Invisible Borders and Capitalist Containment: Migration, Displacement, and ASEAN's Passive Complicity in the Myanmar Crisis

Aniello Iannone[1]* and Wijayanto[2]

[1]International Relations Study Program, Faculty of Social Science and Education (FOSSE), President University, Cikarang, Indonesia 17550
[2]Department of Politics and Government, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia 50275

[1]aniello.iannone@president.ac.id; [2]wijayanto@live.undip.ac.id
*Corresponding author

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Abstract

Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, more than 3.4 million people had been internally displaced by late 2024, while many others crossed into neighboring states; ethnic minorities and low-income communities have borne disproportionate costs. Some are fleeing systemic oppression, economic collapse, and militarised exploitation of resources. Although much of the international community has condemned the military regime, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) remains committed to its longstanding principle of non-interference, responding with largely symbolic measures such as the Five-Point Consensus. This research argues that ASEAN's limited response exemplifies a regional order shaped by authoritarian capitalism rather than a failure of normative principles. Drawing on a Marxist perspective in international relations, this research positions ASEAN's response within a broader system of capitalist containment, in which displaced populations are treated as surplus labor. These individuals contribute to regional economic systems yet continue to face political marginalization and lack protection. Based on secondary sources and a critical political economy approach, the research shows how the region's silence facilitates the exploitation of migrants through collaboration between state actors and capitalist interests. This dynamic sustains the dominance of elite groups. The crisis in Myanmar, therefore, exposes underlying contradictions at the core of ASEAN regionalism, an approach that endorses economic integration and labor mobility while simultaneously upholding exclusionary legal structures, deep-seated social divisions, and the persistence of authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, this research advocates a fundamental re-evaluation of regional cooperation, emphasizing

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migrants' lived experiences rather than prioritizing the security interests of dominant political entities.

Keywords: ASEAN regionalism, capitalist containment, forced migration, surplus labour, authoritarian governance

Introduction

Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has descended into an extended civil conflict, resulting in one of the most severe humanitarian crises in contemporary Southeast Asia (Morada, 2023; Simpson & Farrelly, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). Widespread internal displacement, cross-border refugee movements, and targeted assaults against ethnic minorities and dissidents underscore the fragility of regional protection systems (McConnachie, 2022; Zhou et al., 2022; Khai, 2025). Although the international community predominantly condemns the military regime, ASEAN has responded cautiously. Indeed, ASEAN has adhered to its longstanding policy of non-interference and has implemented only symbolic measures, such as the now-ineffective Five-Point Consensus. This approach extends beyond diplomatic silence and represents a structural strategy designed to contain displacement and movement within a system characterized by authoritarian capitalism and regional elitism. The argument is that ASEAN's silence regarding Myanmar reflects more than institutional weakness or normative paralysis and is rooted in a regional governance paradigm that perceives displaced and migrant populations as both indispensable and disposable. These populations are exploited as surplus labor within regional economies while being systematically denied legal recognition, political rights, and institutional protection. This strategy aligns with ASEAN's foundational principles and consistently prioritizes economic connectivity and elite stability over human security and social rights.

Grounded in a Marxist International Relations perspective (Cox, 1987; Gill, 1995; Worth, 2011; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022; Loong, 2019), this research theorizes ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis as part of a broader regime of capitalist containment, a mode of managing displacement and labor precarity that stabilizes the interests of dominant classes while marginalizing vulnerable populations (Chang, 2017; Rüland, 2000). Within this regime, borders operate as both territorial demarcations and selective filters of mobility, structuring access to labor markets while denying political claims (Lee, 2022; Loong, 2019). The regional non-responsiveness to forced migration constitutes a form of governance characterized by calibrated silence. This approach facilitates the informal incorporation of displaced labor, safeguards state sovereignty, and suppresses collective responsibility. This research examines how ASEAN's institutional response to the Myanmar crisis reflects a regional logic of capitalist containment that governs displaced populations through invisibility, exploitation, and exclusion. Post-coup Myanmar is governed through a plural and territorially fragmented order. The National Unity Government (NUG) operates alongside People's Defense Forces (PDFs), ethnic armed organizations, and local administrations that exercise uneven and sometimes overlapping authority across the borderlands, shaping checkpoints, taxation, humanitarian access, and mobility routes. However, their territorial gains do not

automatically improve civilian or migrant security, which remains mediated by continuing violence and by host-state legal and labor regimes (Simpson & Farrelly, 2023; Zhou et al., 2022; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022).

To address this issue, this research applies a theoretical framework that combines theories from the historical structures approach (Cox, 1981, 1987), which views international institutions as tools of hegemonic social forces, and world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2011; Arrighi, 2010), which places regional institutions within global hierarchies of labor, capital, and sovereignty (Chang, 2022; Piper & Lee, 2016). This research uses qualitative analysis of secondary data, including official statements from ASEAN, reports from international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), along with publications from humanitarian non-governmental organisations and academic sources. Rather than providing a comprehensive empirical account of national responses, the research aims to map the discursive, legal, and institutional mechanisms that govern migration and displacement. These phenomena become visible to the extent that they can be regulated, while remaining largely unrecognized as matters of rights or solidarity (Campbell, 2018; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022). By emphasizing the relationship between regional inaction and the political economy of migration (Cruz-Del Rosario & Rigg, 2019), this research challenges common interpretations that portray ASEAN as merely weak or fragmented (Roberts, 2012; Davies, 2014; Langlois, 2021; Bae, 2024). The analysis argues that ASEAN plays a functional role in maintaining a regional order that incorporates labor, suppresses dissent, and limits the disruptive effects of population mobility. The Myanmar crisis therefore exposes the structural contradictions of Southeast Asian regionalism. In this context, the movement of capital is facilitated, while people's movement is systematically restricted and denied (Martin et al., 2019; Lee, 2022).

