics towards this approach have been expressed by the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across the region. In May 2023, over 40 CSOs across the globe expressed their grave concern over the lack of tangible actions from the ASEAN in ending the crisis in Myanmar. According to them, there are no signs from the Myanmar SAC to address any demands from ASEAN as written in the 5PC. Regarding the open letter sent to the ASEAN leaders signed by 457 CSOs, ASEAN has done little to address the growing situation in Myanmar.¹² The “dialogue” amongst ASEAN shows a partial attitude to the 5PC and produces no solutions to the ongoing problem in Myanmar. The military has persisted in carrying out atrocity crimes against the Myanmar people despite being warned for breaking the 5PC in a joint communique in August 2022. The military’s attacks on a school in the Sagaing Region resulted in the deaths of 11 students just one month after the warning. Thus, CSOs demand all ASEAN countries to refrain from legitimizing the military junta by cutting bilateral ties and set up a clear mandate for the role of Special Envoy to ground Myanmar based on human rights principles, justice, and accountability.¹³

A Bottom-Up Approach?

Sanctions are not the answer to Myanmar’s problems, according to Irewati from Indonesia’s National Research and Innovation Agency. Despite the challenges, ASEAN must keep working to engage all parties in Myanmar and promote harmony among all its ethnic groups. Myanmar shouldn’t be abandoned or isolated by ASEAN since doing so would increase its reliance on China.¹⁴ Myanmar is of great strategic and economic relevance to China. Economic concerns predominate in China’s interactions with Myanmar, although the opening of democracy has long been a top priority in ASEAN-Myanmar talks. On the other hand, Muhammad Arif, an International Relations lecturer from Universitas Indonesia, stated that what Indonesia can do as the chair of ASEAN is to help create an external environment that is not conducive for the military in Myanmar to sustain its role. Indonesia’s engagement with various concerned governments can be seen as part of this effort.¹⁵

As the current leader of ASEAN, Indonesia’s role on the Myanmar issues is undoubtedly important. Wardani¹⁶ stated that Indonesia is arguably politically well-placed to assist Myanmar’s democratization, beyond sharing the lessons learned from Indonesia’s transition from a military ruled country to a democracy. Both countries share centuries-long cultural ties through a trade network established between the Bay of Bengal and the Java Sea, providing them a significant cultural affinity and foundation for a common sense of belonging. However, such efforts require a fresher look.





As an alternative effort to end this ongoing crisis, Indonesia should move beyond stiff regional mechanisms. Indonesia should put more attention to achieving social cohesion through long-term community-based efforts in order to uphold the democratization process in Myanmar. This goal will contribute to the society's ability to achieve sustainable peace, as well as policy and actions that contribute to building democracy. However, this effort needs to speak the language of the people at the grassroots level.¹⁷

We argue that a new model of approach to Myanmar that incorporates the bottom-up approach should also be done by the stakeholders. At this point, Indonesia should not only engage with the political stakeholders, both the military and NUG, or the existing EROs and CSOs in the region, but also involve people at the grassroots level. We see their involvement as more important than only engaging with formal institutions. Engaging with people on the ground by enabling interreligious, intercultural dialogue could help in understanding their struggle and needs. Indonesia also needs to strengthen its non-governmental organizations' capacities to be able to mediate conflicts and promote sustainable peace beyond its locality. This notion could be implemented through Indonesia's already established networks and communities in Myanmar. By going through these third parties, Indonesia could build a multi-stakeholder network to perform as a peace broker that could provide a social arena that allows equal access to desirable resources and outcomes.

As an entry point, Indonesia could leverage networks and capacities that have been built by its NGOs and humanitarian organizations operating in Myanmar. They could also help to implement programmatic interventions through local organizations in order to address common issues and build trust between the public and institutions.¹⁸ This approach might be more effective than just observing from afar, or solely relying on the existing ASEAN-led mechanism. We further contend that the current peace process was perceived as a state-centric initiative involving only a small number of disputing parties. In line with critics of liberal peace, these kinds of peace processes could be seen as not emancipatory, which frequently ignore the pragmatism of contending entities' economic interests in Myanmar, as well as the community as a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that the Myanmar peacebuilding strategy should focus more on the more particular issue within the nation-state's borders. We can see that in addition to the top-down strategy now being used by ASEAN and the other nations, a bottom-up strategy is also required. By cooperating





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more with the local population, ethnic minorities, and other social groups in Myanmar, Indonesia ought to be able to take the initiative in the process by mobilizing actions through Indonesia's network and communities which could finally lead to the existence of multi-stakeholder networks. We believe that by making this kind of effort and comprehending what is actually occurring on the ground, we are one step closer to resolving the complex situation in Myanmar.





Endnotes

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