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The 21st Century Panglong Conference and Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiation

One of the most prevalent topics of conversation in current Myanmar peace process is the 21st century Panglong conference that the NLD-led government has committed to convening sometimes in August, 2016. During the first Panglong conference that resulted in the signing of the historic Panglong agreement on February 12, 1947, which gave birth to the Union of Myanmar, was signed only by four ethnic nationalities: Bama or Burman, Chin, Kachin and Shan. In coining this phrase of the 21st century Panglong, it is clear that State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, would like her planned conference to be inclusive of all major ethnic nationalities.

Even though the government has established a sub-committee to spearhead the planning and organizing of Panglong conference, there are many important questions surrounding this planned conference that are not clear so far since Daw Suu herself has not provided full information outlining her firm positions about it. Will this conference be a one-time event just like the first Panglong conference in 1947 or will this conference be simply her official grand opening of ensuing series of political dialogue under the NLD-led government? What would be the composition, size, agendas and topics of discussion, structure, duration, formula for decision-making, basis as well as criteria for representation, and objective of the conference? Related to all these specific questions, another important question is whether or not leaders of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), who have not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), can participate in the planned conference. Hopefully, with the sub-committees already working on all these questions in line with her instruction, we might soon have full knowledge about the planned conference, if it is to be held in August as indicated.

In attempt to bring onboard the non-signatories, the government negotiating team led by Dr. Tin Myo Win, the new Chief Negotiator for the Peace process, has already met with leaders of the Delegation for Political Negotiation (DPN) in Chiangmai, Thailand and the three-member alliance of Arakan Army (AA), Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Kokang- Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in northern Shan state recently. In their meeting with the leadership of DPN on June 3, the government delegation officially invited them to join a preparatory meeting led by the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), a body that is mandated to lead in the proposed reviewing of the framework for political dialogue. The main purpose behind inviting the non-signatories to join a framework review meeting is to pave a way for the non-signatories to be able to attend the 21st century Panglong conference, join the peace process subsequently, and ensure that they have a sense of equal ownership. In terms of sequencing, there are three logical steps that the government would like the non-signatories to take: (1) Join a meeting to review and amend the framework for political dialogue as necessary, (2) If they accept and agree to a modified framework for political dialogue that would come out from the reviewing process as envisioned, then they would sign NCA, and (3) participate in a Panglong conference as equal and full participants.

For the non-signatories, they warmly welcome the planned Panglong conference. However, the current peace process, including the planned Panglong conference under the NLD-led government, seems so vague to them, at least for now. They have no clear picture of the government's official policy on the peace process, let alone the planned Panglong conference. Among others, three of the most salient questions for them are (1) Will the signing of NCA be a pre-requisite condition for the non-signatories to take part in a conference, (2) If they are required to sign NCA, will the government accept all EAOs to sign NCA, and (3) Can they attend Panglong conference without signing NCA? The non-signatories do have many important questions about the government's peace process policy. Without a clear understanding of the government's peace policy and negotiation position, the non-signatories are not ready to present their own policy and common negotiating position. It is not that they do not have one, but their intention is to stake out their common policy only after they have a clear understanding of the government's policy. Because of this prevalent ambiguity and uncertainty, they have sought clarity from the government. Therefore, what needs to happen now is that the government has to, once again, present its clear negotiating position and give unambiguous explanations on all policy related questions that the non-signatories have already raised with the government delegation led by Dr. Tin Myo Win.

For the non-signatories, signing NCA is not an issue of difficulty **if everyone is included**. The key question is how creative and flexible the government would be on this issue of all-inclusion? The principal reason why they have not signed NCA is mainly because their all-inclusive policy, which is to include all EAOs to sign NCA, was not accepted by the previous government. In the upcoming formal negotiations with the current government, at least for the first formal negotiation, it is loudly clear that the non-signatories would advocate for the non-exclusion of any EAOs who choose to sign NCA, in line with their negotiating position of all-inclusiveness. If their all-inclusive position is not accepted by the government or could not find a common ground, the non-signatories might not be able to join the 21st century Panglong conference in August, 2016 due to many practical challenges including time constraint.

On the other hand, it is growingly clear that the government will continue organizing the planned Panglong conference, no matter what.