MILITARY COUP IN MYANMAR: A TEST FOR ASEAN

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Abstract
The Myanmar military once again seized power from the civilian government. The coup that took place on February 1, 2021 is a step backwards for Myanmar's democratization efforts. The people of Myanmar protested and took to the streets, and the military responded by mobilizing forces and abuse of power. This event has sparked criticism from the international community, and has a pressure on ASEAN to take a more active role in restoring peace. This paper intends to discuss the efforts that can be done by ASEAN. The coup, in any case, indicates the military's unpreparedness to surrender power completely to the civilian government. Hitherto, the coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing appears more lenient than the previous ones. The military also tends to be more transparent to the international community. This is an opportunity that ASEAN can take advantage of in order to play a more active role, provided that ASEAN dares to be more flexible in exercising the principle of non-intervention. The Government and House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI) are expected to push ASEAN towards common stance in order to achieve wider goals of the organization.

Introduction
Ahead of the inaugural session of parliament concerning result of the general election held in November 2020, the Myanmar military led by General Min Aung Hlaing seized control over the government. The military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Mynt, as well as a number of figures from the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party. Myanmar, which has just recently started its transitional period to democracy, was once again under military control on February 1, 2021. The coup sparked massive protests and labor strikes in various parts of Myanmar. Various elements of society in Myanmar took to the streets and expressed their repudiation of the coup. The international community has responded and observed the situation, including the Indonesian government. They are not only observing developments in Myanmar, but also highlighting the role of ASEAN.

As a regional organization, there is a great expectation that ASEAN can play a more active role
in restoring democracy and civil power in Myanmar. This paper will discuss how ASEAN can respond to the international community’s expectation by first trying to comprehend the political direction desired by the military through the coup. By understanding this issue, it may serve as a basis for considering the steps that need to be taken by ASEAN, including Indonesia.

The Ebb and Flow of Myanmar’s Democracy

This is not the first the military junta seized power in Myanmar. The Myanmar military has a long history in Myanmar's internal affairs. The military once controlled Myanmar's government for decades, and during that time, many democratic movements had risen. The coup against the semi-democratic rule in 1962 became a critical turning point of military rule in Myanmar.

Student activists in Myanmar led major protests in 1988 in response to economic mismanagement by the military junta and demanded reforms towards democracy. The protests that occurred on August 8, 1988, or also known as 8888 Uprising, was later recorded as one of the most brutal acts of violence committed by military forces. It was reported that around 5,000 people were killed as a result of military violence. In the same year, Suu Kyi founded the NLD and began to push down the military government to hold democratic elections.

Under domestic and international pressure, in 1990, Myanmar held a general election which was won by the NLD. The military junta refused the result and ordered Suu Kyi to be placed under house arrest. In order to maintain military control over the government, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) drafted a new constitution, in which it is stipulated that 25% of the national and local parliamentary seats must be reserved for military officials. Based on this constitution, another election was held in 2011 which was won by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

During the period of control by the USDP over the government (2011-2016), General Min Aung Hlaing had a substantial influence in politics. The NLD won a sweeping victory in the subsequent election (2015), however they were unable to elect Suu Kyi as President because the constitution drawn up by the military barred her from running for president. The president at that time, Htin Kyaw created the position of State Counselor which placed Suu Kyi as the head of government.

During this period, the relationship between the military and the government of Suu Kyi seemed fine, with General Min Aung Hlaing being able to adapt and cooperate, but at the same time maintaining military rule by hampering any attempts made by the NLD to amend the constitution and to restrict military power. Suu Kyi even received criticism from the international community when she was accused of defending the Myanmar military who were held responsible for the massacre of the Rohingya people. The coup that took place on February 1, 2021 indicated a conflicting relationship. This is the question of many analysts, what prompted the military to stage a coup this time, and what does this coup hope to achieve?

The Myanmar military stated that this coup was a response to the alleged fraud in the 2020 general
elections. The coup leader, General Min Aung Hlaing, had promised free and fair elections in his speech. He also claimed that his government would be different from the military regime that formerly ruled for 49 years who treated the protesters in a brutal manner in 1988 and 2007. However, judging from the acts taken by the military in maintaining its influence, this coup at the very least can be regarded as a desperate act posed by the military over the absolute victory achieved by the NLD during the 2020 elections. The NLD won 396 of the 476 seats in the parliament. NLD’s dominance in the parliament could bring about significant changes that could lead to constitutional changes that weaken the role of the military in politics.

Even though it is still too early to achieve a conclusive analysis, in any case, the way the military took over power and handled protests can be used as an early indication in choosing strategic options to make every effort to get the democratization process in Myanmar back on track. The promise of ‘new fair elections’ was not reflected in the military acts. The taking over of a legally elected civilian government is clearly antithetical to the principles of democracy and constitutional governance, rule of law, good governance, and respect and protection of human rights. The arrests of Suu Kyi and other political figures also served as a grim reminder to the Myanmar people of the arbitrary detention, torture and kidnappings that occurred during the previous coup. This year’s coup was also followed by the imposition of curfews, disconnection of internet networks (internet blackout), crowd restrictions, deployment of armored vehicles and use of force to thwart protests.

What concerns public the most is the presence of the 77th Light Infantry Division to repel demonstrations. This division was blamed for the mass executions of Rohingya people in Rakhine in 2017. Despite a series of abuses of power, there have been no reports of significant casualties on the demonstrators’ side for more than two weeks of military rule. Violence during protests has indeed decreased compared to the previous military junta reign.