Norms, Sovereignty, and the Constructivist Account of ASEAN

Before setting out the theoretical framework that guides this research, it is useful to review how existing scholar has explained ASEAN's conduct and to specify the analytical gap it leaves open. The dominant readings of the association's behavior, and of its response to the Myanmar crisis in particular, have been articulated within the constructivist tradition in International Relations.

A substantial body of literature has interpreted ASEAN's behavior through the lens of constructivist international relations theory. Constructivism, as advanced by scholar, such as Wendt (1992), argues that the international system is shaped through the interaction of material capabilities with intersubjective meanings, norms, and shared identities. Applied to Southeast Asia, this perspective has emphasized the emergence of a distinct regional identity, codified in what has been termed the "ASEAN Way," grounded in non-interference, sovereign equality, consensus-based diplomacy, and mutual respect (Acharya, 2001; Busse, 1999; Narine, 2002). These normative commitments are constitutive features of Southeast Asia's regional identity rather than mere rhetorical devices, forged in the postcolonial

experience and shaped by repeated efforts to build trust among politically diverse regimes (Acharya, 2001; Busse, 1999). It is further supported by analyses that frame ASEAN's response to the Vietnam–Cambodia conflict in 1978 as a defining moment in the crystallization of its security ethos. Acharya (2001) argues that ASEAN's conceptualization of regional security draws inspiration from Deutsch's notion of a pluralistic security community, an idea that privileges non-militarised cooperation over coercive balancing (Deutsch et al., 1957). Within this logic, the absence of war among member states is interpreted as evidence of a normatively embedded framework of mutual reassurance (Acharya, 2001). ASEAN's decision not to form a military alliance against Vietnam, despite the severity of the invasion, illustrates this strategic preference. As Busse (1999) notes, the organization rejected both confrontational postures and passive indifference, opting instead for diplomatic management of regional tension.

However, as several scholars have pointed out (Acharya, 2001; Busse, 1999), the ideational discourse on ASEAN security cannot be fully understood without considering the doctrinal centrality of non-interference. In this sense, ASEAN's commitment to mutual security functions less as a preventive military logic and more as a political technology for sustaining state sovereignty and regulating regional dissent. From this view, ASEAN's response to crises, including the post-coup situation in Myanmar, reflects deeply internalized regional norms. As constructivist scholars contend, the normative cohesion of ASEAN enables stability in a diverse and postcolonial region, privileging peaceful coexistence over confrontational intervention (Acharya, 2001). The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation 1976, often cited as a foundational document, is seen as a testament to ASEAN's commitment to a distinctive, non-Western logic of conflict management and regional integration (Busse, 1999; Acharya, 2001).

Nevertheless, this research contends that constructivist readings of ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis cannot fully explain its behavior. While constructivism highlights the role of norms and shared identities in fostering regional stability, it tends to obscure the structural power relations and material inequalities that underpin the regional order. ASEAN's normative commitment to non-interference cannot be understood solely through the lens of a postcolonial regional identity. By focusing predominantly on ASEAN's normative cohesion, constructivist approaches risk depoliticizing the region's governance structures and overlooking how these norms may serve to reproduce elite authority, perpetuate authoritarian resilience, and facilitate labor exploitation, rather than fostering genuine social cohesion or human security.

ASEAN's muted response to mass displacement and human rights violations in Myanmar illustrates this critical blind spot in constructivist theory. As this research argues, ASEAN's non-interference posture functions as a mechanism of capitalist containment, a strategy through which regional elites insulate themselves from political accountability while preserving transnational labor flows. Displaced populations, particularly post-coup Burmese refugees and migrant workers, are tolerated as surplus labor while being denied political subjectivity, formal recognition, or regional protection. This dynamic exposes a crucial flaw in constructivist approaches: the lack of attention to how norms are embedded within broader

structures of accumulation, repression, and exclusion. Rather than viewing ASEAN's normative order as an end in itself, this research adopts a Marxist-structuralist lens that situates norms within the hegemonic projects of dominant classes and regimes (Cox, 1981; Wallerstein, 2011; Worth, 2011). From this standpoint, ASEAN's identity discourse operates as a performative apparatus that masks the coercive regulation of mobility and legitimizes inaction in the face of humanitarian catastrophe. It lacks the qualities of an emancipatory social contract. Constructivism, in its classical formulation, lacks the analytical tools to confront the material and coercive dimensions of regional governance that become starkly visible in moments of crisis, especially in a conflict as structurally revealing as the Myanmar conflict.

Two gaps follow from this review. First, the constructivist account explains the persistence of ASEAN's norms but not the material interests those norms secure, nor the uneven distribution of their costs across classes and populations. Second, it treats displacement and labor precarity as effects lying outside the regional order rather than as conditions internal to its reproduction. Closing these gaps requires a framework that reads norms as historically produced and interest-laden, and that connects the management of mobility to the structure of regional accumulation. The theoretical framework developed in the next section supplies such a lens, drawing on Cox's historical structures approach and on world-systems analysis to specify the mechanisms through which the regional order governs movement.

