

Research Article

# Beyond Wavering: Post-Colonial Resistance and Norm Contestation in ASEAN's Response to Myanmar's Coup

<sup>1\*</sup>Andra Khagum Muhammad, <sup>2</sup>Jusmalia Oktaviani, <sup>3</sup>Anggun Dwi Panorama

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Jenderal Achmad Yani, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Email: [andra.khagum@student.unjani.ac.id](mailto:andra.khagum@student.unjani.ac.id)

Submission: 31-7-2025 | Accepted: 13-11-2025

## Abstract

This study aims to analyze ASEAN's response to the military coup in Myanmar as a form of post-colonial resistance that affects regional norm formation. This study is important because it reveals how collective memories of colonialism shape ASEAN's attitudes towards the concepts of democracy, sovereignty, and intervention, giving rise to the dynamics of norm contestation between the principle of non-intervention and the pressure to protect human rights. The method employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is used to explore the discourse construction and ideology underlying ASEAN policies. The theoretical framework adopted includes norm contestation theory which emphasizes that international norms are dynamic and contested, as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty's post-colonial approach, which highlights historical trauma as the foundation of institutional resistance. The results show that ASEAN's cautious stance is not a weakness, but a form of protection of sovereignty and political identity shaped by colonial experiences. This study contributes to the understanding of the interaction between global and local norms in the post-colonial world, enriching the discourse of international relations from the perspective of the Global South.

Keywords: ASEAN, Myanmar Coup, Norm Contestation, Post-Colonial, Sovereignty

## INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, numerous nations worldwide adopted a proactive stance in promoting democratic governance and opposing any form of military intervention against elected administrations. This tendency has been observed in the policies of several regional organizations. For instance, in the late 1990s, the African Union adopted a zero-tolerance policy on coups, enforcing strict rules that included membership suspension for nations with illegitimate takeovers (African Union, 2009). In this regard, Resolution 1080 of the Organization of American States (OAS) is noteworthy. This resolution restated the organization's commitment to democratic principles and explicitly opposed any undemocratic shifts of power. It was approved during the same period (Organization of American States, 1991). However, as Tansey (2017) observes, despite the rapid development of anti-coup norms at the regional level, their implementation remains inconsistent, and their adoption at the global level remains limited. In numerous instances, international pressure is found

to be ineffective, or sanctions are deemed to be temporary. This has frequently resulted in the quality of post-coup democracies being deemed to be inadequate.

Two decades after the optimism of post-Cold War democracy, there is an alarming decline in the world, as if we are witnessing a resurgence of coups d'état with an intensity not seen since the end of the 20th century. The African continent has historically been a site of significant political turbulence, with the African Union's zero-tolerance policy toward coups having been implemented in the region. This policy has been a pivotal factor in shaping the contemporary geopolitical landscape, with the continent now emerging as a central nexus for this phenomenon. This shift in regional dynamics is also beginning to extend to other regions, such as Latin America, and is now manifesting in Southeast Asia as well (Cooley, 2015).

Recent studies undertaken by the Cline Centre Coup d'Etat Project, based at the University of Illinois, have indicated a significant surge in the number of attempted coups and successful coups worldwide since 2021. This finding suggests that the anti-coup norms developed since the end of the Cold War are facing substantial challenges in their efforts to prevent coups (Peyton et al., 2021). The 2021 case in Myanmar has been identified as a significant catalyst promoting political stability in Southeast Asia. This development has prompted a range of discussions, including evaluations of the efficacy of anti-coup norms and the responses exhibited by both ASEAN and other regional actors (Lin, 2021).

Following the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, and in response to the political and humanitarian crises caused by the military takeover, the ASEAN convened an emergency meeting in Jakarta on 24 April 2021, with General Min Aung Hlaing in attendance as the representative of the Myanmar military junta. ASEAN leaders adopted the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), which aimed to provide solutions to the crises in Myanmar (Allard, 2021). The five main points of the consensus are as follows: violence must be stopped immediately; all parties must begin constructive dialogue; an ASEAN special envoy must be appointed to mediate the conflict; humanitarian aid must be provided through ASEAN channels; and the envoy must visit Myanmar to meet with all relevant parties (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). The Five-Point Consensus represents ASEAN's response to the crises in Myanmar, underpinned by the principles of the ASEAN Way of Diplomacy, including non-intervention and the principle of consensus among member states.

The adoption of the Five-Point Consensus by ASEAN exposed the fundamental dilemma the organization faces: resolving the tension between its core principle of non-interference and the escalating pressure to enforce the anti-coup norm. Although the Consensus was intended to encourage the resolution of conflict, its structure was indicative of ASEAN's institutional stagnation. It called for dialogue and humanitarian access, yet it lacked any mechanisms for enforcement when the junta disregarded these terms (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023). These half-measures approach can be seen as a consequence of the long-standing tension within ASEAN, rooted in its status as an organization of post-colonial states that are extremely sensitive to violations of sovereignty (Lee, 2018). This tension resulted in a dilemma where ASEAN was unable to fully endorse Western-style

intervention, yet it could not ignore the crises without risking damage to its credibility (Southgate, 2019). The result is a complicated balancing act, where the necessity to recognize the junta's participation rights was balanced with the advocacy for democracy, a contradiction that ultimately failed to satisfy either the norm promoters or the military regime. This institutional schizophrenia explains why ASEAN's subsequent actions showed inconsistency between sanctions and continued engagement, revealing an organization trapped between its identity as a sovereignty-protecting body and its aspirations as a normative actor in regional governance.

