

Editorial

Monday, October 21, 2019

Unfolding the shrewd game of divisive politics

With the statement about the initial points of agreement that was signed between the representatives of the Government of India and the leadership of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by its general Secretary Th. Muivah on August 1, 1997 at Bangkok in Thailand, it appears that the group had morally defeated and that the journey which has started by Th. Muivah and Isak Chi Swe, at the cost of thousand Naga revolutionaries are yet another fail chapter in the history of Nagas.

Government of India is keen in ending the over 2 decades old peace talk by the end of this month (October) and the solution now is shrewdly handled to finalise at the wisdom of the Government of India. The outcome may be a catastrophe with unexpected upside in three states of North East India, as the only possible agreement that the government of India may reach with the NSCN-IM or Naga Political groups is more autonomy presumably granting of a state within a state like structures. Perhaps this might be the reason for the Union government to sent MoS, Ministry of Home Affairs K.Reddy here in Imphal today. As even the government of Manipur is set aside from all preparation to bring a final solution with the NSCN-IM and the Naga Political groups, a serious meeting of all state legislators was convened by the Chief Minister N. Biren Singh. The apprehensive node to even the legislators of the state showed that something that might be unexpected may happened and there is also nothing wrong for the people of the state to prepare for facing any eventuality coming out of this political solution.

Well, Hutovi Chishi, the Convenor of the steering committee of NSCN-IM in a statement said that the initial agreement reached out between the two in August 1, 1997 was that the talk should be at the highest level and without any preconditions and that it should be in a third country. When the talk is nearing its final stage now the so call highest level mentioned has been reduced to talk with the governor of Nagaland and that it has been continuing now in the country particularly in the state of Nagaland or at New Delhi with the condition that the solution should be done within the framework of Indian Constitution.

The idea of a sovereign nation by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) which was formed on January 31, 1980 due to differences with the NNC started igniting its first failure in 1988. The unity of Nagas started crumbling with the attempt to find short cut by Th. Muivah by starting talk with the Government of India. As per record bloody clash took place between cadres of NSCN after a group of the rebel group attempted to assassinate Th. Muivah on April 30, 1988. The clash was still coined as the bloodiest internal clash in the history of Naga insurgency. It was this clash that the NSCN split and two groups – one led by SS Khaplang and another led by Th. Muivah and Isak. The group led by Muivah and Isak had started initiating talk with the government of India by that time. The political aspiration of the Naga martyred who had dream of a united Nagaland was again failed with the split.

Another setback of the NSCN-IM could be the bloodiest communal clash between the Naga and the Kuki that happened in early 90s. Using its frontal body the United Naga Council (UNC) the NSCN-IM served 'quit notice' to the Kukis on November 22, 1992 to leave the so called Naga dominated villages of Manipur. But the outcome is that Moreh, a border town of Imphal is now Zero Naga populated zone and with many of the Forced emigrated Kuki village resettled at Kangpokpi area, Kangpokpi eventually solidifies as Revenue District today. The sad part is that the unity of the Hill peoples has been distorted and divided. Multiple ethnic based militants were given birth adding more obstacles to the journey for a sovereign nation.

If one takes a look to the journey of the NSCN-IM, it is no wonder to imagine the kind of politics that they had been playing with the people of the North East people. In the name of fighting for a promise sovereign nation, the integrity of Nagas in Nagaland has been distorted, revolutionary fighters of the Naga have been forced to sacrifice due to internal clash of the NSCN, multiple ethnic based militant groups have been borne, and the love bond among the various ethnic communities of the state of Manipur has been sabotaged and besides the trust of the people in demanding right to self determination has been thwarted with the latest development. Above all the political identity of the erstwhile nation called Manipur, now a state of Manipur is in the verge of extinction if the RN Ravi's statement regarding the Framework agreement (published in our yesterday's issue) is accepted as the final solution.

It is still early to say, but somewhere the game of NSCN-IM being played for decades turn out as a tactful divisive politics for distorting the unity of the entire north East people, that will never come true.

Registration Certificate lost

I, the undersigned, Puyam Chanu Linthoi, do have declared that, I have lost my original registration certificate bearing registration No. 7405 of 2011 issued by Council of Higher Secondary School Manipur (COHSEM) on the way between Lalabung Makhong Takhellambam Leikai and Khwairambam Keithel in Imphal West on October 5, 2019.

Finders are requested to hand over it to the undersigned.

Sd/-
Puyam Chanu Linthoi
D/O Puyam Tomcha Meitei
Lalabung Makhong Takhellambam Leikai

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On the eve of a final Naga settlement, it is NSCN(IM) versus other armed groups

Courtesy - scrollin
By- Arunabh Saikia

As the Indian government inches towards a final settlement of the Naga dispute, setting an October 31 deadline, Naga groups seem to be divided.

The largest Naga armed group, National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), has indicated it is loath to signing an agreement with the Union government without a separate flag and constitution.

