

Research Note

ASEAN: Conditional Prodder to Myanmar in its Quest for Credibility?

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Although ASEAN has declared the principle of non-interference to be one of its fundamental principles, surprisingly, the Association officially criticised the domestic affairs of Myanmar by adding separate paragraphs regarding 'Development in Myanmar' to its official statements from 2001 to 2011. By contrast, ASEAN has ignored several cases in which Myanmar called on ASEAN for support. Thus, this article focuses on the paradox between ASEAN's principle of non-interference and its policy of engagement with Myanmar. The purpose of the article is to analyse the role of ASEAN in dealing with the junta² despite the ASEAN's non-interference principle and examine how ASEAN has responded to the junta's actions. This article argues that ASEAN plays a role as a 'conditional prodder' — that is, ASEAN's official interference in Myanmar is based on the severity of international pressure and its impact on ASEAN's credibility. Depending on the extent to which ASEAN's credibility is affected by Myanmar's domestic crisis, ASEAN intervenes either through pressure or aid. Throughout the comparative case studies, the findings of the article suggest that if the domestic crisis in Myanmar does not adversely affect the credibility of ASEAN, the Association is likely to use gentle reminders to warn the regime to resolve the domestic crisis internally. However, if the domestic crisis severely affects ASEAN's credibility, ASEAN will violate the principle of non-interference to avoid international pressure by issuing official declarations about the critics of the domestic affairs of Myanmar. Additionally, ASEAN even plays a role during non-political domestic crises such as natural disasters to maintain its credibility in the international community. Nonetheless, this type of interference does not generate a significant consequent impact on the domestic political situation in Myanmar.

Keywords: Myanmar, ASEAN, Political Transition, Southeast Asia

Introduction

After declaring independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar embraced constitutional democracy. However, due to the military's direct control over national politics and government, the process of political transition has been complicated. Demands from different social groups for fair elections led to pro-democracy demonstrations

¹ The analysis and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policies or position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Myanmar. Conclusions made within this analysis are not representative of the positions of any Myanmar government entity. This disclaimer is meant to inform readers that the views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this text belong solely to the author.

² This article interchangeably uses the terms 'junta', 'the regime' and 'the SPDC' to represent the military government of Myanmar.

in August 1988.³ The military government responded with violence, formed a military junta and named it, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).⁴ At the same time, the government made concessions to prevent further unrest by allowing general elections in 1990 (Htut 2019, p.5). However, the military denounced the election results after the substantial victory of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). In 1997, Myanmar engaged with the international community by becoming a part of ASEAN,⁵ which introduced a need to reckon with not only domestic but also international opinion. Domestically, the military government retitled the SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)⁶ in November 1997. According to the junta's justification, the change occurred to ensure the emergence of a democratic system and to establish a peaceful, modern state in the interest of the State and the nation's people.⁷ Internationally, Myanmar became an official member of ASEAN on 23rd July 1997.⁸ The political situation in Myanmar placed immense stress on ASEAN through its dialogue partners, especially the US and the EU.

However, ASEAN is not a monolithic organization. Compared to its founders, initially members of the EU, the ASEAN member states are significantly more diverse politically, culturally and economically. Their political systems are various as well and include 'absolute monarchy, single-party communist states, and vibrant democracies'. Due to the several different political systems, the internal politics of the member states are complicated and difficult to predict.⁹ These complexities reveal intersections between the material and ideational variables of each member state in terms of their national interests (Nesadurai 2009). On the other hand, ASEAN has predetermined rules and regulations for all member states according to the 'fundamental principle' of ASEAN,¹⁰ and decisions are made through 'ASEAN consensus.' Therefore, the response of ASEAN is considered to be the response of all ASEAN members.

From an organisational perspective, ASEAN's international credibility has diminished due to its inability to handle regional events and situations. The changing geopolitical environment in Asia has hindered ASEAN's ability to successfully deal with emerging threats. This includes not only the risks of China's rise to global military and economic power but the unpredictability of the global economy as well, with close financial, trade and investment ties with ASEAN member states as well as several non-traditional security risks such as terrorism (Jürgen and Jetschke 2008). However, the impact of ASEAN's international credibility cannot be accurately measured. Instead, one can examine how ASEAN has shaped its international image as a regional organization. Considering this organisational predicament, ASEAN has made significant institutional changes to address this catastrophe through the adoption of the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN

³ Due to the country's economic stagnation, a popular uprising and series of national demonstrations led by Myanmar student groups took place, calling for democracy, elections and economic reforms. This series of nationwide protests throughout the country is also known as the '8-8-8-8 Uprisings', as the events took place on 8th August 1988.

⁴ The SLORC Declaration No.1/88, *The Tatmadaw assumes State responsibilities*, and the SLORC Declaration No.2/88, 18 September 1988: <https://www.lostfootsteps.org/en/history/19-september-1988>. (Accessed on 15 April 2020).

⁵ ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 when the Bangkok Declaration was signed by the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Myanmar and Laos in 1997 and finally, in 1999, Cambodia became the 10th member of ASEAN.

⁶ The SPDC Notification No. 1/97, 15 November 1997: <https://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199711/msg00207.html> (Accessed on 15 April 2020).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ASEAN, *The Declaration on the Admission of the Union of Myanmar into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, 1997. <http://arc-agreement.asean.org/file/doc/2015/01/declaration-on-the-admission-of-the-union-of-myanmar-into-asean.pdf> (Accessed on 1 June 2020).

⁹ Ramamurthy, Satya and Mumford, Peter. 2017, *Politics, Power, and Change: What's next for ASEAN*, <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/sg/pdf/2017/05/politics-power-and-change-what-next-for-asean.pdf> (Accessed on 8 October 2020).

¹⁰ ASEAN, *Overview Fundamental Principles of ASEAN*; <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview/> (Accessed on 1 June 2020).

Community.¹¹ Improvements in the credibility and ability of the Association were key to becoming a respected international actor. The ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Community were intended to address these critical issues by restoring and strengthening ASEAN in the 21st century (Narine 2009).

