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Myanmar: The State of the Peace Process: A Distant Dream?

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The only good news that has emanated from Myanmar is that the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference is going to be held towards the end of this year. The bad news is that the Government of Myanmar led by Aung San Suu Kyi is still hopeful that the remaining armed ethnic groups who are outside the National Ceasefire agreement and who are more powerful both in military strength and influence could somehow be persuaded to join the mainstream ceasefire agreement paving the way for peace and stability.

But more than anything else there are two stumbling blocks- one is the Army and second surprisingly is China which arms and protects the groups that are located along the Myanmar-China border. It would have been in Chinese interest and Chinese supported projects under the BRI initiative that will have to traverse along the disturbed areas particularly in the northern Shan State. In fact it is said that China had advised the seven party alliance that includes and led by Wa Group not to sign the National Cease fire agreement,

Latest information indicates that China has supplied a civil helicopter to the Wa group that has been illegally flying between Pangshang- the Wa Headquarters and China. It is this kind of encouragement by China that makes the seven party group of FPNCC led by Wa that has refused to go along with the NCA and in fact had offered a different narrative.

It is interesting that a well-known Kachin Analyst who goes by the name Joe Kumbum has suggested that India should get involved in the peace process. Given the fact that China is involved heavily for its strategic interests and Tatmadaw's out right reluctance to support the reforms that would dilute its grip on the 2008 Constitution, it is doubtful where India could fit in particularly after the disastrous experience it had in intervening in another neighbouring country- Sri Lanka.

One area where Indian interests could be affected is the escalating conflict between Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State that is close to the border. The Arakan Army unlike other ethnic Armed outfits have no formal presence in any fixed territory making it more difficult for the Myanmar to deal with them. Perhaps India could support a ceasefire as the conflict has already involved an exodus of over 100,000 persons and more could follow.

It is interesting to note that none of the Armed Groups demand outright secession and this is repeated by the most powerful and well armed Chinese supported outfit the “Wa” State Group.

As recently as 7th February, the Ethnic Kachin Leaders made a significant statement that the existing 2008 Constitution will have to be amended as an “essential pre-requisite” before any meaningful settlement could be achieved. The Kachin Leaders have not demanded secession. They want a Constitution that guarantees equality and self determination and allowing peaceful co-existence.

Dr. Tu Ja Chairman of the Kachin People’s Party said that Kachins will benefit if the Constitution Process that provides democracy and federalism. He insisted that the Constitution **must change** to achieve peace.

One of the signatories of the National Ceasefire agreement, the RCSS/SS-S while talking about the Peace Process that has been engaged in sporadic clashes mentioned that two issues that resulted in the dead lock were one- the Army’s (Tatmadaw) insistence of a declaration of non secession and its six principles.

The Six Principles demanded by the Army are

1. To have a keen desire to reach eternal peace
2. To keep Promises agreed to in peace deals.
3. To avoid capitalizing on the peace agreement
4. To avoid placing a heavy burden on local people
5. To strictly abide by the existing laws
6. To “march” towards a democratic country in accordance the 2008 Constitution.

The Military drafted 2008 Constitution is hardly democratic with one fourth of the members of Parliament being selected and not elected, it can hardly be called democratic as there is no way that the Constitution can be amended without the approval of the selected members who act on the orders of the Army Chief!

Dr Tu Ja added that the armed groups had never asked for secession, but they have reiterated their three objectives namely

1. Change the Governance System
2. Change the 2008 Constitution
3. Change the mechanisms around the Security Issues.

In the peace process one aspect that is being neglected is the political dialogue with the NCA signatories and not much progress has been made. As an outside Observer one cannot understand why the Army is in serious conflict with one the signatories of the NCA like the KNU for years. Though not serious as the situation in the Rakhine State where the Arakan is holding out on its own, it is said that the conflict is essentially over a road project connecting Kyaukhyi township in Bogo through KNU controlled township of Hpapu.

The present status quo with the ethnic armed groups except the Arakan Army being allowed to retain its presence in selected areas and running its own administration and exploitation of economic resources both by the Army and Armed Ethnic outfits

It is clear by now that unless the 2008 Constitution is drastically changed none of the ethnic groups would be willing to go along with the peace process which the present NLD had enthusiastically pushed forward since coming to power.

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