

Myanmar protesters fleeing in Yangon when security forces cracked down in March on a demonstration against the military coup. If Asean fails to show it is able to muster a response to the Myanmar crisis and the pandemic, criticisms will grow about whether the grouping is effective and truly central to the region, say the writers.
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Asean's big test as it marks another anniversary

The 10-nation grouping turns 54 tomorrow while under great pressure to prove its relevance on two key issues facing the region: Myanmar and the Covid-19 pandemic

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For *The Straits Times*

Festive celebrations are scarce during this pandemic period and can sometimes even seem inappropriate. For Asean, which marks the 54th anniversary of its founding tomorrow, it is a grim birthday blighted by Covid-19 and the crisis in Myanmar.

Both challenges combine to present a big test for Asean. If the 10-member grouping fails to show it is able to muster a response, criticisms will grow about whether Asean is effective and truly central to the region.

LOSING MOMENTUM?

Following the military coup in February, the situation in Myanmar

remains not only unresolved but is also rapidly deteriorating, with political conflict compounded by a surging pandemic.

Initially, Asean admirably stepped up efforts with its special summit in April. Its five-point plan included calling an end to violence and agreeing to appoint a special envoy to the country, and the group emerged as the chief interlocutor to try to address the fraught situation.

But those first positive steps then stalled. Once back in his country, Myanmar's military commander Min Aung Hlaing announced that the military would welcome the Asean special envoy only after "stability" was established.

A subsequent June visit by the current Asean chairman from Brunei and the Asean secretary-general yielded no clear progress. Question marks, too, arose over the group's unity, with some like Indonesia which seem anxious to act, while other



Grave diggers lowering the coffin of a Covid-19 patient into the ground at a cemetery in West Java, Indonesia, yesterday amid a surge in infections.

members prevaricate.

In this context, Asean's decision this week to appoint Brunei's own Second Foreign Minister Erywan Pehin Yusof as special envoy can be seen as a special effort by the current chair to find a compromise. The Myanmar military has stated its wish to continue as a "caretaker" government and call multiparty elections in two years. But some like the United States have already decided this as a ploy to secure legitimacy, and urged more pressure against the generals.

This adds to the practical challenges for Asean and its special envoy in dealing with Myanmar without lending legitimacy to the coup. The key question, as Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan underlined yesterday, is the level of access that the special envoy will be given "to engage all stakeholders across the political spectrum".

Meanwhile, Asean also faces the broader problem posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. When the first wave swept across South-east Asia

early last year, most of Asean's member states held up fairly well and countries like Vietnam deserved plaudits.

By April last year, Asean held the first leaders' summit to coordinate Covid-19 efforts in information exchange and offered a comprehensive economic recovery plan by the year end.

But the momentum seems to be fading, even as the Delta variant hits. Case numbers are surging, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. Are critics right then to say that Asean is irrelevant, given the worsening pandemic and the Myanmar stalemate?

Not quite. Such an assessment underestimates the difficulty and complexity of these situations.

In the case of the pandemic, for instance, to get back on the right footing, the primary responsibility rests with the responses of each member state at the national level, with Asean-wide efforts playing a complementary role.

But there is no running away from the fact that the stakes for Asean are high. Failure to regain the momentum on these two critical issues will further hurt its credibility.

What can be done realistically to revitalise Asean's efforts?

On the pandemic, vaccination rates differ widely across its member states. Efforts to exchange information must continue as a staple but be upgraded with assistance.

The mantra that "no one is safe until all of us are safe" applies doubly to Asean, where cross-border movements of people – especially pre-pandemic travel for business and tourism – were extensive.

Efforts should be made to obtain vaccines quickly and collectively.

The Covid-19 Asean Response Fund has pledged contributions of US\$20.8 million (S\$28 million) and should be utilised quickly to distribute vaccines.

Asean can also tap Covax and international donors collectively. The ongoing "vaccine diplomacy" with China and the United States is otherwise a bilateral exercise that differentiates between Asean members.

Intra-Asean assistance is starting, such as Singapore's "oxygen shuttle" programme to Indonesia and its donation of oxygen concentrators to Myanmar. As other countries gain momentum on their national programmes, more assistance must be offered among Asean members.

In the case of Myanmar, struggling with continuing conflict and a pandemic surge, a concerted humanitarian assistance effort is needed, modelled after that in 2008, following the Cyclone Nargis disaster. Asean can again proactively offer to liaise with international donors and the United Nations, and also offer vaccines and funding. Such an initiative can demonstrate Asean resolve and should be a key priority for its special envoy.

It is uncertain, however, if the different parties within Myanmar will be prepared to accept a humanitarian pause to their conflict. Effective humanitarian assistance will require working with the military and, at present, the response remains highly politicised.

Yet the clock is ticking to try to avoid a bad situation from worsening.

MOVING AHEAD TOGETHER

There will be many other items on the agenda arising from this week's Asean meetings, and major powers and dialogue partners have their own priorities. But these two high-profile issues are central to the group's standing and future.

If the situation in Myanmar worsens in terms of both the conflict and the pandemic, the risk of collapse cannot be ruled out and would impact the region as a whole.

The pandemic's impact on the region's economy and political stability is potentially even broader and deeper.

With growing economic damage, there is a risk of scarring among the lower middle class, informal sectors and the youth. Worsening inequalities and rising anxiety among citizens could boil over and de-legitimise governments. Should that happen, the positive pre-pandemic trajectories for dynamic growth could be derailed.

Given the risks and the stakes, the better response is not to engage in unproductive condemnation of Asean but for the group to step up, and for each of its members – and also its partners who say they support Asean – to respond collectively to the outsized and complex challenges facing the region.

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