

CHALLENGES FACING THE ASEAN POLITICAL AND SECURITY COMMUNITY DUE TO THE 2021 MYANMAR MILITARY COUP: THE ROLE OF ASEAN CENTRALITY ©Σ

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ABSTRACT

The coup in Myanmar in February 2021 marked a significant escalation in the country's domestic issues. It presented a considerable challenge for the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), which aims to foster political and security cooperation to achieve stability and peace among ASEAN member states. Members of the ASEAN Community are committed to upholding democratic principles and human rights. Additionally, ASEAN countries have agreed to prioritise ASEAN centrality in decision-making processes to address regional challenges. This study discusses how the 2021 military coup in Myanmar has challenged the ASEAN Political and Security Community. The inability to resolve this coup highlights the limitations of ASEAN centrality. The coup exposes ASEAN's lack of a coercive mechanism to address violations of democracy and human rights by the Myanmar military regime. Furthermore, the absence of unity among ASEAN members in responding to the situation in Myanmar and actions that deviate from ASEAN agreements have undermined the organisation's credibility and cohesion, raising increasing concerns.

Keywords: Myanmar Crisis, ASEAN Political and Security Community, ASEAN Centrality, Cohesiveness, Credibility

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CABARAN KOMUNITI POLITIK DAN KESELAMATAN ASEAN AKIBAT KUDETA TENTERA MYANMAR 2021: PERANAN PEMUSATAN ASEAN

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ABSTRAK

Kudeta di Myanmar pada Februari 2021 telah menandakan peningkatan yang ketara masalah domestik negara tersebut. Penulisan ini membentangkan cabaran yang besar bagi Komuniti Politik dan Keselamatan ASEAN (APSC) untuk memupuk kerjasama politik dan keselamatan bagi mencapai kestabilan dan keamanan di kalangan negara-negara anggota ASEAN. Anggota Komuniti ASEAN berkomitmen untuk mempertahankan prinsip demokrasi dan hak asasi manusia. Selain itu, negara-negara ASEAN telah bersetuju untuk mengutamakan pemusatan ASEAN dalam proses pembuatan keputusan untuk menangani cabaran serantau. Kajian ini membincangkan bagaimana kudeta tentera Myanmar pada tahun 2021 telah mencabar Komuniti Politik dan Keselamatan ASEAN. Ketidakupayaan untuk menyelesaikan kudeta ini menonjolkan kelemahan pemusatan ASEAN. Kudeta tersebut menunjukkan kekurangan mekanisme kuasa paksaan ASEAN untuk menangani isu pelanggaran demokrasi dan hak asasi manusia oleh rejim tentera Myanmar. Selanjutnya, ketiadaan kesatuan di kalangan anggota ASEAN dalam menanggapi situasi di Myanmar dan tindakannya yang menyimpang dari perjanjian ASEAN telah menggugat kredibiliti dan kesepaduan organisasi tersebut, menjadikan kebimbangan semakin mendalam.

Kata kunci: *Krisis Myanmar, Komuniti Politik dan Keselamatan ASEAN, pemusatan ASEAN, Kesepaduan, Kredibiliti*

Introduction

In 2015, ASEAN implemented a regional integration agenda under the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 framework. This vision aims to increase cooperation between member countries in three pillars of integration, namely the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Even though these visions are normatively achievable, efforts to realise them are still challenges that ASEAN must face, especially those related to the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) pillar.

One internal problem still a "thorn" in ASEAN is the crisis in Myanmar. These internal problems related to violations of democracy and human rights in Myanmar have presented entirely political severe challenges to the ASEAN Community. These violations of democracy and human rights in Myanmar have tarnished the goals of establishing the ASEAN Political and Security Community. In the APSC scheme, ASEAN countries agreed to collaborate to create political stability and security through a commitment to comply with democracy, the rule of law and good government, respect and protection of human rights, and various fundamental freedoms.

So far, the crisis in Myanmar is an essential test for ASEAN (Thu and Engel 2021). Can ASEAN commit to the goals of establishing the ASEAN Political and Security Community in which these countries wish to realise political stability, peace, and security? APSC is the highest political commitment that is the basis for ASEAN political and security cooperation. In this case, ASEAN member countries stated that they would disapprove of a non-constitutional and non-democratic change of government or the use of their territory for activities that would disturb other ASEAN member countries' peace, security, and stability.

Regarding the Myanmar issue, can ASEAN act cohesively, given that the Myanmar issue is now considered a regional and international problem? The escalating crisis resulting from the 2021 political coup in Myanmar has harmed the democratisation process in Southeast Asia. As the crisis dragged on, ASEAN's cohesiveness and credibility in resolving the crisis in its region began to be questioned. There is scepticism that the region cannot do more than lengthy dialogue and consensus. This view is focused on the existing mechanisms in ASEAN, which emphasises the ASEAN Way more, making it difficult to resolve the Myanmar problem with this principle.

In response to the Coup issue in Myanmar in 2021, there were differences in attitudes between ASEAN countries. These differences in dealing with security issues in ASEAN have resulted in regional divisions at the ASEAN internal level. This condition has led to a weakening of ASEAN's role in facing emerging regional security challenges. It has lowered ASEAN's reputation in the international community and decentralised ASEAN in the regional security architecture (Dunst 2021; Beeson 2022). The weak unity of ASEAN countries in dealing with the Myanmar issue shows the weakness of ASEAN cohesiveness. This condition challenges ASEAN's credibility as a regional political and security cooperation forum.

So far, research has been conducted to examine the challenges of the centrality of ASEAN cooperation. However, these studies still need to operationalise ASEAN centrality (Natalegawa 2019; Nabbs-Keller 2020). Even several studies that mention ASEAN centrality need to explain what centrality means (Pomfret 2013; Rolls 2012; Tan 2013).

