



ASEAN AHA Centre: Ignorance or Acknowledgement Towards Myanmar 2021 Military Coup?

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Introduction

On one morning of February 2021, Myanmar was shut down in every aspect of the rights. In the early morning when the citizens woke up, there was no electricity, internet access and television channels had been shut down. The dark age of Myanmar citizens has officially started again under military dominance over the whole country (Thang, 2024). ASEAN has made the Five-Point Consensus in 2021 as an action for the Myanmar coup under its principle of Non-Interference and ASEAN Way. This blog is going to find out the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance which is included in ASEAN five-point consensus towards Myanmar. The main purpose of the blog is letting the international community to explore deep down situations of the Myanmar coup in accessing the international humanitarian aid.

Background of 2021 Myanmar Military Coup

Myanmar held a general election in 2020 November and the National League for Democracy (NLD) government won a landslide victory with 396 seats out of 476 in the parliament (Paddock, 2022). However, the military generals refused to accept the outcome of the election and they took power control of the country under the 2008 so-called constitution. The military forces arrested the political leaders from NLD including the president, U Win Myint and State-councilor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Paddock, 2022). Starting from February 1st, the protests have started nationwide including the urban places in Yangon streets as a result of unfair power control over the state (BBC News, 2021). Moreover, the civil servants joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) to show that they do not accept the military government and they are not working under the military administration. According to Bociaga (2021), in the early May of 2021, there were already over 5,000 university lecturers who joined the civil disobedience movement.

The military violated human rights in every aspect of the country by different means. At least 5,350 civilians have been killed, the displacement population is over 3.3 million and over half of the population is now under the poverty line and the actual number must be much higher

than this since 2021 February (OHCHR, 2024). The number of war crimes committed by the military are improving day by day. For example, the thermobaric bomb in Pa Zyi Gyi, Sagaing region had killed more than 160 people including children. Moreover, the airstrikes in Chin state and Bago region had killed 12 civilians and in Magway region, a Japan-funded hospital was burned (Hassan, 2024).

ASEAN Non-Interference Principle and Myanmar Coup

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has used the Non-Interference Policy as the organization's foundation core principle. The principle was adopted in 1967 when the ASEAN was formed by the Bangkok declaration in order to maintain the regional peace and stability by not interfering in the member states internal affairs (Stubbs, 2008). Due to the diversity of the political system of ASEAN, absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, socialism, communism, democratic in the region, the Non-Interference principle of ASEAN had successfully prevented the inter-state wars in the ASEAN region (Molthof, 2012).

On the other hand, the principle of Non-Interference has left unsolved most of the human right violations and inequalities in the region including the Myanmar 2021 coup. Moreover, Harsh (2022) argued the ASEAN Way as time consuming for the Myanmar case since it takes so long for taking actions in Myanmar while people are being killed every day. The principle of Non-Interference in the country's internal affairs has limited ASEAN ability to solve problems in Myanmar. Under the ASEAN principle and ASEAN Way, ASEAN has practiced an approach of policy-making through constructive dialogue in the Myanmar case in the Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (IAMM) (Yasmin, 2022). As an output of IAMM 2021, the Five-Point Consensus for Myanmar is published by ASEAN as a solution for inappropriate power abuse in Myanmar.

The ASEAN Leaders' Meeting of 2021 decided to agree on the Five-Point Consensus as a response to the Myanmar 2021 military coup. All of the parties agreed on the following statements:

- to have an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
- constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.
- 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. (ASEAN, 2021).

Above the five consensuses, the most likely to have direct impact on the human rights issues in Myanmar is the fourth one which is providing humanitarian assistance to the Myanmar community.

The Opportunities of ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar

ASEAN had held a conference in Jakarta in August 2021 in order to raise the funding by the Secretary General of ASEAN, Dato Lim Jock Hoi. By that conference, nearly 8 million USD had been raised in order to provide humanitarian assistance towards Myanmar (ASEAN, 2021b). The humanitarian aid mainly went into the medical aids since the country was affected by the Covid 19 third wave at that time. The conference provided over 1.1 million USD worth medical aids in response to the Covid 19 in Myanmar (ASEAN, 2021a).

Although the Covid 1st wave and 2nd wave had been managed successfully, the spread of the third wave months after the military government took over the power was like a tsunami (United Nations, 2021). Doctors and nurses have to run away into the jungle since the military government is trying to detain them due to the Civil Disobedience Movement and most of the hospitals had to shut down due to the insufficient of medical staff and medicine (Theresa, 2021). Therefore, the humanitarian aid from ASEAN had been a good timing for the people of Myanmar to recover from Covid 19 while suffering from the military actions of inhumanities.

