

Guest Column

ASEAN for Whom? The Jakarta Summit on Myanmar Will Tell



Myanmar coup leader Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing arrives in Jakarta for the ASEAN summit on Saturday morning. / BPMI Setpres / Rusman



By **ROSALIA SCIORTINO** 24 April 2021



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The Special Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Myanmar has begun in Jakarta today amid controversy over the expected attendance of Myanmar’s coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. ASEAN has promised outcomes while being tightlipped on the summit’s specific aims, with most **observers** assuming that the regional block will strive to attain open access for humanitarian aid and an end to violence so as to make “dialog” among the different parties possible.

This well-meaning intention is, however, challenged by civil society groups across the region. Participants at the Southeast Asia Peoples’ Summit on Myanmar held virtually on April 22 by key regional and local civil society organizations and networks rejected any interaction with the Myanmar military (or Tatmadaw). They also requested ASEAN condemn the coup –a word used so far only by Malaysia— and recognize and invite the National Unity Government (NUG) announced on April 16 as the true representative of the people of Myanmar. The NUG itself had the wit to **urge Interpol** to collaborate with the Indonesian police and arrest the junta leader when in Jakarta for having committed crimes against ethnic minorities, the Rohingya and now the entire population.

The tension between governments and civil society has been a constant feature of ASEAN history. Looking back, it took a long time for the former to realize the latter’s contribution to regional development. Only in 2008, the adoption of the ASEAN Charter brought significant changes with the placing of “the well-being, livelihoods and welfare of peoples at the center of the ASEAN community building process”. To promote the envisioned “people-oriented” ASEAN, all sectors were expected to engage in the political, economic and sociocultural communities that constitute the three pillars of ASEAN and (accredited) civil society groups were finally listed among the “entities associated with ASEAN”. In the same charter and successive documents, the ASEAN Mechanisms were created for civil society to formally interact with ASEAN, foremost the annual ASEAN People’s Forum (APF) to be held on the sidelines of the annual ASEAN summits and the commissions on human rights and on women and children’s rights.

This period of change coincided with the 2010 Myanmar decision to “transition” to democracy, with the Tatmadaw allowing elections and assigning a role to the opposition, and the resulting general sense of optimism that Southeast Asia was distancing itself from its authoritarian past and heading toward a more democratic future. In those years, the World Governance Indicators (WGI) showed a modest improvement in the lagging-behind indicator of “voice and accountability”—as an

The regional environment, however, eventually (re)turned hostile towards civil society due to democratic backsliding and authoritarian endurance—with the possible exception of Myanmar’s move towards a semblance of democracy. At the regional level, Laos refused to host civil society groups and the APF in 2016 and the 2019 one saw support by the Thai government withdrawn at the last moment. More generally, the rights-based preoccupations of civil society and the communities they represent, expressed with recommendations and calls for action at the end of every APF, have remained marginal to ASEAN interests and processes. Yet, a **2018 poll** mandated by ASEAN itself found that among its top five key regional issues the general public emphasized protection of human rights, fighting corruption and good governance—all themes dear to civil society and consonant with the ASEAN Charter, but generally disregarded in ASEAN practice.

Fast-forwarding to today, the region, and thus ASEAN as its regional body, remains dominated by centralized and populist governments of diverse ideological orientations, but with a shared tendency to curtail civic space by limiting public gatherings and freedom of expression, imposing repressive rules for civil society organizations (CSOs) and people’s movements, and increasing use of force and human rights transgressions. In the face of this democratic regression and undermining of progressive forces, new movements are emerging that reach beyond borders in their search for strength and sources of inspiration. And if initially the so-called Milk Tea alliance stretched between Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, since the February coup it has become centered on Myanmar and rapidly expanded to Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

The violent brutality in Myanmar resonates as an extreme representation of the oppression felt in other countries in the region and admiration for the population’s courage and determination in opposing the coup is re-energizing activism in neighboring countries. A sense of solidarity is emerging in parallel to the growing realization that the fight of the people of Myanmar has repercussions for democratic forces in the entire region. Irrespective of the specific context of each country, the challenging of authoritarian manifestations—be it the coup in Myanmar, the war on drugs in the Philippines, the anti-reform government in Thailand, draconian order rules in Singapore or identity politics in Indonesia—are starting to be seen as in need of a shared effort if they are to be addressed. In the same way that the three-finger “Hunger Games” salute first adopted by Thai activists has become a symbol of resistance for people in Myanmar and their allies in other parts of the region, information and tactics are shared regionally against the pending threat of pan-Asian authoritarianism.

Civil societies and like-minded people are taking what is happening in Myanmar as a warning and a reminder that democracy is fragile and ought to be treasured. As Ati Nurbaiti, a senior Indonesian journalist, **put it**, “It’s that once you have gone so far to achieve some democracy, you hold on to it for dear life—literally.” The summit will now show whether governments share the same principles upheld by their people and enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. In this context, the summit is not only a litmus test for the diplomatic capacity of ASEAN in resolving a major crisis in a member state, but will also shed light as to the extent that ASEAN is indeed people-oriented. If the voices of the people of Myanmar, their legitimate representatives and their growing region-wide alliance are ignored, as many fear in view of the current rights-averse climate, it would imply that the governments of ASEAN are not representing the “We, the peoples of the member states of ASEAN” as they have committed to in the first sentence of the ASEAN Charter. And with that, ASEAN would not only forgo its stated democratic principles, but also its very *raison d’être*, as without people there can be no ASEAN.

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