

Introduction

As Myanmar takes faltering steps towards democracy, a greater challenge confronts this nation emerging from years of military rule and international isolation – finding solution to the insurgencies simmering in the non-Burman areas since decades. While the results of this national reconciliation in Myanmar are crucial for this ethnically diverse country, they are equally important for India as the insurgent groups operating in northeast India have deep linkages with the ethnic armies of Myanmar which provide them with refuge, training and weapons. Reconciliation shall enable the Naypyidaw to administer these insurgency ravaged border areas effectively, thus reducing the drug-trafficking and illegal cross-border movement all along the 1643 kms unfenced border with India. Already devoid of bases in Bhutan and Bangladesh, improvement in the internal security situation in Myanmar leading to shift in focus of the Myanmar Army, also called Tatmadaw, from its borders with Thailand and China to its border with India, shall herald the beginning of the end for the insurgent groups operating in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland. But first, a solution has to be found.

A Fractured Nation

Myanmar is a diverse land. There are 135 recognised ethnic minorities which comprise one-third of the population. These minorities occupy about half of the total land area of Myanmar of 676,577 sq kms, mostly in the forested border areas and the remote mountains rich in jade, timber, gold and poppy. The entire population has been grouped into eight major national ethnic races viz; Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan. Among these, the Barmars (or Burmans) which populate the inland plains constitute 68 per cent of the total population, and are the dominant race occupying key positions in the government, military and economy. While the Burmans are Buddhists, the ethnic minorities are generally not, with majority of them being Baptist Christians. During the British rule, the then Burma was administrated separately as ‘Burma Proper’ dominated by Burmans and the ‘Frontier Areas’ populated by ethnic minorities. The exclusion of ethnic minorities from political power fuelled insurgencies even before the Union Jack was lowered in Rangoon.

The efforts of General Aung San led to the historic Panglong Agreement in 1947 wherein the representatives of the government and the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic minorities reached a consensus. This agreement promised complete autonomy to the frontier regions after Independence in return for their support for the formation of the Union of Burma. The ethnic minorities also had the option of seceding from the Union 10 years after Independence. However, Aung San was tragically assassinated in July 1947 and these promises faded away. Soon a cocktail of communist ideology, instatement of Buddhism as the official religion and marginalisation of minorities led to numerous insurgencies blooming after Independence in January 1948.

The conflict was first initiated in 1948 by the China supported Burma Communist Party, some elements of the People’s Volunteer Organisation, and members of two army battalions. In January 1949, the predominately Christian Karens, organised under Karen National Defence Organisation began fighting for an autonomous Karen state ‘Kawthoolei’ in the eastern part. The other minorities like Chins and Kachins, both inhabiting the areas contiguous to the Indo-Myanmar border also rebelled, inviting heavy military response. Things worsened when the military junta institutionalised a unitary state with a new constitution in 1974 which no longer guaranteed the ethnic autonomy granted at Independence. Later, the junta signed a few ceasefires in 1994. They did not last very long. Some of the ethnic armies, who had signed the 1994 ceasefire, started rearming themselves after the Myanmar Army asked them to assimilate with the Border Guarding Forces (BGF) and come directly under junta’s rule. Except for few small groups, none of the ethnic armies agreed, leading to conflict escalation. The 2008 Constitution formalised the military-dominated centralised power structure leaving only negligible power to Myanmar’s seven divisions and seven ethnic states. The ethnic armies refused to accept the 2010 elections as legitimate and fighting intensified.¹

The Myanmar Connection

India shares border with Kachin State, Sagaing Division and Chin State. In Myanmar, ethnic minority populated provinces are called states while Burman populated provinces are called divisions. The perpetual civil war in Myanmar is deeply entwined with the conflicts in India’s northeast. The Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups who migrated from Myanmar in the last century are settled along the border areas in Assam, Manipur and Mizoram in significant numbers. These groups share ethnicity in Myanmar where borders are unfenced and hardly administered by Naypyidaw. The Nagas who are also spread on both sides of the border treat the International Border (IB) with same disdain as the Pashtuns treat the Durand Line. It was a 140 strong ‘China Group’, led by Th Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and SS Khaplang who on their return from China opposed the Shillong Accord and launched National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) from bases inside Myanmar. From 1988 onwards, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) started sending its cadres for military training to Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar. In May 1990, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), along with NSCN(K) and ULFA floated a pan-Mongoloid coalition called the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front to wage a “united struggle for the independence of Indo-Burma”.