Theoretical Framework

Borders, Mobility, and Regional Capitalism

To understand ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis, this research departs from mainstream accounts that attribute the association's inaction to normative inertia or institutional weakness. This research approaches ASEAN as an active component of a broader mode of regional governance structured by capitalist accumulation and authoritarian consolidation. Drawing on critical perspectives in International Relations, particularly Robert Cox's historical structures approach, Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, and Balibar, Mezzadra, and Neilson's border-thinking, this framework contends that displacement, mobility, and political silence constitute core elements of Southeast Asian regionalism (Balibar, 2004; Cox, 1981, 1987; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Wallerstein, 2011). At the heart of this logic lies a specific regime of bordering, one that operates less through visible walls or spectacular restrictions than through invisible thresholds, legal ambiguities, and practices of selective inclusion. As Balibar (2004) notes, borders today are no longer confined to the edges of national territories; they proliferate within and across societies, shaping who may move, who may work, and under what conditions. Building on this, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) theorize borders as productive sites that differentiate labor and life rather than simple gates that open or close.

This is especially relevant in the case of Burmese migrants after the 2021 coup, tolerated in informal economies across the region, particularly in Malaysia and Thailand, but rarely granted legal status, let alone protection. They are visible only insofar as their labor can be absorbed. Beyond that, they remain politically invisible, administratively absent, and socially expendable. This differential visibility reflects a broader structural logic, Cox (1981, 1987) describes as a historically contingent configuration of material forces, institutions, and ideologies that reproduces the power of dominant classes. ASEAN's doctrine of non-interference, often celebrated as a principle of mutual respect, functions here as a regulative ideology. It stabilizes authoritarian rule by precluding regional accountability and, in doing so, it neutralizes the disruptive potential of collective rights claims from below. ASEAN's silence therefore functions as a governance strategy that contains displacement through managed inaction. Recent studies affirm this interpretation. ASEAN's strategic silence facilitates authoritarian consolidation and capitalist extraction (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018; Raymond, 2025; Creak & Barney, 2018). It enables a regional order in which displacement is contained and commodified rather than resolved.

This complicity is amplified by Southeast Asia's structural location within the global capitalist system. Wallerstein's (1974) concept of the world-economy and semi-periphery helps explain how states like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia manage migration in ways that serve both transnational capital and domestic hierarchies. Although less powerful than core countries, the semi-periphery plays a crucial role in the global division of labor by absorbing surplus labour from the periphery while remaining economically tied to the core. Burmese migrants, like many others across the region, are absorbed as cheap, flexible labor, yet denied rights and recognition (Harvey, 2005; Loong, 2019). Within this framework, forced migration constitutes an essential component of regional development models that rely on cheap, docile, and flexible labor.

Mobility in this framework is governed through fragmentation, containment, and economic utility. The peripheral states (like Myanmar) are those that face severe exploitation and oppression, often producing surplus populations that are then absorbed into the semi-periphery. Sparke (2007) and Agnew (2005) argue that borders increasingly serve to manage labor flows while blocking the mobility of rights-bearing subjects. As such, Burmese workers are integrated into labor markets but excluded from political life, a pattern replicated across other marginalized populations in the region (Cruz-Del Rosario & Rigg, 2019; Martin et al., 2019). Theories of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005) and surplus populations are instructive here. Migrants displaced by military violence also become functional to a regional model of development that thrives on informality, precarity, and disposability. Their status as "invisible labor" becomes essential to regimes of accumulation that profit from unrecognized proletarianization (Mostafanezhad et al., 2022; Loong, 2019). Ultimately, ASEAN occupies a central role in this regime. Its institutional grammar, grounded in sovereignty, consensus, and economic integration, actively contributes to a regional order in which capital flows freely, but rights do not. The Myanmar crisis crystallizes these ASEAN principles (Bae, 2024; Morada, 2023).

Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, consistent with its theoretical grounding in critical political economy and Marxist International Relations. Rather than measuring policy outcomes or assessing institutional effectiveness, the analysis seeks to uncover the structural logic that drives ASEAN's approach to displacement following the Myanmar crisis. This requires an inquiry attentive both what is articulated in official discourse and what is left unspoken, including the silences, omissions, and strategic invisibilization of certain populations within regional governance frameworks. Aligned with this epistemological stance, the research relies exclusively on secondary sources, treating them as discursive artifacts embedded within systems of power. The primary corpus of sources includes public statements and policy documents issued by ASEAN from 2021 to 2025, such as Chairman's Statements, Joint Communiqués, and materials related to the Five-Point Consensus. These are complemented by institutional reports from international organizations and human rights NGOs, as well as scholarly contributions from critical migration studies and Southeast Asian political economy. Because the research relies on secondary sources, its claims are limited to regional discourses and institutional structures rather than migrants' firsthand experiences. This limitation is consistent with the research's regional level of analysis but constrains the conclusions that can be drawn about everyday practices.

Given the repressive political environment and the transnational nature of the displacement regime, the analysis centers on the regional architectures through which mobility is governed, deferred, or suppressed. The goal is to map the political and institutional arrangements that allow ASEAN to sustain its stance of calibrated disengagement, tolerating displaced populations without naming them, managing their movement without acknowledging their rights, and stabilizing borders without invoking protection. This discursive mapping proceeds through a close reading of official language, tracing how ASEAN frames its responsibilities, to whom it attributes agency, and how it defines regional order. Special attention is paid to the text and its structure: which categories appear and disappear, which actors are named or erased, and how responsibility is diffused across vague invocations of consensus and dialogue. In this sense, the methodology is underpinned by the premise that language itself is a form of action: institutional discourse performs governance by assigning value to some lives while rendering others illegible. Crucially, this approach resists the temptation to treat ASEAN's response as a deviation from an otherwise coherent framework. Instead, it understands institutional silence as productive, a form of strategic non-engagement that facilitates the informal absorption of displaced labor while protecting the sovereignty of member states. By reading across policy documents, rights reports, and scholarly critiques, the analysis aims to reconstruct the contours of an unspoken consensus: a tacit agreement to contain mobility, preserve elite cohesion, and sidestep the disruptive implications of recognition. In doing so, the methodology aligns with recent work in critical migration studies that foregrounds the politics of visibility, legal ambiguity, and labor segmentation (Lee, 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022). This approach takes seriously the idea that regional governance often unfolds through managed indifference as well as through formal instruments and enforcement mechanisms, patterns of inaction that

are as consequential as direct interventions. ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis, read through this lens, mirrors the broader regional order: one in which capital moves freely, while people in motion are rendered governable only through silence, precarity, and exclusion.

