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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 10/19/2018 - 11:29

Paper No. 6447 **Dated 19-Oct-2018**

By S.Chandrasekharan

The much hyped summit between the Ethnic Armed Organisations that have signed the National Cease fire agreement and the top leadership of both the Government and the Army ended as a “damp squib.”

The Army on one side and the EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organisations) on the other, continued to be rigid and stuck to their well-entrenched positions while the State Counselor Suu Kyi who was caught in between could not persuade either of them to relent.

The Army Chief made his position very clear along the expected lines in the beginning itself allowing no room for a dialogue. He said

1. ‘Non Separation’ of Ethnic Minority State and Regions will have to be part of any future deal with the ethnic armed groups in the country as the Constitution demanded it.
2. ‘Non Separation’ is a long term guarantee, as noted in Article 10 of the Constitution that states that no part of the territory constituted in the Union such as Regions, State, Union Territory and Self-administered Areas shall ever secede from the Union.

The EAOs represented by the Chairman of the KNU said that he saw contradictory perspectives of the Army, the Government and themselves on the question of ‘Non Separation’ and self determination that are proving to be key hurdles in moving forward in every stage of political negotiations. What he meant was and rightly so is that the ultimate goal of establishing a federal system of government should not boil down just to the issue of secession alone. He also said that their demand for self determination must apply to respective State and Regions of the Union and should be able to draw their own constitutional structure in the States.

Suu Kyi on the other hand was faced with a dilemma- She cannot let down her own Army Representatives but at the same time her heart was with the just demands of the minorities. She therefore took a middle position that -one should create conditions that would make secession “irrelevant”- Easily said than done.

In the address during the opening ceremony she tried to distance herself from the “Army created” 2008 Constitution. She said that the “dream of a Federal Union is on one side and the 2008 Constitution is on the other.” This is a clear statement that the 2008 Constitution and a federal Constitution sought by the EAOs are incompatible and that it has to change.

She added that no one should secede and it is important that no one should even think of secession.

The point is that the principles of non integration and a federal Union already figure in the National Cease-fire agreement and the ten parties who were represented at the Summit had already agreed to abide by the agreement. The Army on the other hand wants even these parties to specifically swear on a clause that mentions ‘non separation’ as a necessary ingredient. This is not understood.

Specifically, the National Cease fire agreement under the Basic Principles states as follows

1. Establish a Union based on the principles of democracy and federalism in accordance with the outcome of political dialogue and in the spirit of Panglong . . .
2. While upholding the principles of non-disintegration of the Union and non-disintegration of National Solidarity and perpetuation of National Sovereignty.

Surely these cover the Army’s demand of ‘Non Separation’.

What is at stake is the Army’s fear of dilution of the 2008 Constitution that gives them a firm grip on the nation in all respects. Unless the Army relents, the cease-fire process can never succeed and any number of Panglong Conferences and the Summits will not help in moving forward. One could see that Suu Kyi is willing to wait and go step by step on reconciliation in amending the Constitution. But it may take a very long long time!

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