Manipuri insurgent groups like UNLF and People Liberation Army (PLA) and smaller groups of Kukis and Zomis have established camps in Sagaing Division, Kachin State and Chin State. ULFA, National Development Front of Bodoland (NDFB), PLA and UNLF also utilise NSCN(K) camps in Sagaing Division for shelter and training. Meanwhile, NSCN(IM) has allied itself with the KIA and Chin National Liberation Army to facilitate arms smuggling. All these insurgent groups obtain weapons from clandestine sources on the Sino-Myanmar border. Some of these weapons originate in China’s Yunnan province while others are made in gun factories in areas in northeastern Myanmar. The largest rebel group of Myanmar, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), due to their close ties with China, act as a broker for Chinese-produced arms as well as sell weapons from their arms factory near Panghsang. ULFA’s army chief, Pares

Barua is believed to be taking shelter at Taka in Myanmar along with a large number of cadres. Taka is a PLA base near Chindwin River.

Prelude to Reconciliation

A national reconciliation first requires the guns to fall silent. Therefore, Myanmar government is attempting a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) covering all ethnic rebel groups. The NCA shall allow ethnic armed groups to travel freely without weapons across demarcation lines and across the country. The NCA will also allow these groups to establish liaison offices where necessary and enable humanitarian actors to deliver assistance in conflict areas.² Towards this end, the Myanmar government has signed various agreements with the ethnic armies. The 25,000 strong UWSA was the first to sign ceasefire agreement with the civilian government in 2011. The Wa Hills are a part of Shan State and the UWSA is demanding a separate state for the ethnic Wa people. However, this ceasefire is uneasy and UWSA continues to acquire weapons and advanced equipment like helicopters, armoured vehicles and man-portable air defence systems. All these weapons are acquired from China which is wary of losing its dominant role in Myanmar to the West and is keen to retain its leverage.³

The Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government in January 2012. However, sporadic clashes still continue between the RCSS' military wing - the 6,000 strong Shan State Army-South and the Myanmar Army.⁴ Another Shan group, the Shan State Army-North has received support from UWSA which fears that it shall be next targeted by the Myanmar Army if KIA is militarily defeated. After fighting for six decades, the Karen National Union and its military arm, the 7000 strong Karen National Liberation Army signed an agreement with the Government in January 2012, though clashes still persist. The Karenni Nationalities Progressive Party and the Government signed a peace deal in June 2012 which is being adhered to. However, the five-point agreement with the Arakan Liberation Party signed in April 2012 has seen more violations than compliance. The Chin National Front (CNF) and its armed wing, the Chin National Army (CNA), were founded in the late 1980s to fight for the political rights of the Chins. It is active along the Indo-Myanmar border and they regularly cross this porous border. The CNF signed a peace deal in January 2012, the New Mon State Party in February 2012, and the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation in August 2012. The Pa-O (also known as Pa-Oh) are an ethnic group in Myanmar, comprising approximately 600,000 people.

KIA was founded in 1961 and is the second largest armed group with 10,000 rebels. Sporadic fighting continues in the Kachin Hills which lie opposite eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Early 2013 saw heavy fighting between the Myanmar Army and the KIA near Lajayang including use of fighter planes, helicopter gunships and artillery by Myanmar Army. This makes Kachins the only major ethnic group that has not reached a truce. But just short of a ceasefire, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Government signed an agreement on May 30, 2013 to reduce violence by instituting a monitoring mechanism to avoid the escalation. After this agreement, UN was allowed to deliver aid to displaced persons in KIA controlled areas. The war in Kachin State has forced more than 80,000 people to flee their homes.⁵