Many studies on the ASEAN Political and Security Community have also been carried out, focusing on organisations' internal and external challenges (Chalk 2015; Collins 2007; Chun 2021; Chalermphanupap 2014; Chang 2016; Khoo 2015). Even though it has mentioned ASEAN cohesiveness, this study has yet to provide an overview of cohesiveness in responding to political and security issues at the internal level.

This study focuses on the challenges of ASEAN centrality (APSC) based on

Myanmar's non-compliance with norms and rules that are common goals, Myanmar's non-compliance in implementing the 2021 Myanmar military coup problem resolution mechanism that ASEAN has provided, and ASEAN's inability to create a unified stance in resolving the issue of Myanmar after the 2021 Coup.

Based on the background above, this article aims to understand the challenges faced by the ASEAN Political and Security Community after the 2021 Myanmar military coup. In this context, ASEAN faces challenges to ASEAN centrality regarding the issue of Myanmar after the 2021 military coup.

Framework

ASEAN Centrality

The concept of ASEAN centrality is used in this study because ASEAN centrality is often associated with the weakness of ASEAN leadership in determining attitudes and making the same decisions to respond to problems in the region. ASEAN centrality

ASEAN centrality is not a wholly new or unique term. However, it is related to several similar concepts, namely: ASEAN as "leader", "driver", "architect", "institutional centre", "pioneer", "core", and "fulcrum" regional processes and institutional design in the Asia Pacific Region (Acharya 2017).

ASEAN centrality must be understood in terms of its significance in strengthening ASEAN's ability to influence and shape the regional environment and regional order (Caballero-Anthony 2014). As articulated by ASEAN Leaders, this centrality ensures that regional processes and engagement run well and are directed and determined by ASEAN-led mechanisms. Regarding ASEAN leadership, Richard Stubbs provides a valuable way of operationalising ASEAN leadership. Stubbs defines ASEAN leadership as an interactive process by which (ASEAN), as a country or group of countries in the international system in cooperation with follower countries, can (1) facilitate the resolution of a problem area, (2) lead the development of regional infrastructure consultations, and (3) influence and shape the way an issue is discussed (Stubbs, 2014).

There are at least three aspects of ASEAN centrality (Yang 2015): First, ASEAN must hold a central position in Southeast Asian integration, and ASEAN represents the common interests, common position, and shared identity of Southeast Asian countries. It means that there is unity and cohesiveness in the regional community. As ASEAN strengthens regional integration, its members will recognise and fully support the core values of the ASEAN Community. Realising ASEAN Centrality facilitates closer integration between the collective interests of the ASEAN Community and the interests of individual ASEAN members, thereby placing ASEAN at the heart of regional and national development.

The second aspect of ASEAN Centrality is the consolidation of ASEAN as a centre in international power politics and "the core of East Asian and Asia Pacific regionalism". The development of ASEAN community development projects allows its members to rely on ASEAN's good services in political struggles among regional countries. They are practising ASEAN Centrality in ASEAN-led processes so that ASEAN will consolidate the regional and individual interests of Southeast Asian countries and prevent these interests from being marginalised.

Finally, ASEAN Centrality is essential if ASEAN is to maintain its agenda-setting and bargaining capabilities in an ASEAN-led process. If ASEAN can consolidate its unity and cohesion, regional collective interests will be guaranteed.

In this study, ASEAN centrality is defined as the ability of the ASEAN organisation to form unity and a unified attitude to issue binding decisions that its member countries can obey. Thus, there will be no organisational centrality if there is no complete unity of attitude among member countries when they try to solve or find a solution to a problem that confronts them with outside parties. This means that external powers, such as non-

member countries, have little influence, let alone being able to control the attitudes of small countries that are members of the ASEAN organisation. In this case, member countries have an equal position, with widespread authority, even though there are member countries with senior categories as founders or figures in forming the organisation.

Centrality also means the same desire of each member country for the target of a decision and the same commitment to comply with it. It not only concerns leadership and management as well as organisational performance but also concerns fundamental issues, namely values or culture more broadly, which influence the way decisions are made and the behaviour or actions of member countries (Nainggolan 2023)

According to liberal intergovernmental theory, organisations are cohesive when they can speak with one voice or establish a familiar position when the preferences of individual member states converge, when they require commitment from other states, or when they believe that a standard policy would be more beneficial (Moravcsik 1995; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2018). Likewise, member states are divided, or lack cohesion when their preferences differ, and the benefits of cooperation could be higher. Cohesion concerns the question of the extent to which the members of these organisations have the same voting position.

In the regional context, Nguitragool adds that "a set of ideas, belief systems and norms that determine the behaviour of regional organisations" shape the cohesion of a regional organisation. Individual member states' dynamics shape regional organisations' cohesion in pursuing their preferences (Nguitragool 2018).

Meanwhile, organisational credibility is usually associated with the organisation's reputation for achieving its goals. In addition, credibility (or reputation) refers to the extent to which an organisation or an actor is expected to uphold its commitments. In international relations, threat credibility is the perceived probability that a leader or country will follow through on the threats and promises it has made. According to Richard Ned Lebow, a credible threat includes the commitment formulated, the communication of that commitment to others, the ability to support the commitment, and the desire to support the commitment (Lebow 1981).

Regarding ASEAN's centrality, Former Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan argued that ASEAN should strive to become "a centre of growth, a centre of gravity, a fulcrum for the revival of regional architecture, new growth areas, and landscapes." He notes that centrality has external and internal dimensions and requires members "to remain united, develop, coordinate, and participate as a cohesive group with clear shared goals" (Petri and Plummer 2013). If ASEAN is divided internally, it will weaken ASEAN's credibility in the eyes of its dialogue partners and the international world. Apart from that, if ASEAN unity is not achieved, it will be problematic for ASEAN to maintain its central role in the region.

