

Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship: Understanding Cambodia's Way for Myanmar



In Depth interview with Dr. Chhort Bunthang

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1. Myanmar crisis has been evolving into a multidimensional crisis involving political, security, humanitarian, health, economy, social, and many more aspects. From the point of view of Cambodia, what is the right prescription to resolve this crisis and what ASEAN can really do?

According to my understanding, ASEAN does not have strong enough legal framework, mechanism, power, and experiences to resolve the Myanmar crisis. Even though ASEAN has set the Five-Point Consensus for resolving Myanmar crisis, ASEAN has no effective means or instruments to enforce military group to follow them. In the previous time, the similar political crises– political violence, coup d'état, etc.– have happened in the ASEAN member states, namely the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand on occupation of Khmer Preas Vihear temple (Thailand coup d'état). But ASEAN also has not been playing an important role to solve these problems. For me, ASEAN is a weak regional organization that does not have strong role in helping or surviving ASEAN people or nations from their crisis.

I think if ASEAN wants to play an important role in the region, it should rethink about its charter, vision, mission, strategies, policies and so on. If we find that some points of all legal frameworks and regulations of ASEAN do not meet the need and situation of the ASEAN states, we should change or we could propose to reform the ASEAN. Otherwise, some of ASEAN politicians and people still become the victim, then they continue to take the super

powers outside the region to help and protect them, therefore ASEAN will have no important role to help its members and it will eventually break down in the future.

Anyway, ASEAN should continue to use the Five-Point Consensus and try to find other ways that can help us in response to the Myanmar crisis.

2. The progress of the Five-Point Consensus has not come with any significant result. Why is that so? What is wrong and what should be fixed?

As I have mentioned in the first question, ASEAN does not have strong enough legal framework, mechanism, power and experiences to resolve the ASEAN member states crisis. So even though ASEAN has set the Five-Point Consensus to resolve Myanmar crisis, ASEAN has no means or instruments to enforce military group to follow them. In addition, the military leaders in Myanmar do not obey the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus or ASEAN's appeal. On one hand, maybe they think that if they do not follow the ASEAN's suggestion, no one can push and take action on them. On the other hand, the ASEAN consensus policy and principle of non-interference in internal affairs of AMS is

“lack of solidarity among AMS.”

Furthermore, the shortage of common understanding among ASEAN leaders and politicians on the ways to respond to Myanmar crisis is also the case.

In addition, the conflict in Myanmar itself is very complicated as it has a long history and deeply rooted in Myanmar society, especially in Myanmar politicians and minority groups. I think if we cannot apply all the Five-Point Consensus at the same time,

“ we should choose which one we can do first. It is especially the key point on ceasefire, and then we try to do another point of our Five-Point Consensus. ”

I strongly support the idea that we do not recognize the military group as the official government of Myanmar and that we do not let them to join the ASEAN meetings. But if we want to talk with Myanmar conflict parties, we must have the chance to meet all the relevant parties including military group, National Unity Government of Myanmar, and the minority group as well. I do not care which party we should meet first, but we have to meet all relevant conflict parties. Otherwise, ASEAN cannot resolve Myanmar crisis.

3. ASEAN Leaders particularly President Joko Widodo, PM Lee Hsien Long and others are insisting for the ASEAN envoy should be allowed to meet with DAW Aung San Suu Kyi, however that demands is yet to be fulfilled. What is your take on this ?

I maintain that if the conflict parties do not agree to a ceasefire, how can the ASEAN envoy or the ASEAN delegation meet with the parties concerned in Myanmar? In the past, both ASEAN leaders and the current chair of ASEAN have met directly with Gen Min Aung Hlaing to discuss and set conditions, especially the five-point consensus principle.

On the contrary, Aung San Suu Kyi, both ASEAN leaders and the current ASEAN Chairmanship, did not even have a chance to meet her. I think ASEAN envoy and ASEAN leaders should find a way to talk to her, ask her what she wants and tell her what ASEAN wants her to accept in order to mediate an end to the crisis. I think the first step is to explore the possibility of meeting Aung San Suu Kyi via video conference. And then, we will find the opportunity to directly meet her and relevant parties.

