

# Between Principles and Actions: ASEAN and Indonesia in Dealing With The Political Crisis In Myanmar

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explains the role of ASEAN in addressing the political crisis and human rights violations in Myanmar, focusing on Indonesia's leadership as the ASEAN Chair in 2023. Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which garnered global attention, ASEAN endeavored to formulate the Five Point Consensus through a constructive approach to tackle this crisis, yet its implementation remains constrained. This article uses a case study method to evaluate ASEAN's response to Myanmar's post-coup situation. The study finds that ASEAN demonstrates adaptability in addressing the Myanmar crisis, transitioning from the "constructive engagement" approach to "enhanced interactions." Under Indonesia's leadership, ASEAN deployed a team of the Special Envoy for Myanmar Affairs and rebuilt ASEAN's centrality through proactive mediation efforts, diplomatic coordination, engagement with external partners, and commitment to regional stability and peace. Additionally, ASEAN's intervention with restrictions on Myanmar's participation in various regional activities serves as a form of 'pressure' to encourage cooperation and accountability. Through these enhanced interactions, ASEAN and Indonesia played a more active role in mediating the crisis and promoting reconciliation among all stakeholders involved.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN; Indonesia; Myanmar Coup; Constructive Engagement; Enhanced Interactions

*Artikel ini menjelaskan peran ASEAN dalam mengatasi krisis politik dan pelanggaran hak asasi manusia di Myanmar, dengan fokus pada kepemimpinan Indonesia sebagai Ketua ASEAN pada tahun 2023. Pasca kudeta militer tahun 2021 di Myanmar yang menyita perhatian global, ASEAN berupaya merumuskan Lima Poin Konsensus melalui pendekatan konstruktif untuk mengatasi krisis ini, tetapi implementasinya masih terkendala. Dengan menggunakan metode studi kasus, artikel ini mengevaluasi respons ASEAN terhadap situasi pasca kudeta di Myanmar. Studi ini menemukan bahwa ASEAN menunjukkan kemampuan beradaptasi dalam mengatasi krisis Myanmar, melakukan transisi dari pendekatan "constructive engagement" ke "enhanced interactions." Di bawah kepemimpinan Indonesia, ASEAN mengerahkan tim Utusan Khusus untuk Urusan Myanmar dan membangun kembali konsep sentralitas ASEAN melalui upaya mediasi proaktif, koordinasi diplomatik, keterlibatan dengan mitra eksternal, dan komitmen terhadap stabilitas dan perdamaian kawasan. Selain itu, intervensi ASEAN dengan pembatasan partisipasi Myanmar dalam berbagai kegiatan regional merupakan bentuk 'tekanan' untuk mendorong kerja sama dan akuntabilitas. Melalui peningkatan interaksi ini, ASEAN dan Indonesia memainkan peran yang lebih aktif dalam memediasi krisis dan mendorong rekonsiliasi di antara seluruh pemangku kepentingan yang terlibat.*

**Kata-kata Kunci:** ASEAN; Indonesia; Kudeta Myanmar; Keterlibatan Konstruktif; Interaksi yang Ditingkatkan

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Over the past two years, Myanmar has been in a situation that has not fully recovered due to the military coup that shook the country's political landscape. Although ASEAN leadership has changed hands three times during this period—Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, and currently Indonesia—efforts to restore stability in Myanmar have not yielded the expected results. As widely known, the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, shocked the international community by overthrowing the democratically elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, a prominent figure of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party and a symbol of democracy and human rights advocacy in her country (Muhammad and Sahide 2022; Rizky 2021; Roza 2021).

Aung San Suu Kyi's and the NLD's victory in previous elections marked the beginning of a promising era of democratization and freedom for the people of Myanmar. However, the unexpected military coup in 2021 swiftly shattered these hopes. The military's arbitrary actions in retaking control of the country, dissolving the legitimate government, and arresting Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD officials, were alarming and raised concerns about the future of democracy in Myanmar (Oktaviani and Riva 2022; Panjaitan 2022). Aung San Suu Kyi, who had previously endured 15 years of house arrest for her democracy advocacy, once again faced a heavy challenge as the military coup placed her under arrest and subjected her to controversial legal charges. Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, more than 6,000 civilians have lost their lives in the first 20 months (Gaborit 2021).

The political and social crisis that has plagued Myanmar presents severe challenges to ASEAN, a regional body responsible for managing regional issues and security in the area. In response to the deteriorating situation in the country, ASEAN has taken the initiative to hold special meetings to seek effective solutions. The outcome of these meetings was the Five Point Consensus (5PCs), an agreement comprising five crucial points as steps to address the crisis in Myanmar (Ar Rasyid and Rijal 2023; Prayitno 2022). These five consensus points include cessation of violence, constructive dialogue toward peaceful solutions, the appointment of a special envoy as mediator, humanitarian assistance, and ASEAN envoy and delegation visits to Myanmar. However, despite being agreed

upon, the implementation of this consensus has not been effective. An ultimate challenge is the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms within the consensus or agreement, providing the Myanmar military junta with little motivation to adhere to it.