The tough stance of each ASEAN member who cannot compromise or be united in dealing with the issue of the 2021 Coup in Myanmar has shown the world community the weakness of ASEAN's centrality, even though ASEAN has been claimed to be united and solid. The absence of a common perception in responding to the Myanmar issue after the 2021 Coup shows the weakness of ASEAN unity, member countries' diverse national interests, and collective commitment. All this causes the absence of ASEAN centrality. In other words, without common perception, unity, interests, and commitment, ASEAN centrality is just an illusion (Nainggolan 2021).

ASEAN Political and Security Community

The ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) is one of the three pillars of ASEAN Community cooperation. The ASEAN Community was formed at the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali on October 7, 2003. The ASEAN Community consists of three

pillars: the ASEAN Political and Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

The ASEAN Political and Security Community is a community that specifically relies on peaceful processes to resolve member disputes. The overall foundation is political cooperation and security cooperation within a comprehensive security framework, which includes national and regional resilience. The establishment of the APSC aims to develop and strengthen political and security cooperation by forming and enforcing norms, preventing conflict, developing ways to resolve conflicts, and building post-conflict peace (*APSC Blueprint 2009*).

In determining its cooperation norms, APSC adheres strictly to *national standards of sovereignty, sovereign equality, non-interference, territorial integrity*, decision making based on consensus, national and regional resilience, avoiding the use of threats or force, and peaceful resolution of differences and disputes (Luhulima 2011).

The realisation of the APSC will ensure that countries in the region live peacefully with each other and the world in a just, democratic, and harmonious environment. APSC is not a defence pact, military alliance, or joint foreign policy. In overcoming future security challenges, ASEAN Member States are responsible for strengthening regional peace, stability, and security so that they are free from foreign military interference in any form.

The Political Cooperation launched in the APSC focuses on developing a just, democratic, and harmonious environment and upholding human rights. By highlighting democracy and human rights, Indonesia's political and security cooperation expands comprehensive security from security regime to human security (Luhulima 2011).

In this collaboration, ASEAN needs to foster shared political values such as democracy and human rights because developing these values will greatly reduce sources of conflict between countries and within countries. Democracy and human security determine national security in the constellation of life between globalised countries. Therefore, securing human life within the ASEAN environment will also safeguard the lives of ASEAN countries.

The ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 re-emphasises the focus on comprehensive security. It stipulates, "In building a peaceful, secure and stable region, ASEAN adopts a comprehensive approach to security that enhances our capacity to confront existing problems or emerging challenges, resolve differences and peaceful disputes, ensuring that our region remains free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and enhancing maritime security and cooperation." Importantly, the Blueprint links peace and security with a "just, democratic and harmonious environment" (ASEAN Secretariat 2016).

Myanmar Issues and the 2021 Military Coup

The Myanmar issue is an issue that has become a strong criticism of ASEAN by the outside world. Two main issues are occurring in Myanmar, both of which have shown violations of democracy and human rights in Myanmar. First, there was a violent takeover of power in Myanmar. The military junta took over power from Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021. Second, there is the issue of the Rohingya ethnic group, whose existence the military authorities did not want. The Rohingya ethnic group has long experienced acts of violence committed by the authorities. Acts of violence and human rights violations have become increasingly violent since the military junta came to power in 2021. Acts of violence against them have resulted in thousands of casualties. As a result, there has been a wave of Rohingya ethnic refugees to neighbouring countries, which has become a problem in itself for ASEAN countries.

The event that marks an essential record of recent violations of democracy and human rights in Myanmar is the 2021 Military Coup. This latest coup caused the military

to expand its power and ushered the country into a dark period because Myanmar's political and economic conditions reached their lowest point (Pedersen 2022). The coup occurred on February 1, 2021, carried out by the Myanmar military group, known as the Tatmadaw, against the legitimate government. Commander-in-Chief General Ming Aung Hlaing led this coup in the country's capital, Naypyidaw. This incident resulted in the de facto leader of the Myanmar state, Aung San Suu Kyi, being deposed and detained by the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw then declared themselves a Military Junta Regime (Group 2021; Kompas 2021).

The cause of this coup began when the military camp was accused of fraud in the general elections held in November 2020 (Aung 2021), which was caused by the strong legitimacy of the military in the country's political dynamics, which had been rooted for a long time, entering an era of transition to democracy, since 2011 (Stoke 2019). A military coup was not the first incident by the Myanmar Military regime in controlling control over the country's government. The coup began in 1962 when General U Nu seized power from the leader of Myanmar, who was elected through democratic elections, U Ne Win (Steinberg 2010; Perry 2021)

Meanwhile, demonstrations and civil disobedience against the Myanmar military continue. The military junta's decision to extend the detention and prosecution of Suu Kyi also heated tensions between the wider community and the military junta in various large and small cities in Myanmar (Kompas 2021). The military junta continues to suppress the freedoms of Myanmar's civil society, prohibiting people from gathering, arresting pro-democracy politicians and activists, imposing a curfew, closing communications access, and shutting down all internet and telecommunications networks for the third time since then. In addition, the military leadership continues to carry out violent oppression and persecution against the people of Myanmar to crack down on dissent and people who defend their rights (Aswin Ariyanto Azis, 2023).

What is important to note in Myanmar is the 2020 election activities, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and alleged human rights violations against the Rohingya ethnic minority by the military junta, which have not been addressed by the Myanmar government (Kompas 2020). Meanwhile, the Tatmadaw admitted that it had to intervene because the Myanmar government failed to investigate allegations of fraud in the November 2020 election. However, the Tatmadaw also ignored the existence of the Myanmar National General Election Commission, which is constitutionally authorised to resolve election disputes.