4. In what condition that is ideal for the talk?

So far, the fighting between the conflict parties have continued. If the ASEAN envoy or the ASEAN delegation wants to meet all stakeholders on the territory of

Myanmar, it is very risky for their security. Any armed party may attack them and blames each other, and no one is responsible. If ASEAN wants to meet with all parties in the absence of a ceasefire, it should do so in any country outside of Myanmar, in the case Min Aung Hlaing, DAW Aung San Suu Kyi and representative of major ethnic armed groups should be invited to the meeting. Importantly, whether the military agreed to release Aung San Suu Kyi to attend the meeting or not?” If all armed parties agree to a ceasefire before meeting, it is the safest way.

5. What is the rational of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s decision to visit Myanmar as the first foreign leader to visit the country after the coup last year?

Prime Minister Hun Sen’s rational in making decision to visit Myanmar is to contribute in resolving Myanmar crisis with the rest of AMS based on ASEAN Charter and policies. He said that his meeting with Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing from Myanmar military group had resulted in the extension of ceasefire with all ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the country– which was originally set to expire at the end of February through the end of the year. Prime Minister Hun Sen maintains that his first visit to Myanmar can be the starting point of the negotiation with the relevant conflict parties in Myanmar in order to stop violence, find peace, and resolve the Myanmar crisis– which until now is still stuck, and ASEAN has not been able to resolve. He added that his meeting with Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing does not mean he recognizes military group as official government of Myanmar. Instead, it is just the process of finding the resolution to Myanmar crisis, and next, he will find the chance to meet all relevant parties in Myanmar conflict.

6. After the visit of PM Hun Sen, DAW Aung San Suu Kyi’s sentence is extended into 4 years by Myanmar Junta’s Court. how do you see this?

I think that Gen Min Aung Hlaing wants to show Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition and the people of Myanmar that he is a strong legitimate leader who can do anything without fear of ASEAN and others. And Min Aung Hlaing also wants to intimidate and soften the attitude of the opposition against him and also wants to send a message to ASEAN leaders that he also wants to do whatever should not put too much pressure on him. In addition, Min Aung Hlaing does not seem to want to be pressured by anyone, especially if he and the military group lose their interests.

7. Prime Minister Hun Sen suggest to include Myanmar political representative in ASEAN meetings, can you explain what is the reason behind that idea? Would it bring any different in the progress of the Five-Point Consensus?

In general, I think Prime Minister Hun Sen cannot do anything that violate ASEAN's Charter, vision, policies, tradition, especially the Five-Point Consensus. But his perspectives and practices in playing the role in the ASEAN chairmanship can be different from the other AMS leaders when they play their role as the ASEAN chairmanship. Although he just started to play his role in trying to find the resolution in Myanmar crisis, there are some AMS and also some countries outside the region that disapprove his method in performing this work. Some AMS leaders said Prime Minister Hun Sen violated ASEAN's Charter and policies, and that his position seems to recognize the military group as the official government.

I think this is not something uncommon because each person always has a different perspective, idea, and experience in solving the problems that are within his or her obligations, and each person has the rights to say what he/she thinks. From my own idea, ASEAN should find the best way to resolve Myanmar crisis because this is the first time ASEAN tries to involve in the internal affair of AMS, which ASEAN has never done in the previous time. If ASEAN could find the best resolution for Myanmar crisis, it can be the model to resolve conflicts in other AMS that have similar crisis.

8. Will Prime Minister Hun Sen push for an inclusive national dialogue with the National Unity Government of Myanmar? If yes, what is the approach to achieve that point?