In an effort to preserve its reputation and avoid intervention, ASEAN has faced a severe setback in dealing with Myanmar, partly due to divergent national interests and past experiences. Myanmar's military junta has frequently been observed to enjoy the support or tolerance of neighboring countries such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This is primarily due to the perception of the coup d'état as an internal matter, a position that aligns with the strong principle of non-intervention that characterizes these countries' foreign policy. In addition, some of these countries have similar experiences or domestic political interests, prompting a degree of caution with regard to criticism of military actions in neighboring countries, in order to maintain internal stability and legitimacy (Sulaiman & Nelson, 2023). By way of contrast, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have adopted a position that is more critical of the military regime in Myanmar, in part due to their own stated commitment to democracy, but also because of their concerns that the crises in Myanmar could have a negative impact on both regional stability and the reputation of the ASEAN in the eyes of the international community (Saha, 2024). This fundamental difference has thus resulted in difficulties experienced by the ASEAN bloc in terms of achieving collective action in response to the Myanmar crisis.

Previous studies have made significant contributions to the examination of ASEAN's response to the Myanmar coup. However, the existing literature also leaves gaps which require further exploration. Plunkett and Tansey's (2024) study provides an in-depth examination of the development of ASEAN as a "norm waverer," a term used to describe an organization that responds to external pressures and international credibility rather than consistent commitment to established norms. However, a critical examination of their research reveals a lack of consideration for the role of colonial legacies in shaping patterns of resistance and contestation of norms in Myanmar and within the ASEAN framework. The objective of the study is to address this gap by analyzing the role of colonial legacies in influencing the dynamics of resistance and contestation of norms in the region. This aspect has not been previously discussed in depth. Consequently, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ASEAN's response to norm violations.

To facilitate a more comprehensive discussion, this paper will analyze Gibran Mahesa Drajat's research findings in depth. The study sheds light on ASEAN's conflicting stance in the socialization of normative standards to Myanmar, particularly in the aftermath of the 2021 military takeover (Drajat, 2022). It

underscores the perpetual dilemma faced by ASEAN, wherein it is compelled to balance the pressures of international entities, advocating for non-interference, with its own domestic commitments to the principle of non-interference. However, the intricacies involved in ASEAN's efforts to strike a balance between the pressures exerted by international entities and their domestic commitment to the principle of non-intervention have not been thoroughly examined in this study.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to explore the complexities of the aforementioned issue by examining Drajat's research. Secondly, it aims to broaden the reader's understanding of the dilemma faced by ASEAN regarding the tension between international pressure and the principle of non-intervention. The article under review also includes a piece written by Has Yadanar-Aungmin (2021) analyzing the contradiction between the principle of non-intervention and ASEAN's policy of engagement in Myanmar. The study concludes that ASEAN acts as a "conditional prodder" where its intervention depends on international pressure and its impact on ASEAN's credibility. However, this analysis has not yet discussed in depth the manner in which the internal dynamics of ASEAN influence the decision-making process in this context. The purpose of this study is to provide answers to the following questions by expanding our understanding of the tension between the principle of non-intervention and ASEAN's engagement policy in Myanmar. This approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ASEAN response and strategy in addressing this complex situation.

The significance of this research lies in its role in illuminating ASEAN's response to Myanmar in the context of various coup crises worldwide. This response serves as a prominent illustration of the challenges faced by post-colonial regional organisations in upholding democratic norms. A crucial case study is offered by ASEAN of how resistance to global norms is shaped by historical trauma. These findings challenge the concept of the "norm waverer" by demonstrating that ASEAN's hesitation is a form of institutionalised resistance. They also provide a new framework for understanding the Global South's resistance to Western norms, which are often considered universal. This study extends beyond conventional analyzes of norm contestation by examining the postcolonial origins of ASEAN's "waverer." It also offers a new perspective on why Western norm enforcement mechanisms often fail in the postcolonial world. The fundamental question that this study ultimately centers on is as follows: How does the collective memory of colonialism affect ASEAN's understanding of "democracy" and "intervention"? The study reexamines the theory of norm contestation and highlights the global South's resistance to mainstream IR studies, which are still largely influenced by perspectives.

## METHODOLOGY

This research examined a qualitative case study approach to analyze the phenomenon of postcolonial resistance and contestation of norms in ASEAN's response to the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Data collection was conducted through analyze of official ASEAN documents, including the Five-Point Consensus and meeting reports, as well as in-depth studies of speeches and official statements by

leaders of member countries. At the same time, information was gathered by examining various sources, including books, papers, magazines, reports, periodicals, news, and bulletins, that addressed similar topics (Creswell, 2018). This approach is employed to assist researchers in formulating clear and definitive conclusions regarding the crises in Myanmar.

In this study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed as an analytical instrument to understand how language and discourse function in shaping and reproducing power relations and ideology in a social context. Fairclough elucidates that CDA analyzes the interplay between text structure, discursive practices, and the broader social context, with the objective of unveiling latent meanings and underlying political motivations in language use (Fairclough, 1995). This approach enables critical analysis of both written and spoken texts by examining how discourse shape's identity, social relations, and power systems. Language must be considered a social practice that is not neutral (Mogashoa, 2014). Consequently, CDA analysis must consider the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the text is situated. Therefore, CDA emerges as a pivotal instrument for meticulously exploring the social and ideological underpinnings of this research.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Drawing on Antje Wiener's ideas in a theory of contestation (2014), this research adopts a norm contestation framework to analyze normative dynamics in global governance. The concept of contestation is grounded in a theoretical approach firmly rooted in constructivist thinking. It involves a critical examination of the assumption regarding the immutability of communities within the context of international relations. Wiener's argument demonstrates that the legitimacy of global governance is insufficient to rely solely on the formal acceptance of existing norms. Rather, Wiener asserts that it must provide space for regular contestation practices from various actors and cultural backgrounds (Wiener, 2017).