Since the coup in February 2021 sparked a bloody civil war, more than 4,000 people have been killed and around 20,000 jailed for opposing the military takeover. Dozens of prisoners are missing and believed to have been killed by the regime. About 50 people were arrested in June for posting anti-regime messages on social media (Washington Post, September 10, 2023). In April 2023, air strikes killed at least 100 people, most of them civilians and many of them children. Human Rights Watch described the attack as a war crime (Arab News.com). As a result of the increasing conflict in Myanmar, by the end of October 2023, it is estimated that 500,000 people will become refugees (Asiainikkei.com, December 6, 2023).

Since the military took power in February 2021, the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has continued to get worse. Even though the international community intends to provide humanitarian assistance, they have difficulty accessing people who need it. This condition has led to a massive civil war. Border control measures and lockdowns have exacerbated this increase in violence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as sanctions imposed by Western countries, which have created significant challenges for ASEAN in delivering humanitarian aid to affected communities (Caballero 2021). This situation makes it difficult for ASEAN to implement its plans to provide humanitarian assistance to Myanmar.

ASEAN Steps to Overcome the Myanmar Coup

Coinciding with the day the military coup occurred in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, ASEAN stated that ASEAN was entirely bound by the ASEAN Charter, which emphasised the importance of political stability and security in the region and also encouraged the implementation of dialogue and reconciliation for all parties involved in Myanmar (Association et al. 2021). At that time, Indonesia immediately appealed to all parties in Myanmar to exercise restraint (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021). The Indonesian government takes at least 4 (four) decisions in response to the Myanmar military coup, namely: 1) Indonesia is very concerned about the latest political developments in Myanmar; 2) Indonesia calls for the use of the principles contained in the ASEAN Charter, including a commitment to the law, good governance, democratic principles and constitutional government; 3) Indonesia also underlines that disputes over election results can be resolved through available legal mechanisms; 4) Indonesia calls on all parties in Myanmar to exercise restraint and prioritise a dialogue approach in finding solutions to various existing challenges and problems so that the situation does not get worse.

After more than a month after the coup in Myanmar, ASEAN countries still need to take a significant stance toward efforts to resolve the crisis in Myanmar. Even the ten ASEAN member countries responded to the coup in Myanmar, which occurred on February 1, 2021, differently. Some expressed concern and asked all parties to exercise restraint, but others kept their distance and chose to wait for developments in the situation.

The Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand viewed the coup in Myanmar as an internal matter. They did not comment further, despite all three having experienced a military coup and the struggle to form a democratic government. Philippine Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin Jr. said he was “monitoring” developments in the situation in Myanmar following the arrest of several civilian leaders, including de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and Thai Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan also made similar statements. On the other hand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia expressed deep concern, calling on all parties to exercise restraint and work towards a peaceful solution. Meanwhile, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, and Laos have not issued any statements.

After nine months since the military coup that triggered the crisis in Myanmar, ASEAN has also not made a real contribution to alleviating the humanitarian needs of the Myanmar people. However, ASEAN has finally made progress by discussing the Myanmar issue at the ASEAN Leaders Conference in Jakarta on April 24, 2021. ASEAN’s approach to resolving the political situation in Myanmar resulted in five points of agreement, including an immediate cessation of hostilities, humanitarian assistance, and the appointment of an ASEAN envoy (ASEAN 2022).

The Five-point consensus agreed to by all ASEAN leaders, including Myanmar, contains: 1. Stop all forms of violence occurring in Myanmar as quickly as possible, 2. Carry out constructive dialogue for all parties to achieve peace in the interests of the Myanmar people; 3. Willingness to facilitate mediation and dialogue for all parties involved, and 4. Providing humanitarian assistance through the AHA Center, 5. Sending a special envoy to visit Myanmar to meet all parties involved (CSIS 2022; Studies 2023; Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2021). This consensus is aimed at suppressing the humanitarian crisis occurring in Myanmar

Based on the five-point consensus mechanism, involvement and dialogue are very important for ASEAN in handling the Myanmar crisis. Unfortunately, in terms of distributing aid to the people of Myanmar, the Five Point Consensus is not of much help because it needs to set out ways to do this. The AHA Center, for example, has the

resources but needs the mandate and authority to operate in situations of internal conflict. ASEAN hopes that the Myanmar Military Regime will cooperate with countries in the region rather than alienate its people. In this mechanism, ASEAN relies on the junta's willingness to open the door to dialogue.

Brunei's leadership period in 2021 will be the basis for ASEAN to take substantive steps to overcome the Myanmar crisis. Even though the pandemic hampered ASEAN's diplomatic efforts, under his leadership, Brunei finally managed to convene the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on Myanmar in April 2021 in Jakarta, encouraged mainly by Indonesia, which produced the Five-Point Consensus and appointed a special ASEAN envoy to Myanmar.

However, there are obstacles to implementing the resolution of the Myanmar crisis. Myanmar Army Chief General Min Aung Hlaing's recent refusal to link ASEAN special envoys to meet with all parties, including ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, has complicated ASEAN's current efforts. Finally, ASEAN "expelled" Myanmar from the 2021 ASEAN Summit after Myanmar expressed the country's unwillingness to cooperate in the regional democratic process.

Looking at the composition of Brunei Darussalam's leadership and the interests of each ASEAN member country, resolving the Myanmar problem has encountered difficulties because it takes a long time to reach a consensus within a limited time. Therefore, it is expected that member states choose to respond separately. Jakarta asked all parties in Myanmar to exercise restraint and encourage constructive dialogue rather than ASEAN confronting and blaming the leadership of the current Myanmar military regime (CNBC Indonesia 2021).