Taking ASEAN's fundamental principles (principle of non-interference) and organizational predicament into consideration, this article examines the inconsistent interference of ASEAN in the domestic affairs of Myanmar despite its non-interference principle and demonstrates how ASEAN prioritizes its international reputation as a regional organization over the internal affairs of its member states. This article also highlights ASEAN's violation of its own principle, having officially interfered in Myanmar's internal affairs in some cases and turned a blind eye in others. Two research questions have been formulated to examine the role of ASEAN: (1) Why did ASEAN intervene in the domestic affairs of Myanmar despite its principle of non-interference, and under what circumstances has ASEAN responded to the junta's actions with regard to Myanmar's internal affairs? (2) How has ASEAN engaged with the military government of Myanmar?

Using a comparative case study method, this study examines how ASEAN's responses have differed between each case study and why these differences occurred. In addition, this study uses content analysis of ASEAN's official statements to evaluate the wording of communications about Myanmar's domestic affairs. The findings of this article imply that pressure from the international community and ASEAN's credibility issues have always been a precondition when dealing with the regime in response to Myanmar's domestic affairs. Thus, this article argues that ASEAN plays a role as a 'conditional prodder', which indicates ASEAN's inconsistency and conditional response to Myanmar. If the domestic crisis in Myanmar is not detrimental to ASEAN's credibility, the Association merely uses gentle reminders to warn the regime to resolve the domestic crisis internally. However, if the domestic crisis seriously affects ASEAN's credibility, ASEAN violates the principle of non-interference to avoid international pressure and issues official declarations regarding the internal affairs of its member states. Alternative situations may be influenced either by pressure or by assistance – for instance, in the case of natural disaster, depending on the extent to which the credibility of the Association is affected by the internal crisis of Myanmar. However, these types of interferences do not have a considerable impact on the domestic situations of the member states. ASEAN's official interference and disregard for Myanmar's internal affairs occurs on a case-by-case basis, depending on the extent to which ASEAN's international credibility and reputation are undermined.

This article holds six sections. The following section, Section One, analyses the existing literature pertaining to ASEAN's standards and its policies of engagement with Myanmar. Section Two discusses the significance of the study which is the uniqueness of Myanmar case. Sections Three, Four and Five show ASEAN's inconsistent interactions when dealing with the SPDC and the domestic affairs of Myanmar. Section Three examines ASEAN's interference in Myanmar's domestic affairs through the lens of two comparative case studies (Depayin Incident and Saffron Revolution) in order to highlight ASEAN's use of public pronouncements to apply pressure. Section Four points out ASEAN's detachment in Myanmar's domestic affairs through two comparative case studies (the UNSC Resolution to Myanmar and the relinquishing of Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship) to underline ASEAN's disregard for the domestic affairs of Myanmar. Section Five underscores the different variations of ASEAN's interference by analysing the role of ASEAN as a facilitator of aid in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Section Six ends the article with a conclusion and comparative analysis to prove that the role of ASEAN as a 'constrained prodder' is imperative for the Association to defend its credibility and act wisely under international pressure.

¹¹ The ASEAN Community (AC) includes three pillars of community: Political Security Community, Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community. These pillars were launched in 2015 and represent a historic milestone for ASEAN, as well as the association's resilience and dynamism. They signify to the world how successful the cooperation of ASEAN Member States has been in integrating the states as one community.

1. Previous studies of ASEAN policies toward Myanmar

The relevant literature for this paper can be divided into three major themes. The first consists of a discussion of the ambiguity in ASEAN's principle of non-interference. This principle has been established in several ASEAN documents and has attracted research interest among scholars. ASEAN set alternative goals and standards based on the Western liberal approach to global governance as well as Asian cultures and the colonial and Cold War experiences of its member states (Stubbs, 2008). Scholars have analysed the complexities underpinning the conception of the 'ASEAN Way'¹² concerning the interactions of member states. In a broader sense, the principle of non-interference provides protocols to prevent member states from denouncing or intervening in the domestic affairs of their counterparts and encourages them to refrain from attempting to delegitimise or overthrow the governments of other member states. However, the extent to which this principle will play a role – if any – in the future is a major question. As Katanyuu (2006) argued, the principle seems to be outdated due to the general need of the member states to work toward more open regulation of human rights abuses. He concluded that the change in ASEAN's principle is a necessary development caused by individual members' stands and international pressure. Therefore, ASEAN policy is expected to move closer to democratic principles, simultaneously pressuring Myanmar. At the same time, Ruland (2011, p.98) noted that although some changes have occurred, the principle of non-interference remains a strong 'core norm' of ASEAN.

A second theme concerns the discussion of ASEAN's policies of engagement with Myanmar. The initial decision to grant membership to Myanmar and Cambodia was not easy for the Association. Researchers have argued that ASEAN's decision to accept Myanmar affected its relations with Western partners, who urged it to reject the country's membership bid. As some have claimed, ASEAN feared that Myanmar would fall into the hands of China (Cribb 1998; Amer 1999).¹³ Granting membership to Myanmar, which shares long borders with China and has been relatively subject to Chinese political and economic control, enabled ASEAN to diminish China's influence in the region (McCarthy 2008).

Scholars have argued that 'constructive engagement' was specifically designed for Myanmar in response to the SLORC's failure to recognise the results of the 1990 election (Davies 2012). Unlike the West's policy of economic sanctions, ASEAN urged the junta to negotiate a compromise on Myanmar's political transition in a manner conducive to the establishment of an ASEAN-based approach. In the following years, ASEAN persistently repeated its official declarations, highlighting the term 'constructive engagement' when addressing domestic issues in Myanmar. Some ASEAN scholars also hold the opinion that ASEAN's policies in Myanmar have failed (McCarthy 2008; Davies 2012). Researchers have argued that the engagement policy, in particular, failed to be productive in addressing Myanmar's deteriorating human rights record (Khoo 2004; Davies 2012). However, as Roberts (2011, p. 77) rightfully pointed out, the 'domestic developments do provide an opportunity for a broader international consensus'. Given the domestic growth of democratic tendencies in Myanmar in recent years, there is a vivid need to reconsider some of the analytical assessments of ASEAN's policy, which have proved to be imprecise.

The third theme is a discussion of ASEAN's international credibility, an arguably significant factor of international cooperation with other states and organisations. The economic crisis in East Asia has imperilled ASEAN. Its member states are now ready to achieve formal political unity by welcoming Cambodia as a new member and deciding on further measures to restore ASEAN's credibility. Prime Minister of Singapore

¹² The 'ASEAN Way' can be defined by four elements: the principle of non-interference, quiet diplomacy (Loh 2018), the non-use of force and decision-making through consensus (Katsumata 2003).

