



Myanmar after the 42nd ASEAN Summit: What's New?

Him Rotha

The situation in Myanmar was still one of the dominant agendas at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia on 10-11 May 2023. There were many expectations for the Indonesian ASEAN Chairmanship in dealing with Myanmar. Yet, after the May Summit, ASEAN has not yet found an alternative approach to the issue. The bloc still sticks with the Five-Point Consensus, which is described to be in “no significant progress” by its leaders.¹

In the ASEAN Retreat this year, Indonesia laid out its plans for Myanmar. Indonesia would establish the Office of the Special Envoy alongside the “Implementation Plan” of the Five-Point Consensus.² Moreover, according to President Joko Widodo, the Republic also had the intention to send military generals to Myanmar. Nevertheless, all these things have not been realized yet, perhaps, at least in the public domain.

Indonesia has usually stated that it adopts “quiet diplomacy” in dealing with this issue. Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi said in an interview in May that the country has engaged with relevant stakeholders for 60 times already this year.³

It should be noted that before the Summit, there was an attack against ASEAN’s aid convoy. The perpetrator is still unknown, while some analysts viewed this attack could be a warning message to ASEAN by unidentified actors in Myanmar.⁴ With the recent attack and the ongoing turmoil, Myanmar was one of the main agenda for discussion among Southeast Asian leaders during the 42nd Summit.

In the Chairman’s statement, there are two paragraphs dedicated to Myanmar; one is the Situation in Myanmar’s Rakhine State and another one is the political development in Myanmar. In the section about the development in Myanmar, ASEAN still emphasized the Five-Point Consensus

¹ ASEAN Indonesia 2023. May 2023. With President Jokowi as Chair, ASEAN Discusses Follow-up of Five-Point Consensus in Myanmar. Available at <https://asean2023.id/en/news/with-president-jokowi-as-chair-asean-discusses-follow-up-of-five-point-consensus-in-myanmar>

² A. Muh. Ibnu Aqil and Yvette Tanamal. Date. Indonesia pushes for implementation of Myanmar peace plan, resumption of COC talks. Jakarta Post. Available at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2023/02/05/indonesia-pushes-for-implementation-of-myanmar-peace-plan-resumption-of-coc-talks>

³ Kate Lamb and Ananda Teresia. May 2023. Exclusive: Indonesia quietly engaging key stakeholders in Myanmar crisis, foreign minister says. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-quietly-engaging-key-stakeholders-myanmar-crisis-foreign-minister-2023-05-05/>

⁴ Arlina Arshad. May 2023. Attack on Asean aid convoy may be ploy to stir trouble ahead of Asean Summit: Analysts. Straits Times. Available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/attack-on-asean-aid-convoy-might-be-deliberate-ploy-to-stir-trouble-ahead-of-asean-summit-analysts>

as the bloc's "main reference" to respond to Myanmar.⁵ The bloc also stressed that the solution for the crisis shall be "Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led".⁶ On this point, many ASEAN leaders expressed mixed signals. Many stated the disappointment on the slow progress of the Five-Point Consensus; however, they still suggested that Myanmar shall not be intervened by external actors.⁷

Nevertheless, some critical aspects were not mentioned in that statement. The ASEAN's Special Envoy to Myanmar post was left vacant after the end of the Cambodian Chairmanship in 2022. Furthermore, the term "implementation plan" of the Five-Point Consensus was also not mentioned in the Statement. Another important thing is related to what would ASEAN respond regarding the tentative election orchestrating by the Myanmar Military Authority. All of these posing more and more doubts on ASEAN's credibility in dealing with Myanmar.

Based on the ASEAN Chair's Statement, it is suggested that ASEAN has not yet had new consensus approaches to responding to the Situation in Myanmar even though the situation on the ground is still inflaming.

Beyond the statement, it seems there were some divisions within ASEAN on the presence of the military authority. According to some accounts, some ASEAN countries suggested inviting the military back to the Summit and high-level meetings as ASEAN might feel "Myanmar fatigue" that could distract the bloc from other bigger agendas.⁸

It should be noted that some alternative options outside the ASEAN's framework are carried out by Myanmar's neighboring countries under the Track 1.5 meetings in India and Thailand.⁹ Obviously, these meetings have been proclaimed as complementary to ASEAN, but the nature is different. The meetings could be a signal that Myanmar's neighboring countries begin to shift from depending on ASEAN to having their own initiatives to resolve some issues within Myanmar that concern their respective borders. This is because ASEAN's approach is undertaken at a slow pace, according to one Indian official.¹⁰

With the credibility currently being undermined, the second Summit under the Indonesian Chair, which will be in September this year, will be more difficult because of the possible military-led election in Myanmar in August. Currently, there is still doubt that the election could be held according to some accounts.¹¹ Nevertheless, should the election be conducted, there could be some

⁵ Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit. Available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/attack-on-asean-aid-convoy-might-be-deliberate-ploy-to-stir-trouble-ahead-of-asean-summit-analysts>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kimberly Lim. February 2023. Asean has no licence to interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs: Singapore. South China Morning Post. Available at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3211707/asean-has-no-licence-interfere-myanmars-internal-affairs-singapore>

⁸ AFP. May 2023. Indonesia's Widodo Admits No Progress by ASEAN on Myanmar Peace Plan. Available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/the-world-myanmar/indonesias-widodo-admits-no-progress-by-asean-on-myanmar-peace-plan.html>

⁹ Thompson Chau. April 2023. India hosts '1.5' informal Myanmar talks amid flurry of diplomacy. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/India-hosts-1.5-informal-Myanmar-talks-amid-flurry-of-diplomacy>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ AFP. March 2023. Myanmar junta hints at further election delay. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2525029/myanmar-junta-hints-at-further-election-delay>

rifts within ASEAN as some might offer their tacit support no matter how reluctant, while some could deny the election result and review its diplomatic considerations with Myanmar.

The Myanmar Crisis continues to be a lingering challenge with no light at the end of tunnel for ASEAN despite many efforts made by the regional bloc, particularly previous and current ASEAN Chairs for the past years namely Brunei, Cambodia and Indonesia. A hope for potential and meaningful settlements for the Situation in Myanmar can happen only if ASEAN members are able to agree that the ongoing status quo in Myanmar is not acceptable, and that doable and well thought approaches are needed to help the fellow ASEAN member to return to normalcy. Otherwise, others including some frustrating ASEAN members might take necessary bolder steps outside ASEAN to address the crisis in Myanmar. This situation would hurt ASEAN and question its relevance as a regional institution.

Him Rotha is a Junior Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

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