NAGALAND'S FRAGILE PEACE

The government of India continues to play the game of attrition and divide-and-rule in Nagaland Sudeep Chakravarti

In Nagaland, Christmas is taken seriously, and much prayer is invested for a productive new year as much as a peaceful one. That's pretty much shot.

This could well be the shakiest year yet since 2007-08 for a shaky peace process. It will happen not so much on account of government ineptitude and insensitivity that has cursed much of north-eastern India, but on account of the wrecking ball of public trust that Naga rebel groups have diligently transformed their "national movement" into.

Moreover, the government of India, the rebel groups and the government of Nagaland—an agency that has ridden cycles of complicity, both easily and uneasily, with the government of India and the rebels alike —play games in which domination, emotion and corruption are seamlessly teamed. And there's bitter jostling for gen-next power in the two major Naga rebel groups—jostling is relatively less incendiary in two other, minor groups.

Together this bleeds the economy, stalls development and robs futures in a geography that has the potential to be a robust bridge of political and economic well-being between South Asia and South-East Asia.

But first, the immediate trigger for this disquiet. This past 21 December, cadres of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), or NSCN (I-M), from one of the faction's designated ceasefire camps in Mukalimi, in Zunheboto district, stopped a taxi, roughed up several passengers and allegedly molested two missionaries. These two ladies were of the Sumi, or Sema, tribe. Zunheboto, northeast of Kohima, the state's capital, is the tribe's homeland.

In the belligerent absence of an apology—NSCN (I-M) is the largest and most powerful Naga rebel group. and under the terms of a ceasefire operational since 1997 can retain arms in camp—locals grew restive. Matters escalated within days. Several hundred civilians, many armed with dao—machete—and guns converged on the Mukalimi camp. Sporadic firefights ensued. A civilian was killed, and a few were injured. On 30 December, the camp was overrun. Cadres—"national workers"—fled. For NSCN (I-M), which runs a parallel administration in Naga-inhabited areas—including in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh—enforces taxation (in Nagaland there is no government tax on income as part of a peace deal), and maintains, recruits and trains an army with sophisticated weapons, it was a staggering loss of face.

NSCN (I-M) initially attempted damage control by accusing its arch foes—besides paramilitaries and the Indian Army, the second largest armed Naga rebel group and I-M's competitor for territory and revenue, NSCN (Khaplang)—of conspiring to incite civilians, and even firing from their shoulders. (The two factions have often brutally fought the other, and have ditched a civil society peace initiative, Forum for Naga Reconciliation.)

Eventually the leadership of NSCN (I-M), based in Hebron Camp near Dimapur, the state's commercial hub, held a court martial. A sergeant of the outfit, of the Tangkhul Naga tribe which calls Ukhrul district in northern Manipur home, was awarded capital punishment. Two others charged with the 21 December assault were cashiered.

"Have the Naga people lost (their) faith in the present Naga National Workers?" prompted a 30 December administrator's post on the popular "We The Nagas" group on Facebook. The responses cut across tribal lines, and ranged from insults to lessons. "They r more interested in making money then fighting for the Nagas, Only few R dre who z fighting for Real," declared one. Another suggested: "... Feel the pulse of the common men... If the National Workers try to continue to play the role of Pigs and Dogs in George Orwell's 'ANIMAL FARM', someday they shall be overrun by the considered inferior animals."

Alongside such reflection by the younger generation with which many in the ageing leadership of the rebel

groups appear to be out of touch, major tribal and influential church institutions in Nagaland united in condemnation of the attack in particular and behaviour of rebel groups in general.

While this may seem like an "Aam Aadmi moment" in Nagaland, such perception is for now as fragile as reality. Peace talks with rebel groups have gone nowhere slowly for more than a decade. The government of India continues to play the game of attrition and divide-and-rule. As dangerously, second-rung leadership in all factions have been positioning themselves to grab power after iconic rebel leaders like Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S.S. Khaplang either pass on or pass the baton. Some restless leaders could even attempt to pull the plug on the peace process—several hardliners and prospective warlords occupy this tier.

Such dynamics could destroy the notion that celebrates the absence of war as peace.

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