

ASEAN Won't Save Myanmar

The organization isn't designed to solve problems—particularly not one as thorny as the post-coup unrest in Myanmar.

BY OREN SAMET

Ever since Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, staged a coup against the country's civilian government on Feb. 1, leading to a seemingly irrepressible popular uprising, foreign-policy experts have continued to search for potential international solutions to the deteriorating situation. With major Western powers like the United States possessing limited leverage over the Tatmadaw, and China and Russia stymieing a robust response at the international level, many have looked to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to play a more significant role.

The governments that make up ASEAN, which is set to meet in Jakarta, Indonesia, this weekend to discuss the crisis, are Myanmar's neighbors. They have a strong interest in avoiding the country's descent into complete chaos. So the hope that they might feel compelled to act isn't totally unwarranted—but it is misplaced. ASEAN isn't designed to solve problems, particularly not one as thorny as the unrest in Myanmar. Its consensus-based decision-making structure inhibits decisive action, especially given its significant divisions. It's not even clear that all ASEAN leaders recognize what a profound political rupture the coup has produced.

As a result, expect few, if any, concrete actions to come out of this weekend's summit. Instead, ASEAN leaders are likely to pursue a face-saving mix of diplomatic expressions of "concern" and vague proposals for "engagement." Some regional leaders have already floated the possibility of sending humanitarian aid, a signature ASEAN move. On the surface, that seems like a reasonable response. The people of Myanmar are suffering, after all, and they could certainly use relief, just as they did after a devastating cyclone killed tens of thousands of people in 2008. In that instance, ASEAN helped persuade the paranoid Tatmadaw generals to eventually allow international humanitarian assistance.

But the current crisis is not a natural disaster; it's a man-made one. The suffering has a clearly identifiable cause: the Tatmadaw, which has already killed over 700 people, imprisoned thousands more, and brought the economy to a standstill over the past few months through heavy-handed repression and large-scale communications blackouts. The situation requires a political resolution, and humanitarian relief would be a band-aid, if it even made it to the people at all.

ASEAN pursued a similar, and largely useless, course of action after the Tatmadaw's genocidal operations in Rakhine state drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017. Strong public pressure, particularly on the governments of Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, led the organization to raise the issue for discussion at its regular meetings. But ASEAN's most concrete response to the still unresolved crisis has been to offer humanitarian aid and encourage the rapid repatriation of Rohingya refugees—something human rights groups, and most Rohingya themselves, have cautioned against.

In a sign of just how unserious ASEAN is about addressing the root causes of the current crisis, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing has been invited to attend the meeting as Myanmar's representative. ASEAN leaders will, no doubt, claim that this decision aligns with their "noninterference" principle, which prohibits involvement in the "internal affairs" of member states. But what constitutes impermissible "interference" has always been an opportunistic calculation on the part of the region's leaders, who are generally happy to promote economic integration while leaving human rights issues off the agenda. And make no mistake: Inviting Min Aung Hlaing to the meeting is, in itself, an unmistakable intervention in Myanmar's internal affairs.

The Tatmadaw and its coup government—dubbed the State Administration Council—are not the only game in town. Opponents of the coup, including duly elected members of Myanmar's parliament, announced the formation of a National Unity Government last week and have demanded an invitation to the summit in Jakarta. That makes two governments with dueling claims to legitimacy, neither with anywhere near a monopoly over the use of force within Myanmar's territory. By inviting Min Aung Hlaing and not National Unity Government representatives, ASEAN has made a choice to intervene and recognize the less legitimate of the two—a fateful decision with serious implications for the bloc's ability to act as an honest broker or a force for positive change.

Ultimately, it is not the noninterference principle that poses the greatest barrier to action but ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making structure. If any member state objects, a proposal cannot move forward. This structure has proved to be a hindrance to action on important regional priorities in the past, for instance when Cambodia scuttled multiple resolutions on the South China Sea. It's even more of a problem when the direct interests of an actor with a seat at the table are at stake.

Proponents of this consensus approach stress that it's an important way to keep lines of communication open and promote so-called constructive engagement between members. But ASEAN's previous efforts to engage the Tatmadaw on this basis do not inspire confidence.

Since admitting Myanmar as a member in 1997, when the Tatmadaw was in control, ASEAN leaders have struggled to deliver on their commitment to constructive engagement with the generals. Affording Myanmar membership in ASEAN represented an opportunity to assert the bloc's independence in the face of strong objections from the United States and others in the West, but hope also existed that it might help promote political progress inside Myanmar. The Tatmadaw remained unwilling to compromise, however, and ASEAN did little to push the country toward reform or prevent a brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 2007.

In a tacit admission of this failure, ASEAN governments convinced the Tatmadaw to formally pass on the opportunity to take up the rotating role of ASEAN chair in 2006, after the bloc faced immense pressure from the international community. A year later, seasoned ASEAN leader Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore expressed regret about admitting Myanmar into the bloc, calling the generals "stupid" behind closed doors in apparent exasperation. Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, who presided as ASEAN chair over Myanmar's admission in 1997, called for the country's expulsion in 2015 (though there exists no real mechanism for expelling a member).

ASEAN's structural deficits aren't the only thing holding it back. Many of its individual members have little interest in challenging the Tatmadaw's claims to legitimacy. Going down that road might hit a bit too close to home for some. Thailand's current prime minister is himself

the product of a 2014 coup. A sham election in Cambodia in 2018 has made a mockery of that country's once fragile democracy. And single-party regimes in Laos and Vietnam don't even pretend to claim democratic legitimacy.

While Indonesia has reportedly pushed for this special summit, and officials in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore seem at least nominally concerned about the situation, these other members have dragged their feet. Thailand's prime minister is opting not to attend himself, signaling that the one ASEAN member with a lengthy land border with Myanmar and significant influence over the Tatmadaw has already made the crisis a secondary priority. Along with Laos and Vietnam, Thailand even sent representatives to a military parade in Myanmar's capital to mark Armed Forces Day on March 27. All but a handful of countries declined invitations to the event, which proceeded while troops were massacring peaceful demonstrators throughout the rest of the country.

Some of these questionable decisions appear to be driven by a desire for Myanmar to return to some semblance of normalcy. By engaging with the State Administration Council, perhaps ASEAN leaders believe they can hasten the end of the resistance. But Myanmar has crossed a threshold. The Tatmadaw miscalculated and severely overplayed its hand in staging this coup. Myanmar's future—however it turns out—will not be a return to the past. The Tatmadaw's grip is tenuous, particularly as the National Unity Government gains steam, and ASEAN may very well be betting on a losing horse.

Myanmar's neighbors still have a role to play in helping to avert further catastrophe. Individual governments possess significant leverage, if they choose to use it. Thai officials have close personal relationships with Tatmadaw generals, and countries such as Singapore maintain substantial economic connections with the regime. Some officials, including Indonesia's foreign minister, have shown a willingness to meet with representatives from the elected government, which is a good sign in itself.

But ASEAN has long since been discredited as a vehicle for positive change. An organization that is hopelessly divided and governed by rules that hinder decisive action is not a recipe for a productive response to a crisis that threatens the region. ASEAN is sailing rudderless into the future, and its response to developments in Myanmar makes that clear.