This theory underscores the significance of three primary schools of thought, which are as follows: 1) The premise is that norms are dynamic and can be changed through social practices. This is known as the "normativity" premise. 2) The premise is that there are legitimacy gaps due to cultural plurality and experiences in global society. This is known as the "diversity" premise. 3) The premise is that cross-cultural dialogue should be encouraged in the process of norm formation (Wiener, 2009). This is known as the "cultural cosmopolitanism" premise, which states that cross-cultural dialogue must be encouraged in the process of forming international norms. This concept asserts that international norms are not only passively accepted but also actively debated, negotiated, and reconstructed through interactions between various global actors. This dynamic process has the potential to yield a more inclusive and legitimate global governance (Appiah, 2006).

Accordingly, contestation posits that international norms are not merely passively accepted; rather, they are actively debated, negotiated, and reconstructed through interactions between diverse global actors. This dynamic process leads to more inclusive and legitimate governance (Deitelhoff, 2020). Wiener's ideas on norm

contestation serves as the primary analytical framework for examining the dynamics of norms in ASEAN regional governance. In this context, regional organisations are the unit of analysis. As Wiener himself has stated, it is evident that a single interpretation is inadequate for explaining the contestation of norms.

In order to further enhance the discussion, this study also adopts Dipesh Chakrabarty's perspective, as outlined in his book "Provincializing Europe" (2000). This highlights how Western thinking has dominated our understanding of modern political concepts, including democracy and intervention. Chakrabarty's theoretical framework asserts the inevitability and inadequacy of Western thinking in explaining socio-political realities in non-Western contexts, such as Southeast Asia. The idea invites us to consider the potential of Europe to "provincialize" itself as the center of global intellectual discourse, by conceptualising it as one region among a diverse set of others with unique histories and experiences. This approach facilitates an understanding of how the legacy of colonialism and local experiences shape the perspectives and responses of regional actors regarding international norms.

In the context of this study, the post-colonial approach adopted by Chakrabarty is highly relevant for analysing the ASEAN response to the crisis in Myanmar. This analysis posits that by acknowledging local experiences and colonial legacies as significant factors, it endeavors to explore the way ASEAN challenges and redefines international norms that are predominantly shaped by Eurocentric perspectives. This approach serves to underscore the argument that the internal dynamics of ASEAN are not separable from the historical and external pressures that shape their responses to international issues. This, in turn, provides a more nuanced and critical perspective on the globalization of norms.

## RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### ASEAN's Colonial Legacy

It is evident that the legacy of colonialism has played a pivotal role in the evolution of social structures, a notion that warrants rigorous examination and discussion. The colonial rule of nations such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France resulted in the establishment of territorial boundaries and bureaucratic systems, which had a profound impact on both political elites and local communities. The internalization of certain perspectives among these groups played a critical role in shaping the historical landscape (Severino, 2006). The profound and long-lasting consequences of colonialism are illustrated by the emphasis placed on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention as the foundational principles for fostering regional cooperation within the framework of ASEAN (Acharya, 2014). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the colonial legacy is imperative for a thorough examination of the evolution of the norm of non-intervention within ASEAN framework, including its current status as an integral component of ASEAN's collective identity and its role in shaping the organization's internal dynamics (Ha, Hoang Thi & Bunte, 2023).

To provide a concrete example, one may conceptualise a cartographical representation of the Southeast Asia region during the 19th century, a period which

coincided with the advent of colonialism and the systematic establishment of the geographical boundaries that would come to define modern nation-states. Specifically, the introduction of a bureaucratic system of government has been documented as a replacement for the traditional community structures, which were characterized by a looser mandala-like configuration. The term "mandala" is a conceptual reference to the pre-colonial political and social systems in Southeast Asia, where power was organised in a flexible concentric circle pattern with one central authority surrounded by semi-autonomous communities. This organisational structure contrasts with the modern bureaucracy, which is characterized by rigidity and centralization (Manggala, 2013). This historical legacy has led to a perspective among modern ASEAN countries regarding sovereignty as a fundamental value that must be protected, particularly from the threat of foreign intervention. This perspective is rooted in the profound experiences of colonialism, which have left an indelible mark on the region, fostering a sense of trauma and wariness toward external domination. This mindset then took root in the norms and practices of region's politics, including the principle of non-intervention that characterizes ASEAN cooperation. Furthermore, the bureaucratic systems and government institutions established by colonial powers influenced the formation of new political structures, which in turn impacted interstate relations and the development of policies at both the national and regional scales (Anderson, 2006). These conditions contributed to ASEAN's stance and policies in maintaining regional stability through the stricter enforcement of member states' sovereignty.

The profound impact of colonial trauma on Southeast Asia has not only engendered enduring physical and psychological wounds but has also contributed to the formation of a collective consciousness that underscores the fundamental principle of national sovereignty. Following the period of European colonization, the nations in the region came together to adopt a unified stance, expressing an unwavering commitment to reject all forms of external intervention in their domestic affairs (Nguyen, 2016). This awareness has since been recognized as the historical foundation that has guided ASEAN in promoting the norms of state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention as the fundamental pillars in member state relations. These principles are collectively embodied within the "ASEAN way of diplomacy." It appears that these norms may have evolved as a response to past experiences of oppression, and they could be continually nurtured as a mechanism to maintain regional stability and harmony amid the political and social diversity of the region (Molthof, 2012).

The discourse surrounding colonial trauma, as expressed in the "ASEAN Way," is not only embedded in diplomatic practice but also distinctly embedded in the rhetoric of its leaders. In a well-known speech delivered on the occasion of the Bangkok Declaration's signing on August 8, 1967, Thanat Khoman, the Thai Foreign Minister, stated the following:

"What millions of men and women in our part of the world want is to erase the old and obsolete concept of domination and subjection of the past and replace it with the new spirit of give and take, of equality and



partnership. More than anything else, they want to be master of their own house and to enjoy the inherent right to decide their own destiny" (ASEAN, 1997).

