

ASEAN's Discord Over Myanmar, Could Expose Association to External Dominance

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*The meeting of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers was postponed amid disagreements over Myanmar. The West could use this division within ASEAN to dominate the association and pressure Southeast Asian countries to turn against China. ASEAN's differences over Myanmar in the context of Cambodian **Prime Minister Hun Sen's** visit to the isolated country is the likely reason why the meeting was postponed.*

The meeting should have taken place on January 18-19 in the northern Cambodian city of Siem Reap. It was to be the first ASEAN forum hosted by the country. However, on January 12, Cambodian Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Koy Kuong** announced the postponement of the meeting. The spokesperson declined to give further details, but it is known that Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines did not fully support Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar, and even criticized him indirectly.

Hun Sen held talks with the head of Myanmar's military junta, **General Min Aung Hlaing**, and did not hold any meetings with opposition representatives, including Aung San Suu Kyi. In an interview with journalists last week, Malaysian **Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah** suggested that Hun Sen as ASEAN chairman should have consulted other leaders of the association and asked for their views on what he should try and achieve in Myanmar. As the Minister noted, in ASEAN there are different opinions on the visit but that he would judge after the fact whether Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar was constructive.

Despite the “wait-and-see” position of Malaysia, some countries are concerned that the visit could be seen as regional recognition of the junta and that their views should have been consulted.

Singapore's Foreign Ministry announced that during talks via video link a day earlier, **Prime**

Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the new president of ASEAN to have dialogue with all parties involved in the conflict in Myanmar, including the party of **Aung San Suu Kyi**. Lee noted that all of Cambodia's proposals as ASEAN Chair should be discussed in detail by ASEAN foreign ministers. He also expressed hope that [Cambodia](#) would take into account the views of Singapore and other ASEAN leaders.

The Philippines expressed a similar stance to Malaysia and Singapore, with **Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin** saying on Sunday that he sees Aung San Suu Kyi as an "indispensable" participant of any negotiations between the opposing parties in Myanmar, despite her four year prison sentence. He stressed that the special envoy's access to all parties concerned should not have any conditions. Locsin also announced his intention to work with his ASEAN counterparts in the coming weeks to reach a dialogue between all stakeholders in Myanmar and make progress on the [Five-Point consensus](#).

The crisis in Myanmar is not new and will certainly not have a quick solution. Despite this reality, some kind of concession in ASEAN will still need to be found. In the worst-case scenario, if the path towards a solution is not opened, a rift, if not even a split, will emerge in ASEAN. If ASEAN countries do not come to an agreement on Myanmar, Western forces could take advantage of the internal crises to dominate the association that is becoming increasingly [closer to China](#).

The West has repeatedly used events in Myanmar to put pressure on ASEAN since the country became a member state in 1997. Washington constantly incites tensions in Myanmar and elsewhere in Southeast Asia in a controlled manner as part of their attempts to stop, or at least limit, Chinese influence from strengthening and expanding in the region.

One of Myanmar's leading newspapers, The Irrawaddy, noted China's efforts to support dialogue between Myanmar and ASEAN to resolve the political crisis in the country. The Irrawaddy, founded by Burmese exiles living in northern Thailand but now also based in Rangoon, also acknowledged that Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar sparked mixed reactions in Myanmar and abroad due to his contacts with the military government.

The newspaper cited Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Wang Wen** as saying that Beijing supports the creation of favourable conditions that are conduit to resolving issues. The spokesperson also said that for the ASEAN envoy to fulfill its responsibilities, China is working to reach a consensus between Myanmar's "five-point roadmap" and ASEAN's "five-point consensus."

As ASEAN countries rely on China for the development of their infrastructure and economy, Washington wants to break relations that Southeast Asian countries have with Beijing. So long as the Myanmar issue persists, it will deepen differences within the association that can then be exploited by external forces, especially the US.

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