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From tribalism to democracy: A difficult transition

Patricia Mukhim | 30 March, 2015



The two abiding figures of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, the insurgent group that has led the Naga struggle for sovereignty for decades, are chairman Isak Swu and general secretary Th Muival. On the 36th Republic Day of the Nagas, Swu came up with interesting exhortations for young Nagas. He seems to be preparing them for a possible solution of the intractable Naga problem that has defied resolution since 1997. In that exhortation, Swu mentioned Naga psychology, which, he said, had to be refurbished. He identified tribalism, communalism and factionalism as weapons used to defeat the Naga cause.

While referring to those who started the Naga movement, Swu hinted that those pioneers must have been inspired by a concept of society that was of a higher order; one that would help Nagas transcend from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light, from village state to nation state, from the traditionalist world to the revolutionary world and from the rule of autocratic kings to democracy.

Swu's refrain requires serious analyses. Some questions immediately come to mind. This first is whether the state of Nagaland today is a democracy? An election once every five years is not the only yardstick for democracy. Decades after Nagaland was created, the people had no freedom to speak their minds. Any dissenting voice was silenced and people were coerced to pay taxes to different militant outfits despite their disenchantment. It was only about two years ago that people came together under the banner of the Action Committee Against Unabated Taxation to protest against the multiple taxation by militant outfits. The Acaut demanded that militant outfits come under one banner so that people could pay taxes to a single authority only.

Obviously this was not music to the ears of the NSCN (IM). They have controlled the extortion racket and businesses in Dimapur for decades by striking fear in people. So how can they bring diverse factions of the NSCN under one umbrella? The outfit hemmed and hawed and threatened the Acaut leaders but it is gratifying to note that the latter have persevered with their mission. The Acaut is now a

rallying point for all those who are looking for a life beyond the persistent narrative of Nagaland — the fight for sovereignty, followed by the agreement to a ceasefire in 1997 and the continued dialogue with India that does not seem to have a finishing line.

Swu understands the faultlines of Naga society. He points at those who “overlook the present, glorify the past and dogmatise the future”, and accuses them of keeping the pot boiling for commercial purposes. Evidently he is referring to adversaries and offshoots of the NSCN such as the NSCN(K) and NSCN(U). Hence, when Swu speaks of the enemy/enemies, he is referring to the two breakaway factions and the Naga National Council led by Adinou Phizo. That the NSCN(IM) has not even started a dialogue with these three key actors, no matter how fragile their links with the people are, is indicative of a spirit that is unwilling to accommodate diversities. Yet diversity is the hallmark of Naga society. What Swu refers to as tribalism is the glue that binds each tribe.

The Sema or Sumi tribe to which Swu belongs is proud of its heritage, its language and all the external manifestations that make it different from the Angami or the Ao or the Lotha tribe. That is why each tribe has its distinguished weft and warp in their weaves and is proud of those emblems. Naga unity therefore must be built around a larger cause that each tribe will see as larger than the tribal cause and, therefore, worth investing in.

The NSCN(IM) leadership has been living in denial mode and refuses to believe that young Nagas want a life beyond the rhetoric of Naga chauvinism. The only people that the NSCN(IM) leadership have met are those who feed what they like to hear. Dissenters and people with alternative views are usually kept at a distance. Muivah is not a good listener. He has been the only one articulating the Naga cause for decades. Hence the NSCN(IM) leadership has lost touch with reality and has no way of assessing what people really feel about the movement today or whether they believe that the settlement that is being talked about is going to make any difference to their lives. After all, the political concessions that come will be cornered by a few leaders yet again.

What will the Nagas of eastern Nagaland really get out of the settlement? What do they actually want? If you talk to a Konyak from Mon district, which is designated as one of the most backward in this country, that person would ask for better roads, schools, colleges, health centres, water supply, employment opportunities, etc. For the person from Mon or Wokha districts of Nagaland, life has not moved an inch since Nagaland became a full-fledged state. Kohima, Dimapur and Mokokchung have cornered most of the benefits of statehood.

The questions then is whether the settlement will bring about a more nuanced development paradigm that meets with the needs of the most deprived people among the Nagas, such as the Konyaks who have lived in indigence for decades? And what about the Tangkhul Nagas who also continue to live in undeveloped Ukhrul or Mon districts because they are too poor to move out to Imphal, Guwahati, Shillong and Delhi, where the bulk of their fraternity have migrated to? What will the settlement bring for the Maos, Marams and other Nagas living in

Manipur?

Political pragmatism tells us that Manipur will not be vivisected to accommodate the aspirations of the Nagas for a Nagalim. The political brain governing the Indian state is a clinical one, which, contrary to popular belief, is not a dispassionate, calculating machine, objectively searching for the right facts, figures and policies to make a reasoned decision. It is a brain that is driven by emotion, or so says Drew Westin in *The Political Brain*.

Then in the book *Adversaries into Allies*, author Bob Burg says force can work to a point but as soon as the person in charge loses his positional authority, his ability to force others into action is gone. In other words, force is rarely if ever sustainable. Persuasion on the other hand is more effective because it requires that the other person act on his own volition. When you persuade someone you are actually helping them see why the desired outcomes of both parties in conflict are the same. Future good results are almost assured from such an engagement.

For decades, the Naga insurgents have used bullets to articulate their claim for a sovereign nation. It did not work because, as Burg says, force never works. Now the Nagas know they can persuade their interlocutor to see their point of view. That should work better. The Nagas suffered the most from this "war with India". It was, for them, an untenable position. Finally the Naga Mothers Association forced the rebels to "Shed No More Blood" and a truce was worked out in 1997. It is instructive that the Naga social system, entrenched as it is in patriarchy, has prevented the same women who ended the bloodshed from being active stakeholders in the peace process.

To the young Nagas, Swu says, "Be guided by our own culture." But what exactly is that culture? Is it a culture of tribal warfare, violence, bloodshed and the evils of patriarchy? Or was there a counter-culture that the Nagas have forgotten?

The transition from tribal cultural mores to democratic governance is a difficult one and still a work in progress.

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