

Briefing Note: ASEAN and Myanmar

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Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub



This briefing note expands on the presentation by Jaivet Ealom at the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 2 July, 2024. It provides more detail on the critical ways in which the situation in Myanmar has changed since the adoption of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus and makes four recommendations for Malaysia as Chair of ASEAN:

1. ASEAN governments should expand formal engagement with non-junta actors.
2. ASEAN states should expand Humanitarian Assistance beyond the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA).
3. The Chair should appoint and empower a permanent ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar.
4. ASEAN support for the Rohingya must move beyond humanitarian aid to also include political assistance, integrated with engagement with non-junta actors.

Background

- **The situation in Myanmar has undergone significant changes since the adoption of the ASEAN five-point consensus.** Historically, no central government has ever had full control of Myanmar since its independence, and armed resistance by ethnic minorities has been a persistent feature of the country's political landscape. However, the central government has generally managed to contain these resistance forces within the borderlands.
- **Since the coup, the Burman majority in Myanmar's heartland has risen in resistance against the junta.** This uprising includes individuals with little to no prior conflict experience. Notably, since October 2023, the pro-revolutionary coalition, comprising the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), has [achieved significant military victories](#), altering the dynamics on the ground.
- **The Myanmar military is no longer the primary stakeholder in the country.** Given the current power shift, a more creative reinterpretation of the five-point consensus is now necessary to effectively address the evolving situation. ASEAN must address these changed circumstances by engaging—formally—with the range of important actors fighting against the military junta.
- **ASEAN risks being sidelined through interventions from China, India and the United States.** China is hedging its position by [holding talks](#) with EROs active along its border. India [maintains ties](#) with the Myanmar junta, while the U.S., despite Washington being preoccupied with its own upcoming elections, has [policy circles](#)

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[actively calling](#) for support of the pro-revolutionary side, mainly the National Unity Government (NUG).

Recommendations:

ASEAN governments should expand engagement with non-junta actors in Myanmar's resistance

- The Myanmar military continues to ignore the Five-Point Consensus and persists in its brutal campaign of oppressing and murdering its own citizens. ASEAN nations should reconsider their consultations with the junta as a stakeholder.
- The National Unity Government and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations have considerable territorial and capacity-based legitimacy. Immediate post-coup analysis that a military victory was impossible is no longer accurate, as material and territorial gains by this coalition continue.
- Individual engagement of ASEAN member states remains an option but requires engagement with more actors: Malaysia has previously championed bilateral involvement, but engaging solely with the military regime is insufficient. [Doing so would risk, as Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim stated in 2023, "sacrificing the issues of human rights and the treatment of minorities."](#)

ASEAN states should expand Humanitarian Assistance beyond the limited channels of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA)

- Depending solely on [AHA Centre](#) is a flawed element of the Five-Point Consensus as it channels funds to the junta. [AHA strengthens and legitimizes the Myanmar junta](#) as it prioritizes the government-controlled Myanmar Red Cross including along Thailand's recently announced "humanitarian corridor".
- Local Humanitarian Aid Should be Prioritized: Analysts suggest donors instead support [locally-led and implemented humanitarian aid](#).
- Expanding ASEAN's Humanitarian Assistance beyond the AHA Centre will produce multiple positive effects: 1) Less funds flowing to the junta; 2) Prioritize the needs and concerns of *all* of the citizens of Myanmar; and 3) Activating "[Resistance Humanitarian](#)" organizations that are shown to be more effective in helping hard-to-reach populations and accurately assessing on-the-ground needs.
- Finally, ASEAN should partner with border states and organizations in Thailand, India and Bangladesh to expand humanitarian assistance to Myanmar through its borders. Myanmar's Chin State and Rakhine State—which AHA cannot reach—have

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experienced some of the most significant armed conflict and humanitarian and protection needs of the post-coup period. Malaysia should use its experience from Ops Ihsan in facilitating cross-border aid through government to government and government to NGOs collaboration.

The Chair should appoint and empower an ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar who will hold the role regardless of the rotating chair

- The position of **ASEAN Special Envoy** in the Five-Point Consensus has been **underutilized**. In practice, having the **Chair's Foreign Minister** or **another senior diplomat** fill this role prevents the development of relationships over time due to annual rotations. Additionally, the Envoy role is always likely to be a small part of any ASEAN Foreign Minister's portfolio and will certainly receive less attention.
- For an ASEAN Special Envoy role to be effective, it needs to be independent of the rotating chair and sufficiently resourced to allow for research and travel and to engage with the range of relevant actors in Myanmar's crisis.

ASEAN support for the Rohingya must move beyond humanitarian aid to also include political assistance, integrated with engagement with non-junta actors.

- **Seven years after facing genocidal violence, Rohingya remain as vulnerable and isolated as ever.** ASEAN should work collaboratively with Bangladesh to ensure that Rohingya have access to **basic needs, such as education, communication and livelihoods**.
- **The Myanmar military is forcibly recruiting Rohingya, which risks stoking inter-ethnic violence in Rakhine State.** As the **Arakan Army (AA) continues to win more territory**, the risks for Rohingya still in Rakhine State increase, caught between two hostile groups.
- **The conditions are absolutely not safe for refugee return, but ASEAN can help the Rohingya by ensuring their inclusion in Myanmar's emerging democratic resistance landscape.** The National Unity Consultative Council is mirrored by regional and ethnic Consultative Councils and similar bodies. Not only do these democratic and representative groups deserve ASEAN's support and recognition, the newly formed **Rohingya Consultative Council** should be supported as a **political** voice for the Rohingya in Myanmar's future state.

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