Another opportunity for ASEAN humanitarian assistance is ASEAN response in 2023 Cyclone Mocha in Rakhine State of Myanmar. ASEAN provides humanitarian assistance through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) to the townships of Sittwe, Rathedaung, Kyauk Taw and Ponnagyun (ASEAN Indonesia, 2023). Moreover, through the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA) warehouse in Subang, Malaysia, ASEAN had provided 1.64 million USD worth kits, water sanitation and hygiene towards the victims of Cyclone Mocha (ASEAN Indonesia, 2023). Rakhine state is one of the states that military oppressed and even during the flood, the citizens had to flee from the flood as well from the danger of the soldiers since they are attacking the villages for example 15,000 of residents in Kani and Khinoo townships had been affected by the attacks (Ng & Guinto, 2023). Hence, the humanitarian aid from ASEAN became an effective mechanism for the residents who were suffering from both natural disaster and military oppression.

In addition, AHA Center enhances more opportunities of international aid for Myanmar. The United Nations Security-General, Antonio Guterres mentioned that the UN will collaborate closely with ASEAN's AHA Center to release the humanitarian needs for Myanmar (United Nations, 2022). This indicates that the humanitarian assistance from ASEAN through AHA

Center welcomes more international donors and collaborations even with the international organization like UN to have more awareness on the human right violations in Myanmar.

The Challenges of ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance in Myanmar

On the other hand, despite having opportunities yet, those opportunities are not as effective as they should be for the community. The opportunities existing in the AHA Center sometimes could even lead to the challenges for the people of Myanmar to suffer more and they could not comfort the suffering enough. ASEAN faced several challenges in passing through the humanitarian aid towards Myanmar and having many concerns rising upon whether the ASEAN aid is effective or not.

First of all, humanitarian aid goes directly through the military government which is creating all the chaotic situations in the country. Discussing the delivery of humanitarian aid, the inclusion of U Ko Ko Aung in the meeting who is the chairman of the junta's task force for coordinating humanitarian assistance has raised concerns that the aid will flow directly to the people in need or not (Strangio, 2022). Despite ASEAN's hope of bringing humanitarian aid to the community, there is a high chance of misusing by the military government since the aid is going through the Yangon International Airport Cargo (Sullivan, 2021; Strangio, 2022).

Another challenge of humanitarian aid is that the care workers do not have enough security. Having concerns in spreading aid through the military, ASEAN sometimes uses NGOs and local organizations as a medium of humanitarian aid. However, the evidence shows that being a care worker in Myanmar is not safe since the military is bombing hospitals or schools (Watt & Balkhi, 2023). According to Insecurity Insight (2024), during 2021 and 2024, 930 of health workers have been arrested, 126 have been killed and the facilities have been destroyed 327 times. Therefore, the security concerns of care workers have been raised and it has been a challenge for managing the humanitarian aid from ASEAN to flow directly to the places that are really in need.

Furthermore, AHA Center lacks of an efficient monitoring system, the AHA Center failed to reduce the suffering of Myanmar citizens rather than collaborating with the military junta (Aljazeera, 2021) which is not credible for the Myanmar case since in the history of addressing the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State (Aljazeera, 2021). The weak mechanism of ASEAN under the non-interference principle, the humanitarian aid mainly relies on the military government since ASEAN assumes this case as an internal affair (Khant, 2021). Therefore, the humanitarian aid through AHA center seems ineffective and slow in delivering to the places in need despite using a high budget from ASEAN.

Recommendations

Humanitarian assistance is taking a crucial part in Myanmar's 2021 coup and the role of ASEAN is very important in shaping the future of Myanmar human rights. In this blog, the recommendations for the AHA Center will be mentioned as follow:

1. AHA Center should form a community to directly spread humanitarian aid towards Myanmar rather than relying on the military government nor other local NGOs. By doing so, it will be an effective mechanism and could reduce the challenges of passing the aid directly to an evil-like government, moreover, it will reduce the security concern of the care-workers since ASEAN will be directly monitoring that community.
2. AHA should adopt a monitoring system for tracking whether the aid provided by ASEAN is delivered to the necessary places or not. This kind of system will be meaningful and could reduce the potential threat of misusing by the government and promote the credibility of ASEAN as a regional organization.
3. AHA has to cooperate more openly with other international organizations like the EU and UN by considering their recommendations. Collaborating with those kinds of organizations will enhance the ASEAN mission to give humanitarian aid and could also reduce the potential risk of violating the care workers since they will be wearing a blue helmet. Moreover, this will be an opportunity to pressure the military government as well. ASEAN should consider these recommendations in order to change the challenges to become potential benefits of AHA Center and promote the organization image. By considering back and monitoring the passage of humanitarian aid, ASEAN should reconsider their ineffective actions and solutions, and change to be a better region where every individual right is protected and respected.

Conclusion

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is trying its best in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar despite their policy of non-interference and ASEAN way mechanics. Although they may have challenges in terms of security or dilemma between the two rival governments of Myanmar, they are supporting humanitarian aid through AHA Center according to their 5P Consensus. However, the humanitarian aid will be directly flown to the community, security of health care workers and the credibility of AHA Center is in the process of being questioned and being criticized by the scholars, Myanmar citizens and international community.

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