ASEAN and the Myanmar Crisis: From Non-Interference to Symbolic Action

Historical Foundations of Myanmar's Authoritarian Crisis and Regional Reverberations

Myanmar's postcolonial trajectory has been marked by persistent struggles over state authority, ethnic pluralism, and democratic legitimacy. Since its independence in 1948, the country has experienced a near-continuous cycle of militarisation and internal fragmentation. The military, commonly referred to as the Tatmadaw, first seized power in 1962 under General Ne Win, inaugurating a durable authoritarian regime that suppressed political opposition and restructured the state around centralized, military-dominated governance. A brief rupture emerged with the 1988 popular uprising, known as the 8888 Movement, which was met with brutal repression by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Despite the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victory under Aung San Suu Kyi in the 1990 elections, the SLORC refused to relinquish power, revealing the illusory nature of institutional reform under military tutelage.

The regime's transformation into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the promulgation of the 2008 Constitution, formulated under the Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy (Holliday, 2012), solidified the military's role as the arbiter of Myanmar's political future. While these reforms provided a veneer of liberalization, they were designed to entrench military prerogatives within any future civilian government. The NLD's electoral victories in 2015 and again in 2020 offered the semblance of democratic transition; however, the party's political strategy was characterized by accommodation rather than confrontation, particularly on matters relating to military atrocities, including the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya (Simpson & Farrelly, 2023). This cautious pragmatism failed to prevent the Tatmadaw from contesting the 2020 results and launching a coup in February 2021, thereby reaffirming the fragility of electoral politics in a deeply securitized state.

Ethnic conflict constitutes a second pillar of Myanmar's structural instability. The state officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, but these designations have long served as instruments of control rather than mechanisms of inclusion. Many communities, such as the Karen, Kachin, and Wa, have responded by forming armed organizations, some with decades-long histories of guerrilla resistance. The 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement formalized only a partial settlement: eight ethnic armed organizations signed, while several of the most consequential armed actors remained outside the accord (Simpson & Farrelly, 2023). These fractures continue to shape the dynamics of post-coup resistance, as Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) play a central role in anti-junta mobilization and the formation of territorial autonomies. Nowhere are the legacies of exclusion more visible than in Rakhine State, where the Rohingya population has faced systematic disenfranchisement and expulsion. The denial of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, following their earlier exclusion under the 1974 Constitution, institutionalized statelessness for over one million

people. The military operations of 2017 and subsequent mass atrocities, including forced displacement, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings, produced one of the most severe human rights crises in contemporary Asia (UN Human Rights Council, 2018). The exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia has placed immense pressure on regional migration regimes and exposed the limits of ASEAN's humanitarian infrastructure. Indeed, the scale of displacement represents the most significant refugee challenge in Southeast Asia since the Indochinese refugee crisis of the 1970s.

The February 2021 coup has amplified these dynamics, transforming Myanmar from a hybrid regime into an arena of civil war. Popular resistance has not only persisted but diversified, with many civilians receiving military training from EAOs and joining the PDFs. The formation of the NUG, composed of exiled parliamentarians, ethnic leaders, and civil society actors, reflects a reconfiguration of political authority from below. The post-coup struggle has produced fragmented and shifting control: the NUG, PDFs, and multiple EAOs exercise uneven authority across many areas, while the military retains coercive reach through air power, garrisons, and administrative institutions even where it lacks stable ground control (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022; Simpson & Farrelly, 2023). While the international community remains divided on how to engage the NUG, its very existence challenges the international recognition of state sovereignty and underscores the fragmentation of Myanmar's territorial and political order.

The reconfiguration of authority after the coup cannot be reduced to the emergence of the NUG. Ethnic Armed Organizations have been at least as consequential, and in the borderlands considerably more so. Groups such as the Karen National Union, the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Karenni resistance, and the Arakan Army have converted long-standing insurgent capacity into territorial administration, running courts, taxation systems, checkpoints, and, in several areas, parallel civil bureaucracies. The Arakan Army's advances across Rakhine and the Karenni Interim Executive Council in the east are the clearest instances of resistance actors governing populations rather than merely contesting the military. This matters for the present argument because these authorities challenge the junta's control over mobility while establishing bordering regimes of their own, regulating who may cross, who may trade, and on what terms labor and goods move across the Thai and Chinese frontiers (Zhou et al., 2022; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022). The post-coup order is therefore a patchwork of competing territorialities rather than a single frontier between junta and resistance, each producing its own thresholds of inclusion and exclusion for displaced people.

Shifts in territorial control do not necessarily improve the everyday conditions of displaced populations. The assumption that political authority and protection move together is precisely what the borderland evidence unsettles. As the junta has lost ground, its aerial attacks on civilian areas have intensified rather than abated, so that the retreat of state authority over a district has often widened the war rather than stabilized civilian life (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022; UN Human Rights Council, 2024). Populations under resistance or contested control remain exposed to bombardment, to forced conscription by more than one party, to arbitrary taxation, and to renewed displacement. For those who cross into Thailand or Malaysia, moreover, the determinants of daily life are set less by which

faction holds their home region than by the legal and labor regimes of the host state: precarity in Mae Sot or Klang is governed by immigration law, brokerage debt, and sectoral demand, not by the map of control inside Myanmar. Territorial change and lived security are thus only loosely coupled, and the analysis that follows treats them as distinct rather than assuming that gains for the resistance translate into relief for the displaced.