After the arrival of Cambodia's leadership as Chair of ASEAN, the image of the 2021 ASEAN Summit regarding ASEAN as if "abandoning" Myanmar has become a significant concern for the Cambodian government. The country considers that Myanmar is the one who has ignored the rights and responsibilities entrusted to it by the ASEAN chairperson. Given the current situation, constructive engagement with Myanmar is critical to Cambodia's perspective on the crisis. Therefore, trust and confidence building between ASEAN and Myanmar has been identified as one of the critical priorities for the next leadership period.

Cambodia's leadership role has been constructive in involving all stakeholders, not just the junta, to ensure that Myanmar returns to being a 'normal' ASEAN member state. With the special envoy, Cambodia as chair can focus on building entry points on the ground and involving local actors. It is essential for the Chair, Special Envoy, and all ASEAN members to listen to all different views and ideas from stakeholders and local actors in Myanmar, especially to socialise in implementing the Five Point Consensus.

Under Cambodia's leadership, ASEAN focused on ACT (Addressing Challenges Together) as a regional diplomacy and collective strategy. Together with the designated and authorised ASEAN special envoys, member states must assume responsibility for rebuilding regional trust and overcoming existing obstacles to the Myanmar situation. The willingness of dialogue partners to engage and assist ASEAN in uniting is also essential for peaceful reconciliation. ASEAN will be more effective, practical, and resilient in maintaining its centrality if its institutions are strengthened.

Next, during Indonesia's leadership, President Jokowi, at the 42nd ASEAN Summit, stated that ASEAN would continue to encourage the implementation of the five points of consensus and encourage the creation of dialogue in the region (Azis et al. 2023). Indonesia will encourage dialogue with the junta and with many stakeholders in Myanmar. Indonesia wants the implementation of the Five Point Consensus to become ASEAN's primary mechanism to contribute to helping Myanmar emerge from its political crisis (Kompas, January 29, 2023). Apart from that, ASEAN also facilitates the AHA Center to carry out its duties in Myanmar (Kompas, May 11, 2023)

Junta's Disobedience: ASEAN Failing?

After waiting several months, the Myanmar military government paid little attention to the consensus. Even acts of violence by the Tatmadaw (military) continue. This is proven by the increasing pressure from the junta government on the pro-democracy movement. The junta government even used heavy military equipment, such as fighter planes, to carry out attacks on villages. The death toll has reached thousands of people. In October 2021, the Tatmadaw sent several troops to the northern part of Myanmar to face civilian resistance. During this period, Myanmar entered a new phase, namely the outbreak of civil war.

More than a year since the Myanmar coup, political contestation has gotten worse, and repression against pro-democracy groups and civilians has become more robust. The army has adopted a violently repressive playbook to strengthen its grip on the capital, adopting a strategy of gun barreling, airstrikes, assassinations, arrests, and torture in response to nationwide civilian protests, dissident movements, and opposition groups (Compendium 2022). In April 2022, air strikes killed at least 100 people, most of them civilians and many of them children. Human Rights Watch described the attack as a war crime.

The struggle waged by the People's Defense Forces, as well as armed ethnic groups against the military, is illustrated by mounting evidence that Myanmar is on the verge of civil war. This situation has brought the country to its lowest point. Layers of humanitarian crises, starting from refugee emergencies, cessation of access to basic needs in countries with failing administration and infrastructure, rampant poverty and food crises, and so forth. The normalisation of violence and armed conflict has become an everyday story in this country after losing its legitimate government.

Although ASEAN has taken steps to overcome Myanmar's problems, including establishing a five-point consensus policy, these initiatives have yet to improve the field significantly (Alexandra and Mantong, 2022). The consensus agreed upon at the ASEAN leaders' meeting is still pending. Because they felt that ASEAN was not united, General Min Aung Hlaing and Tatmadaw withdrew their commitment to the ASEAN-led peace process (Bangkok Post, October 7, 2021).

Various dialogues initiated by ASEAN or by ASEAN countries officially and informally have also been carried out, but they have yet to obtain significant results in overcoming the Myanmar problem. This was conveyed by President Jokowi to ASEAN leaders at the Biennial ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, East Nusa Tenggara, where Indonesia became Chair of ASEAN 2023: "I have to be honest, there has been no significant progress in implementing the Five Point Consensus, so we need ASEAN unity to formulate next steps."

The explanation for ASEAN's inability "to exert more successful influence on Myanmar over the past decade has given ASEAN accusations that the organisation is doing nothing to fulfil its commitments on paper and the belief that what ASEAN is doing is entirely ineffective. This ineffectiveness is due to the need for punitive sanctions and compliance mechanisms. Furthermore, ASEAN is considered to be only carrying out a rhetorical action strategy to encourage compliance with regional standards.

Apart from the lack of compelling sanctions and prosecution of Myanmar's violations, ASEAN's obstacle in overcoming this problem is its non-cohesive attitude. At times when these crucial conditions occurred in ASEAN, the attitudes of ASEAN member countries were not integrated in formulating policies towards Myanmar. ASEAN's permanent members are more concerned with creating a unified position against external pressure than developing a single policy aimed at Myanmar. This reaction to external pressure fatally weakened ASEAN's ability to resolve the Myanmar problem (Davies 2012). The differences in attitudes of Myanmar countries in resolving the Myanmar problem can also be seen in the statement by Lina Alexandra, Senior

Researcher CSIS: "There are divisions within ASEAN regarding how they should handle the Myanmar crisis " to a certain extent" (Arab News, May 12, 2023).

