



Protesters in Yangon holding signs demanding the release of detained Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Tuesday. The writer hopes Asean will act as a mediator to help the Myanmar military and the National League for Democracy conclude a new compact for power sharing. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Coup, Covid and other tests of Asean unity

The 10-member grouping must stay united in the face of multiple challenges or risk irrelevance



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These are testing times for Asean as it confronts challenges on many fronts. In this essay, I wish to focus on four of them:

- managing the political crisis in Myanmar;
- overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic;
- making an economic recovery from the recession; and
- maintaining Asean's unity and neutrality in the face of intense rivalry between the United States and China.

THE MYANMAR CHALLENGE

On Feb 1, the military in Myanmar staged a coup against the democratically elected government and declared a state of emergency for one year. This development is a setback for Myanmar and Asean. It has put an end or, at least, a pause to the transition to democracy in Myanmar. It is a setback for Asean because it is inconsistent with the preamble, purposes and principles of the Asean Charter.

It will complicate Asean's relations with the United States and the European Union, both of which have condemned the coup and threatened to impose sanctions.

I wish to make an appeal to the US and EU not to impose economic sanctions against Myanmar. Such sanctions will hurt the people, but not the rulers.

I also appeal to them not to insist that Myanmar be excluded from the Asean delegation when we meet, because Asean will not agree to do so.

After the admission of Myanmar to Asean in 1997, the EU insisted that Myanmar, which it described as a "rogue state", be excluded from future Asean-EU meetings.

Asean stood firm and refused to do so. The Asean view was that Myanmar was a member of the Asean family and we could not exclude it just because the EU did not approve of its behaviour. Asean believes in constructive engagement and not in issuing condemnations or imposing economic sanctions.

I hope Asean will act as a mediator to bring the military and the National League for Democracy back to the negotiating table, and help them to conclude a new compact for power sharing that will lead eventually to full democracy in Myanmar.

Remember that when Cambodia applied for admission to Asean, Asean did not admit it until the two coalition partners of the Cambodian government stopped fighting and achieved a reconciliation.

There is another example of Asean using its diplomatic influence to achieve a desired outcome. This happened when Myanmar was struck by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Asean succeeded in persuading the Myanmar government to reverse its decision not to accept international assistance for the victims of the cyclone. A tripartite framework,

consisting of Myanmar, Asean and the United Nations, was established to receive such aid.

THE COVID CHALLENGE

How are the 10 members of Asean faring in the ongoing battle against the Covid-19 virus?

Going by total case numbers alone, there are five countries with large numbers of infections and five others with relatively low numbers.

The five countries with large numbers of infections are: Indonesia with more than one million cases; the Philippines with over 540,000; Malaysia with more than 245,000; Myanmar with over 140,000; and Singapore with nearly 60,000.

The five countries with low numbers of infections are: Thailand with more than 20,000; cases; Vietnam with over 2,000; Cambodia with more than 470; Brunei with 182; and Laos with 45.

The situation in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia is serious but under control. Their medical facilities have not been overwhelmed. Their citizens have largely abided by the restrictions on movement and not revolted against them. The wearing of face

masks and social distancing are being complied with in all the Asean countries. The situation is therefore quite different from that in the US and Europe.

All the Asean countries are acquiring vaccines to inoculate their populations. Unlike the EU, which has entered into bulk contracts with pharmaceutical companies to secure vaccines for the 27 member states, in Asean, it is every state acting on its own behalf.

Indonesia has secured supplies of the Sinovac vaccine from China. The Philippines has secured supplies of the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia and the Sinovac vaccine. India, one of the manufacturing centres for the AstraZeneca (Oxford) vaccine, is offering free supplies to Myanmar. Singapore has secured supplies of both the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and the Moderna vaccine. Some Asean countries have managed to secure vaccines from the World Health Organisation, through its Covax programme, which is championed by Singapore and Switzerland.

Will Asean succeed in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic? I think the answer is yes but, as we have seen, the situations in the 10 countries are very different. Some countries will recover sooner than others. In some countries, they are still battling new surges of infection. This is also true of the vaccine story. Some countries will succeed in inoculating their populations and acquiring herd immunity sooner than others.

My message to Asean is that no one is safe unless everyone is safe. It is therefore in the interest of every Asean member state to help other member states to acquire vaccines for their people.

THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGE

The third challenge is to make an economic recovery from the recession caused by the pandemic.

How bad is the economic impact of Covid-19? The International Monetary Fund has described the global recession as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Last year, the world economy shrank by 4.4 per cent. In Singapore, the economy shrank by 5.8 per cent. The recession has destroyed businesses, jobs, lives and livelihoods. This has resulted in rising unemployment, and an increase in poverty and human misery.

To make matters worse, this is happening during the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Automation and artificial intelligence will make many jobs redundant. The world is going digital. Working from home can mean working from anywhere. Unless our businesses and citizens can change and adapt to this revolution, they will face a bleak future.

There is, however, some good news.

First, the Asean economy is forecast by the Asian Development Bank to grow by 5.2 per cent this year, an improvement from a projected 4.4 per cent contraction last year. Vietnam has particularly strong prospects with growth projections ranging from around 6 per cent to 10 per cent.

Second, last year, the inflows of foreign direct investment into Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore were greater than in 2019. This is surprising and is a sign of investor confidence in those economies and in South-east Asia more generally.

Third, the 10 Asean countries, together with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, concluded a mega free trade agreement called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This is a victory for free trade and for regional economic integration.

RCEP consolidates and harmonises Asean's free trade agreements with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

Another merit of RCEP is that it is the first free trade agreement that involves China, Japan and South Korea. Those three countries have been negotiating a trilateral free trade agreement for many years, without success.

The big question is, will Asean build back better, fairer and in a more sustainable way? Can our economic policies also incorporate our environmental policies? Can we agree to combat climate change, stop the mass extinction of species and the degradation of our oceans? Will Asean stop the deforestation of its remaining rainforests? Will Asean prevent the extinction of the pangolin, rhino and tiger? Will Asean pledge, at the UN, to plant one billion trees over the next 10 years?

THE COHESION CHALLENGE

The fourth challenge is posed by the intense competition for influence between the US and China in this region, putting Asean under threat.

Some commentators have argued that Asean is already divided. My response is that individual countries can decide to be closer to one great power or another. However, as a group, Asean must remain united and neutral.

A divided Asean is of no value to the world. If Asean were to become pro-US, China will destroy us. If Asean were to become pro-China, the US will destroy us.

By being united and neutral, Asean is trusted by all the great powers. This is why Asean is able to play the role of convener and chair of various regional processes, such as the Asean Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the Asean Plus Three Summit.

It is for this reason that, every year, the leaders of the most powerful countries, including the US, China, Russia, Japan and India, come to meet us at our annual and related summits. This does not happen in any other part of the world. Not in South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, Africa or Latin America.

If Asean were to lose its unity and neutrality, the leaders of the world would stop coming to our annual and related summits. The stakes are therefore very high.

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