The protracted marginalization of ethnic minorities, the weaponization of statelessness, and the structural production of displacement have created a crisis that transcends national boundaries. In this sense, ASEAN's cautious engagement with the Myanmar conflict cannot be interpreted in isolation; it must be understood as a symptom of a broader regional logic in which sovereignty, security, and labor mobility are managed through silence, deference, and symbolic diplomacy. Thus the crisis functions as both a mirror and a rupture, revealing the contradictions of a regional order that facilitates economic connectivity while externalizing the human costs of authoritarian rule. ASEAN's strategic non-interference, while seemingly neutral, is a crucial element of regional governance that seeks to maintain elite cohesion, economic connectivity, and the preservation of authoritarian rule, while deferring responsibility for human rights protection and political accountability. This strategic disengagement ultimately stabilizes a system of governance that prioritizes capital movement and state sovereignty over recognizing and protecting marginalized populations.

Capitalist Containment and the Regional Management of Mobility

In the aftermath of the Myanmar coup, the mobility of displaced populations has been managed primarily as a problem of labor governance. The regional response, or lack thereof, exemplifies what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) conceptualize as productive borders: devices that differentiate, segment, and extract value from human mobility. ASEAN's non-response operates as a form of calibrated silence that enables member states to regulate migration through invisibility, fragmentation, and exploitation. This approach deliberately manages human mobility in a way that serves regional elite interests and sustains an unequal political economy. Drawing from Cox's (1981, 1987) theory of historical structures, ASEAN functions as an institutional crystallization of elite interests, sustaining a regional order where sovereignty is sacrosanct, economic flows are prioritized, and subaltern mobilities are governed informally. World-systems analysis further elucidates how Southeast Asia functions as a semi-peripheral zone where labor migration and forced displacement are absorbed through precarious, low-rights labor circuits that support capitalist accumulation at the regional level, instead of through formal legal frameworks (Arrighi, 2010; Wallerstein, 2011). This structural logic is vividly illustrated in the treatment of post-coup Burmese migrants. By the end of November 2024, more than 3.4 million people were internally displaced in Myanmar, while many others had sought safety or livelihoods in neighboring states (UNHCR, 2024). However, rather than offering legal pathways or institutional protection, ASEAN member states have largely managed these flows through ad hoc, informal, and securitized mechanisms.

Fortify Rights (2024) documented arbitrary arrest, extortion, and the forced return of Myanmar refugees in Thailand, including the return of more than 650 people to an active conflict zone in April 2024. In Malaysia, UNHCR reported that refugees and asylum-seekers remained at risk of arrest, detention, and deportation and that the country still lacked a national asylum framework (UNHCR, 2025). These practices shift protection into ad hoc arrangements and informal work, reproducing passive containment while avoiding shared regional accountability.

These empirical patterns confirm the theoretical claim that migration governance in Southeast Asia operates through exploitative toleration rather than protective norms. Refugees and displaced persons are selectively integrated, as informal labor, into national economies, yet denied political presence and legal personhood. ASEAN's regional framework facilitates this logic through a discursive and institutional apparatus that reinforces sovereignty, denies shared responsibility, and renders precarity administratively invisible, without relying on direct control. ASEAN's silence, therefore, is a strategy of order-making, a regional rationality that secures elite rule by displacing the crisis onto those least able to contest it. ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis, particularly through the articulation of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) in April 2021, has been widely critiqued as inadequate and ineffectual. However, such critiques often frame the issue as a matter of political will or institutional deficiency. This research takes a different view. The 5PC functions as a paradigmatic expression of what can be called performative regionalism, a mode of governance in which symbolic action substitutes for structural transformation, and ritualized consensus replaces material accountability.

From a historical structures perspective (Cox, 1981), ASEAN's regional identity has long been anchored in practices that depoliticize conflict and elevate the principle of non-interference to a foundational norm. The Five-Point Consensus, calling for an immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and the appointment of a special envoy, resonates with this logic. It projects regional agency while leaving intact the sovereign prerogatives of the Myanmar junta and the economic interdependencies that tie ASEAN states to the status quo. Indeed, the consensus lacks any enforcement mechanism, and its implementation has been obstructed at every turn by the military regime itself. Nevertheless, ASEAN continues to invoke it as a reference point for engagement, reflecting what Acharya (2001) terms the "norm localization" dynamic: rather than confronting the crisis, ASEAN adapts it to existing regional scripts of consensus-building and elite coordination. This is a deliberate political strategy. By maintaining the veneer of unity and engagement, ASEAN secures its legitimacy as a regional actor without altering the underlying power relations that generate displacement, repression, and labor precarity.

Empirical assessments confirm this logic. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar (UN Human Rights Council, 2024), ASEAN's humanitarian commitments under the 5PC have not translated into meaningful protection for displaced communities, while the association's special envoy mechanism has largely functioned as a diplomatic placeholder. Haacke (2025) underscores the absence of direct engagement with civil society actors and opposition forces, particularly the NUG and ethnic

armed organizations (EAOs), whose exclusion signals ASEAN's unwillingness to recognize alternative sources of legitimacy within Myanmar. This performativity is further reinforced by ASEAN's institutional design, which privileges elite consultation over grassroots participation. As pointed out by Bae (2024), ASEAN's architecture of summits, retreats, and closed-door diplomacy structurally marginalizes displaced voices, reproducing a top-down regionalism where the crisis is managed as a reputational risk, rather than a human emergency. In this sense, the Five-Point Consensus represents the logical culmination of this form of regionalism. It encapsulates ASEAN's role as a stabilizer of regional capitalism and authoritarian governance, offering a performative response that absorbs international pressure while foreclosing transformative intervention. The Myanmar crisis, thus, becomes a test case of ASEAN's purpose rather than its capacity: to reproduce an order in which sovereignty is sacrosanct, dissent is domesticated, and displacement is depoliticized.