In 2023, Indonesia plays the crucial role of the ASEAN Chair against the backdrop of the political crisis and human rights violations unfolding in Myanmar. As a regional leader, Indonesia bore a significant responsibility to facilitate communication and collaboration between Myanmar and the international community. Through a case study approach, this article delves into the intricate dynamics of ASEAN's response to the crisis in Myanmar, focusing on Indonesia's leadership during its tenure as the ASEAN Chair. The case study approach is chosen for its ability to provide a rigorous and in-depth analysis of ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis, offering valuable insights into the organization's adaptability, decision-making processes, and effectiveness in addressing complex regional challenges while also shedding light on the broader implications for regional diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts. This study also examines the evolution of ASEAN's approach, particularly its shift from a traditional "constructive engagement" stance to a more proactive strategy characterized by "enhanced interactions." This transition reflects ASEAN's adaptability and willingness to evolve its response mechanisms in the face of evolving regional challenges. By embracing enhanced interactions, which included deeper intervention with restrictions on Myanmar's participation in regional activities, ASEAN sought to foster deeper engagement and dialogue with the Myanmar military junta.

### **Dynamics of Constructivism: Exploring State Behavior, Institutions, and Change in ASEAN's Shifting Security Landscape**

To understand this issue, the author employs a constructivist theoretical framework that views the world as a result of human social construction (Erbas 2022). This theory posits that reality is shaped by human beliefs that influence their actions. It emphasizes the importance of social context in the international system, where

states are not merely rational actors, but also social actors bound by social structures that shape their behavior (Checkel 1998; Klotz and Lynch 2014). When states cooperate, their motivation is not solely to avoid conflict but also to create and maintain sustainable peace. The constructivist approach also emphasizes the significance of institutions on a state's actions (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). Institutions create norms, rules, and procedures for collective action in international relations, which are also products of social construction. A state's identity and interests develop alongside the evolution of institutions (Adler-Nissen 2008). On the other hand, institutions evolve as the states within them continue to develop practices and customs that ultimately shape the institutions themselves.

According to the constructivist viewpoint, the ongoing development of state relations through interactions and practices within regional/international institutions is not a static process but rather dynamic, allowing for change to occur. Wendt (2022) argues that interactions foster the emergence of changes in identity and interests (Rother 2012). Within ASEAN, interactions among member states and institutional practices have contributed to the formation and evolution of shared norms and identities. For instance, ASEAN's principle of non-interference and commitment to consensus-building reflect shared understandings among member states regarding sovereignty and regional stability (Acharya and Stubbs 2006; Heng 2014). However, the Myanmar crisis has tested these norms, leading to debates and discussions within ASEAN about the organization's role in addressing internal conflicts and human rights violations. As interactions within ASEAN forums, such as ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and Special Summits, have intensified in response to the Myanmar crisis, member states have been compelled to reassess their identities and interests. For example, Indonesia's leadership as the ASEAN Chair in 2023 may have prompted a re-evaluation of its role as a regional leader and its commitment to promoting democracy and human rights. Similarly, other ASEAN member states may have experienced shifts in their perceptions of regional security and stability in light of the crisis in Myanmar.

However, achieving meaningful change within ASEAN's response to the Myanmar situation is not easily achieved. It depends on whether interactions within the organization allow for deviation from existing norms, particularly the principle of non-interference. While some member states may advocate for a more assertive approach towards Myanmar, others may remain hesitant to deviate from established norms out of concern for preserving ASEAN's unity and sovereignty. Indonesia's role as the chair of ASEAN in 2023 provides a notable example of how interactions and practices within regional institutions can influence change. As the ASEAN Chair, Indonesia has the opportunity to shape the organization's agenda and priorities, including its response to the Myanmar crisis. Indonesia's leadership may facilitate discussions and initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue, mediation, and conflict resolution within ASEAN, thereby contributing to the emergence of new norms and approaches to regional governance. For instance, Indonesia's push for shuttle diplomacy, exemplified by Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi's visits to Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, and Thailand, serves as a method for initiating discussions and contributing to finding the best solution for Myanmar's situation (CNBC Indonesia 2023). By engaging with key regional stakeholders, Indonesia aims to build consensus within ASEAN on addressing the political crisis in Myanmar and ensuring the effective implementation of agreed-upon measures.

