



ASEAN: Regional process should be aligned with Myanmar peoples' aspiration

(Bangkok, 1 March 2021) – ‘The ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AFMM) tomorrow should be utilised by ASEAN as an opportunity to take genuine and meaningful actions to call out the horrific acts of the Myanmar military and to explore a possibility to generate a regional response to address the situation,’ said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and its members from Myanmar, namely Progressive Voice and Equality Myanmar, in a joint statement today.

ASEAN is scheduled to hold a special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on 2 March to discuss the deteriorating situation in Myanmar in the aftermath of the military junta’s illegal seizure of power.

‘The ASEAN response to the crisis must align with UN Human Rights Council’s stance on rejecting the coup, de-escalating the military junta’s brutality, ensuring the safety of those who oppose the military as well as ensuring the fulfilment of their rights, and imposing targeted economic sanctions against military leaders, military-linked entities and cronies,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, FORUM-ASIA’s Executive Director.

Since the Myanmar military illegitimately seized power, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has documented at least 1,132 people to have been arbitrarily arrested, charged or sentenced.¹ On 28 February alone, the military’s deliberate acts of extreme violence against peaceful protesters had killed 18 people and wounded at least 30.²

Hundreds of civil society organisations from Myanmar have jointly condemned the coup and the grave violations and abuses perpetrated by the military and have sought immediate intervention and monitoring mechanisms from the UN Security Council to stop the violence being inflicted by the military junta against peaceful protesters. Additionally, they have called on the Security Council to prevent further bloodshed and loss of life and pressure the junta to release all those arbitrarily detained and to restore democracy in Myanmar.

On 19 February 2021, 69 civil society organisations across Southeast Asia issued ASEAN an open letter to demand a response to the situation in Myanmar. They called for ASEAN to urge the military junta to immediately and unconditionally release all those detained, refrain from using violence against protesters, and ensure the safety and security of people in Myanmar, including pro-democracy activist, human rights defenders, journalists and youth protesters.³

‘ASEAN’s response must comply with the Myanmar’s peoples’ aspiration and the stance made by civil society in the region,’ said Aung Myo Min, Equality Myanmar’s Executive Director.

¹ <https://aappb.org/?p=13324>

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/27/asia/myanmar-un-ambassador-fired-intl-hnk/index.html>

³ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=33925>

While the groups acknowledged efforts made by ASEAN on addressing the situation in Myanmar, through a statement from the ASEAN Chairman, individual Member States as well as the statements from four individual representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), uncertainty remains if the regional body's actions will reflect the will of the people of Myanmar. It also remains to be seen if the responses from the UN Security Council and international mechanisms addressing the urgent situation in Myanmar are taken into account. Given the severity of the situation, the fact that five ASEAN Member States, namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Vietnam, are either unwilling to 'interfere' or demonstrate persistent silence under the pretext of respecting Myanmar's 'internal affairs', is alarming.

What has happened in the Myanmar is symptomatic of a backsliding democracy and rising authoritarianism occurring across Southeast Asia, with further implications of a deteriorating civic space and human rights protection in the region. With the differing positions among its Member States, the groups are concerned that a compromised ASEAN-led approach will further harm democracy and exacerbate the lack of protection of human rights in Myanmar and the region, as a result of a consensus-oriented ASEAN dialogue.

The groups reiterate that the decreasing trust in ASEAN are attributed to its failure to meet this crucial moment, take action, and its persistent silence and weak position on addressing the prolonged crises in Myanmar, including the Rohingya crisis perpetrated by the same military regime that has unlawfully seized power.

'Finding a solution that aligns with the will of the people of Myanmar and international mechanisms to meaningfully address the situation and recognise Myanmar people's brave and unwavering sacrifices to restore democracy, rule of law and protection of their human rights and dignity are essential to regain the public's trust in ASEAN,' said Nang Zun Moe, Progressive Voice's Executive Director.

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The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

Equality Myanmar (EQMM), formerly known as the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), was established in 2000. The organisation facilitates a broad range of human rights trainings, advocacy programmes, and research and documentation projects which target civil society organisations and grassroots communities while engaging with local authorities, Government ministries, Members of Parliament and the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC). EQMM aims to contribute to the establishment of a peaceful, tolerant, and democratic society built on respect for dignity and human rights for all in Myanmar. <http://www.equalitymyanmar.org>

Progressive Voice is a participatory rights-based policy research and advocacy organization rooted in civil society, that maintains strong networks and relationships with grassroots organizations and community-based organizations throughout Myanmar. It acts as a bridge to the international

community and international policymakers by amplifying voices from the ground, and advocating for a rights-based policy narrative. <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/>

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