The conduct of individual member states since 2021 bears out this reading rather than contradicting it. Indonesia, chairing ASEAN in 2023, conducted more than a hundred discreet engagements through an Office of the Special Envoy and convened quiet consultations with the parties, yet secured no cessation of violence and left office with the Five-Point Consensus no closer to implementation. Rotating the special envoy with each annual chairmanship has obstructed the trust-building it was meant to enable, since each incumbent restarts contacts from the beginning (Tene, 2024; Haacke, 2025). Thailand has run a parallel track outside the association, hosting informal meetings more accommodating to the State Administration Council while channeling border assistance through the Thai and Myanmar Red Cross societies in an arrangement ASEAN endorsed after the fact. Even the firmest collective measure, the exclusion of Min Aung Hlaing and his foreign minister from summits and their replacement by non-political representatives, coexisted with the junta's presence at the forty-fourth and forty-fifth summits in October 2024, while the NUG and ethnic resistance organizations were engaged only informally. Material ties compound this ambivalence.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, the junta imported more than one hundred and twenty million US dollars in arms and related supplies from Thailand-registered firms in the year to March 2024, more than double the previous year, as procurement shifted toward Thai banks once Singapore curtailed the trade (Andrews, 2024). The sequential regional effect has pushed the costs outward: the junta's imposition of forced conscription from early 2024 drove fresh movement into Thailand's border provinces even as returns and refoulement continued, and by late 2024 internal displacement had passed 3.4 million (UNHCR, 2024). Member-state responses, in sum, have managed the crisis as a problem of reputation and border control while leaving the structures that generate displacement in place.

Labor Precarity and the Regional Economy

By late 2024, internal displacement in Myanmar had exceeded 3.4 million, while cross-border movement into neighboring ASEAN states continued (UNHCR, 2024; Banki, 2025). However, these movements did not trigger a collective protection response. Instead, these

movements were channeled into regimes of legal uncertainty and informal labor incorporation, consistent with the region's political economy of selective mobility (Mostafanezhad et al., 2022; Frydenlund, 2026).

The logic at work here aligns with what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) call the "proliferation of borders," in which control operates across territorial, socio-legal, and economic domains. In Thailand and Malaysia, Myanmar migrants and refugees are incorporated into agriculture, construction, fisheries, manufacturing, and service work under sharply unequal legal conditions (United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024; Frydenlund, 2026; Khai, 2025). Informal and semi-formal recruitment channels deepen dependence on employers and intermediaries, while limited status restricts access to protection and collective claims (Campbell, 2018; Banki, 2025; Khai & Asaduzzaman, 2023). This combination of market openness and coercive governance aligns with the region's authoritarian political economy (Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2009). The Rohingya face an especially severe version of this legal liminality in Malaysia and across maritime Southeast Asia (Ehmer & Kothari, 2020; Roy Chowdhury & Abid, 2022). Therefore, ASEAN's economic integration remains separated from a regional social-protection regime: migrants circulate as workers while recognition and enforceable rights remain nationally segmented (Bal & Gerard, 2018; Lee, 2022). Their legal uncertainty is not incidental to their economic incorporation. It disciplines labor and transfers the costs of reproduction away from employers and states (Mostafanezhad et al., 2022).

The scale of this incorporation, and its weight in regional growth, gives capitalist containment a material foundation. The United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand (2024) estimated that 4.149 million migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Viet Nam were in Thailand in December 2023. Of these, 2.349 million held regular status under labor-migration or registration schemes and an estimated 1.8 million were in an irregular situation; Myanmar nationals formed the largest origin group among regular workers. Migrant labor sustains fisheries, seafood processing, construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, sectors in which domestic labor shortages have become persistent (Paitoonpong & Chalamwong, 2012; Kadfak, 2025). Current official reporting establishes the scale and sectoral concentration of this dependence. At the same time, a peer-reviewed estimate for an earlier period identified a measurable contribution to Thai output and wider indirect effects through export industries and domestic demand (United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024; Pholphirul & Rukumnuaykit, 2010). Malaysia displays a parallel but distinct dependence. UNHCR recorded 192,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in 2024, 89 percent from Myanmar, yet the absence of a national asylum and work-rights framework pushed many into unstable informal employment (UNHCR, 2025; Frydenlund, 2026). Regional labor demand and the wage gradient between Myanmar and its wealthier neighbors therefore help organize displacement, drawing people from a collapsing economy into growth models that value their labor while withholding secure membership. The economic dimension provides the mechanism of containment: legal insecurity lowers bargaining power and makes the social costs of migrant labor easier to externalize.

This structural asymmetry reveals the material foundations of ASEAN's passive complicity. Within this configuration, displacement lubricates the regional order. By channeling migrants into informal economies, ASEAN member states stabilize elite accumulation while outsourcing the social costs of conflict to border zones, host communities, and humanitarian actors (Campbell, 2018; Frydenlund, 2026; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022). The result is a form of capitalist containment, where the migration management reproduces conditions of inequality, both within and between states (Mostafanezhad et al., 2022; Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2009).