In order to negotiate with the relevant conflict parties, we need to meet all parties. Otherwise, how can we understand each other and see the real problem, the real cause, and what each party wants in the resolutions. I suggest that even though Prime Minister Hun Sen has his own perspective, experience, and method in resolving Myanmar crisis, he should follow the ASEAN Charter and policies— especially the Five-Point Consensus. In addition to that, Prime Minister Hun Sen can appoint ASEAN special envoy and propose other policies and mechanisms to meet and talk with all relevant conflict parties in order to find the resolution. But all of these have to be approved by the other AMS as well. If ASEAN wants to solve the Myanmar crisis as whole, ASEAN leaders should not only meet and talk with military group and the National Unity Government of Myanmar, but also with other ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the country.

I think the end of Myanmar crisis should not basically depend on the outsiders like AMS and the super powers. Instead, most importantly, it should begin from the politicians, leaders, and the people of Myanmar themselves. Otherwise, even the God cannot solve the Myanmar crisis completely and properly.

9. Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn has been appointed as ASEAN Special envoy; do you have any insight about his plan forward?

I do not think he can do anything contrary to the principles or charter of ASEAN. What he hopes for depends on Cambodia's experience in ending its civil war in the past, especially through the win-win policy and close relationships of the current ASEAN Chairmanship to Myanmar's military leaders.

I still think that the crisis in Myanmar can be successfully resolved depends on the will of the conflict parties of Myanmar itself, not ASEAN envoy, ASEAN leaders or superpowers. Even if external parties such as ASEAN envoys, ASEAN leaders or superpowers have the ability, vision, principles, experience, efforts and goodwill, they will not be able to resolve the conflict if Myanmar itself does not want to end the conflict.

Moreover, I still doubt whether the Cambodian experience can be used successfully in Myanmar. Can ASEAN force the Myanmar military to adhere to the proposed principles and solutions based on the principles of consensus and non-interference in ASEAN internal affairs? In addition, ASEAN does not have its own military force the Myanmar's military leaders to respect ASEAN principles or will.

10. Many believe that ASEAN countries are divided in approaching the Myanmar crisis, what is your observation on the dynamic between the AMS (ASEAN Member States)?

As I have mentioned in the previous question, each person or each AMS leader has different perspective, method, and practice in resolving the problems. Some differences are based on each leader's tendency, personal ability, experience, and so on. But some differences depend on each AMS' political position. I would like to see ASEAN to use the critical thinking, reasoning, innovation, new strategy, and wisdom to solve the new problem in the region or in AMS. If we are not brave to have our self-assessment in analyzing the SWOT, and if we still use our traditional charter, policy, and strategies when meeting new problem— we will still have many obstacles in resolving the AMS crisis and we are not helping each other at all in resolving our own crisis.

11. I see that your argument tells that ASEAN charter should be reviewed and way of ASEAN should be reformed in order to address crises such as Myanmar. what is your suggestion of changes for ASEAN charter and way of ASEAN?

I think the traditional principles and charter of ASEAN are still weak and vague. I understand that the ASEAN Consensus and Non-interference Principles are obstacles to resolving crises in ASEAN Member States. Between 2008 and 2011, disputes between Cambodia and Thailand over the seizure of the Khmer Preah Vihear Temple by Thai extremists, a military coup in Thailand, the issue of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, the South China Sea issue involving some ASEAN member states, etc., cannot be resolved.

ASEAN sometimes seems to be an institution that strengthens and empowers the leaders of ASEAN member states, rather than as a regional organization that protects the lives, peace and interests of ASEAN citizens.

I do not think the consensus should cover all the issues, but only the big issues, such as the integration or removal of ASEAN members or the great decisions of ASEAN. The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states should not cover all topics or agendas. It should be determined which tasks can be interfered and which tasks cannot be interfered. If ASEAN cannot be reformed, ASEAN will continue to be weak, unable to solve problems within the ASEAN family, and each ASEAN member will continue to seek superpowers as its backers to protect themselves from neighboring countries trying to influence or take advantage from the weak states. Eventually, ASEAN lost its role and split in the future.



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