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MYANMAR HAS FURTHER SPLINTERED ASEAN UNITY

By
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Asean is split on how to move forward to end the violence in Myanmar. Asean should have known that the junta chief General Hlaing has no intention from the very beginning to give up power to his nemesis Aung Suu Kyi whom he deposed and outsmarted. Two other recent events have also undermined Asean unity. Most importantly, big power politics has been the bane of Asean unity.

Frustrated with the situation in Myanmar, the United States Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, on Tuesday (13 July) during the Asean-US Foreign Ministers Meeting, called on the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to put more pressure on Myanmar to end the violence and to appoint a special envoy, as agreed between Asean and General Min Aung Hlaing at the Asean Heads of State summit at Jakarta April 2021.

Asean has not been able to nominate an envoy that is acceptable to all ten member states because they could NOT agree on a candidate!

I dare say that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was taken for a ride by the Machiavellian Myanmar junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing. Asean should have known from the beginning he was never interested to give up power to his nemesis Aung Suu Kyi whom he deposed and outsmarted. Hence, he would not do anything that will weaken his political leadership.

The domestic violence is a perfect strategy to “legitimise” Gen Hlaing’s use of force to rid the country from the “enemies” of the state from usurping the political independence and territorial integrity of the Union. The resurrected uprisings by the ethnic groups who have taken up arms against the central

Government for a long time provide the General with more ammunitions to extend the emergency rule over the entire nation.

Asean which failed to censor Myanmar for its five-month-old violent crackdown on dissent, is now learning that the so-called "five-point consensus" agreed in Jakarta in April by junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has been ignored from the start. The Asean leaders should have known that General Hlaing was playing for time and testing the regional political waters, so to speak.

Any hope that General Hlaing would implement the five points --to end violence, begin constructive talks with the opposition, allow a special Asean envoy into the country and allow in aid has been dashed by recent events. On his return from the Jakarta summit, Hlaing did everything he could to frustrate the Asean consensus. Although he granted the Asean Secretary General and the Second Foreign Minister of Brunei an audience early June, he conceded nothing on the ground.

Buoyed by support from China, Russia, and India, General Hlaing's upped the stakes. By defying Asean, he raised his political stature at home among the members of the junta. He reckoned the five- point consensus was nothing more than a spiteful joke. He travelled to Jakarta in April for a rush Summit partly to assess the chemistry in Asean, to know which friends of his would turn up to censure him. When Thailand, Philippines and Laos only sent their Foreign Minister to Jakarta, Hlaing knew half the battle already won.

Call it deliberate absence or what, to put it mildly in diplomatic terms, it was dissent or silent revolt. Four Asean member states abstained from supporting the United Nations General Assembly resolution in June 2021 condemning the coup, violence, and calling for all countries to stop selling arms to Myanmar. The UNGA resolution passed by an overwhelming vote of 119 to 1 with 36 abstentions including Brunei, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines supported the resolution.

Asean was split in the middle!

The UNGA resolution strongly condemns the worsening crackdown on peaceful protesters and civil society, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of arbitrary detainees and an end to restrictions on freedom of expression.

Frustrated by the antics, Jakarta was visibly furious. A Jakarta Post op-ed on 1 July **Asean: Sleeping with Enemy** says it all. The future does not look bright on the ground in Myanmar as China pours in more investment and Russia sells modern weapons to the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar). Besides, next year Cambodia will take over from Brunei the rotating Chairmanship of Asean. Phnom Penh will not do anything to upset China, a common friend of Myanmar.

The disunity in Asean ranks will further weaken the association's "centrality." Within Asean diplomatic circles, centrality is defined as the capacity to influence and to steer external issues, usually on security matters, in Asean's

favour. For example, Asean capacity to influence the current dynamics in the US-Sino rivalry in its favour, considered central to Asean unity, is limited.

Thus far, Asean has been skirting the issue and is in no position to change the dynamics. Despite official statements to the contrary, some member states are hedging their positions, ostensibly to protect their national interests- security and economic. However, so far none of the Asean member states has openly embraced, for example, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, designed by the US comprising Australia, Japan, and India to contain China. While some Asean member states are US Treaty Allies, all maintain very strong economic relations with China.

Although on paper, Asean as an organization wants to maintain a balanced relationship between the two powers in peace time. However, when shooting starts, each is for its own self. Making a choice between giving priority to security and or to economics will not come easy for some, less so for those who have strong military ties with either power. This nightmare will continue to haunt Asean.

Apart from the current conundrum in Myanmar, two other important “incidents” which have chipped at Asean unity include the following:

First. The failure the Asean Foreign Ministers Meeting at Phnom Penh in 2012 to produce a consensus for a joint statement. The disagreement was over the inclusion of a statement on China’s activities in the South China Sea, which the host nation refused to accept. Since this incident, the relationship between Asean countries with the two big powers is no longer straight forward as it used to be in the 1990s.

Second. Asean hesitancy to embrace the US- initiated the Indo Pacific idea which initially puts the organization at odds with Washington. The final document on “The Asean Outlook on the Indo Pacific”, which was watered down to obtain general agreement, not amounting to consensus, is a testament of this.

The Outlook puts emphasis on four key elements: broadening the geographic area of the Indo Pacific region, putting emphasis economic prosperity, placing importance on cooperation in the maritime domain and commitment not to allow any power (read US) to use the region for rivalry (read with China). In plain language, it simply means that Asean does not fully share the US concerns of strategic issues in the Indo Pacific Region and that China is a close economic partner of the countries in the region.

Like the above two incidents, big power politics has become a bane in Asean unity. Had it not been for the support from China and Russia, General Hlaing would be less brazen in defying Asean on “a five- point- consensus.”

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