The emphasis on institutions in the constructivist approach provides a theoretical framework that can be employed to analyse an organization like ASEAN, a functional regional organization in Southeast Asia. As the range of security issues threatening a region expands, ASEAN has experienced a transition from its initial goal of economic sector development to security issues. Initially, ASEAN primarily focused on economic sector development and promoting regional cooperation to enhance economic growth and prosperity among member states. This economic-centric approach was influenced by the prevailing norms and priorities of the time, as well as the desire to foster stability and development in Southeast Asia following periods of colonialism and conflict (Batabyal 2004). However, as the regional security landscape evolved, ASEAN began to expand its scope of work to address a broader range of security issues. The concept of security began to broaden

in its definition, no longer limited solely to military concerns (Zdilarzd 2023). This broader understanding of security reflects the interconnected nature of contemporary challenges, such as transnational crime, terrorism, environmental degradation, and pandemics, which transcend traditional military threats. This transition can be understood within the constructivist framework through the concept of “institutional change.”

Furthermore, within the constructivist framework, the evolving identities and interests of ASEAN member states play a significant role in shaping the organization’s agenda. As member states increasingly recognize the importance of addressing non-traditional security challenges, such as economic instability, social unrest, and environmental degradation, ASEAN has responded by expanding its mandate to include these issues (Collins 2019). The constructivist approach offers valuable insights into why and how ASEAN expands its scope of work to encompass security issues. By emphasizing the role of interactions, norms, and identities within the organization, constructivism helps us understand the dynamic nature of ASEAN’s agenda-setting process and its adaptation to changing regional dynamics and perceptions of security (Yukawa 2018).

### **Navigating Diversity and Diplomacy: Myanmar’s ASEAN Membership Journey**

Myanmar, widely known as the “Golden Land,” is significant not only for its mineral wealth but also for its diverse ecosystems and natural beauty (Trendler 2015). It holds a key position in the geopolitical map of Southeast Asia. The strategic location of Myanmar between the two Asian giants, India and China, presents both advantages and challenges in maintaining bilateral and regional relationships. Myanmar’s cultural heritage is the product of a blend of traditions, folk stories, and historical interactions with neighbouring kingdoms. Its long history reflects the struggle and continuity of a country adapting to changing times.

Moreover, with a population surpassing 50 million, Myanmar is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, each with its languages,

customs, and traditions (Ingelmo 2013). From the Shan mountains in the east to the Irrawaddy lowlands, this diversity creates a captivating and unique cultural mosaic. As a nation with such demographics and ethnic diversity, Myanmar plays a crucial role in maintaining balance and stability in the Southeast Asian region. Myanmar's potential, stemming from both its natural resources and human capital, positions it as a key player in regional dynamics, with a role and contribution to the development and peace of the region that cannot be ignored.

Before discussing Myanmar's relationship with ASEAN, it's essential to understand Myanmar's situation before joining ASEAN. The country has undergone various political transformations. One of the most significant periods in Myanmar's history is its colonial era under British rule (Saha 2014). After gaining independence, Myanmar continued to face political challenges. Decades of military rule altered the political and social landscape. This authoritarian governance encountered numerous challenges, including ethnic rebellions, international isolation, and economic sanctions from several countries. Under the shadow of this authoritarian rule, Myanmar held tremendous potential, including its natural resources, cultural richness, and strategically important geographic location. However, political instability, internal conflicts, and isolation from the international community often hindered Myanmar's progress and prosperity.

Becoming an observer state was Myanmar's initial step towards engaging with ASEAN. In 1992, this status offered Myanmar an opportunity to build relationships and understand the dynamics of the organization without full commitment. This status also allowed ASEAN to better comprehend Myanmar's internal situation, especially concerning human rights and democracy issues. Although still an observer, Myanmar actively developed bilateral relations with ASEAN member states (Selth 2013). They understood that full integration with ASEAN could be achieved through understanding and cooperation with each member state. During this period, visits between high-ranking Myanmar officials and ASEAN member countries increased, creating momentum for deeper integration in the future.

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One main reason for Myanmar's ASEAN membership was a deep desire to enhance economic and political ties with its neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. By establishing closer ties with countries in the region, Myanmar hoped to leverage regional collaboration to promote domestic economic growth and stability. Furthermore, by becoming an ASEAN member, Myanmar believed it could enhance the image and legitimacy of its regime in the eyes of the international community.