¹³ The New York Times, *ASEAN Struggles to Change Its Reputation as Weak, Helpless and Divided*, Michael Richardson, International Herald Tribune; April 22, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/22/news/asean-struggles-to-change-its-reputation-as-weak-helpless-and-divided.html>, (Accessed on 8 October 2020).

Goh Chok Tong stated that ASEAN lost much of its power in the Asian economic crisis. He argued that the international community perceived ASEAN as helpless, and worse, disunited. At the 1997 and 1998 ASEAN summits, the organisation failed to restore its credibility and reputation in the eyes of the international community by resolving the regional crisis (Goh Chok Tong 1999). In addition, member states expressed concern about how the human rights record of Myanmar would reflect on the Association's image upon the country's accession (Robert 2010, p.112). The concern only grew when Myanmar retained its membership without resolving its domestic problems.

ASEAN has experienced a number of organisational reforms intended to restore its organisational structure and international credibility. These reforms also illustrate the various ways in which ASEAN has tried to gain international credibility and enhance its reputation. Loh (2018) argued that because of its weak organisational character, ASEAN has struggled to strike a comprehensive balance between credibility and a quiet, informal type of diplomacy that should ensure a lowering of the tensions among its members. Following Acharya (2005), he noticed that researchers have tended to ignore the complexity of ASEAN's normative structure, which could be dominated by different norms in certain cases. Alongside other constructivists, Loh urged researchers to empirically investigate 'the complex interplay between normative and rational motivations' (ibid, p.12) in connection with international pressure.

Despite making strong cases on a variety of issues, researchers have neglected to conduct case-by-case analyses of situations that have challenged ASEAN principles. Instead, they have adopted a broader theoretical approach, missing the ambiguity of each particular position of ASEAN on unique cases. From this perspective, the article argues that the Association's responses to Myanmar's domestic crises do not represent an evolution nor the stability of principles, but rather conditional flexibility. The complex cross-engagement of organisational and international norms requires a close examination of the ASEAN approach to its members, and especially those facing international controversy. Additionally, the issue of the influence of international credibility in ASEAN's decision-making process is largely omitted by the scholars despite its growing importance in international politics.

Therefore, this article contributes to the existing literature by analysing ASEAN's inconsistent interference in the domestic situation of Myanmar between 2003 and 2008 and highlights the Association's prioritisation of international credibility and reputation over solutions to the member state's domestic affairs.

2. The uniqueness of Myanmar's case

When it comes to ASEAN's policy regarding its members, there have been domestic interference not only in Myanmar but also in Cambodia (Jones 2007). However, there are two reasons why this article highlights criticism and interference in Myanmar's internal affairs compared to ASEAN's interference in the domestic affairs of other member states. First, unlike other member states, ASEAN has criticized Myanmar for 10 years, from 2001 to 2011, by including separate paragraphs regarding 'Developments in Myanmar' in its official ASEAN Declaration, such as chairman's statements, joint communiques and even standalone ASEAN joint declarations regarding Myanmar's domestic situation. Despite the principle of non-interference, ASEAN has openly and officially criticised the domestic affairs of its member states for a decade through official public pronouncements. This is a significant issue for both Myanmar and ASEAN.

The second reason relates to the chairmanship of ASEAN, in which all members take turns. When Myanmar was scheduled to take over the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006, ASEAN either directly or indirectly violated the rules of the organization from the outside (especially from the West) and pressured Myanmar to suspend its chairmanship. In terms of the ASEAN chairmanship, compared to Cambodia's 2012 chairmanship, ASEAN's consultations on the South China Sea dispute failed, and ASEAN foreign ministers could not issue

a joint statement for the first time in ASEAN history.¹⁴ As a result, efforts to ease tensions in the South China Sea deteriorated among claimant states and China. The rationale behind ASEAN's failure to issue an official statement was related to efforts to defend China's claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea. China's claims were denied by some ASEAN member states – Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – due to their overlapping rights to sovereignty in the South China Sea.¹⁵ In the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN was disrupted by pressure from a more powerful Chinese foreign policy but did not violate ASEAN's fundamental principles. ASEAN is resilient without violating fundamental norms, no matter how much internal or external pressure is exerted on its norms (Loh 2018). Compared to Myanmar's chairmanship issue, ASEAN did not criticise Cambodia by issuing a separate statement or adding a separate paragraph to its official statement. Therefore, from Myanmar's perspective as a member state of ASEAN, it is surprising to see that ASEAN has, in some cases, intervened in the internal affairs of Myanmar and ignored the domestic situation even when Myanmar called on ASEAN's support.

3. ASEAN's interference in Myanmar's domestic affairs

(1) Depayin Incident and Saffron Revolution

This section displays two domestic crises that affected ASEAN's credibility, influencing ASEAN to exert pressure through public pronouncements and intervene in the internal affairs of Myanmar. The first crisis is known as the 'Depayin Incident.' When former opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi visited Mandalay, Sagaing Division and Kachin State in Myanmar, the regime claimed that her NLD supporters were disrupting public order and blocking traffic during her visit. The regime-sponsored Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) members protested the NLD. The tensions were high between NLD supporters and those protesting them, and small clashes broke out. On May 30, 2003, the clashes ended with a tragic event in Depayin in which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's vehicle was attacked by a crowd (Htut 2019, p.17-18).

In response to the 'Depayin Incident', ASEAN released an official statement regarding the domestic crisis in Myanmar. The Association 'discussed the recent political developments in Myanmar, particularly the incident of 30 May 2003', according to the Joint Communique of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. ASEAN welcomed Myanmar's claims that the actions taken by the government to ease tensions in the incident were temporary and that they hoped to lift restrictions on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD members as soon as possible. The announcement was likely intended to alert the junta and other ASEAN members in general to solve the domestic situation internally and peacefully. ASEAN's response to the Depayin Incident was a warning to the regime to solve its domestic situation in a way that would assure that ASEAN's credibility was unquestionable. Furthermore, ASEAN was also attempting to save the reputation of its member states that was destroyed after the Asian financial crisis (Jones 2008, p.279-280). If the domestic issues of one of its member states directly impact the rest of the Association negatively, the country can only hide behind the principle of non-interference to some extent. This message in particular suggests that ASEAN would intervene if it were necessary to intervene (Robert 2010, p.116). However, it also displayed ASEAN's confidence in the junta to handle the domestic situation itself by warning that Myanmar's domestic affairs had diminished ASEAN's credibility.

