

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

The future of the NSCN-K

The recent change of leadership within the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K) further draws attention to the future of the group and that of the role it plays not only in Myanmar’s peace process but also the country’s ethnic landscape.¹

On 17 August, the group removed Lt-Gen Khango Konyak, who is a western Naga and an Indian national, from his role as chairman following a three-day meeting from 15-17 August at its HQ in Taga. Konyak, 70, is a Naga of Indian origin and a China-trained rebel, he had taken over as chairman of the NSCN-K after Khaplang died in June 2017 after a prolonged illness.² He was replaced by Yung Aung, the deputy minister of the NSCN-K defence department, as interim chairman and also the head of the Government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) which holds sway over the Naga inhabited region in Myanmar’s northern Sagaing Division. Yung Aung, 45, is the nephew of the group’s founder SS Khaplang and is a Hemi Naga from Myanmar. The move has been seen by many as an attempt by the Myanmar Naga to expel their Indian brethren.

How this will change the situation in regards to the peace processes in India and Myanmar remains unclear. According to reports, Yung Aung has deep links with China and maintains close ties with the United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) ‘commander-in-chief’ Paresh Baruah and the Manipuri militant leadership.³

According to an NSCN-K statement, Konyak had been impeached because

He was found guilty of absolute control of powers and functions without collective leadership, non-distribution of powers and functions exposing a one-man government policy, incompatible traits...⁴

However, an NSCN-K official based in India said,

“For quite some time, Konyak was unable to assume an active role in the organisation and discharge his duties due to his sickness.”

Also,

He had been away from Taga for a long time which widened the gulf that existed between him and other top leaders,”⁵

In addition, there appear to be some issues in relation to tribal affiliations. A number of senior leaders were unhappy at his appointment. Many of them belong to the Pangmi tribe, a conglomerate of several tribes inhabiting a large area from the border in Arunachal Pradesh to the hills bordering Hukawng Valley in Myanmar.⁶

Indian media has suggested that after the death of Khaplang the NSCN-K had appointed ‘commander-in-chief’ Khumchok Pangmi, a Myanmar national, as ‘acting chairman’. This appointment was opposed by Naga members

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from the Indian side on the grounds that, being the 'vice-chairman', Khango Konyak was the rightful claimant to the position.⁷ This further added to tensions among the leadership of the group.

It is believed that now Konyak and the group's military commander Niki Sumi and publicity secretary Isaac Sumi, along with a hundred troops, have left to return to India and link up with other Naga groups involved in the Indian peace process.⁸ However, concerns remain about in what direction Yung will take the NSCN-K now.

Although, the NSCN-K is based in Myanmar's Sagaing division, its primary dispute is with the Indian Government as it wants to create a united independent Nagaland based on a federal system⁹ that is to include parts of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh in India and parts of Sagaing Division.¹⁰

The NSCN-K had signed a peace agreement with the Myanmar Government on 9 April 2012 and had also signed a peace agreement with India. However, on 4 June 2015, a coalition of separatist rebels, believed to be led by the NSCN-K, ambushed a convoy of Indian troops in the country's north-eastern state of Manipur killing at least 18 soldiers and seriously injuring twelve others resulting in ramped up tensions between the two neighbours and India banning the group.

The existence of the NSCN-K has serious implications for the relationship between the two countries especially if Yung pursues a similar strategy to Khaplang. As Ghiriraj Bhatteerjee notes,

'If he chooses to emphasize the operational unity of militant

formations across the Northeast – as did Khaplang under the aegis of the United National Liberation Front West South East Asia (UNLFWESA) – this may escalate violence in the region.'¹¹

According to Indian intelligence sources, Chinese intelligence played an active role in encouraging the northeastern groups to come together on a common platform. The source noted that Chinese intelligence operatives are active in the Sagaing region and weapons are often shipped to the northeastern groups through the China-Myanmar border. One source, quoted in the Hindustan Times noted at the time:

The Chinese have promised to provide weapons and logistics to the new grouping as they want to keep things boiling in the northeast in view of their claim on the state of Arunachal Pradesh,¹²

Just a week ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to India in 2006, Beijing's envoy in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, had claimed that Arunachal Pradesh is a Chinese territory, stating that:

In our position, the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. . . We are claiming all of that. That is our position,¹³

It has long been alleged that China has been providing finances as well as arms and ammunition to the NSCN-K and related factions for their operations in Indian territory.

