

SPOTLIGHT ON R2P



Cambodian R2P Program 2021

“ASEAN’s Role in Managing the Myanmar Crisis”

On 26 August 2021, from 9:00-11:00am (Cambodia Time), CICP, with the support of APR2P, organized a virtual moderated dialogue on “ASEAN’s Role in Managing the Myanmar Crisis” via ZOOM. There were more than 100 participants joining the online lecture via ZOOM, and 10 core members of the Friends of R2P-Cambodia attending in-person the event at CICP Office.

The webinar sought to identify the best ways to implement the ASEAN’s 5-point Consensus that was agreed during the ASEAN Special Meeting in Jakarta on 24 April, 2021 in order to stop violence and killing as well as to create conducive environment that could help reach peaceful political settlements for the country to return to normalcy.

Three eminent speakers were invited namely, Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn, Senior Fellow, ISIS Thailand, Ms. Moe Thuzar, Fellow, ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, and Amb. Rizal Sukma, Senior Fellow, CSIS Indonesia, to discuss what ASEAN can and cannot do to try to resolve the Myanmar crisis and deliberate on the role of ASEAN Special Envoy. The virtual dialogue was moderated by Amb. Pou Sothirak, CICP Executive Director.

As moderator, Amb. Pou Sothirak provided some context through which the participants can expect to hear in the following sessions.

The military coup by the junta erupted since 1st February this year is sure to have long term implications not just for Myanmar but also on the credibility of

ASEAN in dealing with violence and killing of innocent civilians as the country is now governed by an unconstitutional military government. Although the appointment of the ASEAN Special Envoy is vital in safeguarding ASEAN credibility, this is just the tip of the iceberg how ASEAN intends to achieve success from the five-point consensus is more challenging.

Formidable efforts are needed to restore Myanmar back to the elected government of Daw Ang San Suu Kyi who enjoyed a very short period of peace and democracy even as the junta is in complete control of the country since the coup and the military has shown no sign to compromise and willing to accept any outside resolution that chal-



Amb. Pou Sothirak



Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn



Ms. Moe Thuzar



Amb. Rizal Sukma

lunge its action of grabbing power illegally.

The return of the Tatmadaw is a dreadful nightmare for ASEAN, slapping the bloc's unity, rupturing its principles and norms beyond imagination. Yet ASEAN is still keen to engage with the junta to try to resolve the crisis because Myanmar is the bloc's member since 23 July 1997. Unless ASEAN can help Myanmar return to normal situation, its preeminent status as the most successful regional bloc will erode.

The crisis in Myanmar is beyond consensus and non-interference. It is about ASEAN relevance, unity, and centrality in the preservation of the bloc's reputation and the ability to offer assistance towards a member state in distress. It is a crisis which affects not only Myanmar internally but also weakens the ASEAN Way to safeguard its image and authority in the eyes of the international community. ASEAN must be able to assist Myanmar's return to the right path of progress and stability, allowing the country to resume its process of integration with the ASEAN family. Losing Myanmar makes ASEAN incomplete and insignificant.

Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn explained the unique role of Brunei as ASEAN Chair. He shared three observations regarding Brunei's ability as ASEAN Chair. First, Brunei's ASEAN Chairmanship has been truly ASEAN. Despite encountering confronting regional challenges such as major power rivalry and the South China Sea dispute and Myanmar, Brunei has been able to hold ASEAN and managed certain degree of regional consensus on those key issues. He also pointed out expectations should be managed given the fact that ASEAN is not a supra-national regional body but an intergovernmental organization that respects sovereignty of member states. As a sultanate, Brunei has closely observed this key element of ASEAN and tried its best to deal with pressing issues by exercising existing ASEAN principles.

Second, Brunei does not have a small-country syndrome. The sultanate has shown time and again it can work with all countries, big or small, within and outside ASEAN. This has been evident in the country's role in resolving the Myanmar crisis. Despite being criticized, Brunei has reached out and consulted with the junta, and with a lot of

efforts, been able to convince the junta and other ASEAN members as well as other external powers to accept the Five-Point Consensus. Should Brunei have a small-country syndrome and does not hold firm to its ways of working which is the ASEAN way, no agreements can be reached at all concerning the Myanmar crisis.

Third, Brunei as ASEAN Chair still has weaknesses. The key one is the country has limited communication strategy to let the ASEAN public know what ASEAN under its chairmanship has been doing to help resolve regional issues including the Myanmar crisis. The mainstream narrative perpetuated by the media appears to suggest ASEAN has been doing nothing to help Myanmar. This in turn has affected the public mood, particularly the Myanmar people, that start to lose trust on ASEAN which is a dangerous trend for the future relevance of the regional bloc. It is time Brunei and other ASEAN members start thinking of having a more proactive communication strategy to give swift, updated and factual information about ASEAN's efforts in addressing regional issues.