Apart from that, in the Myanmar Crisis related to the Rohingya issue, ASEAN was also considered to have made insufficient efforts to control the situation and inhibit further escalation through formally institutionalised approaches and 'tacit diplomacy and collective political will.' Using unusually harsh language, former ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan wrote in a Bangkok Post editorial:

After a humanitarian crisis occurs, ASEAN risks losing international credibility and trust if the regional group continues to ignore the suffering experienced by the Rohingya ethnic group. ASEAN needs a collective sense of urgency and effective leadership at this critical moment, facing the humanitarian disaster in Rakhine. This is bound to be a severe destabilising factor for the entire regional landscape (Bangkok Post, 2017)

ASEAN's inability to resolve the Myanmar problem has fueled the perception that ASEAN is irrelevant and needs a solid commitment to its organisation's goals. During the ASEAN Leaders' Summit in Jakarta, comments that appeared on the Washington Post's Opinion Editorial Board responding to the violations of democracy that occurred in Myanmar considered that ASEAN had failed and was irrelevant:

What the world got from the talkfest in Jakarta was a clear example of the impotence and increasing irrelevance of the regional forum. Instead of showing unity, this summit should have highlighted the inability of the nine ASEAN member countries (excluding Myanmar) to unite in achieving a standard policy to solve one of the world's worst problems (Washington Post, September 10, 2023).

The Challenge of ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN's Cohesiveness

The violation of democratic principles and human rights in Myanmar has challenged ASEAN institutionally. As an organisation that has become a political and security community, cohesiveness is essential; if it does not exist, achieving a condition called integration will be challenging. The unresolved Myanmar issue has questioned ASEAN's cohesiveness. Regarding the Myanmar Crisis, reduced ASEAN cohesion is a factor underlying significant setbacks in the ASEAN community development project (Fardhiyanti and Wee 2022) and achieving the goal of ASEAN centrality (Acharya 2017; Indraswari 2022). Apart from that, the position of ASEAN member countries is often divided when facing various regional security challenges, especially failures in taking a collective stance on internal ASEAN issues, which usually show differences of opinion. Incompatibility between member countries can be observed in the issues of the South China Sea dispute, the increasing influence of China in the region (Gloria 2021), China-U.S. rivalry, and the military coup in Myanmar.

Several observers have highlighted factors leading to increasing pessimism regarding ASEAN cohesion and the prospects for the APSC. Each member's domestic politics and the ASEAN's institutional structure also facilitate differences in member countries' attitudes regarding regional political and security issues (O'Neill 2018). The reduced intra-ASEAN cohesion has posed a severe challenge to ASEAN's aspirations to become the centre of diplomacy and regional processes in the Asia Pacific region (Acharya 2017)

The Myanmar problem dents ASEAN's cohesiveness. The different voices of member countries in responding to the Myanmar issue have shown the level of ASEAN's internal cohesiveness. ASEAN countries have different voices in decision-making regarding issues related to Myanmar, both at the internal ASEAN level and in decision-

making at the UN General Assembly. There are striking differences among ASEAN member countries in voting at the UN General Assembly; different preferences influence these differences. First, ASEAN member countries are divided on issues that impact their national preferences differently (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020).

Regarding democratisation, national reconciliation, and discrimination against minorities in Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and the Philippines, they voted against the resolution due to joint problems within the country. Meanwhile, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia voted for the resolution regarding the Rohingya, considering the strong public opinion supporting the Rohingya in these Muslim-majority countries (Chairil, Putri, and Pertiwi 2022).

Asian values norms and the ASEAN Way influence voting cohesion in organisations. The more central an issue is in ASEAN, the more likely ASEAN member countries are to act in a unified manner on this issue. The preferences of each member country will interact with the policies/norms/principles adopted at the institutional level. ASEAN tends to differ on issues with no basis or does not share regional policies at the ASEAN level, such as the death penalty, refugees, and arms transfers. A joint regional framework is not a cause but an intervening variable that increases the chances of incoherence among member countries. The principle of non-intervention, which is at the core of ASEAN cooperation, also contributes to APSC incoherence.

These ASEAN member countries responded differently to the Myanmar coup on February 1, 2021. Several ASEAN leaders expressed concern and asked all parties to exercise restraint. However, some keep their distance and wait for the situation to develop. The governments of the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand view the military coup in Myanmar as an internal problem and do not comment further, even though all three have experienced military coups and struggles to form democratic governments.

Philippine Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin Jr. said he was monitoring developments in Myanmar following the arrest of several civilian leaders, including de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and Thai Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan followed Manila's political stance. On the other hand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia expressed deep concern, calling on all parties to exercise restraint and seek a peaceful solution. Meanwhile, Vietnam, Brunei, Darussalam, and Laos have yet to issue any statements (<https://www.voaindonesia.com/>)

ASEAN member countries seem to be shackled by the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. The decision-making mechanism based on joint consensus also ultimately causes each member country to express its stance. It aligns with understanding ASEAN's attitude under the ASEAN Charter Article 2 Paragraph 2 letter e. Meanwhile, the United States, Britain, and the European Union will undoubtedly condemn the actions of the previous military coup government because the transfer of power was not carried out collectively to handle the protracted conflict in Myanmar.

Differences in the attitudes of ASEAN member countries also occur in response to the attitude that will be applied towards Myanmar regarding whether or not Myanmar will be invited to the ASEAN Summit after the 2021 Coup. The bloc has long held the principle of "non-intervention" and the tradition of "centrality" or agreement through consensus. It unravelled at a speed that surprised long-time ASEAN observers. The decision to bar Min Aung Hlaing from attending the meeting caused deep divisions barely resolved at the ASEAN summit. Several member states, including Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, argued for maintaining the status quo and allowing Min Aung Hlaing to attend the summit. However, Malaysia and Indonesia, which have publicly stated that the regime leader was not invited, along with Singapore and the Philippines, preferred to rescind the general's invitation. Eventually, a compromise was reached by inviting Myanmar to send "non-political representatives," an idea that Myanmar angrily rejected.