The process of Myanmar's acceptance as an ASEAN member was a journey filled with obstacles and challenges. From the outset, various ASEAN member states held deep concerns about Myanmar's human rights situation. Reports of repressive actions by the Myanmar government against ethnic minority groups, such as the Rohingya, and the arrest and persecution of pro-democracy activists, like Aung San Suu Kyi, created tensions in discussions about Myanmar's acceptance. Many argued that admitting Myanmar under such circumstances could tarnish ASEAN's reputation as an organization supporting democratic principles and human rights (Petersson 2006). However, on the other hand, there were strategic views that saw positive potential in Myanmar's inclusion (Than 2005). By making Myanmar a member, ASEAN had an opportunity to influence and drive change from within. With the hope that diplomacy and regional collaboration could lead to improvements in Myanmar's situation, ASEAN decided to proceed with Myanmar's formal membership. The hope referenced in the statement regarding Myanmar's acceptance as an ASEAN member can be attributed to various actors within the organization, including member states, ASEAN officials, and regional stakeholders. This collective hope stems from the belief that diplomatic engagement and regional collaboration could catalyze positive change within Myanmar, particularly in addressing its human rights situation and advancing democratic principles.

For ASEAN, the decision to admit Myanmar as a member was not only a strategic one but also a reflection of its commitment to promoting regional stability, cooperation, and development. Despite concerns raised by particular member states about Myanmar's human rights record, there was a prevailing belief



within ASEAN that engagement and integration into the regional community could incentivize Myanmar to undertake reforms and adhere to ASEAN's principles and norms.

In 1997, after a series of lengthy discussions and considerations, Myanmar was finally accepted as the 9th member of ASEAN, marking the expansion of the regional organization (ASEAN et al. 2021; Ramadhania and Mabrurah 2021). The decision to accept Myanmar was not taken lightly, given its political background and human rights situation. The signing of this agreement marked not only Myanmar's commitment to cooperate with its neighboring countries but also ASEAN's confidence that Myanmar's integration could bring benefits to the entire region. Despite criticisms and objections from various quarters, both at the national and international levels, regarding issues like human rights violations and democracy, some experts, such as Guyot and Mano believed that Myanmar's membership was a strategic step forward (Guyot 1998; Manosuthikit 2021; Myoe 2011). According to them, through cooperation and dialogue under the ASEAN banner, Myanmar would have more motivation to undergo reforms and improve its human rights standards.

### **The Myanmar Crisis and ASEAN's Constructive Engagement: Challenges and Adaptations**

The author employs a constructive approach that offers an in-depth perspective on how regional organizations behave in international relations. This approach, focusing on social interactions and how shared understanding can be formed, provides an essential framework for understanding the dynamics of inter-state relationships (Adler-Nissen 2008; Checkel 1998). When considering ASEAN in the context of the Myanmar crisis, the constructive approach becomes highly relevant. It helps us understand the reasons behind ASEAN's seemingly slow response to the situation in Myanmar.

In regional cooperation like ASEAN, institutional identity and interests often grow and evolve alongside the issues faced. A real example is how ASEAN handles the human rights crisis in

Myanmar. The seemingly delayed response from ASEAN is not without reason. Every decision made within the organization is based on certain principles and norms that have been the foundation of ASEAN for years. One key principle that has always been debated is the non-interference principle. This principle emphasizes that ASEAN member states should not interfere in the internal affairs of other member states. While many argue that this principle is not inherent to ASEAN, we cannot ignore the fact that historical backgrounds have shaped this understanding. Almost all ASEAN member states, at some point in their history, have experienced colonization or regional conflict. These experiences have driven ASEAN to uphold a principle that places respect for a nation's sovereignty above all else.

Though ASEAN has attempted to respond to the Myanmar crisis by creating the Five Point Consensus, as previously explained, the implementation of this agreement seems to have been less effective. The approach taken through this consensus has failed to prevent the escalation of violence and repression by the Myanmar military against its people. After the military coup in 2021, there was international hope that the Myanmar military would adopt a softer and more open stance toward dialogue. This hope was shared by various international actors, including governments, human rights organizations, and diplomatic observers, who believed that a shift towards dialogue and cooperation could lead to a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Myanmar (Roza 2021). Such hope is essential because it underpins efforts to engage with the Myanmar military diplomatically and encourages the pursuit of non-violent means to address the crisis, ultimately aiming to protect the rights and well-being of the Myanmar people and promote regional stability and security. However, the opposite occurred. Reports of human rights violations increased, with many cases of arrests, abuses, and even killings carried out by the military against civilians. This is clear evidence that the Five Point Consensus has not been able to play its role in resolving the crisis in Myanmar. The failure of the Five Point Consensus (5PCs) to effectively address the Myanmar crisis was attributed to several factors. One of these is the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms within the agreement. Unlike binding treaties or agreements with clear enforcement provisions, the 5PCs lack mechanisms to

ensure compliance by the Myanmar military junta. This absence undermines the credibility of the agreement and provides the junta with little motivation to adhere to its commitments. Furthermore, internal divisions among ASEAN member states regarding the appropriate response to the Myanmar crisis have hindered cohesive action. While some advocate for a more assertive approach, others prioritize maintaining stability and preserving ASEAN unity, even at the expense of addressing human rights violations in Myanmar. These divergent interests have contributed to ASEAN's inability to formulate and implement a unified strategy for addressing the crisis.