In this context, the figure of the Burmese displaced person becomes emblematic of the region's political economy. Whether a refugee in Malaysia, a day laborer in northern Thailand, or an undocumented domestic worker in Jakarta. This figure is mobile, vulnerable, useful, and silenced. The logic of ASEAN regionalism is complicit in a system that privileges economic circulation while entrenching human disposability (Campbell, 2018; Khai, 2025; Frydenlund, 2026).

Thailand and the Reproduction of Exploitation

The selection of Thailand as the first empirical case is justified by both the quantitative centrality of Burmese migration into its territory and the systemic quality of its role within the broader regional regime of capitalist containment (Khai, 2025). Thailand provides a paradigmatic laboratory for understanding how forced migration is governed in the absence of protection frameworks, through a multi-layered apparatus that combines legal informality, institutionalized extortion, and subordinated inclusion into labor markets (Campbell, 2018; Molland, 2021; Khai, 2025; United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024).

Thailand exemplifies what Wallerstein (1974) defines as a functional semi-periphery. It is a state space that, while delegating coercion and outsourcing vulnerability, actively reproduces global labor hierarchies (Piper, 2008; Lindquist, 2010). This structural role has been further elaborated by scholars who describe Thailand as a "buffer zone" in the world-economy where surplus populations are mobilized without rights (Campbell, 2018; Paitoonpong & Chalamwong, 2012; United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024). Thailand's role exposes the contradictions of ASEAN's normative rhetoric around regional centrality. On one hand, Bangkok positions itself as a regional leader and hub for multilateral diplomacy. On the other, it systematically evades international obligations for refugee protection, maintaining a deliberate legal ambiguity that enhances selective control over mobility (Banki, 2025; Khai, 2025; Fortify Rights, 2024). This contradiction, between diplomatic visibility and legal invisibility, makes Thailand a privileged site to unpack the entanglement of peripheral agency, governance at the margins, and extractive accumulation.

Following Cox (1981, 1987) and Wallerstein's (2011) structural lens, Thailand's migration governance is strategic because labor demand and legal insecurity are administered together. Official evidence does not support the claim that more than four million Myanmar nationals alone reside in Thailand. Rather, the United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand (2024) estimated 4.149 million migrant workers in total from Cambodia, the Lao

People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Viet Nam at the end of 2023, including an estimated 1.8 million workers in an irregular situation; Myanmar nationals were the largest group among regular workers. Fragmented registration procedures, recruitment costs, and uneven access to social protection increase dependence on employers, brokers, and periodic government regularisation measures (Campbell, 2018; Molland, 2021; Khai, 2025). Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and its National Screening Mechanism has not protected at the scale required. In April 2024, Fortify Rights (2024) witnessed Thai authorities return more than 650 Myanmar refugees from temporary safety areas to an active conflict zone and documented broader patterns of arbitrary arrest, extortion, detention, and forced return. Legal ambiguity therefore enables selective policing and removal even as labor-market demand keeps informal routes open. The result is a differentiated border regime that admits labor while limiting status, voice, and enforceable rights.

Social precarity is structurally embedded, but the available evidence is better expressed through documented access gaps than through unsupported percentages. The Thailand Migration Report 2024 identifies persistent deficits in recruitment, working conditions, access to justice, social protection, healthcare, and education, with irregular workers facing the greatest barriers (United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024). Women encounter additional exposure to recruitment debt, wage discrimination, care burdens, harassment, and gender-based violence, reinforcing the gendered character of migrant precarity (Piper, 2008). These vulnerabilities are not uniform, and legal registration can improve access to services, but status remains fragmented and frequently tied to employers. Following Cox (1981, 1987), the regime is hegemonic because migrant labor is publicly valued as an economic necessity while the institutional conditions that weaken migrant bargaining power remain largely intact. Thailand thus performs a semi-peripheral function by converting cross-border mobility into economic flexibility while displacing protection costs onto workers, families, and civil-society organisations (Campbell, 2018; Piper & Lee, 2016).

Malaysia and the Governance of Migrant Vulnerability

The Malaysian case reveals how forced migration is governed through a regime of calibrated precarity (Frydenlund, 2026). Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and, in 2024, still had no national asylum framework. UNHCR (2025) recorded 192,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers that year, 89 percent from Myanmar, but registration did not confer legal status or a general right to work. Many rely on unstable informal employment and remain exposed to arrest, detention, and deportation. This institutional arrangement converts humanitarian displacement into a labor market marked by weak bargaining power without requiring formal refugee recognition.

Research on Rohingya and other Myanmar communities shows how public hostility, securitized migration discourse, and insecure status shape access to work, health, and protection (Ehmer & Kothari, 2020; Khai & Asaduzzaman, 2023; Arshad et al., 2025). Frydenlund's (2026) analysis of refugee surplus populations in Kuala Lumpur identifies the resulting combination of exploitation and disposability. Refugees are economically useful in

informal circuits yet remain removable under immigration law. From a Coxian perspective, this regulatory absence is politically produced: state policy, employer demand, and delegated recruitment practices interact to reproduce a compliant workforce whose livelihood depends on remaining visible to markets but less visible to rights-bearing institutions. Moreover, from a Coxian perspective, Malaysia operates as an integral node in a historical structure in which state and business elites converge to transform vulnerability into a stabilizing technology (Frydenlund, 2026; Khai & Asaduzzaman, 2023). ASEAN's principle of non-interference and its passive complicity enable this regime to flourish (Connelly & Loong, 2023; Bae, 2024). Regional silence on deportations, detentions, and trafficking functions as a modality of governance, reinforcing a hierarchical regionalism that secures order through exclusion (Arshad et al., 2025).

