

Will Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship be able to help Myanmar resolve its crisis?

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Prime Minister Hun Sen has announced that he will travel to Myanmar for a two-day visit on January 7-8 in an effort to restore normalcy to ASEAN proceedings by resolving the country's crisis and bringing it back into the fold for future summits.

On December 7, Hun Sen set the date during a meeting with Myanmar's foreign minister, Wunna Maung Lwin.

Cambodia, as a country that has endured decades of civil wars and invasions, understands how difficult it is to be abandoned by the region and the world. Based on Prime Minister Hun Sen's speeches, it appears that he has a pure heart in helping Myanmar avoid being excluded from ASEAN.

Even if prime minister Hun Sen has a good heart to begin working on Myanmar's crisis, this does not guarantee that his efforts will be successful. Many supporters of Myanmar's former president criticised him when he welcomed Myanmar's foreign minister, Mr Wunna Maung Lwin, and when he announced that he will visit Myanmar on behalf of Cambodia in January 2022.

The visit, which was organised shortly after Cambodia assumed the ASEAN chair, demonstrates Cambodia's willingness and intent to help find a political solution to Myanmar's crisis and reintegrate Naypyidaw into ASEAN's good graces.

Cambodia has a lot of experience with divisions, strife, and civil war, which is very similar to Myanmar's current situation. Prime Minister Hun Sen is a deft strategist and seasoned diplomat who will be able to impart to Myanmar the lessons Cambodia has learned the hard way and offer sound advice on how to resolve the crisis.

There are challenges for Hun Sen to work on Myanmar's crisis: the majority of citizens who want Myanmar to become more democratic do not want the Cambodian prime minister to collaborate with the junta leader. Many powerful countries outside of Myanmar, such as the United States, South Korea, Japan, Canada, and others, want Aung San Suu Kyi to become Myanmar's president and they have publicly announced their support for the National Unity



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Government (NUG).

Apart from the majority of Myanmar citizens and ASEAN partners who do not want a junta leader in power, some ASEAN countries do not want Myanmar to rejoin ASEAN because there are a few countries that would benefit greatly from the crisis in Myanmar. Some ASEAN countries do not want Myanmar to return to normalcy because they believe that if Cambodia is able to resolve the crisis in Myanmar, the Cambodian prime minister will become the most powerful politician in the region, which some countries do not want.

If citizens of the same country who speak the same language do not communicate with one another, no other country in the world will be able to assist you. Your neighbors or adversaries will be waiting to profit directly or indirectly from your problems.

Consider Cambodia's experience in 1987 or before 1991, when all parties or sides agreed to sit down and talk to one another before the UN and other generous countries could moderate the discussion and find the best solution.

Hun Sen, who served as the world's youngest foreign minister, nailed it when he said, "If you don't

work with the person who holds the power, who should you work with?" That is the best and only way to solve the problem, but some citizens do not understand the situation and continue to curse Hun Sen.

Myanmar was virtually absent from the recent ASEAN summit, which was chaired by Brunei, due to their lack of engagement and progress with ASEAN's five-point consensus plans for ending the crisis.

Hun Sen has good intentions, but not all projects that begin with good intentions will succeed. Take a look at the issues listed above, however if he succeeds in working on Myanmar's crisis, it is a miracle or a god gift for him and for ASEAN.

Before the crisis in Myanmar took place in February 2021, some scholars and leaders wanted Cambodia to work to maintain its foreign policy balance with all countries around the world, particularly its ASEAN balancing policy. However, there are countries that work hard to keep ASEAN members out, and when Cambodia works to rebuild ASEAN solidarity, those who claim to be the good ASEAN members begin to criticise Cambodia. For a small country like Cambodia, it is unjust.

It is the worst-case scenario to defeat the current junta leaders by fighting or killing each other, because more innocent Myanmar citizens and children would be killed, not the leaders of each side.

Some Myanmar citizens claim that the Cambodian prime minister has committed grave human rights violations and that he will travel to Myanmar to meet with the dictator. But what are they looking for? Do they want a civil war within their own ranks? It has no meaning other than negotiating and cooperating with those in positions of power.

Would the US and China send troops to Myanmar to declare war? They would not waste their money in Myanmar for no reason.

Despite the challenges and difficulties that Cambodia faces in working on Myanmar issues, Cambodia should continue to work on the issue because it is critical for ASEAN as a whole, and Cambodia would be commended for its initiative. Cambodia, on the other hand, should be aware of its true and false supporters when working on this case. ■

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