Regarding the issue of human rights in Myanmar, since 1993, ASEAN formulated the "constructive engagement" policy towards Myanmar, which was not yet an official member of ASEAN at that time. This approach portrayed ASEAN's preference for quiet diplomacy with Myanmar. Instead of interfering in internal affairs, especially those related to human rights and democracy issues, ASEAN focused on enhancing economic relations with the country. One prominent example of ASEAN's constructive engagement policy towards Myanmar during this period was its provision of opportunities for Myanmar to engage with the regional community through forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). These platforms enabled Myanmar to participate in regional discussions on security, economic cooperation, and other issues, thereby fostering dialogue and collaboration between Myanmar and other ASEAN member states. However, when Myanmar officially joined ASEAN in 1997, the dynamics of its relationship with the regional bloc changed. International pressure on ASEAN to play a more active role in promoting human rights improvements in Myanmar increased. However, despite the pressure, ASEAN remained consistent with its initial stance: avoiding confrontational approaches and safeguarding the sovereignty of member states.

Although the "constructive engagement" approach brought about economic improvements between Myanmar and other ASEAN countries, it seemed less effective in driving political change in Myanmar. The political dynamics of Myanmar became a major concern for ASEAN, especially after the military coup against elected

President Suu Kyi in early 2021. This incident marked a turning point in ASEAN's relationship with Myanmar. In the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits in 2021, although not a primary agenda, the issue became a hot topic of discussion among delegates (Iswara 2021). In a virtual meeting setting, ASEAN leaders, including Indonesian President Jokowi, directly engaged in discussions with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing of Myanmar. While no joint agreement was reached, Jokowi's statement emphasizing the importance of Suu Kyi's release and the urgency of political reconciliation in Myanmar deserves appreciation (Saputra 2021). As the leader of Indonesia, a country that has undergone its democratic transition and has played a significant role in promoting democracy and peace in the region, Jokowi saw it as a moral imperative to speak out against the military coup and advocate for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. Furthermore, as the ASEAN Chair in 2023, Indonesia held a position of leadership and responsibility within the organization, making it incumbent upon Jokowi to address pressing regional issues, including the crisis in Myanmar. By voicing support for Suu Kyi's release and calling for political reconciliation, Jokowi demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to upholding democratic values and principles within ASEAN and the broader international community.

This decision of Jokowi surprised many and triggered various reactions and speculations. For some analysts, this decision seemed surprising and was considered a deviation from the fundamental principle of non-interference, a principle that had long been the foundation and pillar of ASEAN diplomacy (Fernida 2021). This principle, which respects the sovereignty of each member country and avoids interference in internal affairs, has been respected and adhered to by all member states.

However, on the other hand, other voices are coming from within the ASEAN structure itself. Some ASEAN officials, while acknowledging that the decision might appear controversial to some, view it from a different perspective. They argue that this approach is evidence of ASEAN's adaptability (Fernida 2021). It shows that the organization is capable of adapting and responding to critical issues it faces. Furthermore, this decision can be seen as an indicator of increased relations and more intense cooperation

among member states. According to the Executive Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), Udayana University, I Ketut Putra Erawan, this adaptability and flexibility are crucial keys to maintaining ASEAN's relevance and effectiveness on the regional and global stage.

From the approach shown by several ASEAN members, particularly Indonesian as the leaders in addressing domestic issues emerging in Myanmar, ASEAN has demonstrated significant evolution. In the past, when facing complex situations in Myanmar, ASEAN adhered to the "constructive engagement" approach. This approach was passive and focused on quiet diplomacy, where ASEAN was reluctant to intervene or directly comment on controversial issues occurring in the country. However, with changing geopolitical dynamics and the urgency of some issues that affect Myanmar and have regional impacts, ASEAN realized the need for a more inclusive approach. Therefore, the organization shifted to the "enhance interactions" approach. ASEAN's shift in approach from "constructive engagement" to "enhanced interaction" reflects a broader evolution in the organization's response to complex regional challenges, particularly those stemming from the humanitarian issue in Myanmar (Aryani 2019; Idris and Othman 2009).