The condition of Myanmar migrants and refugees in Malaysia offers a powerful lens into capitalist containment (Frydenlund, 2026). UNHCR's verified data do not support the claim that more than 100,000 Myanmar nationals were held in immigration detention. The agency instead reported 192,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia in 2024, 89 percent from Myanmar. It stressed that this population remained without legal status and vulnerable to arrest and detention (UNHCR, 2025). UNHCR (2025) also reports restricted access to detention centers, increased raids, and the release of 966 people from detention during 2024. These findings establish a serious protection problem without converting the entire registered population into a detainee count.

The deeper structural issue is the absence of a stable pathway from protection to lawful work and membership. Refugees who rely on informal employment face unstable income, employer reluctance, and heightened exposure to exploitation, while industrial and service-sector demand continues to absorb migrant labor (Khai & Asaduzzaman, 2023; Frydenlund, 2026). Raids, detention risk, passport control, and the lack of work authorization operate as internal borders that discipline mobility after entry (Ehmer & Kothari, 2020; UNHCR, 2025). ASEAN's continued reliance on the Five-Point Consensus has not altered these national protection gaps or imposed substantive costs on Myanmar's military authorities (Connelly & Loong, 2023; Haacke, 2025). Malaysia's case therefore demonstrates how regional non-interference and national immigration control can coexist with economic incorporation, externalizing protection while preserving access to insecure labor.

Conclusion

This research's analysis has revealed the profoundly political nature of ASEAN's regional inaction in response to the Myanmar crisis. ASEAN's stance reflects a structural logic that extends beyond institutional weakness or diplomatic inertia. The construction of a regime of capitalist containment transforms humanitarian crises into resources for accumulation and migrant lives into raw material for low-cost labor. This regime produces, regulates, and exploits marginality. Through analysis of cases in Thailand and Malaysia, the research shows how Burmese migrants are integrated into regional labor markets as surplus and functional labor rather than as rights-bearing subjects. They are visible only insofar as they are

productive, and invisible when they seek protection. This system of selective visibility, grounded in ambiguous legal frameworks, extractive practices, and securitized rhetoric, constitutes the material infrastructure of the regional order. Mobility is tolerated only to the extent that it can be converted into value. At the same time, its political implications, such as the right to asylum, supranational solidarity, and critique of authoritarianism, are neutralized in the name of stability.

ASEAN's response, in this context, cannot be understood solely through norms or diplomatic traditions. It must be read as a regional governance technology that, through silence and delegation to member states, reproduces a hierarchical world economy. Non-interference operates as an active modality of managing inequality. It legitimizes legal segmentation, social exclusion, and the invisibilization of surplus populations. Thus, passive complicity becomes a form of hegemony, a pedagogy of disengagement that generates consent around a hierarchy of the human. From this perspective, the Myanmar crisis confirms the selective and repressive nature of Southeast Asian regionalism. ASEAN's institutional design prioritizes continuity, elite interests, and the stability of economic integration over protection, even at the cost of human suffering. In this sense, the figure of the Burmese migrant, caught between expulsion and exploitation, between military repression and legal invisibility, becomes the most acute symptom of an order sustained by its silences. Examining regional governance from the standpoint of migrants is a vital theoretical and political act. It shifts the analytical focus from institutions to the excluded, from summitry to interstices, and from formal diplomatic codes to informal economies of containment. In this gesture lies the possibility of a radical critique of ASEAN and its project of authoritarian regionalism. Only by tracing the genealogy of its silences and violences can another region emerge, one built on recognition and mobile justice rather than invisibility and extraction.

The architecture of Southeast Asian regionalism thus functions as a stabilizing device for uneven accumulation rather than as a protective buffer against crisis. By refraining from offering asylum, avoiding formal refugee recognition, and outsourcing humanitarian responsibilities to NGOs and international agencies, ASEAN member states have effectively managed the migration fallout of the Myanmar crisis without challenging the very conditions that produced it. In doing so, they reassert a model of governance that privileges state sovereignty, market integration, and elite continuity at the expense of human security and social rights. The implications of this analysis extend beyond Myanmar. They compel us to rethink the role of regional organizations like ASEAN as active agents in reproducing global inequalities rather than simply as weak or underdeveloped institutions. In this context, the discourse of "non-interference" becomes a technology of rule that regulates who can move, who can belong, and who must remain excluded. Its effects are regulatory rather than neutral. Future research must continue to interrogate how migration, displacement, and labor mobility are governed both at state borders and within the structural boundaries of regional and global capitalism. Centering the lived realities of displaced and migrant populations, alongside the political economy that renders them expendable, requires imagining alternative modes of regional solidarity that move beyond elite-centric integration toward emancipatory futures.

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About The Authors

Aniello Iannone is a Lecturer in International Relations and International Political Economy at President University, Indonesia, and General Secretary of its ASEAN Studies Center. He is a Nonresident Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum and Vice Coordinator of the Asia Desk at Geopolitica.info. His research examines ASEAN regionalism, Indonesian political economy and oligarchy, and labour migration through critical international political economy. His work has appeared in Asian Affairs: An American Review, the International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies, Labor History, with commentary published in The Interpreter.

Wijayanto is an Associate Professor of Digital Politics and Democracy in the Department of Politics and Government at Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia. Over the past five years, he has authored a series of books published by LP3ES examining the evolving state of Indonesian democracy. His scholarly work has appeared in leading journals, including *Information, Communication and Society, Contemporary Southeast Asia, The International Journal of Press/Politics, Political Communication, Indonesia,* and *Media Asia*. His research interests encompass digital activism, digital repression, cyber troops, influence operations, gendered disinformation, media freedom, and the broader dynamics of digital democracy in Southeast Asia.

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