In addition, Cambodia and Thailand described the Myanmar issue as an internal problem, while Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia expressed concern, calling for self-control and a peaceful resolution. The Philippines, the region's oldest democracy, appeared to change its views by the day, ultimately stating that it views the takeover with "serious" and "deep" concerns. Vietnam, Brunei, and Laos took their time before issuing official statements. Over the past year, the inability of ASEAN member states to come together to recognise the importance of Myanmar and agree on collective action has allowed the generals to unleash a storm of violence and suffering that has devastated the people.

The potential for difficulty in decision-making in ASEAN due to the diversity of voices occurs in the case of Myanmar. Decisions take a long time because they have to be based on consensus. If ASEAN has succeeded in making a decision, then the new member countries can implement it. When making decisions, ASEAN founders often took different approaches. The Philippines always demands a legal basis for everything, while Singapore tends to ask what is in it for them. Malaysia always refers back to its government. While Thailand prefers the Committee, Indonesia wants everything done according to the Pancasila philosophy (antaranews.com 2018).

ASEAN's inability to take collective action to punish Myanmar is a note for ASEAN member countries to strengthen their cohesion in the future. It will be an extraordinary task, considering the emergence of security issues related to the conflict in Myanmar, which appears to be dividing ASEAN between countries and competing interests (Matthews 2006).

The Myanmar case could be a moment of truth for ASEAN, which has no actual dispute resolution mechanisms except vaguely formulated sections in its charter. However, ASEAN has committed to becoming a "rules-based organisation," and many important things have not been regulated. The existing rules were created over time.

The conditions above reflect weak ASEAN cohesiveness. This weak cohesiveness shows the weakness of ASEAN's leadership in determining attitudes and making the same decisions to respond to regional problems. On the Myanmar issue, APSC faces challenges to the centrality of ASEAN leadership.

ASEAN's Credibility

Based on the agreement made by ASEAN countries within the framework of the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), the principles of democracy and respect for human rights are norms that must be adhered to by member countries. In this agreement, member countries are committed to complying with the principles of democracy, the supremacy of law and good government, respecting and protecting human rights, and various fundamental freedoms (ASEAN Secretariat 2016). In this case, ASEAN countries agreed that they would not approve of non-constitutional and non-democratic government changes or the use of their territory for activities that would disturb other ASEAN member countries' peace, security, and stability.

The APSC agreement is a reference for ASEAN countries in creating regional security and peace through implementing democratic values at home, in the region, and in the world. ASEAN countries agree that democratic values and human rights are among the instruments that create a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region. Even though ASEAN member countries have different levels of democracy, this is not an obstacle to agreeing to the APSC and is further strengthened by the provisions of the ASEAN Charter.

In democracy, the indicators of democracy will, among other things, be seen based on 1) the electoral process and pluralism, 2) civil liberties, 3) the functioning of government, 4) political participation, and 5) political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Based on these indicators, the Myanmar regime is proven to have violated many democratic values and human rights. As a member of ASEAN,

Myanmar has violated the ASEAN Charter and the APSC Agreement, which have committed to upholding democratic values and human rights. Besides that, Myanmar has not made progress in implementing the Five Point Consensus (Kompas 2021). The Myanmar Military Regime's refusal to implement all points in the Five Point Consensus has challenged ASEAN as an organisation that is committed to respecting democratic values and human rights.

Myanmar's rejection of implementing the five-point consensus reflects Myanmar's non-compliance with the ASEAN organisational regime. Myanmar's violations of the principles of democracy and human rights, which are a shared commitment towards the vision of the ASEAN Community, have shown that there are obstacles to implementing the ASEAN Political and Security Community. This has illustrated ASEAN's inability to force its members to comply with what has been mutually agreed upon. In other words, the unresolved Myanmar problem to date calls ASEAN's credibility into question (CSIS 2022).

In the case of the resolution of the Myanmar crisis, it is clear that the political will to act against threats to democratic values and fundamental human rights carried out by the Myanmar military seems to be gradually diminishing among the governments of countries in Southeast Asia. Although only a few appear to remain steadfast in their rhetoric condemning violence perpetrated by the military, others are reluctant because they do not want to "break harmony" by sanctioning the military junta in order to maintain ASEAN unity. If we look more closely, the refusal of the Myanmar Military Regime to implement the 5-point consensus, where it has also been proven to have committed violations of human rights and democracy, has gone against the agreement and goals of the APSC. Ironically, other ASEAN countries cannot have one voice to take action against violations of the values of democracy and human rights, which are the main values of the APSC.

The lack of a common ASEAN position and strategy in pressuring the military junta, especially to stop violence and exercise complete self-control, and also the lack of open access for the ASEAN Special Envoy Force to involve all stakeholders (not only those determined by the junta) have become the main reasons why the Five Point Consensus does nothing. To some extent, ASEAN's decision to only allow the presence of non-political representatives from Myanmar in ASEAN high-level meetings should be respected, as this could be seen as a kind of sanction against the junta, despite the junta government's objections. However, this strategy did not put enough pressure on the junta. Without pushing for further progress, ASEAN risks normalising junta rule. If this happens, ASEAN will lose its credibility in remaining true to its principles and interests and becoming the people-centred organisation it has envisioned (Alexandra and Mantong 2022).

