

Opinion

Asean's Myanmar crisis out of control - "The grouping will likely become more marginalised"

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Myanmar's spiralling post-coup violence and bloodshed has become Asean's existential crisis. It is customary to pin hopes on an Asean way of fudging and nudging the main protagonists into some workable, face-saving compromise to save the day but this time the situation is dire and dark. Unless the 10-member regional organisation can make a difference in halting Myanmar's descent into uncontrollable violence and potential civil war, Asean is at risk of undermining and perhaps ending its success story.

Approaching 54 years of togetherness, Asean has come a long way in defying and outfoxing its critics and detractors. In the process, it has become the principal platform for regionalism and regionalisation to promote peace and stability, bounded by geographical neighbourliness in Southeast Asia and shared interests in strategic autonomy by keeping bigger countries at bay. Adding four members in the 1990s — sequentially Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia — completed the Asean make-up and turned the region into great potential and promise.

In the 2000s, after earlier launching the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Asean Regional Forum and Asean Plus Three, Asean became host to premier regional summits, bringing together major world leaders for concrete cooperation and strategic dialogue, from the East Asia Summit and various Asean Plus One summits to the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus. A plethora of regular ministerial and departmental-level meetings underlay these top-tier get-togethers. Many may ridicule Asean for its endless meetings but this diplomatic community and bureaucratic processes have kept away interstate conflicts all this time.

The 2010s were Asean's high decade. After the Asean Charter was adopted in November 2007, Asean became a legal entity with a document to live by, not just understanding and norms of behaviour. The Asean Charter was fudged to include both democracy, good governance, rights and freedoms as well as the cardinal "non-interference in the internal affairs" of fellow member states. Asean's three community pillars comprising political-security, economic, and socio-cultural were then introduced and pitched to global audiences. The Asean economic community, in particular, envisaged Southeast Asia's regional grouping as a single market and production base of more than 670 million with a combined GDP of more than US\$3 trillion (93 trillion baht), the fastest-growing region in the world.

Asean's success narrative is now undermined by a frontal assault from Myanmar's blatant coup on Feb 1. As Myanmar's military tries to consolidate its grip on power at all costs against a popular revolt inside the country, led by the Civil Disobedience Movement, the climbing death toll is fast approaching 300 with a corresponding tenfold number of arbitrary arrests and detentions. Brute

force and barbaric acts of gunning down peaceful protesters, including women and children, have characterised the military's ongoing and intensifying nationwide crackdown against the civilian population, who remain defiant and committed to reversing the coup.

Unlike its past coups, Myanmar's military has never faced such a determined and broad-based civilian opposition it cannot beat and shoot into submission. This time, the security forces' batons and bullets are being met with makeshift shields and safety helmets in a determined resolve not to return to Myanmar's dark dictatorship and international wilderness for nearly five decades from 1962.

The civilian opposition, led by the National League for Democracy which won a landslide election last November and prompted the putsch, has come up with a competing authority under the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. The civilian authorities, in turn, have outmanoeuvred the military by making pacts with Ethnic Armed Organisations among minorities around the country. This alliance between civilian leaders and armed ethnic minorities is unprecedented in the face of military rule. If Myanmar's military remains united, a protracted stalemate may ensue that involves civilian insurrection and armed clashes between the army and EAOs.

Suddenly, the Asean economic community looks like a mirage. The highly touted connectivity and single market with a streamlined regional production base now seems to have faltered. The political-security community lacks credibility, and the socio-culture community sounds rhetorical. In fact, Asean has been further divided by Myanmar's coup. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have called for an immediate cessation of military-perpetrated violence against protesters, the release of political detainees, especially NLD leader and state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and the restoration of democratic governance based on popular mandate from the November polls. Other Asean countries have demurred and deferred to the "non-interference in internal affairs" principle.

Moreover, Asean stands between Myanmar's domestic slaughter and rights violations and tougher global action in response. Apart from condemnation and targeted sanctions against coup leaders and their material interests, the international community has repeatedly referred to Asean to mediate and broker a dialogue that can lead to a peaceful outcome. Thus Asean is not only ineffectual as a regional organisation but is preventing a more effective international response.

The spectre of Myanmar's internal conflict and violence will impede Asean's economic cooperation. Until recently, richly endowed Myanmar was one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Its geographical advantage comprised links not just to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific but also to China. Investors who have piled into the past decade of political liberalisation, economic reforms and development progress will now be scarred for the foreseeable future. Investor nightmares, such as a host country's nationalisation of private businesses, are becoming a reality in Myanmar, where military authorities are threatening private banks to comply with junta orders or risk government takeovers.

All of this does not mean Asean will break up. Instead, the grouping will likely become more marginalised. As it is divided over China's belligerent role in the South China Sea and the Mekong region — and now over a concerted response to Myanmar's coup and its aftermath — Asean will be hard pressed to be taken seriously. Frustrations with Asean's inertia and incoherence have manifested in such arenas as the recent Quad Summit among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. If Asean cannot get its act together to stop what some now consider crimes against humanity in Myanmar, then external powers may play a greater role as regional member states become more fragmented and in disarray, losing their collective autonomy and earlier promise to maintain peace and promote prosperity.

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P.S.

• The Bangkok Post. 26 Mar 2021 at 04:00:

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2089727/aseans-myanmar-crisis-out-of-control>

Also in The Irrawaddy:

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/aseans-myanmar-crisis-control.html>

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