Myanmar Nagas Turn Inwards

Nagas are one of the 135 recognised ethnic minorities in Myanmar. The political consciousness created by NSCN, assisted by a common religion, pulled the Myanmar Nagas into the ongoing conflict in India. Later, the chimera of Greater Nagaland or Nagalim shrewdly crafted by NSCN (IM) kept them in this intractable conflict. The NSCN (K) chief, SS Khaplang is a Hemi Naga from Myanmar and the NSCN (K) has an approximate strength of 1000 armed cadres in Myanmar.⁶ Their involvement in Nagaland shall reduce as the Myanmar Nagas are looking inwards to where they belong and make peace. On April 9, 2012, the Myanmar Government representative, the Sagaing region minister for security and border affairs Colonel Kyi Naing signed a five-point ceasefire agreement with NSCN(K) representative Y Wangtin Naga, a Konyak Naga from Mon district of Nagaland. It was a rare event of an Indian insurgent group signing an agreement with a foreign government. This ceasefire agreement paves way for autonomy to the NSCN (K) in three districts of Myanmar: Lahe, Leshi and Nanyun of Sagaing Division. NSCN (K) is allowed to open a sub-office in Hkamti district and the agreement provides for its cadres to move 'unarmed' across Myanmar. The Nagas are indeed thinking long-term. The 2008 Myanmar Constitution provides for the grouping together of Lahe, Leshi and Nanyun in a Naga self-administrative zone, which indicates that the autonomy deal is a part of a comprehensive deal by Naypyidaw. NSCN (K) is now likely to focus on Myanmar, making it easier for the Indian Government to sign a peace deal with NSCN (IM).

Reconciliation Process

In November 2013, for the first time in the history of Myanmar, the Government and leaders of 20 ethnic groups met at Myitkyina to find a solution. Apart from the presence of almost all major ethnic groups, the meeting was significant for being attended by Vijay Nambiar, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General, and by Wang Ying Fan, China's representative. The only significant absentees were the UWSA, NSCN (K) and Kuki National Organisation. The government has also set up Myanmar Peace Centre, a Government appointed body to coordinate peace efforts. However, difference of opinion and the no-war-no-peace with the Kachins ensured that a roadmap for reconciliation is not yet in sight despite the efforts of Government's chief peace negotiator Aung Min. In February 2011, about 12 rebel ethnic groups including Kachin, Shan, Karen, Mon, Karenni, Pa-O and Chin formed themselves in an alliance named United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) for better negotiations and to project a united front. But the UNFC does not represent all ethnic groups, the UWSA being the most prominent non-member.⁷

The main demand of UNFC is federalism and rewriting the 2008 Constitution. The UNFC has also made it clear that the peace process cannot move forward until Kachins reach an accord. The ethnic groups presented an 11-point proposal which included the establishment of a federal army. On the other hand, the Government insists that the ethnic groups accept in-principle the 2008 Constitution which formed basis for the November 2010 elections and the election of Thein Sein government. The Government also insists that the rebel armies must transform themselves into political parties, participate in elections and thereafter suggest constitutional changes through parliamentary

processes. This is a non-starter for the ethnic groups. The UNFC maintains that the Government must fulfill the promise of the 1947 Panglong Agreement to establish a federal union with internal autonomy for ethnic minority groups.

Obstacles to Peace

There are many obstacles to the transition of Myanmar into a federal union of empowered ethnic states. The Burman dominated Myanmar Army, which has fought ethnic insurgencies for decades, views itself as the sole protector of the country's territorial integrity. The generals feel that federalism may eventually lead to balkanisation of Myanmar. A renewal of large-scale fighting will severely damage the prospects of economic growth in Myanmar and convince many generals who are uncertain of President Thein Sein's reform agenda that democracy only leads to chaos.⁸ But the ethnic groups maintain that the Panglong Agreement and the 1947 Constitution legitimises their cause and the right to self-determination. They want to replace the 2008 Constitution based over-centralised structure by federalism and regional autonomy. For decades, these political demands had been dealt militarily resulting in constant civil war. As a result, over 150,000 refugees have been forced to take shelter in neighbouring countries.⁹ This includes about 100,000 Chin refugees in Mizoram.