Some of the initial steps of the "enhanced interactions" approach taken by ASEAN began when Indonesia undertook the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023. The country chose not to remain passive in the face of the ongoing crisis; sitting idly by was not an option. Outside the ASEAN framework, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi actively engaged with various countries, including China, Australia, India, Japan, and England, as well as special envoys from the UN Secretary-General (Saputra 2021). This proactive diplomacy demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to seeking a solution to the crisis in Myanmar. Evidenced by the establishment of the Office of the Special Envoy for Myanmar Affairs led by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, in collaboration with senior diplomat Ngurah Swajaya, Indonesia showcased its dedication to taking an active role in addressing the crisis (Bauchner and Harsono 2023). During Indonesia's tenure as Chair of ASEAN, the country also heightened criticism by excluding the Myanmar

delegation from ASEAN meetings on several occasions (Fernida 2021). It is hoped that this pressure will catalyze efforts to resolve the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar.

The “enhanced interactions” approach in ASEAN and through bilateral diplomacy has yielded mixed results in addressing the crisis in Myanmar. While Indonesia’s efforts to engage with various countries and establish special envoys demonstrate a commitment to finding a solution, progress has been slow. The exclusion of the Myanmar delegation from ASEAN meetings has heightened pressure on the military junta but has not led to significant breakthroughs in resolving the political and humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, these actions underscore Indonesia’s determination to take a firm stance and advocate for meaningful dialogue and cooperation to address the situation. Despite the challenges, Indonesia’s leadership within ASEAN continues to play a crucial role in galvanizing regional efforts and maintaining momentum toward finding a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Myanmar, albeit with outcomes that may not be immediately discernible.

One of the primary catalysts for this change is the realization that “constructive engagement” has often proved insufficient and ineffective. The escalation of violence and human rights violations in Myanmar underscored the inadequacy of this approach, prompting ASEAN to adopt a more proactive and collective stance (Aryani 2019). Thus, the evolution of ASEAN’s approach reflects the organization’s commitment to adapting to increasingly complex regional dynamics and delivering more effective responses to its challenges. With this approach, domestic issues with broad and significant impacts on the ASEAN region are not only observed but also discussed collectively by all member states. The goal is to seek joint solutions that benefit all parties and strengthen solidarity among member states.

### **Regional Leadership in Action: Indonesia’s Role in Easing Myanmar’s Crisis**

As the most populous country in ASEAN and an active participant in regional cooperation, Indonesia assumed the role of ASEAN

Chair in 2023. Being the ASEAN Chair is not a simple task, especially in the midst of dynamic and challenging geopolitical situations, including the political crisis in Myanmar following the military coup in 2021. The crisis in Myanmar is not merely a power transition issue but is deeper and more complex. Behind the change of government lies various issues related to human rights violations, freedom restrictions, and threats to regional stability that could potentially affect neighboring countries.

As the ASEAN Chair, Indonesia is at the forefront of efforts to find a solution for Myanmar. With a long history of supporting democracy and human rights, Indonesia has significant potential to serve as a mediator and facilitator of dialogue among conflicting parties in Myanmar. One example of Indonesia's role as a founding member of ASEAN and the largest economy in Southeast Asia is its significant contribution to addressing regional conflicts within the ASEAN framework, such as its mediation in the Southern Philippines conflict. Leveraging its diplomatic influence, Indonesia played a crucial role in facilitating peace talks between the Philippine government and the Moro Nationalism Liberation Front (MNLF) (Alunaza SD and Anggara 2018; Istiqomah 2014; Nugroho and Utam 2022). Indonesia's diplomatic capacity and influence in the region cannot be underestimated. Therefore, the significant question that arises is: how can Indonesia, with all its resources and experience, guide ASEAN in finding the best solution for the crisis in Myanmar? This is a diplomatic challenge as well as a moral responsibility for Indonesia as a regional leader.

As a country with a deep and long diplomatic tradition, Indonesia has long been a key player in regional mediation and conflict resolution. With a history rich in inter-state interactions and a significant role in regional cooperation, Indonesia profoundly understands the importance of dialogue as the most effective instrument for resolving conflicts and tensions. Thus, when tensions escalated in Myanmar, Indonesia took initiative swiftly. As an initial step, the country encouraged inclusive dialogue between the Myanmar military and the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi before the military coup escalation. Indonesia firmly believes that every conflict, no matter how complicated or difficult, has peaceful resolution opportunities. This belief is grounded

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in the philosophy that peaceful solutions can only be achieved through communication and open discussion. This foundation drives Indonesia's diplomatic approach, which always seeks to create bridges of communication between conflicting parties (Pedrason 2023). Indonesia's experience with internal conflicts, such as those in Aceh and Papua, has shaped its understanding of the importance of dialogue and negotiation in resolving disputes.