Four years after the Depayin Incident, the interference of ASEAN in Myanmar's domestic affairs in Myanmar intensified, as another event occurred that demonstrated ASEAN's disregard of its principle of non-interference. This event was known as the 'Saffron Revolution.' In August 2007, the military government withdrew its fuel

¹⁴ Al Jazeera, 'ASEAN talks fail over South China Sea dispute', 13 Jul 2012 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/07/13/asean-talks-fail-over-south-china-sea-dispute/?gb=true> (Accessed on 8 October 2020).

¹⁵ East Asia Forum, *ASEAN stumbles in Phnom Penh*, Donald K Emmerson, Stanford University, 23 July 2012, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/23/asean-stumbles-in-phnom-penh-2/> (Accessed on 8 October 2020).

subsidies and increased oil prices, which devastated the people of Myanmar's purchasing power for basic needs. Political activists from the 88 Generation Students Group¹⁶ began to protest and attracted other social groups into rallies, including a mass involvement of Buddhist monks. By mid-September, the Saffron Revolution had become the most momentous political uprising in Myanmar since the series of pro-democracy movements in 1988. Like the previous demonstrations, the regime reacted to this movement with violence. However, the higher level of involvement of monks increased the magnitude of outrage from both the domestic and international community. In addition to human rights discussions, the unprecedented use of violence against religious monks became the most striking aspect of the Saffron Revolution¹⁷ in the international public eye and undermined the military's institutional authority and credibility (McCarthy 2008; Selth 2008; Horsey 2008).

ASEAN was silent in response to the crisis in Myanmar for five weeks (Emmerson 2008, p.72). However, after the junta's crackdown, the Association was forced by the international community to take action against the SPDC's misconduct at the UNGA plenary on September 27, the day after the violence began (Roberts 2010, p.155). The regime's violent crackdown created diplomatic pressure from the West on ASEAN to act against the junta (Roberts 2010, p.154). The US Senate called on ASEAN to expel Myanmar from the Association or to at least suspend its membership (Rahim 2008, p.68). Meanwhile, Western institutions – including the US and the EU – tightened their sanctions on Myanmar (Taylor 2008, p.260).

The Saffron Revolution was a crucial moment for ASEAN. It occurred two months before the initiation of the ASEAN Summit in November, at which the ASEAN Charter was set to be endorsed. The ASEAN Charter aimed to integrate the entirety of ASEAN as a political, social, and economic community in the region. It also intended to establish a security community through the strengthening of democracy and the protection of human rights. The timing of the Saffron Revolution profoundly affected the credibility of both ASEAN and its new charter (Roberts 2010, p.155). Therefore, in addition to the direct pressure to ASEAN from Western countries, the adoption of the ASEAN Charter by a dictatorial state such as Myanmar deeply impacted the reputation and credibility of the ASEAN Charter.

Singapore, the chair of ASEAN in 2007, intervened to maintain democracy but understood that 'the SPDC has cost ASEAN too much credibility' (Kingston 2008, p.39). Singapore made its announcement as the Chair of ASEAN by distributing a draft document to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and agreeing to a declaration. In practical terms, this paper represented the ASEAN 'Joint Declaration', which was decided and approved by all foreign ministers except that of Myanmar (Haacke 2008, p.140). Additionally, a consensus was reached at the next UNGA meeting on the 'strongly deplored ... violent suppression of the peaceful demonstration' (Selth 2008, p.285; Thawnghmung and Myoe 2008, p.19). By emphasising these public pronouncements, ASEAN appeared to be more concerned with the establishment of a common position towards international pressure at critical moments than the implementation of a consistent approach to Myanmar's political transition (Davies 2012).

In the case of the Saffron Revolution, ASEAN's ineffective measures in response to the junta's violence against protesters, including Buddhist monks, depreciated the credibility of the Association (McCarthy 2008; Selth 2008). An abusive act by one of the members of ASEAN harmed the reputation of the Association in the international community. Instinctively, the international community assumed that ASEAN had a responsibility to put pressure on the junta in response to its violence. Therefore, ASEAN used the severe word 'revulsion' when issuing a standalone official statement. This was the harshest word used in ASEAN official statements regarding the situation in Myanmar since 2001 (See Table 1, p-9). In its official statement, ASEAN noted that

¹⁶ The 88 Generation Students are a political activist group known for their protest of the military government in the pro-democracy movement of 1988. The protest was called the '8888 Uprising', as it occurred on 8th August 1988.

¹⁷ Since a massive number of Buddhist monks participated in these peaceful demonstrations, the protest was called the 'Saffron Revolution', a reference to the colour of the Buddhist monks' robes.

Myanmar's domestic situation had an impact on the 'reputation and credibility of ASEAN'.¹⁸

(2) ASEAN's pressure through public pronouncements about Depayin and the Saffron Revolution

An analysis of official statements illustrates some of the language changes in the declarations directed towards Myanmar (see Table 1). For several years, ASEAN has expressed support for an independent domestic solution to the problems associated with the political transition in Myanmar. Moreover, ASEAN issued a credit of trust in its official statements pressuring the regime to change. However, since 2005, the idea has been reinforced that Myanmar's internal problems should not affect ASEAN. The Association emphasised the interests of the international community in the political transition. This view was echoed in its official statements. ASEAN advocated for cooperation with UN representatives and the release of political prisoners even before the Saffron Revolution. In 2008 and 2009, content related to Myanmar in the ASEAN Declarations – such as the release of political prisoners and promotion of human rights – was largely related to the UN's demands on domestic situations in Myanmar, not to the direct demands of ASEAN.

In response to the 2007 crisis, ASEAN expressed 'revulsion' with respect to the actions of the junta, though this was directly related to the challenges they posed to its reputation. Despite the recognition of Myanmar's right to independently solve its internal problems, ASEAN increased its emphasis on the need to accelerate political transition when the threat of international condemnation became a matter of concern for the Association's reputation. The Association was also influenced by the issue of Western pressure as well as the legitimacy of the ASEAN Charter. As a result, ASEAN responded strongly to Myanmar's internal affairs. It is noteworthy that ASEAN displayed enough cohesion to issue statements containing the word 'revulsion' when criticising the SPDC.