As long as people continue to die because of their religion or ethnicity, it is nearly impossible for non-state actors to change their perceptions of the Government.¹⁰ Even the change of the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 was controversial as Myanmar is the historical name of the majority Burman race. The ethnic minorities also feel that the new flag as prescribed by the 2008 Constitution is another indicator of their exclusion as the stars on the old flag represented the ethnic minorities while one star in the new flag represents only Burmans.¹¹ The Government has also been misusing ceasefire as a substitute for political changes. Previously, Myanmar government had signed ceasefire agreements with 17 ethnic armed groups between 1989 and 1997 wherein the armed groups were allowed to retain their arms and their territory in return for a ceasefire. This did not bring peace. Long ceasefire between KIA and the Government saw vast amounts of timber, jade and precious minerals being smuggled to China by the rebel leaders. Such nominal ceasefires, allowing the rebel groups to indulge in rampant exploitation of natural resources, sees a spurt in opium trade and loss of popular support for the group. When the agreement breaks, the fighting resumes and the locals again rally. The situation returns to where it was, less large tracts of denuded hills, increased poverty and prosperous rebel leaders.

Myanmar has a long tradition of political Buddhism. This Buddhism, as captured on TV cameras of monks leading protests, has been closely associated with nationalism because of its roots in the struggle against British colonial rule in the last century. This leaves little room for the religious minorities.¹² It is particularly true for the minorities like the Rohingya Muslims which are not recognised as ethnic minority, leading to identity crisis. The violence against Rohingyas has led to demonstrations in India and possibly the bomb blasts at Bodh Gaya. Further, this classification of 135 ethnic minorities is itself flawed and is described as a divide-and-rule policy by the community leaders. In Kachin State, where community leaders have made efforts to unite tribe and linguistic groups, the Government has divided them into nearly a dozen different groups, of which most are accurately described as sub-tribes, clans and extended families. A more realistic estimate would put the number of distinct ethnic groups in Myanmar at between 20 and 30.¹³

Way Forward

The ethnic minorities of Myanmar do not want secession. In fact, their demands have now diluted to limited autonomy and special privileges for indigenous population to promote development. But first, Myanmar requires a new Constitution. The Union of Burma was established after an agreement was reached for autonomy to the frontier people. The denial of this political right to the frontier people, now called ethnic minorities, has been the *casus belli* for six decades. The amendment to the 2008 Constitution would allow states to choose their own chief ministers who are currently appointed by the central leaders. The right to choose their own chief executive will motivate the people to participate in elections.¹⁴ An amended Constitution is also necessary for Suu Kyi to be eligible for President as the present constitution specifies that anyone whose spouse or children are foreign citizens are ineligible for the post of President. The Government needs to withdraw the Myanmar Army from the ethnic minority territories and grant them autonomy. The ethnic armies are unlikely to surrender their arms unless convinced that the Government is sincere about equality of rights and autonomy. Myanmar shall assume the chairmanship of ASEAN in early 2014. At this juncture, it is important to amend the Constitution and the Myanmar Parliament has formed a 109-member committee in July 2013 to review the Constitution.

Conclusion

The democratic transition in Myanmar shall be incomplete without the ethnic minorities. Narrowing the trust deficit is the biggest challenge for the reformist Thein Sein. A nation-wide ceasefire in 2014 shall be a major victory for peace. The efforts of Myanmar to usher democracy and peace have been met halfway by the European Union and the USA by partially lifting sanctions. While China has not made its position clear apart from the intention to retain a key role, the reconciliation in Myanmar shall be a very positive development for India. It shall rob the Indian insurgent groups of sanctuaries in Myanmar, reduce drug trafficking and make Myanmar conducive for increased trade and investment; thus also giving a boost to India's 'Look East Policy'. There are great expectations from Aung San Suu Kyi, the demure daughter of the great Burmese hero General Aung San who was assassinated when she was only two years old. She has been raised with a strong sense of her father's unfinished legacy resulting from non-adherence to the decisions of 1947 Panglong Conference. Suu Kyi has hinted at convening a conference to discuss minority issues with representation from the Government as well as the ethnic minorities; perhaps a second Panglong Conference to finalise a grand reconciliation. It is yet to be seen whether she will play a Mandela for Myanmar or not.

Endnotes

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