

## **All Eyes on Myanmar: Indonesia Seeks a Unified ASEAN Response**

On February 16, **Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi** began a **tour of ASEAN member states**, starting with **Brunei**, the current chair of the regional organisation. Such a tour was regarded necessary in order to assure a joint common response to the **worrying events in Myanmar**, where the Army took power at the beginning of the month, an event which led to street protests and a divided international response. It is exactly this divided response that **Indonesia is trying to turn into a united front of action**, at least at regional level, through **ASEAN**. As the **driving force of the regional organisation**, Indonesia's role in assuring **ASEAN remains a vector of Peace, Security and Stability** stays central in the observance of the principles of the **ASEAN Charter**.

According to Marsudi, *"a regional mechanism must be able to work better to give constructive assistance to the settlement of the difficult issue"*, hence *"Indonesia has consistently expressed readiness to contribute to it"*. Part of Indonesia's efforts to *"exercise self-restraint and pursue the path of dialogue in finding solutions to challenges, so as not to exacerbate the condition"*, Minister Marsudi spoke of having contacted the **Foreign Ministers of ASEAN member states**, as well as her counterparts from **Australia, Great Britain, India and Japan**. **UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Myanmar**, Christine Schraner Burgener, has also been contacted by the Indonesian Minister. Similar dialogues with the **US** and **Chinese Ministers of Foreign Affairs** took place on February 16 and 17, respectively.

Following the incidents caused by the Burmese army on February 1, **Indonesia and Malaysia have requested an extraordinary meeting of the Association** in order to discuss the on-going developments in Myanmar. While the **ASEAN's collective position** was to *"encourage the pursuance of dialogue, reconciliation and the return to normalcy in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar"*, the response of Southeast Asian countries signaled a rather diverse first reaction. Not surprisingly, **Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines** expressed their concern over the on-going political crisis. **The Foreign Minister of Singapore**, Vivian Balakrishnan, after defining the alarming situation in Burma, however stated that there are no reasons to adopt *"widespread sanctions"* against the country and that the ASEAN group can facilitate the return to normal. Prawit Wongsuwon, Deputy Prime Minister of the **Kingdom of Thailand** regarded the recent developments as Myanmar's "internal affair", an assessment also echoed by the **Cambodian** premier Hun Sen. **Laos** refrained from official statements, while **Vietnam** manifested its will for the situation to *"soon stabilise (...) and develop the country for peace, stability and cooperation in the region"*.

Undoubtedly, **Indonesia's consistent diplomatic initiative to seek a joint response from ASEAN**

**demonstrates the country's responsible regional role as a communicator and guardian of peace**. In fact, it is exactly Indonesia's experience and sense of responsibility in conflict resolution and peace building – such as the peace process in Afghanistan – which were highly commended by the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, in his telephone call with Minister Marsudi, on February 16.

Indonesia's foreign policy move comes at a time when **the international community is rather divided on the military, political and social dynamics in Myanmar**. In the immediate aftermath of the events, the **Group of Seven** largest economies (G7) were *“united in condemning the coup in Myanmar”* expressed deep concern about the fate of detained political leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi. The **Community of Democracies**, a global coalition of states supporting common democratic values and standards, currently chaired by **Romania**, expressed *“grave concern for the Myanmar military's removal of the democratically elected civilian government; for the arbitrary detention of civilian government leaders, civil society members, human rights activists, and journalists”*. Certain individual states went further, applying punitive measures. **New Zealand**, for example, has interrupted its relations with the military junta and the **US** has already adopted sanctions. The **European Union** is planning a meeting on the matter on February 22, possibly scheduled so that ASEAN's response could be properly considered. **Japan** was rather reluctant in joining the denouncing Myanmar, as, in Minister's Yoshihide Suga's opinion, too harsh punitive measures would lead to Myanmar's increasing reliance on China.

According to the **Chinese state-run media**, however, the recent developments in Myanmar are nothing but a *“cabinet reshuffle”*. Responding to an interview with several Burmese media outlets on February 15, the **Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar**, Chen Hai, stated that *“As a friendly neighbor of Myanmar, China pays great attention to what is happening in Myanmar recently”*, noting, however, that his country was *“not informed in advance of the political change in Myanmar”* and recent change *“is absolutely not what China wants to see”*. During the interview, the Chinese Ambassador manifested his country's support for *“the mediation efforts by ASEAN”*.

Given the generally rare media appearances of Chinese diplomats, there is a possibility that the Ambassador's interview was in response to a previous protest in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, on February 11. According to the protesters, the Beijing *“aided the coup plotters”* and transferred experts to Myanmar to help the military junta replicate the so-called digital Great Wall of China. China immediately denied any involvement and refuted the accusations as *“extremely ridiculous”* nonsense. Similar inferences have been voiced with regard to **Russia**, whose Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, visited Myanmar only days ahead of the coup. While Russia never responded to the allegations, its representative at the UN Human Rights Council called the coup a *“purely domestic affair of the sovereign state”*.

So far, **China and Russia have vetoed a UN Security Council condemnation of the coup**. The two countries, however, were part of the consensual **UN Human Rights Council Resolution** to release Myanmar's former *de facto* President Aung San Suu Kyi and other officials and to cease the violence against the protesters. Later on, China and Russia *“dissociated”* from the resolution.

Understandably, Indonesia's role in the mediation process at ASEAN level **will have sound international reverberations**. Of equal importance is, of course, **the reaction of the current authorities in Myanmar. Myanmar's decade-long democratic transition shall serve as an inspiring model for the Global South, rather than a shattered dream where power games are placed ahead of democratic development and civil society's aspirations**. Shall the on-going Indonesian diplomatic demarche identify a mutually acceptable solution at regional level, with the **assent of Myanmar's all relevant parties**, there is no doubt it will be embraced by the international community. **Indonesia's efforts will hence become not only a reinforcement of the ASEAN principles, but also a stabilizing factor and a common denominator in the International Arena.**

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*The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.*