This assertion signifies an acute recognition of the colonial trauma endured by Southeast Asian nations, along with an unwavering aspiration to eradicate foreign subjugation. It underscores the principle of sovereignty and independence as the cornerstones for the establishment of ASEAN. Despite the pronounced emphasis on mutual care and community-based initiatives within ASEAN framework, the principle of "non-intervention" remains the foundational principle in ensuring the respect for the sovereignty and independence of each member nation. The significance of mutual care is manifested through voluntary cooperation and regional programs, which are designed to avoid interference in the internal affairs of other countries. These two principles, when implemented collectively, contribute to the maintenance of peace, stability, and solidarity within the region. This speech was delivered amid a challenging geopolitical landscape in the post-colonial era, marked by the Cold War and the Indochina conflict (Chongkittavorn, 2016). In this complex geopolitical climate, the founding nations of ASEAN were compelled to establish regional solidarity and cooperation as a strategic measure to forestall external domination and prolonged conflict.

The anti-colonial discourse was given more concrete affirmation by President Soeharto in his official speech before the House of Representatives (August 1973), six years after the Bangkok Declaration.

"In the long term, we want the nations of Southeast Asia to have the joint capacity to manage their own future and not let that future be determined or interfered with by external powers. A [strong] Southeast Asia can achieve welfare and prosperity for its peoples; it can possess a regional resilience which in turn, will provide a bigger contribution to world peace generally" (Indonesia department of foreign affairs, 1997).

In his 1973 speech, Soeharto explicitly affirmed the principle of state sovereignty by constructing a discourse on regional security and collective capabilities as the primary pillars of regional governance. The principle of non-interference as a form of resistance to neo-colonialism is clearly affirmed by the clause "shall not be interfered with by external forces," and sovereignty as a core norm of ASEAN is reinforced by it. In this context, the concept of "managing one's own future" serves as a discursive mechanism to establish collective political autonomy, while concurrently affirming Southeast Asia's position as a sovereign actor in the global political landscape.

Moreover, the emphasis on "contributing to world peace" demonstrates that the discourse of sovereignty is not only interpreted defensively, but also proactively—by positioning ASEAN as an actor capable of adding value to the international order. This combination of self-determination and global responsibility has resulted in a new understanding of sovereignty (Li et al., 2023). Instead of being viewed as isolation, sovereignty is now seen as a prerequisite for equal participation in international relations.



Soeharto's discourse represents the framing of the norm's sovereignty in the international arena, which is an important topic in international relations. The idea of "the ability to manage one's own future" is not just about saying no to other countries getting involved. It's also about how countries in the post-colonial world can assert their independence and make their own rules and choices, based on their unique historical experiences. This illustrates how universal norms, such as non-interference, are locally interpreted as protection from asymmetrical power relations that persist from colonialism (Corthay, 2016).

In addition to the speeches delivered by ASEAN leaders, the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) also reference colonial legacies and anti-intervention discourse in Article (2), point (a-c), as follows: (1) mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations; (2). The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; and (3) non-interference in the internal affairs of one another (ASEAN, 1967).

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) between ASEAN and other principles is an epistemic decolonization strategy. This strategy involves transforming colonial trauma into distinctive norms of sovereignty. It does so by operating on the principles of "mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity." (Yamakage, 2017) The idea of Westphalia is given local meaning through the process of "provincialization." This is based on the shared memory of colonial violence and the need for self-protection (Chakrabarty, 2000). In this case, the principle of non-interference becomes a "fortress" against new domination.

The political discourse within ASEAN, which speaks to the legacy of colonialism has led the organization to exercise great caution when it comes to issues of intervention, internal conflict, and pressure from major powers. The collective mindset of ASEAN leaders has been shaped by historical memories of colonization and foreign domination, leading to a strong value placed on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention (Jones, 2012). This attitude is reflected in ASEAN's cautious diplomacy, in which consensus is often prioritized, and open confrontation is avoided to maintain regional stability. Thus, colonial rhetoric serves as both a historical backdrop and a normative structure that continues to influence ASEAN's political and diplomatic behavior (Villanueva & Manalo, 2017).

### **Between Solidarity and Sovereignty**

The military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 triggered a grave political and humanitarian crisis, thereby placing considerable strain upon the fundamental principles of ASEAN, notably the norms of non-intervention and regional solidarity, which have historically served as foundational principles for regional cooperation (Connelly, 2021). This crisis presents a structural dilemma for ASEAN, as it must choose between safeguarding the sovereignty of its member states and fulfilling its humanitarian responsibilities. This is particularly salient considering the consequences of widespread violence and human rights violations (Dunst, 2021).

Despite the adoption of the principle of non-intervention as a fundamental tenet by ASEAN, the ongoing situation in Myanmar necessitates a more adaptable and pragmatic response to address the tension between sovereignty and regional solidarity within the context of these intricate crises (Muhammad & Sahide, 2022).

The "Five-Point Consensus" (5PC) framework adopted by ASEAN as its primary response to the crisis in Myanmar contains several points that implicitly signal strong adherence to the principles of sovereignty and the norm of non-interference. These principles are characteristic of ASEAN. Specifically, the second point underscores the imperative for "constructive dialogue among all parties" while the fifth point emphasizes the "the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). These points underscore a non-coercive and cautious mediation approach, strategically avoiding direct intervention or coercion against the Myanmar government. As illustrated, the standard of non-interference is subject to constant renegotiation in accordance with the demands and pressures imposed by crises. The discourse surrounding the tension between calls for regional solidarity and the safeguarding of state sovereignty does not merely constitute a political process; rather, it is informed by historical experiences that have given rise to patterns of collective resistance to external domination. Consequently, rather than resorting to sanctions or overt intervention, ASEAN has established mechanisms that prioritize local control and prudence. This approach has been met with criticism regarding its effectiveness in protecting human rights and ensuring regional stability.