Comparing ASEAN's reactions to these two incidents, it is striking that ASEAN did not use harsh language such as the word 'revulsion' in the case of the Depayin Incident. Although ASEAN tried to save its reputation after the Asian financial crisis, the Association faced no strong international pressure after the Depayin Incident. Therefore, one could argue that due to international pressure and the compromised legitimacy of the ASEAN Charter, the wording in the public pronouncement regarding the Saffron Revolution was even stronger than that of the Depayin Incident. However, it is notable that both incidents affected ASEAN's reputation to the detriment of ASEAN. By examining ASEAN's actions before and after the Depayin Incident and the Saffron Revolution, the decision whether to exert pressure was determined by the extent to which ASEAN's reputation had been damaged due to the domestic crises of Myanmar. ASEAN hoped to ensure that Myanmar's domestic affairs did not damage ASEAN's legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. It can be argued that ASEAN, adhering to the principle of non-interference, is less interested in pressuring Myanmar to resolve its internal crises than it is in protecting itself.

4. ASEAN's non-interference in Myanmar's domestic affairs

(1) UNSC Resolution to Myanmar

The previous section revealed that ASEAN's interference in the domestic crisis of Myanmar was intended to preserve the credibility of and undermine international pressure on the Association. In contrast, this section examines two domestic crises that impacted ASEAN's credibility so deeply that ASEAN detached itself from the internal affairs of Myanmar and even Myanmar called on ASEAN's support. After the Depayin Incident and the Saffron Revolution, ASEAN's policy position moved towards 'critical disengagement'. 'Critical

¹⁸ Singapore Government Media Release, *Statement by ASEAN Chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo in New York*, 27 September 2007, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20070927974.htm>, (Accessed on 18 October 2020).

disengagement' argues that the failure of ASEAN's efforts had less to do with its binding norms. ASEAN's failure to adopt a stronger position on domestic affairs of Myanmar was largely due to the region's increasing influence from the interests of the liberal elite and the growing challenges of achieving consensus decision-making within the Association (Jones 2008).

On June 24, 2005, the United States brought Myanmar to the United Nations Security Council under the pretext of its 'other matters' agenda.¹⁹ The Security Council called on the government of Myanmar to begin a genuine democratic transition and effective political dialogue regarding the political situation in Myanmar. The United States had been pressuring Myanmar with sweeping support for members of Europe. On November 29, the United States wrote a letter to UNSC president accusing Myanmar of threatening peace and security in the region. In December, 10 members of the council wanted to include Myanmar issue in the council's agenda, but some members, including China and Russia, objected. On December 3, 2005, under the heading of other matters at the Security Council meeting, it was decided with consensus. to receive a briefing from Myanmar senior official.²⁰

When Myanmar called on ASEAN to oppose the UNSC resolution, Singapore's Foreign Minister responded: 'ASEAN has lost the credibility and ability to defend Myanmar' (Robert 2010, p.145; Renshaw 2019, p.160). At the same time, ASEAN's call for to move toward democracy and the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners²¹ has inserted pressure on Myanmar by echoing the voices of the United States and the European Union. The case represented a shift in the direction of adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states. ASEAN, under its current policy, has led to significant setbacks. Criticizing Myanmar's internal affairs by violating the non-interference principle and ASEAN's inability to influence Myanmar and its desire to hand over responsibility to the UN to hinder the SPDC's actions (Jones 2008, p.282).

Evidence indicating ASEAN's detachment from the domestic situation in Myanmar includes ASEAN's rejection of Myanmar's request for defence against the Security Council by saying that ASEAN had lost its ability to do so. Therefore, when ASEAN was again faced with challenges to its reputation and credibility, the Association's agenda overlooked Myanmar's internal affairs.

(2) Relinquishing Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2006

The next case study that demonstrates the detachment of ASEAN in Myanmar's affairs concerns the issue of Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship in 2006. The chair of ASEAN rotates annually in alphabetical order according to the English names of the member states, and therefore, Myanmar was slated to assume the chairmanship in 2006. Myanmar's opportunity to take responsibility for ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 would grant the junta legitimacy in all aspects through the hosting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Post-Ministerial Meetings (PMCs). However, ASEAN faced intense pressure from the West for allowing Myanmar to assume ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 due to economic and security concerns (Katanyuu 2006).

If the regime did not complete its domestic political transition process by 2006, when Myanmar was supposed to take over as the chair of ASEAN, Western countries (the US included) would refuse to attend the ASEAN meeting, and the possibility of the disintegration of ASEAN would become a threat. In June 2004, these concerns and calls for the removal of Myanmar from the ASEAN chairmanship began to escalate to the level of the government (Robert 2010, p.122). In 2006, the United States called on Myanmar to resign from its scheduled ASEAN chairmanship, having made it clear that Myanmar was overly chaotic in its relationship with ASEAN. In May 2005, the US repeated its claim that the Myanmar chairmanship would threaten ASEAN-US relations (Robert 2010, p.120).

Considering this, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) was formed in November 2004 to promote 'human rights and democratic reforms' in Myanmar. AIPMC was a network of parliamentary caucuses in six ASEAN states – Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand

– intended to promote ‘liberal interventionist policies’ in Myanmar. The AIPMC, a sub-regional alliance of legislators, campaigned for their governments’ adoption of liberal-interventionist policies toward Myanmar. The AIPMC was not a formal organisation under ASEAN but was comprised of members from ASEAN member states. Moreover, ASEAN did not prohibit the group from interfering with Myanmar’s obligations to chair the Association in 2006.

The AIPMC created enough pressure on Myanmar to prevent its turn to chair the organisation. The efforts of the AIPMC were greater than those of ASEAN’s constructive engagement (Jones 2009). The AIPMC voiced resistance to Myanmar’s ASEAN chairmanship responsibilities, underlining that it would negatively impact the credibility and external relations of ASEAN. In addition, the members of the AIPMC highlighted their governments’ concerns about Myanmar’s human rights record and resulting ‘security externalities’ (Jones 2008, p.281).

