

Naga Insurgency and Leadership in Transition

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The Naga insurgency is undergoing an unstated transition in its goals and hierarchy. SS Khaplang, infamous as Baba Khaplang, died on June 09, 2017, in the Taga camp of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), deep inside Hukawng Valley in Myanmar. The insurgent behind the June 2015 ambush on a Dogra battalion in Chandel district of Manipur and many other deadly attacks, somehow did not die of an Indian bullet. The 'K' of NSCN(K), his death provides a window of opportunity to positively alter the course of the Naga insurgency. A few months earlier, another key Naga insurgent leader, Isak Chisi Swu, also passed away on June 28, 2016 at the Fortis Hospital in New Delhi. Isak Chisi Swu was the 'I' of NSCN (IM), and their ideological face. However, unlike Khaplang, Isak Swu had given up the gun and was the mover behind the historic framework agreement with the central government which was signed in 2015 by the NSCN (IM). With both 'I' and 'K' now gone from the main factions of the NSCN, the Naga insurgency is undergoing a transformational change in demands and strategy.

The Khaplang Succession

Sanjoy Hazarika, the author of the seminal book on the northeast, *Strangers of the Mist*, recently termed Khaplang as the "Fighter-Uncle-Warlord". Shangwang Shangyung Khaplang, the chairman of the NSCN (K), was a Hemi Naga from Myanmar, who was born in April 1940 at Waktham, in Myanmar, a mountain village opposite Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh.¹ Later, he joined the Naga National Council (NNC) formed by Angami Zapu Phizo. Khaplang had close

proximity with the Myanmar Nagas, enabling him to set up camps, and coordinate the movement of many Indian insurgent groups, besides selling arms sourced from the Yunnan province of China. The Taga camp of the NSCN (K) hosted the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) cadres. Paresh Baruah alternated between Taga and another hideout in the mountains of Shan state bordering China's Yunnan province. Being the key link between the Indian insurgents and Myanmar, Khaplang's death will erode the logistic bases and safe havens these myriad groups enjoyed in Myanmar.

In the recent years, there was friction between the Konyak-Pangmi and Sumi factions of the NSCN (K). The Konyak-Pangmi group is led by the self-styled Vice-Chairman Khango Konyak while the Sumi faction is headed by the self-styled army chief Nikki Sumi, who hails from Zunheboto in Nagaland. Post Khaplang, the leadership of the NSCN(K) has transited to the hands of Khango Konyak, though there are reports that Khaplang's younger military aides may make a bid for the post.² The new face of the NSCN(K), Khango Konyak, not only needs to take a decision about participation in the peace process with New Delhi, but also requires to nurture a close relationship with Naypyidaw to maintain the status quo in Myanmar. In case the NSCN(K) remains aloof from a political process in Nagaland, there is a possibility of the Indian Nagas defecting and forming their own factions.

Dynamics of the NSCN (K)

The NSCN (K) has a footprint in Upper Sagaing division of Myanmar, opposite Mon, and a presence from Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh to Phek in Nagaland. The NSCN (K) had established a formal presence in Myanmar by signing a written accord with the Myanmar government on April 09, 2012, and later, participated in the 2016 peace conference organised by the newly elected government in Myanmar. In the recent years, after being sidelined by the NSCN(IM), the NSCN(K) had morphed into an anti-India and anti-talks outfit. It was responsible for many attacks in Nagaland, Upper Assam, the southern districts of Manipur and the Tirap-Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. It teamed up with the anti-talks faction of ULFA (Independent) led by Paresh Baruah, the anti-talks Songbijit faction of the NDFB, Kamatapur Liberation Organisation, and the Meitei insurgent groups of Manipur, mainly UNLF, PREPAK and PLA. Khaplang grouped the dissatisfied Naga, ULFA and Bodo factions together and named them the United National Liberation Front of Western Southeast Asia (UNLFW). The NSCN (K) was in an uneasy ceasefire with the government since 1997, but

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abrogated it on March 28, 2015, apparently unable to make headway due to the political space being occupied by NSCN(IM).

