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The second session of Panglong Conference, officially called 21st Century Panglong Conference began on 24 May and end on 29 May a day later than the original schedule. Though many critics have said that the conference did not bring the “desired” results- I think one should go by what Suu Kyi at the end of the day said after the conference that peace “is starting to take tangible form for the first time.”

The Conference:

The Conference brought in over 1400 representatives from the government, Parliament, the Army, political parties, ethnic armed entities and civil society members. Significant was the presence of the Chinese backed UWSA group and six of its associates who were invited as “special guests” at the last minute as well as the Chinese Ambassador who sat through the entire proceedings of the six days.

Equally significant was the absence of the once powerful and now weakened United Nationalities Federal Council who on the eve of the conference released a statement that they would not be attending as they were not given the “full rights” to participate. In the absence of the UNFC, the conference was indeed not ‘inclusive’ and yet the presence of the two most powerful insurgent groups- the UWSA and the KIA made up for the absence of other marginal groups.

While Aung San Suu Kyi expressed optimism on the outcome of the conference and that the year 2017 would be the year of Peace, the Army Chief made a sour note that the Army would stick to the path of peace provided by the National Cease fire Agreement and not to any other path of peace or political negotiations. This in effect was contrary to the new three stage process proposed by the WA group and six of its allies.

Principles Accepted- On Consensus.

At the end, the Conference adopted 37 principles that included 12 on political issues, 11 on the economy, 10 on land and the environment and 4 on social policy. The following points are of interest.

* In the political sector, three of the principles like the sovereign power resting with the citizens, separation of powers of executive, legislative and judiciary and entrusting the powers to the Union, States, Regions and Self Administrative areas were closely on the lines of the 2008 constitution. Two of the issues namely Union, Region and State Cabinet issues enjoying the “taxes according to laws” and self administered states and regions to carry the names of the races are entirely new. The rest of them had slight changes from the constitution but were not totally opposed to them

* There was general agreement that Myanmar must be a multi party democracy with free and fair elections in accordance with the constitution.

* Implicit in the dialogue process as described above would need certain changes in the constitution and even new additions to the 2008 constitution. This would mean that the amendments that can be done only through the provisions of chapter 12 of the 2008 constitution which in turn would need the approval of the army as it holds a strangle hold on all amendments. Since the army representatives were present and consented to the agreed principles, it is expected that they would come on board.

* On economy, two issues appeared to be important- one- allocation of national budget in a fair and equitable manner and two in the management rights in economic affairs between the Union and others is a noteworthy inclusion.

Issues where No Consensus could be Found:

* What is more significant and crucial are the eight points on the political side that were not agreed to and these mainly related to the issues relating self determination, secession and compliance to the army sponsored and much hated 2008 constitution. These are being given here in full detail to understand the future challenges.

Specifically these were-

1. No privileges or restriction of rights for any ethnic group.
2. Union that allows self determination within a federal frame work.
3. Constitutions for states and regions must comply with the 2008 constitution.
4. Right to self determination in politics, economy, social affairs, culture and heritage of the states and regions.
5. Self determination of the national characteristics and culture of ethnic people.
6. No part or territory of Union shall ever secede'
7. States and regions to prescribe constitutions and laws that do not exceed the 2008 constitution.
8. Self determination as prescribed in 2008 constitution.

Discussion on Security Sector:

Besides, the political, economic and social sectors, an issue that was discussed in great detail but not officially published was the one on security where the Army maintained that there could only be one army and that would be the "Tatmadaw." The question of a federal army has been an issue of intense debate right from the first Panglong Conference. While the Burmese Army continues to insist that there should be one national army under the new federal arrangement, the ethnic armed groups would prefer to retain their respective armed forces under some accepted arrangements. They would thus prefer a "united Army" guaranteeing democracy and a federal system. In the face of a rigid stance from the Army, it was not expected that a decision could be taken so easily. It needs time and building of trust between the regular forces and the armed insurgent groups. One good example to study would be the integration of the Maoist militants with the Nepalese army after the accord.

Contentious Issues/Wordings

One issue that took most of the time in the discussions and locked the talks into a stalemate was the one on "secession." This issue has already been tackled in the 2008 constitution and precluded by the three basic principles- namely non integration of the Union, non disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty. Sure, that the first Constitution and the first Panglong Conference of 1947 had provided option for secession after ten years. But in the changed situation now, it is too early to expect the ethnic groups who have been fighting since independence to agree to this clause soon. It is like expecting a child to run when it had just learnt to stand up!

UWSA has to be on board for success of the Peace Process:

The Peace accord after the conference cannot move forward without meeting the challenge posed by the UWSA and its alliance of seven parties called “Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC).”

There is no doubt that both Suu Kyi and the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw) see this as a challenge to the peace process. The issue is further complicated as the group is fully backed by China and it was only after Chinese intervention that they were invited to the conference. The Wa has been claiming its territory as a “Wa State” a term not approved by the State. One Analyst has rightly said that without Wa participation the peace process is meaningless and I would add that the other powerful group KIA will also have to be on board for the peace process to succeed.

Encouraging Developments:

There were of course some encouraging developments. Aung San Suu Kyi separately met the representatives of the Wa. It is heard that the KIA chief N'Ban La who attended the conference called on Suu Kyi with his wife. Before departing, he also told the media that he was leaving with success in hand and that the Kachin groups planned on holding a dialogue with the government soon. Some good news from the northern border had also come with the fighting between the Northern Alliance and the Burmese Army having eased out. It must have been realised by now that any further intensive operation against the Kachins would only throw the group into the lap of the UWSA and in turn to the Chinese!

Soon after the conference, the Wa led alliance on return to their base declared that it would only meet with the government peace negotiators as a single entity and not as separate groups. In the normal circumstances, the government should not agree to this as it tantamounts to having a separate parallel peace process outside the NCA. Yet in its anxiety to get the WA and its alliance group on board, the government Peace Commission is now planning to meet the group- now being called the “Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC).

Conclusion:

In the concluding remarks, Aung San Suu Kyi said- and we quote “The agreements that we have been able to sign today mark a significant step on our path toward peace, national reconciliation and the emergence of a federal democratic federal Union.” It is a little too optimistic and yet in a limited way there was progress. She has expressed her intention to have the conference every six months. There is realisation that peace has to be concluded soon. Suu Kyi is not getting young and the challenges are too many. Yet she is the only hope for Myanmar for becoming a truly federal democratic state!

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