

Give Asean seat to Myanmar opposition

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Nearly nine months after its forceful takeover of the country from a legitimately elected civilian government, Myanmar's military has shown that it is one thing to seize power but an entirely different reality to consolidate and impose control.

The inability of the Tatmadaw, as Myanmar's armed forces are called, to follow through with their Feb 1 coup has posed multi-layered challenges at home, in the region, and internationally. In response to the Tatmadaw's blatant putsch, spearheaded by Sen Gen Min Aung Hlaing and coup government called "State Administration Council" (SAC), Asean has dithered and dragged its feet, continually falling behind the coup curve in the face of concerted international condemnation.

Now Asean's working mechanisms are catching up with Southeast Asia's 10-member grouping. As the 38th and 39th Asean summits and related leaders' meetings loom, the Myanmar coup issue has topped the agenda, exposing Asean's structural weaknesses. Because of Asean's rotational practice based on the alphabet, Brunei currently chairs the organisation, followed by Cambodia next year. These two countries, as opposed to Indonesia and Malaysia which have opposed Myanmar's coup regime, are unlikely to be tough on the Tatmadaw.

For Asean, leaders' meetings are pro forma, attended by heads of government as deemed fit by individual countries. But the prospect of having Gen Min Aung Hlaing at Asean-led summits would surely alienate other major partners. The East Asia Summit, for example, includes the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, democratic countries that would not want to meet, even virtually and not in person, with the Tatmadaw strongman.

Asean's Myanmar conundrum is simple. Gen Min Aung Hlaing and the Tatmadaw more broadly are facing a nationwide opposition, led under the umbrella of the National Unity Government (NUG) and comprising the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the People's Defence Forces (PDF), and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Had the military coup succeeded in putting down the civilian-led resistance, Asean would not be in this bind and Gen Min Aung Hlaing's participation at the upcoming Asean-related summits would be par for the course.

But Myanmar's incomplete and eroding coup may signify that military takeovers around the world in the future may not come off so successfully as they used to transpire. The coalition of forces and means of power has shifted in favour of resistance and opposition. Information and communications technologies have enabled an unprecedented mobilisation and organisation among Myanmar's opposition groups. Some of them also have taken up small arms in open defiance and conflict against Myanmar's security forces.

This stalemate inside Myanmar, whereby the Tatmadaw does not have the wherewithal to consolidate and control while a determined and fierce opposition movement is unable to overcome a battle-hardened army with superior firepower, is now an international dilemma which Asean has been pressed to resolve. Yet early apologists for Myanmar's coup who saw it as a done deal and a

necessity to get on with it should be called out. Myanmar's coup was staged and but it has not succeeded. The opposition movement is strong and fierce, and the Tatmadaw is unlikely to be able to put them down without a fight to the end.

Asean's ducking and dodging will not do the job. At an emergency meeting on Oct 15, Asean ministers decided not to invite Min Aung Hlaing and proposed a "non-political representative" to take Myanmar's seat, implicitly aware that having the junta leader's inclusion is tantamount to disinviting leaders of other major summit partners. Asean's consensus on Min Aung Hlaing is a major move on its conventional and hitherto sacrosanct "non-interference" principle in each other's domestic affairs.

Now that "non-interference" no longer holds, the next big challenge and potentially evolutionary step forward for the organisation is to see how far relative and incremental "interference" can go and what parameters can be drawn around it. The Myanmar coup issue could be a blessing in disguise for Asean if the organisation can reconceptualise and put in practice a new kind of norm, a mix of the old "non-interference" and new ways of having a say in neighbours' domestic political situations.

Under these tense and politicised circumstances, Myanmar's would-be "non-political representative" is an oxymoron. Any senior official or alternative appointee even with a decent reputation from Myanmar's side would likely come with Min Aung Hlaing's backing and blessing. By definition, Myanmar's representative as Asean has suggested will be doing the bidding of the senior general and the Tatmadaw.

To bite the bullet, Asean should invite representation both from the NUG and from the military regime, since neither has the upper hand and full control over Myanmar's future. Excluding the NUG will further dent Asean's credibility and international legitimacy, thereby undermining Asean centrality. In fact, certain pro-democracy governments among Asean have already engaged with the NUG. Thus far, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore as well as the Philippines have been clear in their support for a return to democratic rule and constitution framework in Myanmar. The rest have sat on the fence or implicitly backed the coup regime.

With such divisive views on Myanmar, a dual structure of representation is fairer because the NUG is the legitimate government of the Myanmar people underpinned by a constitutional framework and a democratic process. Myanmar's military regime obviously has power and holds the seat of government in Nay Pyi Taw. But all in Myanmar is being played for at the cost of blood, sweat and tears in an intensifying civil war.

How Asean's summit season plays out over the Myanmar coup and representation at top meetings will have far-reaching ramifications. The United Nations, which led the way in not meeting as yet with Asean heads over the issue of Myanmar's legitimate leadership, will have more to say and will take into account events on the ground when its credentials committee gathers in November to determine the country's rightful representation. What Asean does now by recognising both the NUG and the SAC during this summit season will save the organisation from more erosion of centrality and credibility and shore up its Five-Point Consensus from April with more bargaining power vis-a-vis Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing. It will also let the Myanmar people fight for their own self-determination in a fairer fashion.

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