Kukis’ demand questions the Naga framework agreement

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September 13 marks the 25th year of the gruesome murder of over 100 people in a single day, including infants and the elderly by cadres of the Naga Lim Guard, which was a proxy of the Naga militant group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah).

During the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict from 1992 to 1997, hundreds were killed on both sides. The Kukis alone lost over 900 lives. On 13 September 1993, the Naga militants killed over a hundred, which was the highest casualty in a single day. The exact number of deaths, however, varies from source to source.

For the past several years, Kukis across the globe have observed September 13 as ‘Black Day’ in remembrance of their loved ones by offering prayers and putting on black clothes or shawls in their respective places of residence as a symbol of mourning the deaths.
While some argue that the continued observance of the day can potentially bring misunderstanding and reignite conflict between the two communities, others argue that it is the least the community can do to show its love and respect to the departed souls.

Despite the dissenting views, black day observance this year is significant for three reasons: the unprecedented scale of preparation for the day, the Indian government’s political dialogue with Kuki armed groups, as well as because of the much-publicised Naga Framework Agreement.

Like in previous years, the Kukis around the world are making necessary preparations for the day. But in an unprecedented gesture, organisers are trying to draw the attention of not only the local authorities and the Indian government but also the wider international community.

In Churachandpur district headquarters of Manipur state in Northeast India, the organisers plan for a three-day (Sep 11-13) programme under the theme 'Justice to Victims of Kuki Genocide' where they will bring together artists and speakers from across the state and from neighboring states.

Two notable initiatives are the erection of memorial stones that contain the names of the people who were killed and the invitation of local, national and international media houses to cover the event.

Similarly, the Kukis residing in Delhi National Capital Region plan to organise a peaceful rally on September 13 by carrying coffins to symbolize the deaths of their loved ones 25 years ago.

The Indian Army and the Kuki armed groups have observed Suspension of Operation since August 2005 but a tripartite agreement involving the two Kuki conglomerate armed groups – the United People's Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organization (KNO), the Manipur state government, and the central government, was formally signed in August 2008. It took over 10 years for the central government to start political dialogue with the Kuki armed groups, with the seventh round of talks held on July 9 this year.

One major development during the sixth round of political dialogue held on January 10 this year was the apparent shift in the demand of the Kuki armed groups, from statehood to the formation of a Territorial Council (TC). One of the Council provisions, which the armed groups would like to see implemented, is along the lines of the Bodoland Territorial Council in Assam, which includes grant of adequate administrative autonomy on legislative, executive and financial matters.

The Kuki armed groups also want New Delhi to set up a regional office of the Ministry of External Affairs in the TC areas to allow free or visa-less movement of its people across the border to visit their loved ones who were separated by the independence of India and Myanmar from the British. The envisioned TC would also have separate educational boards for high schools and higher secondary schools as well as the entitlement of one member each in both houses of the national parliament.

After maintaining ceasefire with the Indian government since 1997 and following several rounds of political dialogue, the NSCN-IM and the government of India signed a framework agreement at the residence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on 3 August 2015.

One fundamental demand of the Naga armed group had been the establishment of greater Nagaland or Nagalim by extending the state of Nagaland's boundary to include the Naga-dominated areas in neighbouring Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, which has been strongly opposed by the affected states.

Though the NSCN-IM has reportedly abandoned or has been forced to drop its demand for the unification of all Naga inhabited areas, the framework agreement has agreed to grant a “special status” to the Naga people wherever they are.

Though details of the framework agreement are yet to be made public, what has been apparent during the course of the last several years is that the central government had reached out to civil society organizations, Naga tribal bodies and other stakeholders other than the NSCN-IM.

Though it is not officially spelt out, something widely discussed is that the Nagas will end up getting some form of autonomy in their internal administration, as well as certain privileges over social and cultural matters irrespective of their geographical locations.

The framework agreement shows that a solution to the Naga issue will affect the interests of the Kukis, who for the past 25 years have been demanding justice for the gruesome acts of violence perpetrated by the NSCN-IM.

If the Indian government addresses the Naga issue based on geography, it can potentially create unrest and violence since most hill areas of Manipur are inhabited by the Kukis and the Nagas.

Even if attempts are made to address the Naga issue on the basis of ethnicity, it still can trigger violence since some assimilated Naga tribes, particularly those that settled in Chandel district of Manipur, belong ethnically and linguistically to the Kuki group.

The question now is whether the Central government will grant Territorial Council status to the Kukis of Manipur; for doing so will likely affect the interests of the Nagas. Or will the government put pressure on NSCNIM to resolve its unsettled disputes with the Kuki people?

In the way that it has done to the NSCN-IM in particular and the Nagas in general, will the Indian government reach out to Kuki civil society organizations, tribal bodies and other stakeholders other than the UPF and KNO since it is clear that the Kukis’ demand for justice questions the Naga framework agreement.

The way the government handles these delicate and sensitive issues will largely shape the political landscape not only for the Kukis and the Nagas but the entire region of Northeast India. After all, there is no easy way to fix these vexed issues.

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