The death of Khaplang shall pave the way for peace talks with the rebel group, bringing about a change in the insurgency dynamics. His successors, led by Khango Konyak, are unlikely to be as belligerent as him. Khango Konyak is a Konyak Naga from the Mon district of Nagaland, indicating that the NSCN (K) leadership is now in the hands of the Indian Nagas. According to Wasbir Hussain, Executive Director of the Centre for Development and Peace Studies, Khaplang was the most important player in the insurgency in the northeast. Khaplang's departure from the scene will also impact the activities of the rebel umbrella UNLFW. The government is viewing the departure of Khaplang as an opportunity. Union Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju recently stated that a peace dialogue with the NSCN (K) is possible if the organisation gives up violence and secessionist activity. "*Khaplang was the main person who was supporting and facilitating insurgency in the northeast and had a clout. He was a Myanmar citizen and, hence, there was a problem. We appeal to all the Indian Nagas in the NSCN (K) to surrender and return to the mainstream.*"³

About Chisi Swu

Isak Chisi Swu was the self-styled chairman of the NSCN(IM), and a Sumi Naga from Zunheboto district of Nagaland. Isak Chisi Swu, SS Khaplang and Thuingaleng Muivah were opposed to the signing of the 1975 Peace Accord, and were in China for training when this accord was signed by the Naga National Council (NNC), of which they were key functionaries. As one of AZ Phizo's most trusted aides, Swu was sent to China twice to seek support for the Naga movement.⁴ On the return from its second trip, the 'China Group' felt betrayed and formed the NSCN in 1980. It went on to become the 'mother insurgency' of the northeast, and kept the Naga Hills on a boil till the late Nineties. In 1988, it split up on tribal lines between the IM and K factions, accompanied by a heavy bloodbath. The NSCN (IM) remained potent, maintaining about 4,500 armed cadres, a presence in a few foreign capitals and a headquarters at Camp Hebron, about 40 km from Dimapur.

Isak Chishi Swu represented the other side of the Naga insurgency, and could talk to the other factions using his old contacts in the Naga Baptist Church. Called 'Uncle Isak', he kept the NSCN (IM) together in spite of tribal fault lines, and now

Thuingaleng Muivah is in a legitimacy crisis as Muivah is a Thangkul Naga from Somdal in Ukhrul, Manipur. Most of Muivah's comrades – Rh Raishing, Phungting Shimrang and Angelus Shimray – are Thangkuls, leading rivals like Khitovi Sema, Khole Konyak, Wangting Ao and P Thikhak to describe the NSCN (IM) as a

2015 framework agreement has led to agreement on core issues and a positive change in Naga Hills can have a cascading effect in entire Northeast.

Thangkul outfit, with little legitimacy in Nagaland. Muivah is a deeply divisive figure in the Naga separatist movement – not the least because he authored a party document wherein he chest-thumped the Thangkuls as “revolutionary patriots” and the Angamis leading the NNC as “reactionary traitors”. Many Nagas feel that he is overly influenced by the Chinese Communists.⁵

The second-rung leadership of the NSCN (IM) consists of VS Atem, I Shimray, S Hungshi, AK Lungalung and Kraibo Chawang. While S Hungshi is the so-called ‘Commander-in-Chief’ of the Naga Army, VS Atem is the self-styled convener of the Steering Committee. Another emerging figure in the group is Anthony Ningkhan Shimray, also a Thangkul. He is also their top arms procurer. According to a recent interview given by him to the *Caravan Magazine*, the final solution between the government and the Nagas needs to be incorporated in the Indian Constitution. He also suggested that judicial, law and order, and administrative powers would be vested in the new Naga government, and the Naga Army and the Indian Army shall have a joint defence.⁶ This seems like a hardening of positions by Muivah to consolidate his position in the post-Swu times.

The Peace Process

While SS Khaplang was merely in a ceasefire from 1997 to 2015, and yet to commence talks, Swu and Muivah turned pro-talks in their later years. They met Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in Paris in June 1995 and PM Deve Gowda in Zurich in February 1997, leading to the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the NSCN (IM) and the government on July 25, 1997. They later met Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee thrice – in Paris (September 1998), Osaka (December 2000), and New Delhi (January 2003), which led to a series of talks culminating in the framework agreement of August 03, 2015.⁷ New Delhi has invested significantly in the peace process, with over 80 rounds of talks already concluded.

The government is working out a ‘final settlement’ based on the framework agreement, but it shall have to ensure that the agreement is acceptable to all factions and sections of the society. With the Sema figurehead of Isak Chisi Swu gone, and a

hardliner Thuingaleng Muivah in the chair, it is a difficult preposition. In addition, there are factions like the NSCN (Unification) led by Khole Konyak and Kitovi Zimomi, and NSCN (Reformation) led by Wangtin Naga and P Tikhak (a splinter group of NSCN-K), which remain fence-sitters on the framework agreement. The Naga Hoho, the apex tribal council, led by its chief P Chuba Ozukum, also remains firm on the demand for physical integration of all Naga inhabited areas.