Ms. Moe Thuzar discussed perspectives within Myanmar about the ASEAN's efforts in response to the Myanmar Crisis. She provided a comprehensive background concerning the aftermath of the illegal and unconstitutional Myanmar military coup on 1 February including considerable human casualties, collapse of socio-economic developments and setback for the country's ability in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

She also discussed what ASEAN has done to help resolving the crisis. ASEAN has shown efforts to help put Myanmar return to normalcy including shuttle diplomacy, achieving the agreement of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, and reaching out to anti-junta representatives such as the National Unity Government. Yet, at the moment, ASEAN's approaches appear lacking clear and cohesive action plans. Combined with the continuous lack of cooperation from the junta, the regional bloc has apparently been at a standstill position in finding ways forward regarding the Myanmar Crisis.

Talking about the views in Myanmar in response to ASEAN's effort in resolving the Myanmar Crisis, Ms. Thuzar noted

that the public mood of the Myanmar people has not perceived too kindly with ASEAN. Some see ASEAN abandoning them and de facto recognizing the junta, causing anger and protests against ASEAN. This was stunning given the fact that a decade ago, several polls suggested that Myanmar people, especially the youths and younger officials, had a positive outlook on ASEAN's role in maintaining regional peace and stability, particularly after the bloc was able to channel needed humanitarian aids in the country following the Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

Moving forward, it is up to ASEAN to convince the Myanmar people that the regional bloc does not fail them. ASEAN credibility will primarily lie on the full implementation of the Five-Point Consensus.

Amb. Rizal Sukma shared his views on ASEAN's ability to deliver the Five-Point Consensus. ASEAN has been criticized for being slow and problematic in handling the Myanmar crisis. However, no other international bodies or regional bodies come up with something better than ASEAN. Therefore, ASEAN and its Five-Point Consensus remain the most viable option to help ease the Myanmar crisis.

The appointment of the Special Envoy is a welcomed sign in implementing the Five-Point Consensus, despite long delays. The role of the Special Envoy on Myanmar is important. According to the Five-Point Consensus, the Special Envoy need to handle three tasks: 1) Help stop violence; 2) Deliver humanitarian assistance; and 3) help foster dialogues among all relevant parties in Myanmar. These three tasks are the mandate of the Special Envoy. The role of the Special Envoy should not be compromised.

Unfortunately, ASEAN has not had any coherent plans to support the ASEAN Special Envoy. With no clear terms of reference, it appears that the process of implementing the Five-Point Consensus falls on ASEAN Chair which will change annually, and the next one will be Cambodia. To increase the chance of success for the Special Envoy, ASEAN needs to pay attention to the following key steps:

Need to have a clear terms of reference of the Special Envoy. ASEAN should not tie the Special Envoy to each ASEAN

Chairmanship to avoid problematic delay and process of appointment whenever ASEAN Chairs change.

- The Special Envoy should have a comprehensive structure to undertake its mission.
- The Special Envoy should be given broad mandate to ensure its mission is to foster inclusive dialogues in Myanmar, not to follow what the junta says all the time.
- Regarding the upcoming Cambodia ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022, Amb. Sukma suggested ASEAN and Cambodia the following:
 - ASEAN needs to discuss how to operationalize the Five-Point Consensus
 - Cambodia needs to push ASEAN to have a comprehensive mission plans on the Myanmar Crisis

Amb. Rizal Sukma added that Cambodia should discuss with ASEAN in exploring the possibility of engaging with anti-junta movements such as the National Unity Government (NUG), Committee Representing Pyidaung-su Hluttaw (CRPH), and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to gain better levers in forcing the Myanmar junta in accepting the implementations of all objectives agreed in the Five-Point Consensus.

Amb. Pou Sothirak said the virtual moderated dialogue was very successful due to the high turn-out rate as well as the interesting engagements between the three distinguished speakers and the online viewers. All three excellent speakers have done well in explaining what has been evolved in the Myanmar crisis. The whole webinar was a good learning experience for all participants to hear from the eminent experts on what ASEAN can and cannot do to try to resolve the Myanmar crisis and deliberate on the role of ASEAN Special Envoy as well as developments surrounding the crisis.

He then thanked the three speakers and all online viewers for their contributions to this virtual dialogue. He also expressed his appreciation to APR2P for its support in making this event possible.

ASEAN's Role in Managing the Myanmar Crisis

Thursday, 26 August 2021 | 9:00 - 11:00 AM | Cambodia Time

The online lecture seeks to identify the best ways to implement the **ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus** in order to **stop violence and killing** as well as to create conducive environment that could help reach **peaceful political settlements** for the country to return to normalcy.

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Topic: ASEAN's Response to the Myanmar Crisis: Views and Reactions from Myanmar

Topic: ASEAN's Role in Myanmar: Can it Deliver?

Topic: Brunei's Unique Role as the ASEAN Chair

Moderated by
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