ASEAN's approach to constructive engagement over the past few decades has been to prioritize persuasive diplomacy and dialogical diplomacy, avoiding the use of sanctions or direct pressure on the ruling regime in Myanmar. This approach proved effective. It promoted Myanmar's democratization process prior to the 2021 military coup. The policy provided Myanmar with space to participate in the regional community. It also allowed Myanmar to pursue change. Myanmar pursued change through an inclusive and gradual approach. However, following the 2021 military coup, this approach was deemed inadequate. The coup led to a serious political and humanitarian crisis. It failed to exert sufficient pressure to halt the violence or end the crises. The limitations of constructive engagement in the post-coup context have led to calls for ASEAN to seek a more assertive and effective mechanism (Alexandra & Adhikari, 2023). This mechanism would respond to the crises in Myanmar. It would do so while upholding the organization's fundamental principles. These principles include non-interference and the sovereignty of member states.

In the wake of the crisis, ASEAN member states such as, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia demonstrated reluctance to readily accept the results of the decision, thereby indicating the presence of significant internal contestation. The principle of non-intervention was strictly upheld by some member states such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore as a form of resistance to foreign interference and colonial legacies. In contrast, other member states advocated for a more assertive and proactive response to address widespread humanitarian suffering. This phenomenon is indicative of a fundamental tension between the imperative to

safeguard national sovereignty and the need to meet demands for legitimacy, on the one hand, and the pressure from international actors for more concrete action, on the other. ASEAN's consensus-driven decision-making process, which prioritizes mutual agreement, has emerged as a significant challenge in formulating efficacious policies, leading to the delineation of members into two predominant groups. This has often hindered the implementation of collaborative policies such as the Five-Point Consensus.

Expectations for ASEAN to take concrete action in response to the political and humanitarian crises in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup have been further heightened by pressure from global and regional actors, including the United Nations, Western countries, and various human rights organisations. This situation creates a significant dilemma for ASEAN as a regional organization. On the one hand, it is obligated to uphold the principle of member state oversight and the norm of non-intervention, which serve as its fundamental principles. On the other hand, it is compelled to address humanitarian demands, maintain its legitimacy and support in the international arena, and uphold its principles. As a regional body that upholds these principles, ASEAN faces a considerable challenge in achieving a balance between domestic interests and significant external pressures to formulate a response to the crises, both effective and sustainable.

The concept of the ASEAN way as a foundational norm in regional diplomacy is currently subject to contestation, thereby reflecting the ongoing tension between the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention and the need to respond to human rights violations and violence occurring in the region. The prevailing perspective regarding this norm is that it is not static but rather is the result of a dynamic process of negotiation taking place within a complex political landscape and evolving diplomatic practices. In the context of the 2021 Myanmar crisis, the principle of non-intervention—a pillar of the ASEAN Way—was subject to challenges from both internal pressure from members and external demands for the organization to demonstrate greater responsiveness to humanitarian crises. This development gave rise to a normative debate about the optimal operational modalities for this regional organization, with discussions centering on the balance between promoting effectiveness and respecting the sovereignty of member states.

A close examination revealed considerable variations in the responses exhibited by ASEAN member states to the military coup in Myanmar, thereby illuminating the presence of underlying discord within the organization. In the context of responding to the crisis, certain member states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore have advocated for a more proactive diplomatic approach. These countries have emphasized the importance of facilitating inclusive dialogue and protecting civilians. In contrast, other member states, such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, have adopted a more conservative stance, basing their decision-making on principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. This approach is characterised by a reluctance to engage in adventurous actions and emphasizes a more cautious and pragmatic strategy in foreign policy (Gunawan, 2024). These divergent perspectives impeded the formulation of a unified and resolute collective

response, thereby prompting a normative shift concerning the balancing act between upholding regional solidarity and fulfilling humanitarian obligations in the context of the ongoing crises.

Tabel 1. Divergent ASEAN Member State Responses to the Myanmar Military Coup

Country	Diplomatic Actions	Official Statements/Political Stance
Brunei Darussalam	April 5, 2021: Issue a joint statement with Malaysia supporting Indonesia's proposal for a special ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. As ASEAN Chair, release an official statement (February 1, 2021) without mentioning "coup"	Emphasize ASEAN principles: dialogue, reconciliation, and the interests of the Myanmar people. Avoid explicit intervention, classify the crises as "domestic affairs".
Cambodia	mediation assistance and Hun Sen's visit to Naypyitaw in Jan. 2022 yielded no outcome	PM Hun Sen: "Coup is Myanmar's internal affair"
Indonesia	The utilization of "shuttle diplomacy" in relation to ASEAN and partner countries is a key component of the foreign policy strategy. An emergency meeting of the ASEAN has been scheduled for March 2, 2021.	Condemn the use of violence. On March 19, 2021, President Jokowi proposed an emergency summit.
Laos	During the 46th meeting of the Human Rights Council, the Lao People's Democratic Republic asked all other countries to work with Myanmar to solve the problem peacefully. called upon to create a conducive environment for Myanmar to resolve its internal differences.	supports non-intervention in Myanmar's sovereignty and considers the coup as an internal matter.
Malaysia	Proposed establishment of an electoral expert group in ASEAN. On February 23, 2021, 1,086 refugees from Myanmar were sent back to the military government.	Support targeted sanctions and the release of political prisoners. Support Indonesia's call for an emergency summit.
Philippines	On February 12, 2021, Join China-Russia in rejecting UN resolutions Expressed support for the implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, including the cessation of violence and dialogue between all parties in Myanmar.	rejects direct foreign intervention and emphasizes the importance of respecting Myanmar's sovereignty in addressing the political crises. Ask to return Aung San Suu Kyi to the government.
Singapore	Approve the emergency ASEAN meeting. Order monitoring of financial transactions related to the military of Myanmar.	On March 5, 2021, called the junta's actions a "national disgrace." reject strict economic penalties because of the risk of harming civilians.
Thailand	Set up shelter for more than 43,000 refugees from Myanmar in the Mae Sot district.	Classify crises as "internal affairs."