One of the key principles Indonesia emphasized during its tenure as ASEAN Chair is the concept of ASEAN's "centrality." This principle reflects the view that ASEAN should occupy the forefront position in efforts to resolve various crises that may arise in the region. More than just being a spectator, ASEAN needs to be a proactive main actor in mediating and facilitating regional conflicts and issues. In the specific context of Myanmar, Indonesia has underscored the importance of ASEAN's central role in helping facilitate the resolution of the country's internal issues. As a leading nation, Indonesia hopes that ASEAN will not only act as an observer but will also actively guide Myanmar toward recovery and renewal, especially in the context of returning the country to a sustainable democratic path (Azis et al. 2023; Savitri and Eko Hadisancoko n.d.).

Indonesia sees that through the principle of "centrality," ASEAN make more substantial and significant contributions to addressing issues related to Myanmar. ASEAN is expected to help create an environment where dialogue, diplomacy, and cooperation can strengthen stability and peace in the region by playing a more proactive role. Therefore, the "centrality" principle drives the efforts of Indonesia and other ASEAN member states to respond effectively and positively to sensitive issues such as the situation in Myanmar. In the case of Myanmar, ASEAN's centrality is realized through its proactive mediation efforts, diplomatic coordination, engagement with external partners, and commitment to regional stability and peace. Led by Indonesia, ASEAN has convened special meetings and summits to facilitate dialogue and consensus-building among conflicting parties in Myanmar, such as The 3rd ASEAN-Australia Summit, the 45th ASEAN-Canada Summit, the 20th ASEAN-India Summit, and the 13th ASEAN-United Nations (UN) Summit (CNBC Indonesia 2023). Through joint



statements and diplomatic initiatives, ASEAN has conveyed its concerns about the political developments in Myanmar and called for peaceful dialogue and the restoration of democratic norms (Hsu 2015; Mueller 2019). Additionally, ASEAN has engaged with external partners to seek support and assistance in addressing the crisis, amplifying its influence and impact on the situation in Myanmar (Paik 2016). By taking a proactive stance and engaging constructively with the parties involved, ASEAN's centrality aims to create an environment conducive to dialogue, diplomacy, and cooperation, ultimately contributing to peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, amid often uncertain political dynamics, the people often become the most affected victims. In this context, Indonesia, along with other ASEAN member states, has made a strong commitment to ensuring the well-being of the people of Myanmar. These efforts involve various areas, ranging from humanitarian assistance implemented in response to emergencies, to support in revitalizing the affected economy. These efforts also encompass social programs aimed at directly benefiting the people, including in education, healthcare, and other basic facilities. Emphasizing the well-being of the people of Myanmar in this context involves various aspects. Through humanitarian aid, ASEAN countries aim to show solidarity and moral support to the affected people. Additionally, the economic recovery efforts also serve as an investment in broader regional stability. A more economically and socially stable Myanmar is expected to have a positive impact on overall stability in Southeast Asia.

Through a series of programs and multilateral cooperation, ASEAN strives to alleviate the suffering of the people of Myanmar and ensure that their fundamental rights are not overlooked. By creating an environment that supports well-being, ASEAN hopes to assist the country in overcoming its challenges and building a brighter future for its people. This also demonstrates that integrating Myanmar into ASEAN signifies a commitment to respecting the humanitarian values underlying regional cooperation.

Indeed, Indonesia's role as the ASEAN Chair during the Myanmar crisis holds immense significance. Positioned as a regional leader, Indonesia shoulders a substantial responsibility in navigating a

multifaceted situation demanding nuanced solutions. Indonesia adopts a mature diplomatic approach to address this challenge, capitalizing on its strong relationships with ASEAN member states and external actors. This approach prioritizes dialogue, consensus-building, and engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, as previously highlighted. By actively facilitating dialogue and mediation endeavors, Indonesia aims to mitigate the political turmoil in Myanmar, orchestrating diplomatic initiatives within ASEAN and collaborating with external partners to bolster regional endeavors towards peace and stability. This mature diplomatic stance is particularly crucial in circumstances necessitating adept navigation of sensitivities and intricacies, with a steadfast focus on peaceful resolutions while upholding ASEAN's fundamental principles of dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect. Indonesia's role as the ASEAN Chair underscores its unwavering commitment to nurturing regional cohesion and addressing regional challenges through constructive engagement and diplomacy. This diplomatic effort aims to find common ground among various interests in the efforts to restore stability in Myanmar.

