

# CAN SPLIT IN NSCN PAVE THE WAY FOR NAGA PEACE TALKS?

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What's the big deal with the Naga peace process? Two, actually.

One is about Khango Konyak, the leader of the largest belligerent Naga rebel faction, National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang), or NSCN(K). Khango was impeached in August by a group led by the nephew of the faction's former chairman, S.S. Khaplang—who died in June 2017. Effectively, Nagas of “Indian” provenance were ousted in this ethno-territorial coup by Nagas who have homelands in present-day Myanmar.

Will Khango and officers and cadres loyal to him enter ceasefire negotiations with India's government as a prelude to peace talks? Or, would they ally with the largest Naga rebel group, NSCN's Isak-Muivah or I-M faction?

For the first, there would need to be a cooling period for the rebels who just weeks ago were among India's bitterest foes. The second is also conceivable: that Khango would find room in NSCN (I-M) in the same way his tribesman Khole Konyak, who was expelled by the much smaller “unification” faction of NSCN in 2016, joined I-M. (Khole was earlier expelled from his post as army chief of NSCN(K) in 2011 when Khaplang, I-M's arch enemy, was the faction's supremo.) Theoretically, I-M would rather incorporate a potential foe than be undercut by yet another faction in peace negotiations, where it projects itself as the premier voice of Naga identity and aspiration.

In practice, though, it would be different. Unlike Khole, who is now a figurehead in I-M, Khango could bring with him large numbers of cadres and end up being another semi-warlord with competing influence. As could his colleague Niki Sumi, the mastermind of several attacks against India's army and paramilitaries since NSCN(K) broke away from a ceasefire in early 2015. Either way, they could join the queue for post-conflict integration, possibly gain sinecures as part of a final settlement. It's all a matter of realpolitik negotiation.

The second big deal: will there be a final settlement, a logical end to the so-called framework agreement for peace signed between the government of India and NSCN (I-M) in August 2015?

It took from 1997, when I-M signed a ceasefire with government of India, till 2015, for formal announcement of peace negotiations. What has changed since 2015 is that there are now discussions about post-conflict roles for I-M leaders and cadres. In that slipstream have arrived parallel talks with India's government and six other Naga rebel groups, all wary of I-M's present heft and future influence.

Not much else has changed. I-M runs the largest parallel government among the rebel groups—because the Indian and Nagaland governments permit them to. I-M maintains a well-equipped army. It influences elections. It raises revenue from businesses and citizens through voluntary and forced donations. In June, I-M issued media notices to the effect that “financial administration of Southern Nagaland”—a euphemism for Naga areas in Manipur, was relocated from one “kilonser” or minister, to another. Last week, the outfit's ministry for home affairs banned “night clubs, gambling and any anti-social activities” around Dimapur. I-M's headquarters are nearby at Camp Hebron.

What security would I-M's leaders and senior cadres gain with peace? goes a school of thought, even if there is talk of a face-saving, socio-cultural Naga umbrella organization to absorb some. Nagaland is already a state with entrenched politics. As I wrote in July, issues of sovereignty are off the table. Nagaland has federal powers, special concessions with taxation and land ownership, and its revenues are hugely underwritten by the central government. Naga homelands in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are in the peace-mix but a contiguous greater Naga political homeland is not.

If it is to be a game of attrition, as it has been these past decades, the government retains most of the cards and much of the conviction. A stalemate in the Naga areas is in fact a stalemate of relative isolation in which Naga groups—armed, in ceasefire, and civilian tribal organizations—go about their business. And all parties offer face-saving statements from time to time, tailored to the audience.

*This column focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights and runs on Thursdays.*

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