	Present at IAMM on March 2, 2021.	Protect the rights of Myanmar's refugees
Vietnam	join China and Russia to reject the UNSC decision in April 2021	expect only “stability” without condemning the coup and supporting the non-intervention principle

Source: Compiled from Hanung & Arinii (2021)

ASEAN's delayed response to the Myanmar crisis has led to a widespread questioning of the organization's relevance and credibility in the international arena. The delay in implementing substantial measures, coupled with the discordance in member attitudes, highlights ASEAN's challenges in navigating the tension between external pressures for prompt action and its own internal principle of sovereignty and non-intervention. To address this deadlock, ASEAN can prioritize the enhancement of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). These measures are designed to foster mutual trust and transparency among member countries through more intensive communication and cooperation mechanisms. This strategy is an effective approach for reducing tensions and misperceptions without compromising the principle of sovereignty. This situation has given rise to significant criticism regarding the effectiveness of ASEAN in maintaining regional stability and defending the norms that have served as the foundation for the region's political identity (Saravanamuttu, 2025). In the context of competing norm dynamics, the organization faces a structural dilemma between the demands of humanitarian response and adherence to the legal and political framework inherent to member sovereignty. The failure to expedite the execution of substantial actions undermines the credibility of ASEAN as a pivotal actor in Southeast Asia, engendering unfavorable perceptions among the global community. This, in turn, poses a threat to the legitimacy and function of ASEAN within the regional security framework.

The ASEAN framework does not comprise immutable, fixed rules. Rather, it is the outcome of interactions and negotiations between diverse actors with disparate interests, values, and historical experiences, which renders its norms highly dynamic. This process confirms that norms are always in a state of contestation, constantly reassessing their meaning and application to accommodate the changing political situation, internal and external pressures, and the pragmatic needs of the region. Thus, an understanding of the norms in ASEAN should be seen as a reflection of a complex renegotiation process, where each norm can be translated and realigned according to the actual context without losing the continuity of its basic principles in maintaining regional stability and identity.

In order to enhance comprehension of the prevailing normative dynamics, the table is designed to illustrate how the process of norm renegotiation takes place at different levels of actors and social arenas, while explaining the mechanisms of engagement as well as the level of intensity of norm competition within the ASEAN community and its relationship with global norms. This approach offers a more systematic perspective on the intricacies of crisis management and norm

negotiation, which are not only political but also normative in nature. Sets out the levels of norm contestation that are common in the regional and international order.

Table 2. Levels of norms renegotiation and mechanism of Norm in ASEAN

Level of Norm Contestation	Description	Location and Actor Dimensions of Contestation	Manifestation in Myanmar Crisis
Fundamental Norms	Core principles such as sovereignty and non-interference that are strongly protected	Myanmar government and ASEAN member states that emphasize sovereignty and non-interference as fundamental norms	Rejection of direct foreign interference, maintaining the principle of non-interference in crises, which includes both regional and extra-regional actors.
Regulatory Norms	Norms that regulate collective procedures, e.g. mediation and dialogue	ASEAN mechanisms and norms such as the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) as regional compromise and mediation	Implementation of 5PC that promotes inclusive dialogue, cessation of violence without coercion
Specific Norms	Operational standards and concrete actions at regional and global levels	Assignment of ASEAN special envoys, humanitarian assistance, international pressure by UN and human rights organizations	Special envoy visits, limited humanitarian assistance, UN sanctions and resolutions

Considering the intricate dynamics inherent in the ongoing Myanmar crisis, ASEAN is confronted with an imperative to cultivate a greater degree of adaptability and pragmatism within the ambit of its regional cooperation framework. These norms aim to uphold the principles of state sovereignty and regional solidarity that define ASEAN, while addressing pressing humanitarian concerns and the shifting global geopolitical landscape. The process signifies a dynamic normative negotiation in which the ASEAN endeavors to strike a balance between fundamental values and the pragmatic imperatives of evolving political and humanitarian realities on the ground. The implementation of the Five Points of Consensus suggests a dynamic collective endeavor to identify a middle ground between non-intervention and humanitarian responsibility, thereby indicating an evolution of regional norms in addressing contemporary challenges in a constructive and flexible manner. Consequently, ASEAN faces the challenge of preserving its normative identity while also creating opportunities for pragmatic norm renewal to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in the future (Achmadi, 2025).

### ASEAN Beyond Waverer

The concept of "norm waverer" was introduced by Plunkett and Tansey (2024) to describe ASEAN as an actor that is inconsistent and hesitant in adopting and enforcing international norms, particularly in the context of the Myanmar crisis and the response to the military coup. This observation is associated with the prevailing

tendency within ASEAN to prioritise non-confrontation and non-interference, which has given rise to perceptions of indecisiveness. However, ASEAN's cautious approach is indicative of a deliberate balancing act. The organisation demonstrates a commitment to its principles, exercising restraint in its actions. This approach is guided by the necessity to preserve harmony among its diverse member states and to uphold the principle of sovereignty. This cautious approach is not unique to ASEAN, as global actors such as the United Nations also encounter similar dilemmas when confronted with complex conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine situation. Therefore, while ASEAN's inconsistent actions may appear to demonstrate a lack of resolve, they also highlight the complexity inherent in the enforcement of norms in a region characterised by a variety of political interests and institutional limitations. To enhance the effectiveness of its normative framework in future crises, ASEAN may require greater commitment and innovative mechanisms.