The clearest sign that the Myanmar issue could permanently change ASEAN dynamics was the tacit agreement by summit leaders to reassess the principle of non-intervention and the tradition of consensus. There is a more pressing challenge in the form of the legal arguments of the Myanmar Representative (SAC), which the regime presented to ASEAN through the Myanmar Foreign Ministry's public statement. As Myanmar's de facto representatives, SAC members and cabinet officials have attended ASEAN ministerial and working meetings.

The presence of Myanmar, represented by SAC, risks contaminating the ASEAN summit and is dangerous because of the presence of leaders from partner countries, including the United States and South Korea, who condemned the coup. This certainly has an adverse impact on the credibility of ASEAN, which has long been considered to uphold the values of democracy and human rights within the framework of the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC). This exposes ASEAN to the risk of being a regional organisation that is not consistent and credible with its primary vision and mission. It is seen as still providing space for violators of democracy and human rights

because it presents representatives of Myanmar (SAC) and speaks at the summit. The stakes are too high and will impact ASEAN's credibility. "The stakes are too high for ASEAN's credibility to carry out business as usual with the SAC at the summit" (asia.nikkei.com).

The current crisis in Myanmar has become a clear signal, showing that the principle of non-intervention is counterproductive to ASEAN's goal of maintaining adequate stability and security in the region. ASEAN's principle of non-intervention will always be contested and persuaded to look inside their bodies and examine their "loopholes" that might weaken their existence in the future (Anugrah, 2021).

From the start, ASEAN was seen as lacking the unity, political will, and leadership needed to respond to the crisis in Myanmar. Statements have been issued, emergency meetings of foreign ministers have been held, and an unprecedented meeting of ASEAN leaders has been held, but significant progress has yet to occur. The unresolved crisis in Myanmar is a test and challenge for ASEAN (Roberts, 2010). As a result of the unresolved crisis, ASEAN's credibility and relevance in resolving regional problems is being questioned (Lardo 2021).

Based on the case of Myanmar, *the APSC* essentially faces the choice of sacrificing the credibility of ASEAN and possibly the East Asia Summit with dialogue partners. This is as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte stated at the ASEAN Summit: "The lack of progress in Myanmar has called ASEAN's credibility into question. The way we respond collectively will affirm ASEAN's relevance or reveal our (ASEAN) impotence" (Asia.Nikkei.com, November 1, 2021).

Apart from that, regarding Myanmar's human rights violations, the ASEAN Human Rights Body should have a big role in resolving this problem. However, the unclear regulation of human rights bodies in the ASEAN Charter will make it "toothless" regarding human rights violations in its member countries.

Thus, in facing the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, the limitations of the ASEAN Way principles are starting to become visible. The principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of its member countries is a dilemma facing ASEAN. How ASEAN acts on Myanmar has resulted in varying views from its members. The lack of unified action against countries that violate ASEAN principles reflects the weakness of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN's claim to be a rules-based and people-centred regional organisation will be meaningless if ASEAN fails to act in the face of the massive violations of human rights and atrocities that have been widely witnessed in Myanmar. ASEAN centrality is under pressure from both inside and outside.

Conclusion

The tough stance of each ASEAN member who cannot compromise or be united in dealing with the issue of the 2021 Coup in Myanmar has shown the world community the weakness of ASEAN's centrality, even though ASEAN has been claimed to be united and solid. The absence of a common perception in responding to the Myanmar issue after the 2021 Coup shows the weakness of ASEAN unity, member countries' diverse national interests, and collective commitment. All this causes the absence of ASEAN centrality. In other words, without common perception, unity, interests, and commitment, ASEAN centrality is just a hope.

The weak centrality of ASEAN leadership is visible in the implementation of various ASEAN policies and activities. The fragility of cohesiveness and the exact steps taken by ASEAN members in resolving crucial problems between them or within a country illustrates the weakness of ASEAN centrality. Apart from that, the solution for resolving claims and conflicts between member countries, which is submitted entirely to international arbitration without being bridged by ASEAN member countries or

activating the High Council, has given rise to criticism regarding ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanism.

The development of ASEAN diplomacy in Myanmar has damaged the credibility and image of the organisation as a peacemaker. When dealing with the Myanmar issue, the principle of non-intervention has been recalibrated periodically because this principle is an essential component that maintains the integrity of ASEAN. The involvement of ASEAN member countries as a family where pressure and criticism should be given in addition to support is an effective way to build trust and confidence between ASEAN and Myanmar. Myanmar is still a member of the ASEAN family, and until now, it has been difficult to see this country emerge from the crisis without engaging with ASEAN. ASEAN's role could become obsolete if it continues to divide and compromise with actors who seek to undermine the organisation's credibility.

With the violations of democracy and human rights by Myanmar and Myanmar's non-compliance with implementing the Myanmar problem resolution mechanism established by ASEAN and agreed upon by the parties involved, ASEAN's credibility as a Political and Security Community is being questioned. ASEAN has failed to ensure that its member countries comply with the conflict resolution mechanisms that have been mutually agreed upon.

In resolving the Myanmar issue, although consensus remains one of the rules of the game for ASEAN, consensus is not the only rule that must be pursued to maintain ASEAN's cohesiveness, especially to achieve its vision of making ASEAN a community-oriented organisation that promotes and protects human rights. All ASEAN principles and norms, especially promoting democracy and human rights, good governance, the supremacy of law, non-intervention, and respect for state sovereignty, need to be upheld.

Centrality must be strengthened by improving the unity and cohesiveness of ASEAN member countries. A strong commitment from ASEAN countries to support joint (multilateral) decision-making and comply with the collective agreements reached can increase the centrality of ASEAN leadership. ASEAN's success in strengthening common interests as a common identity will support the achievement of ASEAN centrality.

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