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A MOMENT OF TRUTH (AGAIN) FOR ASEAN

By

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I understand that the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a consensus-based organization that “moves at a pace comfortable to all,” which means at a pace comfortable to its slowest member. I also understand that ASEAN generally adheres to the principle of “noninterference in the internal affairs of one another.” But when one of its members issues orders to “shoot in the head” unarmed peaceful protesters, this goes against everything that ASEAN is supposed to stand for. Its continued inaction in the face of the ruling junta’s assault against the people of Myanmar (Burma) will again raise the question of ASEAN’s viability and utility. Every ASEAN document proclaims the need for ASEAN to remain “in the driver’s seat” when it comes to dealing with security challenges in the region. The time has come for ASEAN to drive.

ASEAN’s Charter cites “(A)dhering to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and good governance, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” as a basic precept in its preamble. Member States are supposed to act in accordance with “respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice.” As Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said in a recent tweet, the “principle of noninterference in others’ domestic affairs cannot be used to conceal crimes against humanity; that would be tantamount to ASEAN complicity and consent.” In a separate post, he opined that ASEAN’s noninterference policy “marginalizes ASEAN in the moral esteem of the planet and thereby sidelines it from the centrality it has long sought and attained.”

But what can/should ASEAN do? For starters it can stop issuing anodyne proclamations calling for “all parties to refrain from instigating further

violence, and for all sides to exercise utmost restraint as well as flexibility” and instead address the problem head-on, as did the Philippine Foreign Ministry’s Statement “On the Violence on Myanmar’s Armed Forces Day”: “The Philippines is profoundly dismayed at reports of excessive and needless force against unarmed protesters ... We reiterate our call for security forces in Myanmar to exercise restraint and desist from resorting to disproportionate force against unarmed citizens. We remain steadfast in supporting Myanmar on its path to a fuller democracy ...” Unfortunately, getting a consensus institution like ASEAN to issue such a public statement remains unlikely; it’s not consistent with “the ASEAN way.”

Nonetheless, ASEAN has at least two vehicles for delivering a quieter message to the generals. One is via a visit by the Troika, consisting of the heads of state of the current, immediate past, and next ASEAN Chair. In this case, that would be, respectively, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, and Cambodia—not the largest nor most influential messengers in ASEAN—but could easily be supplemented with others for a more impactful effect. However, both ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, which includes China, India, Japan, and the US among others) have Expert and Eminent Persons Groups (full disclosure: I am a member of the latter) which could offer ASEAN’s “good offices” in seeking a solution. The ARF, in particular, is supposed to evolve from a confidence-building mechanism to undertake a preventive diplomacy mission; clearly the current situation in Myanmar is one that is ripe for outside mediation.

There are a number of senior ASEAN statesmen who could head such a delegation. My personal choice would be former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, who would bring both personal prestige and the clout of ASEAN’s largest and most influential member to the table. Their message should be a simple one: immediately stop the killing of unarmed peaceful protesters or face being expelled from ASEAN. Better yet, ASEAN should inform the junta that it is prepared to recognize the interim unity government being set up by the CRPH—the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the national parliament), comprised mostly by members of parliament who were duly elected in last fall’s national elections. This prospective unity government, which involves a number of ethnic parties as well as Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, would no doubt welcome ASEAN’s intervention (which renders the non-interference clause moot); most importantly, ASEAN’s recognition would de-legitimize the junta, a threat they would have to take seriously.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has taken a number of unilateral measures to pressure the junta to respect the people of Myanmar’s wishes. It also needs to pressure ASEAN to do more. One vehicle for doing so would be through the Quad, whose four members—Australia, India, Japan, and the United States - makes up half the non-ASEAN membership in ASEAN’s premier multilateral offering, the “leaders-led” East Asia Summit (EAS). Collectively, they, preferably with like-minded members New Zealand and South Korea, should inform ASEAN that they will not participate in future EAS meetings as long as a junta-led Myanmar remains in the group. This will, of course, require India—the world’s largest democracy—to get off the fence and finally speak out in defense of democracy for its neighbor. The final two EAS

members, China and Russia, should, but are not likely to join this effort; both actually sent representatives to the junta's March 27 Armed Forces Day parade in the midst of the civilian carnage. The people of Myanmar will remember this.

ASEAN was already in the midst of an identity crisis prior to the Myanmar coup, prompted by calls by leading intellectuals like Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan to censure two of its members—Cambodia and Lao—for putting the interests of their patron state—China—ahead of the interests of the group. Moving at a speed comfortable to them has prevented ASEAN from speaking out forcefully against Beijing's excesses in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Here ASEAN needs to follow the example set by its track two neighbor, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which adopted an 80% consensus rule which prevents one or two members from preventing the rest from moving forward when necessary. In practice, this rule is seldom applied. Knowing that one does not have a veto usually encourages the finding of a compromise solution.

If ASEAN were prepared to “move at a pace comfortable to none,” i.e., to compromise rather than let a single member (or two) hold the group hostage, then perhaps it could finally put some meaning behind the term “ASEAN centrality.” Right now it just means sitting in the middle of the road and going nowhere.

Postscript: If, as sadly anticipated, ASEAN once again fails to act, it may be time for Indonesia to free itself from its ASEAN shackles and take a unilateral leadership role commensurate with its size and international standing; by sending both a mediator and a message to Naypyitaw, Jokowi would also be sending a powerful message to his erstwhile ASEAN colleagues. It would be interesting to then see how many, if any, of his fellow ASEAN members would step up along with Jakarta.

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