

TOWARDS A NEGOTIATED SOLUTION TO BURMA'S ETHNIC ISSUES: Realities and Possibilities for the Karens

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Just over a year ago, the Karen National Union, as the principal representative of collective Karen interests, entered negotiations with the new quasi-civilian government of Burma/Myanmar with the ultimate aim of attaining a democratic federal union, wherein diverse ethnic nationalities equally enjoy a level of right to self-determination. From the start, there is a realization within the KNU and by the Karen people that negotiations would entail compromises on the path to be followed to the ultimate objective. And that the negotiation process will be influenced by the prevailing balance of political forces. The majority of Karen people earnestly supported the process, hoping that this time both sides are committed to finding a lasting solution to Burma's decade-long ethnic conflict through political means.

But today, the overwhelming worry among most ordinary Karen people is that the initial ceasefire agreement signed in early 2012 between the KNU and Burmese government might have prepared the grounds for rampant, not-properly-regulated extraction of natural resources in Karen state with no tangible benefits for the local citizens. They are quietly concerned that this brutal economic exploitation in Karen state under the guise of ceasefire agreement will reduce the organization that has spearheaded Karen resistance movement for more than sixty years to a mere economic partner of former regime's cronies and, consequently, lead to its eventual demise as an important political voice representing Karen people's will.

On the part of the government, it strategically seeks to retain as much economic privileges and political power for itself as possible, while in negotiation with the different ethnic armed groups. Although there has not been any significant fighting in most part of Karen state since the initial ceasefire agreement was signed, the Burma army continues to solidify its military dominance by stockpiling its supplies and strengthening its frontline military outposts. Under the guise of development-first strategy, it seems that the government is trying to pursue an outcome in which ethnic resistance forces would yield to immediate economic incentives and finally succumb to a combination of political and military pressures. Since last year, not only have the extractive industries coming into Karen state vying for natural resources skyrocketed, but the number of troops from Burma army stationing in the region have increased significantly. And yet there is no serious indication so far from the government that it is indeed interested in addressing the question of autonomy for ethnic nationalities. Despite relaxed restriction on freedom of expression and decreased human right violations in some parts of the country, prospect for real political transformation remains largely uncertain.

That is the state of realities we find ourselves in today. So, what do we do and where do we go from here? Inasmuch as we cannot afford to lose our hope in this situation, it is important we remain pragmatic in making our collective efforts.

For the ethnic nationalities, critical to our political objective is broadening the space for free political activities through a combination of mobilization for public participation, interethnic cooperation and continued self-defence. In the case of Karen, the KNU must continue to engage the reform-minded component of the government and draw them onto the terrain of serious and substantive negotiations leading towards comprehensive national political dialogues. With its historical legitimacy, KNU still commands the support of the majority of Karen people. The KNU-led Karen national liberation movement still enjoys the capacity to mobilize large-scale mass action if not

restricted by the government. Utilizing this political capital, it is possible for us that we turn our collective political aspiration into goal-oriented programmatic actions.

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Hence, efforts to crystallize Karen political aspirations must start with mass education and communications that reach out to Karens everywhere, including the Diasporas and those living inside Burma and beyond the current government-administered areas. Policies and practices it adopts must be transparent and accountable to the people who have put their trust in and supported the organization in the face of brutal repression throughout the past several decades. Endeavors must be made to ensure that the approaches it adopts are people-centered, religion-neutral and gender-sensitive. This, in turn, will require an active and willful participation of Karen people from all walks of life with the KNU as a flagship carrier of Karen political voice.

We should recognize that our political struggle will take various forms and phases. The immediate objectives we set for ourselves in each phase of our national struggle, however, should not impede the possibility of achieving our ultimate goal of self-determination within the Union of Burma/Myanmar. Likewise, any sub-set of goals we seek to achieve in each form of our struggle must strategically contribute to the eventual goal above.

In essence, we should accept that achieving the goals of lasting peace and prosperity for all ethnic nationalities in Burma/Myanmar would take multiple stages in the form of multilateral agreements, and in general, should involve the following phases.

PHASE 1: The period from the establishment of solid ceasefire up to the holding of political negotiations and the development of a national political framework. *(In this phase we should aim to: consolidate ceasefire through a mutually agreed code of conduct; in light of cessation of fighting, develop government troop reduction scheme in the areas and create a non-militarized zone where neither government nor Karen troops are allowed to operate; and mobilize for free public discussions and consultations.)*

PHASE 2: The period of the amending of the 2008 constitution based on the national political framework developed in phase 1. *(In this phase we should aim to: adopt amendments to the constitution and sign a national accord with the government; and, start addressing the socio-economic problems facing people in Karen state.)* At this stage, it is only practical that a greater emphasis is given to inter-ethnic collaborations in the interest of the country as a whole. We will need to work with other ethnic nationalities very closely and openly. The contents and scope of constitutional amendments should be agreed upon by the current government and all the major ethnic armed nationalities.

PHASE 3: The period of the phasing in of the amended constitution, which should include the restructuring of the Karen state political and administrative structures. *(In this phase it will be practical to establish, in accordance with the spirit of the national accord, an Interim Karen State Administration in which the KNU would play a part. This interim administration should be in effect and functional until the new elections are held and a new state government is elected under the amended constitution. In this regards, the restructuring should take into consideration all the ethnic states.)*

The current phase of struggle we are in may be characterized as transition from an era of active military engagements to a period of ceasefire and trust-building. This is the time we need to focus on making sure the ceasefire is solid and sustained while working on laying policy and regulatory foundation – that ensures fairness, equality, sound environmental protection and reinvestment in the state infrastructures – for all kinds of economic activities and development works undertaken in the state. This is where the KNU and Karens public – individuals as well as issue-based think-tanks and interest-based civil society organizations – can, together, play a collaborative role in laying institutional groundwork to help shape the future of Karen people and the union.

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Meanwhile, an interim revenue sharing mechanism must be developed and negotiated between the government and KNU (not just between individuals or leaders) so that the KNU can continue to finance its operations while the government engenders its macroeconomic reform agendas. Or else, the people in Karen state, particularly those who live near or within KNU-controlled areas, will be subject to double-taxation by both or forced taxation by the latter. Without a negotiated revenue sharing arrangement, the KNU will end up having to ask the government for automobile import license or trading permits to generate revenue so that it can finance its political activities and fulfill its social responsibilities.

Moving forward into phase two and three, we must be prepared to discuss the thorny questions of amendments to the 2008 constitution, future political functions and administrative structure of Karen state and, most importantly, consolidation of various armed groups within Karen state into a unified command structure of either Karen state or Karen national guard. My understanding is that we are meeting here today, and that there will be many more meetings and discussions like this in the future, with the aim to establish a national consensus on the basic principles and the practical policies that can support KNU’s efforts to negotiate a future political framework with the current government; and to develop broad consensus on the need for a multi-ethnic national assembly that will chart a negotiated, or even compromised if need be, political path towards a peaceful and prosperous future for all the peoples of Burma/Myanmar.

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