But other Naga outfits involved in talks with the Centre are keen to sign. "Most of the competencies have been agreed upon so we may proceed," said a member of the working committee of the Naga National Political Groups, a coalition of seven Naga armed groups, who requested anonymity. "The flag and the constitution will be pursued later through democratic political process after signing the agreement."

Observers in Nagaland fear that an accord signed without consensus could usher in a fresh era of conflict. The last time the Centre attempted such a pact, with the Shillong Accord of 1975, the Naga armed movement splintered into factions, leading to a violent phase of internecine conflict.

If the government does go ahead and sign it with one side, then it may be a case of history repeating itself," said an editor in Dimapur.

War and peace

For over six decades, Naga nationalists have fought the Indian government for a sovereign ethnic homeland that would include Nagaland as well as the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar across the border. Over the decades, the Naga armed movement split into several factions, often at war with each other.

In 1997, the NSCN (IM), the most influential Naga group on the Indian side of the border, signed a peace treaty and started a dialogue with the Union government. There was, however, little headway until 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government signed a "framework agreement" with the group – a development publicised as a major breakthrough by both sides.

Indeed, the agreement injected a fresh lease of life into the talks – the next few years, by all accounts, saw the two parties agreeing on most issues, raising hopes that a solution to the vexed six-decade-long question was around the corner.

The scope of the talks has been broadened since October 2017, when six other Naga armed groups joined negotiations. Having signed ceasefires, these now called themselves Naga National Political Groups and operated as one bloc. They include the NSCN (Kivovi Zhimomi), the Naga Nationalist Council, the Federal Government of Nagaland, the NSCN (Reformation), the National Peoples Government of Nagaland (Non-Accord), the Government Democratic Republic of Nagaland (Non-Accord). Later, the Khango Konyak-led faction of the NSCN (Khaplang) also joined talks.

End of a honeymoon

However, after the initial amity, the two sides have struggled to seal the deal. For almost a year now, the NSCN (IM) and the Indian government have been locked in a bitter impasse over the issues of a separate Naga flag and constitution. Whispers in the Indian security establishment suggest that the Modi government, freshly re-elected for a second term, is starting to lose patience. This was borne out in August, when RN Ravi announced the

three-month deadline in August. The former Intelligence Bureau officer, who had been government's interlocutor for talks, had just been made governor of Nagaland. For years, Ravi had been popular with Naga groups but the bonhomie may be wearing thin. Ravi's announcement to the press was coated in niceties. But a stern message had already been conveyed to the NSCN (IM) at a closed-door meeting in July. According to NSCN (IM) leaders present at the meeting, Ravi had warned that the three month-window was an ultimatum. "The last formal meeting in July, Ravi was very rough," said a member of the collective leadership of the group. "But we are not going to budge."

With the government impatient to push through a deal and the NSCN(IM) refusing to sign the dotted line, could an agreement take shape without the largest Naga group? The Naga National Political Groups seem willing to stick to the deadline.

"The government of India has been very clear about the three-month time frame which ends on October 31," said Alezhu Venoh, envoy of the groups. "So, we are certain they will be gentlemanly about it and stick to that and sign an agreement by the end of that period."

Ravi did not respond to queries seeking comment.

Who represents the people?

In Nagaland, consensus for any decision affecting public life is usually built through a strongly networked Naga civil society, which includes several influential tribal councils. While each Naga tribe has its own council, there are umbrella bodies representing several tribes.

The Naga Hoho was considered to be the apex body of all Naga tribes but its influence has waned in recent times. In 2016, three powerful tribes broke away to together form the Central Nagaland Tribes Council. Similarly, in the eastern districts of the state, the Eastern Naga Peoples' Organisation holds sway. Venuh claimed that the Naga National Political Groups had the backing of the 14 major sub-tribes of Nagaland to sign an agreement on their behalf. "We have always had regular consultations with civil society groups discussing the roadmap of the negotiations," he said. "Our people are tired; our people are impatient for a solution."

A leader of the Naga Tribes Council, another umbrella organisation, echoed the same sentiment. "There is no hard and fast rule that these many groups have to be on board for a solution," said the leader, who did not want to be named. "We have to be realistic and pragmatic to bring the negotiations to a logical conclusion."

However, the consensus may not be unanimous. The Naga Hoho has put its weight behind the NSCN (IM). "Can it be possible to sign an agreement without the chief negotiators?" asked its president HT Zhimomi.

'Indian side of the fence'

The NSCN (IM), for its part, called the Naga National Political Groups' stance "unfortunate". V Horam, an executive member of group's steering committee, accused the Naga National Political Groups of "not being clear about Naga history" and being "on the Indian side of the fence".

He said: "If they are willing to sign an agreement without a flag and Constitution, this amounts to saying that Nagas are not a sovereign nation at all. What was the whole struggle about?" Besides, Horam contended, the Indian government, through the framework agreement, had already agreed on "shared sovereignty", implying that they had agreed to an equal relationship between

India and the Naga state emerging from the agreement. Accepting the primacy of the Indian Constitution thus, Horam added, would mean abandoning this pact.

