

Talking with the SPDC The Politics of Negotiation and KNU's Cautious Efforts for National Reconciliation

By
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Deliberately led by its Vice Chairman, Gen. Saw Bo Mya, the Karen National Union (KNU) recently made a series of efforts in pursuit of peace that caught many in the Burma's opposition movement by surprise. A five-member KNU delegation, composed mainly of junior military officers, was sent to Rangoon on December 3 for initial talks with the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Earlier, the team met with SPDC point man Col. Sann Pwint in Bangkok before proceeding to Rangoon. Upon their return from Rangoon, the five-member KNU team announced that they had reached a "gentleman's agreement" with the SPDC, calling for both sides to stop shooting as part of a confidence building measure toward further negotiations. Because the KNU has yet to start any serious political discussion with the SPDC, Gen. Saw Bo Mya suggested lately that the gentleman's agreement, in practice, might be considered an agreement between the KNLA, the armed wing of KNU, and the SPDC.

Although some may have thought otherwise, it would be a mistake to assume that Gen. Bo Mya is not acting as a leader of the KNU. In spite of all the previous failed talks, the KNU continues to tread cautiously on the path of negotiation, engaging in the policy of open talks with the SPDC and making genuine and concerted efforts toward achieving a long overdue national reconciliation. Nevertheless, how successful these efforts will be depends largely on the political will of SPDC. The SPDC has the option of halting all of its military offensives against the Karen and inviting all the stakeholders such as the KNU and the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to the table of national dialogue, which may well be in the form of National Convention. If not, the SPDC may choose to simply continue its various human rights violations against Karen civilians, such as those disclosed in the December 27 media release by the KNU, and prove that the regime is deficient in political will to pursue the path to a true national reconciliation.

Historically, the SPDC has insisted that it wants the KNU to stop fighting first, agree to enter the "legal fold" and then participate in the national development process. In 1996 representatives of the SPDC told the KNU that because the current ruling regime was not a political organization, the KNU would have to discuss its political concerns at a future political forum, referring to the National Convention. And yet the negotiations failed in the past because they required the KNU to return to "legal fold," with the unacceptable condition of first 'relinquishing the military course of action,' which, in the opinion of KNU, simply amounts to surrender.

In an attempt to demonstrate the KNU's desire for a genuine national reconciliation to the international community, Gen. Saw Bo Mya also sought an opportunity to attend the Thai-sponsored international forum on Burma in Bangkok on December 15, 2003. However, the Thai foreign ministry denied the request, reportedly on the ground that the forum was meant only for government-to-government discussion. Equally unfortunate is the most recent rejection by the SPDC of the KNU's proposal to hold further talks in Bangkok. The SPDC may be concerned about relinquishing full control over the process, and at the same time views the KNU's revolution as an internal matter. On the KNU's part, it has requested to meet again with the representatives of SPDC in Bangkok not only because it wants to meet in a neutral venue, but also to recognize the role that the Thai government plays in Burma's transition to democracy.

As widely reported in the Thai media, senior Thai military officials have in fact played a significant role in persuading the KNU leaders to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with the SPDC, while Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai have worked directly with their Burmese counterparts to organize the international forum in Bangkok, attended by ten "like-minded" countries including Australia, Japan and China. Despite initial concern for international criticism, Burmese Foreign Minister Win Aung attended the meeting and explained vaguely how the SPDC intends to implement its seven-point "road map" for democracy, pledging to resume the National Convention that should eventually lead to the drafting of a national constitution. In addition to the involvement of Thai military in the KNU's negotiation, Win Aung's presence at the Bangkok forum on December 15 could be seen as a recognition by the Thai, the KNU and the SPDC for the need to find some solution to Burma's political problems through regional efforts. In a sense, Burma's political transition at least has been regionalized, if not totally internationalized.

As stated before, the move initiated by KNU's Vice Chairman may have caught many in the opposition movement by surprise, particularly because it was Gen. Saw Bo Mya who initiated the efforts. However, the move should not have caught anyone by surprise if, in fact, it is understood that we have all along been seeking a way to resurrect the national dialogue to break the political deadlock that has caused so much pain and irreparable damage in our country. We cannot afford to just talk glibly about negotiation and reconciliation but, rather, we will have to take risks - many of which involve unforeseeable outcomes - such as misunderstandings and harsh criticisms from our own friends and allies. Alliance politics may have deterred us from taking actions or positions that we as individuals support, but Gen. Saw Bo Mya's almost solo initiative has undeniably and progressively led us to think differently and, perhaps, to look at the situation from a more pragmatic angle. Should there be any doubts about and bitterness toward the SPDC because of past deeds or ongoing incidents in some places in our country, the Karen could and would register their doubt and bitterness before anyone else. But the Karen resistance movement, of which Gen. Saw Bo Mya has been a part as one of the most outstanding leaders, has a much higher goal than to express doubts and to feel bitter toward our historic oppressors. The 55 years of armed conflict has been ruthless and costly, but we are willing to make any necessary sacrifice for our desired national reconciliation, peace and freedom.

It appears now that the KNU may be willing to give the SPDC the benefit of the doubt. At the very least, we should recognize that the SPDC, in effect acknowledges, along with its "10-like-minded governments" that: (1) it is increasingly being held to account by the regional and international community, and is consequently feeling enough pressure to come out and offer its rendition of a peace process; (2) if and when the National Convention and the KNU's participation occur, the NC needs to be monitored regionally, internationally and by the media.

Nonetheless, there is no guarantee of success in the efforts put forth by the KNU. As we have argued before, "the Karen and other democratic forces have to confront the realities and continue to struggle with the understanding that politics by nature is dynamic and fluid, and it at times requires our ability to know when and how to (nor not to) strike strategic deals with our opponents." For the record, KNU has already reportedly acknowledged its doubts that a National Convention would lead to any type of peaceful and legitimate settlement in Burma without the participation of the largest popular party, the NLD and its leadership. On the other hand, from our internal unconfirmed but reliable source, we have learned that the NLD could be also constrained to make its own strategic move inside and join the NC. We, together with the

organizations we work with, can try to create a political atmosphere conducive to that move from outside. It is not the primary concern of the KNU to predict how the NLD will respond to the first step of Khin Nyunt's proposed seven-point road map. But if both the NLD and KNU are at the same table, together with other cease-fire groups and the SPDC, wouldn't that amount to a more credible national dialogue?

Last but not least, any criticism regarding the KNU's current tactics could more appropriately focus on questions such as 'how is the KNU prepared strategically?' and 'how can we as allies prepare to bring forth positive change by working hand in hand with the KNU?' Criticizing the KNU over alliance politics and imagining a division between the KNU and Gen. Saw Bo Mya are politically counterproductive and certainly would not support the strategy of those in the pro-democracy movement. There are no persons chosen or groups anointed to bring about change in Burma. Change must be effected through the efforts of every citizen. But certainly an organization that has been engaging in these efforts for over fifty years will strive to realize its goal by any means necessary. As principled democrats, we are prepared to work or support anyone who can set Burma on the course of democratic transition, the ultimate goal of our struggle.

NOTES: Opinions expressed herein are entirely of the authors; the authors do not intend to set forth any official policy of KNU.

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