At last, Myanmar decided to relinquish its responsibility to assume chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006 and informed ASEAN that Myanmar would assume the chairmanship of ASEAN under more appropriate conditions. Foreign Minister U Nyan Win of Myanmar informed ASEAN that 2006 was an important year for Myanmar’s democratic transition and national reconciliation (Table 1). ASEAN expressed its understanding of Myanmar’s decision as well as its appreciation of Myanmar for refusing to undermine ASEAN’s ‘solidarity and cohesiveness’ due to domestic issues. ASEAN appreciated that Myanmar acted in the interests of ASEAN and all of its members. ASEAN members agreed that Myanmar may take responsibility for the chairmanship when the country is ready to do so.²² While Myanmar’s abdication of the ASEAN chair represented a random breach of the non-interference principle as well as the Association’s normative inability to preserve its credibility when responding to international pressure, ASEAN’s successful pressuring of Myanmar to relinquish its chairmanship significantly tested the capacity of the Association’s principle of non-interference.

Table 1. ASEAN’s use of public pronouncements and displeasure by official ASEAN communiqués (2001-2011)

No.	Issued Date	Name of ASEAN communique	Author’s analysis of the context of the ASEAN communique
1.	23-24 July 2001	Joint Communique of the 34th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Hanoi, Vietnam	The first mention of Myanmar, encouragement of the ‘on-going process of national reconciliation’.
2.	29-30 July 2002	Joint Communique of the 35th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam	There was no paragraph about Myanmar.
3.	16-17 June 2003	Joint Communique of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Phnom Penh, Cambodia	ASEAN ‘discussed the recent political developments in Myanmar, particularly the incident of 30 May 2003’ and ‘welcomed the assurances given by Myanmar’. Compared to statements regarding the ‘Saffron Revolution’, critics offered no strong language about the Depayin Incident.
4.	29-30 June 2004	Joint Communique of the 37th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Jakarta, Indonesia	ASEAN acknowledged the ‘National Convention Process’ as explicitly internal to Myanmar while highlighting the UN’s role in facilitating Myanmar’s political transition.

5.	26 July 2005	Joint Communique of the 38th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Vientiane, Laos	Emphasised that domestic issues should not affect 'ASEAN's solidarity.' Myanmar relinquished its responsibility for the ASEAN chairmanship, which it was supposed to assume in 2006.
6.	12 December 2005	Chairman's Statement of the 11th ASEAN Summit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	ASEAN 'noted the increased interest of the international community on developments in Myanmar.'
7.	25 July 2006	Joint Communique of the 39th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	ASEAN emphasised that Myanmar's domestic decision should 'engage the international community.'
8.	29-30 March 2007	Joint Communique of the 40th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Manila, Philippines	ASEAN expressed concerns about the release of political detainees.
9.	27 September 2007	Statement by ASEAN Chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo in New York	ASEAN 'expressed revulsion' regarding the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and noted that Myanmar's actions affect the 'reputation and credibility of ASEAN.'
10.	21 July 2008	Joint Communique of the 41st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Singapore	ASEAN encouraged Myanmar to release prisoners as well as to work with the UN and human rights representatives.
11.	20 July 2009	Joint Communique of the 42nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Phuket, Thailand	Repeated the need to release the prisoners and highlighted 'outside pressure and sanctions. The 'good offices' of the UN Secretary-General have been sustained and welcome Myanmar's assurances that it will fully cooperate with the United Nations.
12.	19-20 July 2010	Joint Communique of the 43rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Hanoi, Vietnam	Emphasised the successful post-Nargis measures. Acknowledged 'free, fair, and inclusive' elections. No criticism of Myanmar's domestic situation or its national convention.
13.	19 July 2011	Joint Communique of the 44th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Bali, Indonesia	ASEAN welcomed 'enhanced relations with other countries.'

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from official statements issued by ASEAN

Sections Three and Four examined ASEAN's subsequent struggles to find an approach that employed not only 'constructive engagement' but also 'critical disengagement' to the regime in Myanmar. ASEAN's approach maintained its credibility by alleviating international pressure on the Association while simultaneously preserving its reputation in the international community. However, it is interesting that ASEAN engaged with the junta even in the case of non-political issues in Myanmar's domestic affairs when further challenges emerged after 2007. ASEAN's endeavours in response to Myanmar's domestic challenges throughout the institutional evolution of the Association serve as the topic of the next section.

5. ASEAN as a facilitator in Cyclone Nargis

ASEAN appeared to apply pressure to or denounce the junta in the interests of regional and international recognition as far as the Association's credibility was concerned. Compared to the previous cases, this section shows that ASEAN sought to resolve differences and disputes with the regime peacefully in order to cultivate a positive image and credibility in the international community. Interestingly, ASEAN followed its basic principles of 'settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner' as well as 'renunciation of the threat or use of force'²³ and played a role in the domestic affairs of Myanmar.

From May 2 to 3 of 2008, the Irrawaddy Delta region of Myanmar was struck by Cyclone Nargis, causing the deaths of as many as 140,000 people. This was considered the largest disaster in the history of the country. Amidst such tragic events, the SPDC held a national referendum on the new constitution on May 10 and 24 and claimed that the constitution had been confirmed by a majority of voters (Seekins 2009). During the period of Cyclone Nargis, the military regime faced domestic and international pressure due to its lack of disaster preparedness, inadequate warning time, slow emergency response and limitations on international humanitarian aid to the country (Martin and Margesson 2008).

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed 'deep concern and immense frustration' about this disaster.²⁴ French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner proposed that the international community should deliver aid to Myanmar without waiting for approval under the UN Security Council resolution on the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P), which referred to the obligations of a state to protect its people and the obligations of the international community to take action if the state cannot perform its functions.²⁵ China and Russia judged the R2P proposal by claiming that the R2P should apply to genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. At the same time, the French proposal was supported by the US, Canada, Australia, and Germany (Robert 2010, p.190).

Following the massive devastation by Cyclone Nargis, a political deadlock arose between Myanmar and the international community. The SPDC was concerned not only about the constitutional referendum that should have taken place on May 10 but about the presence of the international community in the country at this crucial moment as well. The growing calls for external intervention highlighted the restrictive political decisions that placed the international community in a more difficult position for the provision of humanitarian assistance (Martin and Margesson 2008; Selth 2008). In addition to the invasion, the regime viewed the cyclone as a 'security threat' rather than a disaster, due to the potential influx of foreign aid workers and media workers into the country through massive relief efforts (Robert 2011, p.191). From the SPDC's perspective, the presence of the international community in Myanmar could potentially end authoritarian rule in Myanmar.