A separate flag and Constitution was the "heart and soul" of that arrangement, said VS Atem, formerly chief of the group's armed wing and now a key member of its collective leadership.

Although the framework agreement remains under wraps, several people privy to it confirm that it does not explicitly refer to "shared sovereignty". But they also claim it does not specify that a final solution would have to be within the ambit of the Indian Constitution, as has been widely reported.

"The framework agreement is essentially a set of broad guidelines under which negotiations between the two entities were to take place," explained Khekiye K Sema, a retired bureaucrat of the Indian Administrative Service, who was asked to read out the agreement at a recent consultation at Camp Hebron, the NSCN (IM)'s headquarters, 40 km off Dimapur. "The meaning of many things in it is open to interpretation," Sema added.

The Naga National Political Groups, which signed a preamble similar to the 2015 framework agreement when it joined talks, alleged that the NSCN (IM) had been selling a pipe dream to the people of Nagaland all along. "Till today, they have not made the contents of the framework agreement public," pointed out Alezho. "IM keeps talking about shared sovereignty, but we very well know that the Indian Parliament is not going to accept something like that. Which country on earth will share its sovereignty?"

A tribal leader, backing the Naga National Political Groups to ink an agreement with the Indian government, summarised the position: "What is the point of mere symbolic gestures like the flag and constitution when we are not going to be sovereign in any case?"

The Naga state

To be sure, there seems to be little difference of opinion between the Centre, the NSCN(IM) and the Naga National Political Groups over the division of responsibilities vis-à-vis the Naga state and the Indian government. Nagaland will, for all practical purposes, continue to be another Indian state, but with a broader list of subjects under its control. Though Article 371 (A) of the Constitution already ensures special privileges to the state, the new agreement is to be a stronger assertion of Naga rights.

Besides, the new agreement proposes a bicameral Naga parliament in place of the existing state assembly. The new body, the Tatar Hoho, will also have powers to govern Naga areas in adjoining Manipur and Arunachal.

No map of any neighbouring state will, however, be redrawn, which was a major concern of the neighbouring states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. There will be, it is understood, only cosmetic administrative changes. Naga areas in the hills of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh are likely to be converted into satellite territorial area councils – governed by the Tatar Hoho, and funded directly by the Centre. Assam, where three people died in 2018 in protests against territory being ceded to the Nagas, has so far been kept out of the arrangement.

Perhaps the closest the Nagas have managed to wrest for themselves in terms of sovereignty is a unique passport:

Indian but with a distinguishable Naga marker.

"The difference is that the [Naga National Political Groups] are saying that they accept the Indian Constitution, but the NSCN (IM) wouldn't say it in as many words," said Sema. "But it is clear that the IM will not bring home sovereignty as most people rudimentarily understand it: complete cut-off from India."

The flag and the Constitution

Is the NSCN (IM) then clutching at the straws with its demands of a separate flag and Constitution? The NSCN(IM)'s insistence on shared sovereignty dates back to at least 2015. And the idea of a separate Naga constitution, or yezhabo, goes back decades. But recent developments in Jammu and Kashmir may have given greater appeal to a yezhabo with authority that is independent of the Indian Constitution.

On August 5, the Centre unilaterally stripped the state of Jammu and Kashmir of special status and autonomy guaranteed to it under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, using other provisions of the same Constitution. This set off ripples of anxiety in Naga civil society, which feared that the autonomy accorded to Nagaland under Article 371(A) could suddenly disappear. Despite government assurances that these provisions will not be tampered with, such fears persist.

Certainly, NSCN(IM) leaders insist that a yezhabo is vital to holding the Indian state accountable. "If we now agree to a solution within the ambit of the Indian Constitution, even if that solution is sky-high, there is a chance that the same Constitution will be used later to undo all of it," said Horam.

Atem also suggested the yezhabo would be a safeguard against encroachment by the Indian state: "Since we have agreed that our unique relationship will be defined by the division of competencies, this agreement has to be kept protected so that its sanctity cannot be mishandled by any government. Otherwise, where is the guarantee that government of India will not go back on its word?"

He continued: "That is why the agreement needs to be safeguarded by being incorporated as a separate chapter in the Indian Constitution as well as our own yezhabo. The idea is that no party shall then be able to unilaterally change anything."

Shilling redux?

As the two negotiating blocs wrangle over technicalities, conflict-scarred Nagaland fears the consequences of a "solution" that involves just one party. "If the government signs an agreement with the [Naga National Political Groups], that will lead to a direct confrontation with IM," cautioned Sema. "That would mean a civil war-like situation in Nagaland."

Sema's ominous forecast is rooted in the bitter lessons of the the Shillong Accord of 1975. The accord was signed by a section of the Naga National Council, the only armed group in existence at the time. It was perceived to have given up the Naga demand for sovereignty without building a broad-based consensus around it. In 1980, a faction of the Naga National Council broke away to form the NSCN, which disintegrated further over the decades, giving rise to internecine conflicts.

The NSCN (IM) certainly appears indisposed to take a step back. "We will not be part of a solution in which Naga pride will be compromised," said Horam. "The struggle will continue."