

Hun Sen is right to have visited Myanmar

There is no alternative to working with the power in place, and like it or not, that is the Tatmadaw. The Cambodian Prime Minister is also well placed to break the ice for Asean.



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For The Straits Times

Give the Devil his due. I am no fan of Hun Sen. I think many of his policies are not in Cambodia's long-term interests and will be modified – if not repudiated – by his own people once he has shuffled off this mortal coil. But on Myanmar, Mr Hun Sen is absolutely right.

His visit to Naypyitaw last Friday and Saturday was controversial. Some regarded it as legitimising the State Administration Council (SAC), as the junta calls itself, despite it having ignored Asean's five-point consensus which, among other things, called for an immediate cessation of violence and "constructive dialogue" between all parties.

Mr Hun Sen's visit also sparked not a little confusion. An American friend, a former senior policymaker, asked whether the Cambodian leader was "stabbing Asean in the back" or just doing his job as current Asean chair?

This is a legitimate question, particularly since Mr Hun Sen has hinted that he may ignore the Asean position that Myanmar be represented only by a "non-political representative" and invite Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to summits under Cambodia's chairmanship this year.

DISSECTING ASEAN'S FIVE-POINT CONSENSUS

The path forward in Myanmar is far from straightforward. It will be morally ambiguous, as exits from coups usually are. But two things are clear.

First, to preserve its own credibility, Asean clearly had to take a strong position after the SAC blatantly flouted the five-point consensus reached by Asean leaders, including Gen Min Aung Hlaing, in April last year. It did so by excluding him and other members of the junta from Asean's November 2021 summits.

Second, of Asean's five points, it was always clear that two were non-starters.

It would have taken naivety of a special kind to really believe that the Tatmadaw would forswear the

use of force as long as anti-coup demonstrations continued. Now that the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) has made common cause with some Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO) to wage armed struggle against the junta, it would not just be breathtakingly naive but insane to think that Myanmar's military would "immediately cease" violence.

The SAC is determined to politically destroy Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) by convicting them of criminal charges and jailing them.

There was never any room for compromise, let alone "constructive dialogue" with the NLD. Had the Tatmadaw ever been inclined towards compromise and dialogue, there would not have been a coup in the first place.

Of the five points, only three – the appointment of a special envoy, allowing whoever was made special envoy to visit Myanmar, and the provision of humanitarian assistance – were ever practical propositions. Of these three, only the first has been implemented.

Asean leaders are not naive. The other two points – cessation of violence and conducting a dialogue with the opposition – are better understood as Asean seeking to occupy the moral high ground for a variety of immediate domestic and diplomatic reasons rather than realistic goals.

POSTURING IS NOT ENOUGH

Occupying the moral high ground is a time-tested and legitimate diplomatic tactic. Diplomatic posturing is, however, not to be confused with practical diplomacy. Occupying the commanding moral heights always risks slipping and falling flat on your face or heavily on your butt when you try to climb down. Neither is a dignified or credible posture. But sooner or later, climbing down has to be attempted in order for practical diplomatic engagement to take over.

To be credible, Asean had to assume a high-minded posture and exclude the SAC. But Asean is not going to remain credible only by posturing either.

Even the two relatively practical of the five points – allowing the special envoy to visit and humanitarian assistance – cannot be implemented without the consent and cooperation of the SAC. There is no reason for the SAC to cooperate as long as Asean



Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (left) with Myanmar Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin upon the Cambodian leader's arrival in Naypyitaw last Friday. With his visit, Mr Hun Sen has broken the ice and opened the way for Asean to play some sort of role when the Tatmadaw is ready, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

shuns it.

There is no alternative to working with the power in place in Myanmar, and that, like it or not, is the Tatmadaw.

The Tatmadaw may have miscalculated the ease with which it could establish control after the coup, but almost a year after the coup, the level of resistance does not seem significantly higher than the conflicts that the Tatmadaw has had to manage since Myanmar's independence, and the NUG is nothing more than a symbolic alternative.

Some commentators have made too much of defections from the military and police to the NUG. The NUG claims 2,000 soldiers and 6,000 policemen have defected since the coup. Even if you accept these numbers, this has to be compared with a military that numbers 406,000 in all three services of army, navy and air force, and a paramilitary force that totals 107,000, of whom 72,000 are policemen. Defectors are less than 2 per cent of the total armed forces of 513,000. This does not add up to an SAC in the process of disintegration.

The SAC and the Tatmadaw are realities that cannot be ignored forever. But key Asean countries having struck moralistic postures, who can or wants to make the first move? There is a political price to be paid for climbing down from the moral high ground.

THE RIGHT FIT

Enter Prime Minister Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen.

To put it delicately, Mr Hun Sen's international reputation has never been pristine. Nor is he known as a moralist. I do not know what he expected to achieve in Naypyitaw, but the downside reputational risk to him for breaking Asean consensus was and remains minimal. Someone had to make the first move and better Mr Hun Sen than anyone else.

Mr Hun Sen had used Asean to legitimise his 1997 coup, an experience that may be interesting to the Tatmadaw. So has Thailand similarly used Asean to legitimise coups.

But unlike Thai leaders, Mr Hun Sen seems less inclined to pay even token obeisance to "democracy", however that protean term is defined. Unlike Thailand, Cambodia's relations with Myanmar are not weighed down with historical baggage.

During the 1980s through to the end of the 1990s, several Asean countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, had urged the Tatmadaw to look to president Suharto's Indonesia as a model of how it could civilianise itself and gain international acceptance.

But as these three countries had advocated the exclusion of Gen Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC, the Tatmadaw may now be more

inclined to look to Cambodia for advice.

In any case, the worst that could have happened to Mr Hun Sen was to have been coldly received or not received at all, and that was what every other country has experienced, including China. As it turned out, these minimal downside risks were probably more than balanced by the relatively warm welcome Mr Hun Sen received in Naypyitaw.

He did not get to meet Ms Suu Kyi or other imprisoned NLD leaders. But whatever his goals may have been – and I doubt that meeting the opposition was very prominent among them – he has broken the ice and opened the way for Asean to play some sort of role when the Tatmadaw is ready.

There will probably be no breakthrough on Myanmar during Cambodia's chairmanship this year. The Tatmadaw marches to its own political timetable. Neither Mr Hun Sen nor anyone else is likely to shift its plans in any significant way.

Given the strong moralistic stance Jakarta has taken, neither is significant movement probable under Indonesia's chairmanship next year. Why should the Tatmadaw do Indonesia a favour? But if the Tatmadaw is so inclined to hold some form of elections, there is an opportunity to do so or begin the process under a sympathetic Asean chair when Laos takes over in 2024.

And if not for Asean, then Mr Hun Sen eschewing a moralistic approach has perhaps opened the door a crack for the United Nations Secretary-General's special envoy Noeleen Heyzer.

The Tatmadaw gave Mr Hun Sen two small gifts. The joint press release issued after his visit announced the extension of a ceasefire with EAOs until the end of this year and welcomed the participation of the special envoy of the Asean chair in ceasefire talks with the EAOs.

The joint statement also supported the convening of a meeting on humanitarian assistance, including the special envoy, the Asean Secretary-General and the Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management, as well as relevant UN specialised agencies.

All this is of course small beer, mere gestures rather than substantive changes of direction. Neither is entirely new. But the only gestures the SAC had hitherto been willing to make to everyone else involved the middle finger. Mr Hun Sen has achieved more than anyone else. It would be churlish not to acknowledge this.

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