UN’s Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener has warned the deputy head of Myanmar’s military junta that any use of force against protesters would have dire consequences, and the international community is always monitoring their every move. This warning is of utmost importance in order to protect the people of Myanmar. Moreover, the warning was conveyed through a communication channel that rarely occurred between the military junta and the outside world. This proves that there is still hope of a mediation insofar as the junta is willing to communicate with the international community. Such opportunity must be leveraged by Indonesia and ASEAN with the aim of restoring Myanmar’s normal condition.

**Viable Efforts for ASEAN**

The coup in Myanmar has sparked calls for ASEAN to play a more active role in the region. Brunei Darussalam, as the chair of ASEAN, has implored Myanmar to seek dialogue, reconciliation and the return to normalcy. Citing the ASEAN Charter, Brunei implored Myanmar to adhere to the principles...
of democracy, rule of law and good governance, respect and protection of human rights as well as fundamental freedom, and also reminded that political stability in ASEAN is essential for achieving a peaceful, stable and prosperous ASEAN Community.

The response from ASEAN community so far has been anything but significant, as individual member states show dissenting views. Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Prawit Wongsuwan, stated that the coup is Myanmar’s internal affairs. The Philippine’s Foreign Minister, Teodoro Locsin Jr. argued that the coup in Myanmar was a necessary act in order to protect democracy in Myanmar. Cambodian leader Hun Sen also regarded it as Myanmar’s domestic affairs and declined to comment further. Meanwhile, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have expressed their concern over the situations in Myanmar and plead all relevant parties to hold a dialogue.

A more assertive and overt position had been demonstrated by a number of countries from outside of ASEAN. The United States, Britain, Australia and the European Union condemned the coup and arrests committed by the military junta, and the declaration of a state of emergency in Myanmar. Joe Biden's government is even considering to impose sanctions on Myanmar. New Zealand has cut ties with the military junta, suspended aid and barred travel to Myanmar military leaders. Those were the most resolute acts undertaken by sovereign countries over Myanmar coup. Not all countries are capable of being assertive, for example China, India and Japan.

Many interests have forced those states to take a more careful approach in responding to the unfolding developments. And now the question is, how should ASEAN respond to the mounting pressure to play a more active role? The foregoing explanation has described that there are still opportunities to push for a mediation, so what are the obstacles currently faced by ASEAN?

ASEAN has adhered to the principle of non-intervention since this regional organization was formed and has been attested through many occasions/events. The 1998 Reform in Indonesia can be regarded as an example of how this principle was implemented by ASEAN. No ASEAN member had even attempted to intervene when Indonesia's internal affairs were in turmoil. The principle of non-intervention is considered to be one of the important factors that helps this regional organization to survive and stable.

It is an undeniable fact that in recent years, this principle began to attenuate, albeit on a minimal scale. Based on historical records, the principle of non-intervention embraced by ASEAN was excluded in several events or occasions, including against the Myanmar issue. In 2007, ASEAN reached a unanimous vote to postpone Myanmar's turn to chairmanship in ASEAN, as a consequence of its military action during the Saffron Revolution when tens of thousands of Buddhist priests took to the streets and protested against the junta. When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, ASEAN also acted out of the ordinary. When the death toll reached 134,000 and the junta refused foreign aid, ASEAN responded to the international
outrage over the military government’s mishandling of the crisis. ASEAN convinced the military junta to be willing to open cooperation with the international community and ASEAN served as a channel for distributing aid from the international community. ASEAN has also come under heavy criticism for its weak role in responding to the Rohingya crisis. By adhering to the principle of non-intervention, ASEAN is restricted from making any significant efforts to any progress or development that occurs in Myanmar. However, it has been proven that in recent years, ASEAN has begun to have the courage to express its stance on the issue of Rohingya. This is evident from the statements uttered by the chairman of ASEAN and joint declarations brought forth by various ASEAN summits.

ASEAN's long efforts to embrace Myanmar's military junta should also be highlighted as an important reminder. ASEAN accepted Myanmar's membership in 1997 by prioritizing efforts of "constructive engagement" so that the junta would be more open to the aspirations of the people and to make compromises with Suu Kyi. Political reforms that occurred during the reign of PM Thein Sein, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the opportunity for NLD to reclaim its role in Myanmar politics, have been attributed to the efforts carried out by ASEAN ever since Myanmar joined as a member. Myanmar's willingness to accept election observers from ASEAN in the 2012 election must also be taken into consideration.

If ASEAN had the courage to implement the principle of non-intervention in a more flexible way, ASEAN could have taken the advantage of the current situation to put pressure on Myanmar's military government. This pressure, if carried out collectively, even if it still has to observe the principle of non-intervention, is expected to restore Myanmar’s democratic process. Indonesia must take the initiative to push this initiative.

**Closing**

The process of returning the Myanmar military which has been in power for decades to their barracks as professional army is not an easy task. The February 1, 2021 coup reflects the military's unpreparedness to surrender government affairs to the civilians. Despite the abuse of force by the military, this year's coup appears to be more lenient than the previous ones. The junta also demonstrates a more open stance to the international community. This is an opportunity that ASEAN should take advantage of in order to play a more active role. This active role requires ASEAN's courage to be more flexible in applying the principle of non-intervention. The Indonesian government, with the support of the parliament, can take a role as a driving force for other ASEAN member countries towards a common position.

**References**


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