In carrying out its role as ASEAN Chair, Indonesia also demonstrates a strong commitment to the fundamental principles of ASEAN, especially non-interference and mutual respect for sovereignty. Amid a complex situation and international pressure, Indonesia strives to maintain the integrity and sustainability of these principles while seeking solutions that enable Myanmar to overcome its internal crisis. Indonesia's focus is not solely on diplomatic aspects; it also considers the humanitarian impact arising from the crisis in Myanmar. With an inclusive and caring view towards the well-being of the people of Myanmar, Indonesia seeks to support efforts that directly benefit the affected Myanmar population. Through a combination of humanitarian aid provision, diplomatic engagement, and collaboration with international partners, Indonesia contributes to alleviating the suffering endured by individuals impacted by the crisis (Iswara 2021; Bauchner and Harsono 2023; Saputra 2021). Furthermore, Indonesia undertakes firm actions, such as isolating the military junta government from high-level ASEAN activities and convening an ad hoc conflict resolution team chaired directly by the Minister

of Foreign Affairs (Fernida 2021). These initiatives underscore Indonesia's unwavering commitment to upholding ASEAN's principles while addressing the pressing humanitarian needs arising from the situation in Myanmar.

Indonesia's dedication to fulfilling its role as ASEAN Chair amid the Myanmar crisis reflects a determination to maintain peace, stability, and progress in the Southeast Asian region. As highlighted earlier, Indonesia's role in addressing the Myanmar crisis within the ASEAN framework has been multifaceted and crucial. One key aspect has been its mediation and facilitation of dialogue between Myanmar's military junta and other ASEAN member states. Through ASEAN ministerial meetings and special summits convened under Indonesia's leadership, the country has provided vital platforms for constructive dialogue and negotiation aimed at finding peaceful solutions to the crisis. Additionally, Indonesia has played a central role in coordinating ASEAN's collective response to the crisis, including drafting and implementing the Five Point Consensus, a framework to address the situation in Myanmar. Furthermore, Indonesian leaders, notably Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, have engaged in shuttle diplomacy and bilateral negotiations with key stakeholders in Myanmar to encourage dialogue, de-escalate tensions, and facilitate reconciliation processes. Alongside these diplomatic efforts, Indonesia has actively contributed humanitarian aid and support to alleviate the suffering of the Myanmar population affected by the crisis. These comprehensive initiatives underscore Indonesia's commitment to maintaining peace, stability, and progress in the Southeast Asian region while addressing the urgent humanitarian needs arising from the situation in Myanmar. Through its diplomatic leadership and engagement within ASEAN, Indonesia continues to play a critical role in advancing regional efforts to address the Myanmar crisis and uphold ASEAN's principles of dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect. Through these efforts, Indonesia hopes to build bridges of dialogue, alleviate tensions, and facilitate the necessary reconciliation processes to restore the situation in Myanmar. In this endeavor, Indonesia plays a critical role in ensuring that ASEAN remains relevant and effective in addressing serious regional challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The escalation of conflict in Myanmar within the context of the political crisis and human rights violations it faced following the military coup in 2021 has been on the rise. This situation has posed severe challenges for ASEAN. While the initial response from ASEAN to this crisis was deemed sluggish, efforts to seek solutions and stability continue. Within ASEAN, the principle of non-interference has traditionally been pivotal to its identity and approach to regional affairs. However, the escalating crisis in Myanmar has posed a challenge to this principle, prompting ASEAN to reconsider its role and pursue more proactive solutions.

Employing a constructive approach in analysis provides a valuable framework for examining ASEAN's response to the evolving crisis in Myanmar and the dynamics within the organization. This approach perceives the world as shaped by human social constructs, underscoring the significance of interactions and social identities in shaping international relations. From a constructive perspective, this shift reflects ASEAN's evolving social identity and its acknowledgment of the necessity for collective action to address multifaceted regional challenges. Consequently, "enhanced engagement" emerges as a viable solution to facilitate deeper dialogue, cooperation, and collective action within ASEAN and with external stakeholders, aimed at resolving the crisis in Myanmar and fostering stability in the region. This approach may also entail imposing sanctions, such as exclusion from ASEAN activities, and establishing ad hoc teams to address the situation effectively.

As the chair country of ASEAN in 2023, Indonesia plays a crucial role in seeking solutions to the Myanmar crisis. With extensive diplomatic experience and a commitment to democracy and human rights, Indonesia has endeavored to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between Myanmar and the international community. As mentioned earlier, Indonesia has convened special meetings and summits to foster dialogue and consensus-building among conflicting parties in Myanmar. These include the 3rd ASEAN-Australia Summit, the 45th ASEAN-Canada Summit, the 20th ASEAN-India Summit, and the 13th ASEAN-United Nations (UN) Summit. Although there is debate about Indonesia's chosen

approach, it reflects an evolution in how ASEAN handles complex regional crises – how changes in these dynamics reflect ASEAN’s ability to adapt to evolving situations, shifting from a “constructive engagement” approach to an “enhanced interactions” approach. ASEAN’s response to the Myanmar crisis encompasses various measures, such as the Five Point Consensus (despite its failure), exclusion from regional activities, and the appointment of a special envoy for mediation. Although the Myanmar conflict remains unresolved, these steps demonstrate concerted efforts to confront a complex and challenging situation.

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