

## **All Eyes on Myanmar (4):**

### **ASEAN Leaders' Meeting as Vector of Consensus**

The **ASEAN Leaders' Meeting** held in Jakarta on Saturday, April 24, **at the initiative of the President of Indonesia**, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), represents a so-far successful result of tremendous and assiduous diplomatic efforts to convene it – in the first place – and – even more difficult – to reach a consensus (*a fundamental principle governing the entire activity of ASEAN*) **on the situation in Myanmar**. It stands as a daring diplomatic endeavour, which has been developed as a regular ASEAN Summit, yet clearly reflecting the dramatic developments in the aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar.

The first conclusion coming out from the Chair's Statement is that Myanmar's coup leader, **Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is presented as a part of the ASEAN Leaders, which means that his current official capacity has been de jure accepted as leader of Myanmar.** The title of the Chair's Statement (*i.e. ASEAN Leaders' Meeting*), issued at the end of the summit is very clear from this point of view. Naturally, the invitation extended to General Min at the ASEAN Meeting also represented a strong incentive for the coup leader to agree with the need for dialogue and negotiation process.

The Meeting took place in the well-known tragic situation of Myanmar and was echoed in Jakarta with public protests during the Meeting, right in front of the ASEAN Secretariat – the venue of the event.

**A consensus having been reached on the situation in Myanmar is – undoubtedly – not only very much commendable, but similarly a test – passed with flying colours – by the regional organisation. Composed of five substantial and extremely important points, underlined in a clear formulation, as per the Chairman's Statement of the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 2021, the ASEAN Leaders' agreed on the following:**

- First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
- Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.
- Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN.
- Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre.
- Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

The ASEAN Leaders have also presented their view on a related question to the much regrettable developments in Myanmar, namely the continued efforts in addressing the situation in the Rakhine State.

**Shall one give credit to the Senior General Min Aung Hlaing**, one may say, without hesitation, that ASEAN, diplomatically, managed **to identify the most important premises leading to a solution for the crisis in Myanmar. The immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar by exercising utmost restraint by all parties is absolutely necessary and, at the same time, will serve as the background for starting the negotiations.**

Certainly, it is worthy to pinpoint that, while still being in Jakarta, the coup leader **was perceived with a not very much encouraging overall determination to fully act in accordance with the five points above.** The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, **asked by the press about the reaction of the coup leader** said that **the general was “not opposed to a visit by as ASEAN delegation or humanitarian assistance” and that “he heard us; he would take the points in which he considered helpful”.**

Having in mind that *“by all parties”*, included in the Chair’s Statement, **encompasses the Myanmar election winners**, most of them currently under arrest, one may acknowledge the difficulty of the negotiations, as well as their unpredictable outcome. On one hand, for those involved in the coup, which considers the regime change a fait accompli, the negotiations might be regarded as possibly delegitimizing, yet necessary. The election winners – regrouped as a National Unity Government (NUG) – and their associated mass of protesters may find the peace negotiations as a venue for voicing their claims and concerns, yet may be reluctant to depart from the former status-quo. As a representative of the Myanmar opposition put it, *“Meetings that contribute to a solution to the deepening crisis in Myanmar are welcome (...) meetings that exclude the people of Myanmar but include murderer-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing... are unlikely to be helpful.”* Certainly, reaching consensus among such a multiple spectrum of actors has no quick solution, hence leaving room for the regrettable scenario of a protracted crisis.

In this regard, the third point of the consensus, that a **Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process**, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN, is of utmost importance, being as well a significant diplomatic success. The accomplishment of this point could predict the de-escalation and possible settlement of the Myanmar crisis.

With reference to the Meeting of the Leaders of ASEAN itself, this event was not presented in the Chair’s Statement **as a sole and specific meeting on Myanmar**, as it was and continues to be reflected in mass-media and in different political statements. **In fact, it was an urgency** to be treated and presented in ASEAN style. The Myanmar question is tackled just at the end of the document in the framework of the *“pressing issues of common interest to all ASEAN Member States”*. **In other words, the Statement is elaborated in the form of a normal annual summit of ASEAN.**

The upper part of the Statement, i.e. the paragraph two, though a reiteration of the very initial position of ASEAN, **represents a warning for the Myanmar's coup leader** present in the audience about the tremendous negative results of continuing the dangerous situation in Myanmar upon the political stability in the ASEAN Member States, the Centrality role and unity of the Association and ASEAN Community. Concurrently, in the same paragraph, the document **details how the other nine ASEAN Member States expect to solve the situation in Myanmar, namely by “adherence to the rule of Law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government, respect for fundamental freedoms, and the promotion and protection of human rights”**. It is worthy to observe the absence of the demand to return to status qua, which could have been interpreted as an act of interference into internal affairs of Myanmar.

**The atmosphere of the discussions** can be inferred from the statements of President of Indonesia, Prime Minister of Singapore (*already mentioned above*) and Prime Minister of Malaysia explaining the firm manner they spoke, as well as some aspects which were not introduced in the Chair's Statement.

**During the press conference following the Meeting, President Joko Widodo assured the Indonesian people** that the situation in Myanmar was discussed very seriously, with firm wording.

President of Indonesia emphasised that *“the development of the situation in Myanmar cannot be further accepted and, cannot continue anymore. The violence has to be stopped. Democracy, stability, and peace in Myanmar must be restored immediately. The interests of Myanmar's people must always be a priority”*. The President also referred to *“the importance of the military leaders in Myanmar to assume, as first step, the commitment to stop using their violence. At the same time, all parties should refrain so that the tension be reduced”*.

**Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin** declared that he *“called for unconditional release of political prisoners”* and that *“the deplorable situation in Myanmar must stop immediately”*.

**The successful convening of the Meeting itself** represents a concrete evidence of the positive advantage of diplomacy in action. It is as well a demonstration of the ASEAN style to address complicated situations and questions by applying its sacred principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of any Member State, being aware that the external actions have only the role of a facilitator. **The determining factor remains the internal one, i.e. the voice and the will of the people**. The principle of observing the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence forms the intangible political framework of the ASEAN Community. So far, there is no abdication or derogation in case of these principles, regardless some attempts to bypass the values enshrined in the UN Charter. In fact, the whole Southeast Asia political and strategic architecture is based on these sacred principles.

At the same time, the Meeting **was a test for the Unity, Stability and Centrality of ASEAN, which was**

**successfully passed. Indonesia being the initiator**, at the highest level, **has consolidated its role as the driving force of ASEAN** by materializing such important, yet particularly complex, diplomatic endeavour. **By continuing Indonesia's serious involvement and accelerating the rhythm of next developments, there are grounds to reach a viable solution for the tragedy happening in Myanmar.** Regrettably, the on-going crisis represents a disgrace to the democratic path the international community supported Myanmar to enter, after multiple turbulences during its contemporary history.

Naturally, as a strong and responsible regional actor and close neighbour, **Thailand may play a key role** in the crisis mitigation efforts along side with other important close or regional neighbours.

Ultimately, it is to the interest of the people of Myanmar the return to the path of democracy, **even if such a process would be based on a political-military compromise.** As to the date reserved for the beginning of such a process, no proposal has been yet advanced. From a diplomatic standpoint, a lengthy process is – sadly – to be expected.

**In the eventuality of a contrary result, this attempt might serve as a tonic for those voices arguing that Myanmar has fallen short of complying with the criteria of a full and equal member of ASEAN.**

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**This paper represents an opinion.**

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