The prevailing perception within the ASEAN community is that the organisation often falls short in adopting a unified and resolute position, demonstrating a preference for avoiding confrontation and upholding the principle of non-interference. This tendency often leads to the perception of hesitancy or indecisiveness in formulating normative responses. The term "waverer" in this context signifies the inconsistency or flexibility in ASEAN's position regarding the anti-coup norm. This inconsistency, as argued by Plunkett and Tansey, highlights a perceived vulnerability in ASEAN's ability to consistently uphold global standards. The study under consideration herein sheds light on the dilemma faced by ASEAN in that regard, as the block faces a tug-of-war between global pressure to uphold the anti-coup norm and regional traditions that emphasize sovereignty and non-intervention. This term is intended to underscore ASEAN's apparent indecisiveness and inconsistency as a normative actor in the international arena. It also aims to facilitate a discourse on ASEAN's effectiveness and its role within the global norm system.

Their approach is predicated on a Western normative framework that values proactive and decisive responses as the ultimate standard of normative performance. ASEAN's approach to the matter has been characterised by a reluctance to adopt a unified stance, opting instead for a strategy of compromise. This approach, however, has been met with criticism, as it has been perceived as a sign of indecisiveness. However, the label is subject to significant limitations, including oversimplification and a narrow analysis of ASEAN. The norm-waverer approach is characterised by an oversight of the dimensions involved in ASEAN members' strategic calculations (Beeson & Bellamy, 2008). These calculations involve domestic rivalries and complex political interests, as well as motivations that extend beyond normative solidarity. Examples of these motivations include the maintenance of regional stability, autonomy, and institutional reputation (Ianone, Annielo; et al, 2024). Consequently, it falls short in capturing the intricate internal dynamics and ongoing normative negotiations within ASEAN. In these deliberative processes, ASEAN engages with and considers interests and external pressures concurrently. This multifaceted



nature of ASEAN's deliberative processes naturally gives rise to positions that appear indecisive and fluid, prior to the establishment of an official course of action.

Instead of characterizing ASEAN as an unreliable and inconsistent "norm waverer", this approach is considered overly simplistic and incapable of capturing the intricacies of normative negotiations. To understand the inconsistency of ASEAN's actions on crucial issues such as the Myanmar crisis, it is necessary to employ Antje Wiener's (2014) framework of norm contestation. This framework enables us to comprehend the inconsistency in question as a strategic and contextual process of normative debate. The use of the term "waverer" is rooted in a European-centric normative framework that places proactive responses at the top of the hierarchy of normative performance standards. However, this framework frequently overlooks particular regional contexts and the psychological consequences of colonialism, leading to the principle of sovereignty (non-intervention) being regarded as a contentious and strictly enforced standard in Southeast Asia. This apparent inconsistency, however, is indicative of the deliberate balancing act performed by the ASEAN to maintain firm principles that serve to preserve both regional sovereignty and stability. To achieve this, ASEAN must exercise caution in its actions to avoid internal conflict and external interference.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's interpretation of Western universalism proves pertinent in the analysis of Plunket and Tansey's research, wherein his concept of "provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty, 2000) contends that the designation 'norm waverer' frequently disregards the particular context of the region. The principles of non-interference and the ASEAN Way are not a reflection of a failure to adhere to Western standards. Rather, they are a form of regional agency that emerged colonial trauma and the need to maintain stability amidst diversity. For example, the Myanmar issue is approached by the ASEAN organisation in a way that shows how global norms are actively negotiated by the organisation—rather than being rejected—by considering local historical and political realities. Thus, the complexity of normative processes in Southeast Asia is not captured by European-center analytical frameworks. These processes require the lens of postcolonial experiences and regionally specific rationalities to be read through.

The "norm waverer" label frequently disregards the significant context of colonial heritage and the regional standard nature of ASEAN. The historical trauma of colonialism has greatly influenced how sensitive ASEAN member states are to issues of sovereignty, or national independence, and foreign intervention. This has led to the norm of sovereignty being a strong and closely guarded standard. Moreover, ASEAN's distinctive approach to ensuring regional stability encompasses not only the unambiguous implementation of norms but also the utilization of consensus mechanisms and the principle of non-intervention, which is meticulously upheld to navigate the intricacies of local interests and sensitivities (Arifin, 2022). ASEAN's approach to 'instrumental rationality' involves a strategic compromise and the selective adoption of norms. This is not just a reaction to potential conflict or insecurity, but rather a deliberate strategy to maintain its institutional reputation and regional stability in the face of complex global normative pressures (Yoshimatsu,

2023). This approach makes ASEAN appears as a reasonable and practical organisation that adheres to rules. It does this by using disagreements over rules to protect the region's interest and prevent problems that could weaken the group. Thus, what appears as "wavering" reflects the normative negotiation process influenced by historical experience, local geopolitics, and pragmatic political strategies.