Whether the Yung leadership will change its stance in relation to its demand for a separate homeland is unclear. Although the NSCN-K was allowed to observe the recent Union Peace

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Conference its demand for a separate homeland negates its ability to join the peace process.

Hla Maung Shwe, a member of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) secretariat has said that the NSCN-K could only join the NCA if they abandoned the idea of “separation,” because Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution bars any attempt to secede from the Union.¹⁴ Myanmar’s Constitution already outlines a Naga Self-Administered Zone comprised of the townships of Lahe, Leshi and Nanyun in Sagaing Region, however, the NSCN-K is still seeking to create a united Nagaland. The fact that the leadership has sought to remove Indian Naga influence could suggest that their position may change in the future, or result in further tribal in-fighting. Either way, the Myanmar Government needs to find a solution to the Naga issue to bring peace and stability to the region.

Background

A split in what was then The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) created the NSCN-K. The NSCN was originally formed on January 31, 1980, by Isak Chisi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah, and S.S. Khaplang. The group soon attacked Indian Army outposts and convoys and also embarked on a number of robberies. However, differences began to emerge when the Indian Government began to make peace overtures to the group. Disagreements between the three leaders finally resulted in splitting the NSCN into two factions, one led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu (NSCN-IM), and the other by Khaplang (NSCN-K). Reportedly, over two hundred rebels died in the fighting as the two groups separated.¹⁵

Although both were involved in a formal peace process with the government of India, large-scale fighting between the two factions and frequent assassination attempts continued. The situation was made worse when, in 2011, Khaplang was impeached because, according to the then NSCN-K, General Secretary Kitovi Zhimomi:

... he opposed the Naga reconciliation process initiated by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation. Two months ago, Khaplang asked us to withdraw from the Covenant of Reconciliation signed by him. . . Khaplang is no more associated with the group. He is alone and can't force us to go against the will of the Nagas, who want peace, unity and reconciliation. His true colours were exposed when he opposed peace and reconciliation. He had also directed all NSCN-(K) members not to attend the highest level of a meeting convened by the FNR¹⁶

The Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) was created to assist in bringing all different factions together to find a peaceful solution to the Naga issue. Because of the impeachment, the NSCN-K Indian based army commander General Khole was elected president. According to Zhimomi:

Ours is a political problem and we will have a political solution. Peace within the Nagas alone will be insignificant if we do not sit with New Delhi. For now, we are focusing on the Naga reconciliation. We will talk with the Centre after resolving the problems with the Nagas.¹⁷



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The NSCN-K blamed the FNR's Rev. Dr Wati Aier for the split. Kughalu Mulatonu, the 'Envoy to the Collective Leadership' of the NSCN - K also accused Rev. Dr Wati Aier of sending NSCN-IM cadres into Myanmar to attack the group resulting in 10 dead on the NSCN-K side, and 50 on the NSCN-IM side.

In a further twist, Khaplang then decided to expel not only Khole and Kitovi but also several other ministers from the NSCN-K's Government of the People's Republic of Nagalim (GPRN) for conniving with the unification group and for their anti-party activities. As a result, Khole and Kitovi formed the India based NSCN-KK and distanced themselves from the NSCN-K in Myanmar.

Notes

¹ For more information on the NSCN-K see EBO Background Paper No.1/2015 'The National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K)' and EBO Background Paper No 5/2015 'The NSCN-K and the Myanmar Peace Process'

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nscn-k-purges-indian-elements/article24727420.ece>, accessed 2 September 2018

³ <https://www.eurasiareview.com/28082018-india-myanmar-nscn-k-coup-analysis>, accessed 2 September 2018

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <https://thewire.in/politics/myanmar-naga-rebel-base-northeast-nscn>, accessed 2 September 2018

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ <https://www.eurasiareview.com/28082018-india-myanmar-nscn-k-coup-analysis>, accessed 2 September 2018

⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nscn-k-purges-indian-elements/article24727420.ece>, accessed 2 September

⁹ Email correspondence with Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 25 September 2015

¹⁰ See also The National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khaplang (NSCN-K) - EBO Background Paper No.1/2015 - June 2015 for further background.

¹¹ <https://www.eurasiareview.com/28082018-india-myanmar-nscn-k-coup-analysis/> accessed 2 September 2018

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ 'Arunachal Pradesh is our territory: Chinese envoy', Rediff India Abroad, 14 November 2006

¹⁴ <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=51140d79-ebf2-4a4f-9559-0c045da941cd> accessed 2 September 2018

¹⁵ 'NSCN(K) rules out split after Khaplang ouster', Times of India, 17 June 2011

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*