Like the crisis in 2007, ASEAN found itself in an uncomfortable position for shielding Myanmar against international pressure.²⁶ The allegations of critics largely concentrated on ASEAN's insufficient response and humanitarian aid to victims after the Cyclone. Part of this criticism was centred on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, which constrains the capacity of ASEAN to respond to a crisis on time (Amador III 2009). Additionally, due to the SPDC's fear of intervention by the international community, accessibility to and distribution of the international aid provided to the affected areas of Cyclone

Nargis were delayed (Selth 2008). The international community and the UN were limited in their ability to directly influence the junta. In this situation, considering the SPDC's rising fears of foreign interference as well as of long-term solutions to Myanmar's domestic problems, ASEAN was forced to play a mediating role in the dialogue between Myanmar and the international community.

Thus, ASEAN attempted to organise joint activities between the UN and ASEAN to provide humanitarian assistance to Myanmar with consent from the junta. ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan delivered the Association's response at a special foreign ministers' meeting convened in Singapore in mid-May 2008. The ministers agreed that the ASEAN-led approach was the best way to address the current difficulties in Myanmar.²⁷ Alarmed by the growing demand for humanitarian intervention in Myanmar, ASEAN also deliberated upon what actions to take and informed the regime that the natural disaster would allow the Association to facilitate cooperation between the military and the international community (Kipgen 2016). This step was intended to help both Myanmar and ASEAN demonstrate a desire to cooperate with the international community on a non-political issue. In other words, ASEAN attempted to compensate for its reputational damage by playing a prominent role in a natural disaster while relegating the issues of political transition and human rights to issues internal to Myanmar.

The junta was persuaded to admit the first stationing of the ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) in the devastated area, which was organised by the ASEAN Secretariat in collaboration with the ASEAN Disaster Management Committee (ACDM) and the Myanmar government.²⁸ Because ERAT was the first formal and external assessment of the Cyclone, the team was confronted with tremendous political pressure from the international community.²⁹ Based on the evaluation of ERAT, ASEAN offered targeted aid to the affected population in support of the distribution of military government assistance. Led by the ASEAN-ERAT, a task force coalition – including representatives from the ASEAN Secretariat, the Government of Myanmar, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and key international representatives – was formed. The task force was able to address the recommendations and establish rescue operations as well as short- and long-term plans for tackling Cyclone Nargis' casualties.³⁰

The success of ASEAN's efforts to establish a channel between the regime and the international community, along with ASEAN Secretary-General Surin's leading position in ASEAN's Humanitarian Task Force,³¹ demonstrate that the government of Myanmar kept a more open mind to ASEAN than the West with regard to the use of ASEAN as a coordinating platform. ASEAN commissioned assessments and encouraged the Government of Myanmar to pursue stronger aid coordination. Cyclone Nargis showed that ASEAN could be more effective as a coordinator for the junta than other governmental or international organisations (Haacke 2008; Amador III 2009; Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2008). Despite the principle of non-interference and the international community's pressure on the Association concerning the persisting reluctance of the junta, ASEAN paved the way for the accessibility and quick dispatch of humanitarian assistance to the victims of Cyclone Nargis.

²⁷ ASEAN, *Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting Chairman's Statement*, Singapore, May 19 2008, <https://asean.org/special-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-chairman-s-statement-singapore/>, (Accessed on 2 June 2020).

²⁸ The Tripartite Core Group comprised of Representatives of the Government of the Union of Myanmar, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations with the support of the Humanitarian and Development Community, *Post-Nargis Joint Assessment*, July 2008. <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/21765.pdf> (Accessed on 18 May 2020).

²⁹ The ASEAN Secretariat, *A Humanitarian Call: The ASEAN Response to Cyclone Nargis*, Jakarta, Indonesia July 2010. <https://www.asean.org/storage/images/2012/publications/A%20Humanitarian%20Call%20The%20ASEAN%20Response%20to%20Cyclone%20Nargis.pdf>. (Accessed on 27 May 2020).

³⁰ Ibid, p-48.

³¹ The Task Force, in turn, resulted in the establishment of a tripartite core group to organise the relief operations, comprising ASEAN, the UN and the Junta.

On the other hand, this period of time presented a key political conjuncture beyond the distribution of aid during Cyclone Nargis, as it was crucial for holding the National Convention to prove the state constitution. The willingness of ASEAN to cooperate with the international community through successful negotiation with the junta earned the Association a positive reputation. However, ASEAN's actions had no extensive impact on Myanmar's military-led domestic political transition process.

Scholars continue to debate the different perspectives regarding ASEAN's political repercussions in Myanmar. The military government overlooked the post-cyclone relief efforts, owing to great support from ASEAN. The regime still maintained its control despite the pressure from Western governments and the French proposal of R2P. The junta reasserted itself within a few weeks of the crisis, but this could be perceived as an indication of a horrific human security deficiency (Taylor 2015; Than 2009). If ASEAN members refused to join the international community in order to deal with the junta during Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN was likely to lose its credibility. The narrow focus on ASEAN's humanitarian assistance convincingly 'depoliticised' its engagements with Myanmar and lessened the junta's fears about mass invasion and 'security threats' in the country (Robert 2010, p.192). The relations between Myanmar and the international community especially with the West remained consistent as isolated relations.

Nonetheless, in the domestic affairs of Myanmar, which cannot be resolved by the means of Western countries, ASEAN served as a key facilitator in helping the junta and the international community to dispatch humanitarian aid to the cyclone victims. ASEAN's role as a facilitator reaffirmed the importance of maintaining ASEAN policy. However, by overlooking the political implications of the government-planned National Convention and narrow focus on humanitarian aid, one could argue that ASEAN did not demonstrate considerable interest in Myanmar's political transition due to the potential damages to its reputation it could incur.

