

Why is Cambodia being chastised over the Myanmar Crisis?

Cambodia took over as the rotating chair of ASEAN for the third time since the beginning of 2022. It has a lot of responsibilities and crises to deal with during its ASEAN presidency, including the ongoing South China Sea crisis, the Myanmar crisis, and the regional humanitarian crisis.

Many predictions and judgments are being made about Cambodia's leadership as ASEAN chair. Before the start of work, some ASEAN member states had already judged Cambodia, and some western scholars had already criticised Cambodia based on Cambodia's previous ASEAN chair history.

When we look back at Cambodia's previous leadership as ASEAN chair, we can see both positive and negative outcomes.

During Cambodia's first ASEAN presidency in 2002, many great initiatives were proposed by Cambodia, including COC and other mechanism to solve regional crisis. To welcome ASEAN leaders, Cambodia has a fantastic hospitality team.

Cambodia was elected to lead ASEAN for the second time in 2012, and it is rumored that during its second term, Cambodia was the one who prevented ASEAN from issuing a statement after the summit. At the time, the issue of the South China Sea was the most pressing concern at the ASEAN summit. Cambodia has been labeled a client state of China because it had prevented other ASEAN members from strongly condemning China's statement.

For ASEAN countries, the South China Sea is the most sensitive issue, particularly for countries that claim sovereignty over the South China Sea.

Every country cherishes its own territory and makes every effort to safeguard it. But, Cambodia is not a claimant state.

Cambodia was blamed by regional and international media for its inability to resolve the South China Sea crisis, but ten years later, no other ASEAN members have been able to resolve the crisis. Many claimant states have had extensive trade exchanges with China while they criticised Cambodia as being close to China.

Now Cambodia has another chance to lead ASEAN, and there are more difficult issues awaiting Cambodia's leadership.



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Apart from the South China Sea and Covid-19, the Myanmar issue is a new challenge.

The Myanmar issue came up on February 1, 2021, when Brunei was the ASEAN chair. In April of 2021, ASEAN held its most important summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, in order to find a good mechanism to resolve the crisis that had recently occurred. A few ASEAN leaders were unable to attend the summit. Following the meeting, ASEAN released the Five-Point Consensus as a model for resolving the Myanmar crisis. The five-point agreement is an excellent choice for all stakeholders.

Brunei's ASEAN chair was passed to Cambodia without resolving the crisis that occurred during its term. Now, Cambodia, as chair, must bear the brunt of criticism from regional and international researchers who claim to have great solutions to the crisis aside from negotiations with all parties involved.

Hun Sen, a week after taking over as ASEAN chair, visited Myanmar to meet with the junta leaders and their administration. Hun Sen's visit at the time drew a lot of criticism from ASEAN members and Western academics.

Some feared that Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar would be interpreted as an attempt to legitimise the regime that deposed the elected president.

Hun Sen responded to criticism by saying, "If we don't talk to those in power and those with guns, who we should talk to?" He added that if we don't negotiate with the people in power, we won't be able to solve the problem, citing

his own experience as the longest prime minister in history.

Myanmar's crisis is not a recent occurrence. The country has been under the control of junta leaders for decades. It's a geopolitical crisis as well as a leadership crisis. Myanmar or Burma is officially known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, which means that the country is made up of people from various ethnic groups who are proud of their ethnicity and nationality.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has repeatedly stated that the Myanmar crisis cannot be resolved in a year or two years, but this takes time that we cannot predict. Prime Minister Hun Sen, on the other hand, has chosen to meet with Min Aung Hlaing personally as a strategy to resolve the crisis, despite the fact that this method has been widely criticized as a communist leader meeting with evil. However, he believes that there are no other options besides negotiation.

Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ASEAN working group are trying their best to resolve the Myanmar crisis; as a reward for their efforts, the junta should release at least professor Sean Turnell, an Australian economics professor who is in jail in Myanmar right now.

Negotiations among stakeholders would be the most effective way to resolve the crisis, but which country would be best suited to assist Myanmar?

Cambodia was known as a country with a wealth of experience in resolving internal problems, but the case of Myanmar is a little

different because when Cambodia was in crisis, it was not yet a member of ASEAN, so Cambodia didn't need ASEAN's approval first, but simply needed all Cambodian parties to meet and negotiate, claiming national interest as the most important priority for all.

Before submitting a request letter to the United Nations for assistance, Cambodian politicians discussed and agreed among themselves. If the internal leaders refuse to allow them to come, the international community will be unable to assist. It's critical to keep this case in mind.

They must not, however, overlook the most important person who served as a matchmaker, allowing all parties to meet and discuss. Who is this mysterious figure? Dr. Pung Chhiv Kek, the founder and president of Licadho, a well-known Cambodian nongovernmental organization.

In the case of Myanmar, who or which country should serve as the matchmaker? It would not be as simple as Cambodia because Myanmar requires prior ASEAN consensus on how to rescue the country and who to rescue. It would take a longer time for ASEAN to reach a consensus because some members would prefer to use a hardline strategy while others would prefer to use a soft line strategy. It means that the helpers must first fight amongst themselves, while the innocent victims wait for assistance.

It's odd that some western academics chastise Cambodia for implementing negotiation strategies, because no country would want to fight the junta regime since it would be a waste of money, power, life, and economy to help another country when their own problems remain unsolved.

It is a dilemma for Cambodia to be the ASEAN chair because the crisis that others have been unable to resolve is being pushed upon Cambodia to resolve in a short period of time. The case of the South China Sea Issue is the practical experience of how other countries pushed Cambodia to be in crisis while they are waiting for benefits. ■

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