Framework Agreement

The importance of the 2015 framework agreement can be gauged by the fact that it was signed at 7 Race Course Road in the presence of the Prime Minister and the National Security Advisor (NSA). It was also expedited due to the deteriorating health of Isak Chisi Swu, whose affirmation was crucial. The government and the Nagas have reached a fundamental agreement on the core issues, though some of these issues have not been made public. From unreasonable demands of sovereignty, with a flag, passport and a separate Naga Army, the NSCN (IM) has apparently scaled down to a model of peaceful coexistence. The positives include the acknowledgment by the NSCN (IM) to be part of the Indian system, which is an indirect way of accepting the fact that it has given up its demand for sovereignty. The NSCN (IM) leadership had also agreed that “violence is not the path to take” and, hence, they will be surrendering their arms. The timings and modalities for the arms surrender shall be worked out, and shall most likely coincide with a political process. On the flip side, the NSCN (IM) has maintained its demand for a “special identity for the Naga people.”

The special identity is essentially a manifestation of the Greater Nagalim demand. The challenge before New Delhi is to balance these aspirations with the territorial integrity of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. Post the signing of the framework agreement, the Chief Ministers of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh have stated that they will not cede an inch of their land. The Greater Nagalim is unlikely to manifest into a unified political unit. To find a middle path, the government is working on a ‘special identity’ of the Naga people, to include those Nagas who live outside of the geographical territory of Nagaland. The ‘special identity’ will be based on history and culture.⁸ Therefore, there shall be arrangements for a cultural unity of all Nagas like a pan-Naga Hoho, a proposed statutory body as part of the framework agreement, that will enjoy independent executive and budgetary powers to look after the welfare of Naga inhabited areas outside Nagaland.

Way Ahead

The surgical strikes by the Indian Army were a total success. They have forced the insurgent groups to disperse their camps, and shift them further inside Myanmar. The presence of the ULFA and People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the far-away Shan state along the Sino-Myanmar border is evidence of the shrinking space. This leads to their reduced influence inside India. However, unlike Bhutan, where India launched joint operations to flush out the ULFA, or Bangladesh, where the Sheikh Hasina government cracked down on the Indian insurgents, India does not expect Myanmar to launch military operations against the Naga insurgents. The Naga issue remains low priority for Myanmar, preoccupied as it is with the Rohingya conflict and the sharp confrontation with the Was and the Kachins, who have ten times the number of troops and many times the firepower of the Nagas.⁹

Peace is waiting to return to the misty hills. The government has invested in the ongoing peace process and has recognised the 'unique history' of the Nagas. Greater autonomy is on the cards and is feasible; however, the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas in Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh is fraught with impossibilities. Possibly, only some cultural integration of the Naga-inhabited areas shall be feasible. It was indicated that the Centre would respect the Naga customary and landholding systems based on the unique history of Nagas across the Naga-inhabited areas of the northeast.¹⁰ Within Nagaland, the current Chief Minister TR Zeliang has expressed his willingness to step down, and make way for insurgents-turned-politicians, *a la* Laldenga in Mizoram in 1986. Another challenge is to get other Naga factions on board as the NSCN (K) is not involved in the peace process. The government may sideline it by terming it as consisting of Myanmarese Nagas. However, its trouble-making potential of teaming up with all the anti-talks factions of the northeast needs to be factored in. A lot depends on Muivah, the sole survivor of the 'China Group', whether he would like to see a solution in his lifetime or leave it to the next generation. For a solution, he needs to unite the factions and 'hard-sell' the agreement to the customary tribal bodies.

It is time to engage meaningfully with the next Naga generation which does not carry the baggage of the NNC days, burning hills and violent nights. The days of an imaginary Naga homeland with AK-47s are passé. From Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like the Forum for Naga Reconciliation to the Naga Mothers' Association, nobody wants the state to go back to the anarchy of insurgency and the 'nights of the guerillas'. Their children are working in

Bangalore and Hyderabad as there is no industry in their hill-top home towns. The emerging Naga hierarchy has grievances, but also political and economic aspirations. A positive change in the Naga Hills shall have a cascading effect on the entire northeast.

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Notes

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9. Hazarika, n.2
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