6. Conclusion: ASEAN as a 'conditional prodder' for Myanmar

The pressure of the international community and the issue of credibility have always been matters of concern for ASEAN when it comes to the domestic affairs of Myanmar. This article argues that ASEAN played a role as a 'conditional prodder' in dealing with the junta, meaning that, in contrast to the non-interference principle, ASEAN is likely to formally intervene in the domestic affairs of Myanmar if a crisis threatens ASEAN's credibility or reputation in the international community. Alternatives to interference may include pressure and assistance, depending on how deeply the credibility of the Association is affected by the internal crises of Myanmar.

In the case of the Depayin Incident, ASEAN attempted to rehabilitate the reputations of ASEAN member states that were destroyed after the Asian financial crisis. Therefore, ASEAN responded to the regime's actions to ensure a 'national reconciliation' and thus maintain ASEAN's credibility. In the case of the Saffron Revolution, the misconduct by the junta impaired the reputation of the Association in the international community. This can be observed in ASEAN's official statements on the topic, which noted that Myanmar's domestic situation had impacted ASEAN's reputation and credibility. Due to international pressure from the UNGA and the compromised legitimacy of the ASEAN Charter, the wording in the public pronouncement regarding the Saffron Revolution was stronger than that of the Depayin Incident.

When Myanmar again called on ASEAN to defend the Security Council's decision, ASEAN claimed that it had lost its 'credibility and ability' to do so, as its reputation and credibility were challenged. Thus, Myanmar's internal affairs were ignored in favour of the Association's agenda. Moreover, the revocation of the responsibility of a member state to assume chairmanship in response to international pressure was a clear violation of the Association's standards and rules. In light of this, ASEAN sought a means to approach the junta in a way that could restore its credibility by reducing pressure from the international community.

In 2006, Myanmar was slated for assuming rotated ASEAN chairmanship duty for the first time, but Western pressure on the internal situation in Myanmar had an impact on ASEAN itself. Therefore, ASEAN either directly or indirectly exerted pressure on Myanmar to relinquish the chairmanship of ASEAN. Therefore, in 2006, Myanmar relinquished its chairmanship of ASEAN, emphasising the importance of resolving its internal affairs. However, after President Thein Sein came to power in 2011, Myanmar's political and economic situation had changed, and the international community – including ASEAN – recognised for his political and economic reforms. Therefore, Myanmar successfully assumed the ASEAN chairmanship in 2014. Compared to ASEAN's response to Myanmar's chairmanship and domestic situation in the early 2000s, the international community and ASEAN have welcomed the success of Myanmar's democratic transition in the period from 2010 to mid-2010 as well as Myanmar's successful ASEAN chairmanship in 2014. Then, in 2017, the refugee crisis in Rakhine State drew renewed international attention and criticism. ASEAN thus issued a special statement on Myanmar's internal affairs, as it yet again affected the international credibility and reputation of the organisation.³² Therefore, ASEAN's response to the current domestic political situation in Myanmar has also violated the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states. The decision of ASEAN to do so appears to depend on the extent to which domestic problems in Myanmar damage the organisation's international credibility and reputation.

The case of Cyclone Nargis demonstrated that ASEAN struggled to seek institutional cooperation in response to Myanmar's domestic challenges. If ASEAN had refused to collaborate with the international community in the aftermath of the SPDC's limitation for the humanitarian aids, ASEAN would have suffered detriments to its credibility. The specific focus on ASEAN's humanitarian assistance diminished the SPDC's fear of massive intrusion and 'security threats'. Hence, ASEAN played the role of a facilitator between the junta and the international community to accommodate humanitarian aid for cyclone victims. However, ASEAN did not exert significant pressure on the Myanmar government's controversial national referendum, thus displaying no direct influence of ASEAN in Myanmar's political transition process. The findings of the study are summarised in Table 2.

³² ASEAN Chairman's Statement on The Humanitarian Situation in Rakhine State
<https://asean.org/storage/2017/09/1.ASEAN-Chairmans-Statement-on-the-Rakhine.pdf> (Accessed on 8 October 2020)

Table 2: ASEAN's incoherent interferences in Myanmar in the quest for ASEAN credibility

Date	Case	Factors affecting ASEAN's credibility	Impact on ASEAN's credibility	ASEAN's Reaction
May 2003	Depayin Incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ASEAN's attempt to save member states' reputation after Asian Financial Crisis – No direct international pressure 	Low stake	Mild wording about Myanmar in the official statement of ASEAN
June 2005	UNSC resolution to Myanmar by the US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No direct pressure to ASEAN, however, if ASEAN were to support Myanmar against the US, it could weaken ASEAN's credibility 	Low stake (If ASEAN ignores Myanmar's request)	Ignore Myanmar's request for ASEAN's support at the UNSC
July 2005	Myanmar relinquish ASEAN Chairmanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The US's direct pressure to ASEAN for Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship responsibility 	High stake (If Myanmar assumes Chairmanship in 2006)	Break the member state's formal responsibility to assume chairmanship; Allow AIPMC's action
September 2007	Saffron Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Direct pressure to ASEAN at the UNGA meeting – Timing of the crisis and Legitimacy of the first ever endorsement of ASEAN Charter 	High stake	Issuing standalone ASEAN Joint Declaration for Myanmar with the harsh used of wording "revulsion"
May 2008	Cyclone Nargis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No direct international pressure – ASEAN's successful role as facilitator between the junta and international community can increase its credibility 	Increase ASEAN's credibility	Facilitator

Source: Compiled by the author

Despite what has been discussed, the findings of this study may have some limitations that future research may resolve. The primary limitation of this study concerns the generalisation of the results. The role of ASEAN as a 'conditional prodder' to Myanmar cannot be supported by its relations with the other ASEAN member states. This paper only represents Myanmar's domestic affairs and ASEAN's responses to its emerging domestic crises. These generalisations thus require further research through analysis of ASEAN's responses to the different domestic situations of other member countries.

Throughout this article, it had been evidenced that ASEAN has struggled to find ways to deal with the Myanmar military regime through 'constructive engagement' as well as 'critical disengagement.' Although the domestic political development of Myanmar has occasionally appeared in justifications for ASEAN's credibility, it does not represent a primary factor in the Association's agenda. Furthermore, ASEAN's position appears to have been unstable over time and has changed due to international pressure as well as threats to its credibility. The role of 'conditional prodder' is just one-way ASEAN is able to harmonise the goals of its members with those of the international community.

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