Instead of viewing ASEAN as weak or uncertain, it is essential to recognize ASEAN as a group that follows rules and has its own ways of operating. These ways of doing things stem from the region's history and the needs of the people who live in Southeast Asia (Rahmadian & Hospes, 2015). The diplomatic practices of ASEAN in the aftermath of the crises must not be perceived as a passive or reactive response to international pressure. Instead, they should be regarded as a proactive endeavor to safeguard the region's sovereignty, stability, and autonomy from external interference, particularly that stemming from the West. This perspective is encapsulated within the Five-Point Consensus, a set of principles that guides ASEAN's foreign policy. However, the Five-Point Consensus faces significant challenges due to Myanmar's complex politics and the differing opinions of the ASEAN members (Tene, 2024). The strategy exemplifies ASEAN's unique approach to diplomacy, which prioritizes discussion, consensus-building, and respect for each member state's distinctive circumstances. This strategy demonstrates that ASEAN is not just indecisive or vacillating but instead engages in active negotiations and establishes standards consistent with the distinctive circumstances present in the Global South.

The Myanmar crisis is a good example of the different interests, historical experiences, and interpretations of norms among ASEAN's member states. Because of this, ASEAN's stance on international norms reflects the plurality of discourses among its member states. This means that ASEAN's response cannot be seen as a single failure or inconsistency. Instead, it is the result of a complex process of internal negotiation and contestation. The member states' approach to this issue is divided, with some emphasizing the principles of regional solidarity and stability, while others prioritize national sovereignty and non-intervention, influenced by their colonial history and resistance to external domination. The post-colonial strategy maintains that the significance of standards established by ASEAN must be comprehended within the context of the experience of the Global South, where global standards that are frequently formed by Euro-centric viewpoints do not always correspond with the historical and political setting of the area. ASEAN's emphasis on solidarity and non-intervention is not simply a tool to avoid responsibility. It is also an expression of normative rationality. The postcolonial historical context shapes this rationality. It is also shaped by the pragmatic need to maintain stability amidst diverse global pressures.

The recontextualization of the "norm waverer" concept has significant implications for the study of international relations and regionalism. It demands greater awareness of the region's political, cultural, and historical diversity, which goes beyond the dominant Western paradigm. ASEAN is often seen as a fickle and

inconsistent actor by those who label it as such, and this perspective is often rooted in Western normative standards that regard proactivity and steadfastness as signs of successful norm enforcement. However, Wiener's norm contestation perspective is important here. According to this view, international norms are arenas of negotiation and debate (Wiener, 2014). These norms should not be viewed as static. The responses of actors such as ASEAN must be understood in the context of complex and contextualized normative negotiations (Deitelhoff, 2020)

While the critique of the "norm waverer" label has underscored the complexity of ASEAN's stance in negotiating international norms, further in-depth analysis is necessary to unearth the institutional motives and pragmatic politics underlying the region's conduct. In future research, the decision-making dynamics of ASEAN should be explored, including how the principles of consensus and non-intervention are flexibly operationalized. The role of diverse national interests, domestic pressures, and strategic calculations among member states in shaping these dynamics should be investigated. Understanding the concept of "beyond wavering" can provide a richer theoretical foundation for viewing ASEAN not just as an indecisive actor, but as a strategic and pragmatic normative entity within the Global South context. This idea also creates opportunities for researchers to reexamine how the region and other Global South groups respond to international rules that have been largely shaped by Eurocentric perspectives. By focusing on negotiation processes, knowledge resistance, and adapting to historical and cultural context, researchers can better understand how these groups respond to international rules. More studies are needed to gain a deeper understanding of how political rules operate in Southeast Asia. These studies will help ASEAN stand out as a group that discusses global rules in a manner distinct from the conventional international approach.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the normative dynamics exhibited by ASEAN in its response to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. It utilises Antje Wiener's conceptualisation of norm contestation theory, along with a critical evaluation of the term "norm waverer." This designation has been repeatedly affixed to ASEAN, necessitating a thorough examination. An in-depth examination reveals that ASEAN norms, particularly the principles of non-intervention and solidarity, are subject to ongoing debate and renegotiation in response to internal and external pressures. The Myanmar crisis serves as a real-world test, highlighting the tension between upholding sovereignty as a colonial legacy and global demands for ASEAN to act more decisively.

This study argues that ASEAN's stance is not merely "wavering" or inconsistent, but rather a manifestation of a complex and contextual normative process. The cautions exercised by ASEAN in situations such as the Myanmar crisis are indicative of instrumental rationality and strategic efforts to safeguard institutional reputation and regional stability in the face of global pressures. Moreover, this approach facilitates the recontextualization of ASEAN's role as a normative actor in the Global South, where a significant emphasis on sovereignty

and non-intervention is the consequence of colonial trauma and resistance to external domination. Moreover, this study offers constructive criticism regarding the pervasive influence of Eurocentric perspectives within the field of international relations studies, particularly in the context of evaluating regional organisations such as ASEAN.

This research study is notable for its use of dynamic norm contestation theory as a methodological framework, complemented by a critical reflection paradigm concerning the notion of norm wavers. This integrated approach makes a substantial contribution to the existing literature on normativity in Southeast Asia, thereby enriching the existing body of knowledge in the field. Nonetheless, the study's restrictions are attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, there is a paucity of openly accessible primary data, which hinders comprehensive analysis. Secondly, the investigation prioritises normative perspectives, omitting a detailed exploration of technical diplomacy and political realism—factors that significantly influence ASEAN's responses.

This study lays the groundworks for future research by establishing a framework for broader empirical investigation. Potential avenues for further investigation include in-depth interviews with key actors in ASEAN or more focused policy analysis. Additionally, further exploration into comparative studies on the responses exhibited by disparate regional organisations to internal crises can contribute to a deeper understanding of analogous normative dynamics across various regions. The results of this study lend further support to the notion that social norms are living, evolving social constructs, perpetually subject to contestation and renegotiation, a phenomenon that is especially evident in the context of the diversity and complexity that characterises Southeast Asian politics. Therefore, a more flexible and contextualised understanding of ASEAN norms is imperative, as previous views that oversimplify this normative phenomenon must be challenged.

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