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Moving forward after the 16th Congress

Challenges for the Karen National Union

The 16th Karen National Union Congress held between 14 March and 9 April 2017 further solidified the current Karen leadership's grip on power and will hopefully see an end to divisions within the organisation. Since the 15th Congress and going back as far as 2012,¹ when the KNU accepted peace overtures from the Thein Sein government, two competing factions have emerged within the organisation. These factions, the first led by Chairman General Mutu Sae Poe and the second by Vice-Chairperson Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein had sought to take control of the organisation, via participation in the peace process, to decide the Karen people's future.²

Divisions within the KNU

The first faction, elected at the 15th Congress, had found its success at the ballot box heavily criticised due to unsubstantiated allegations of vote rigging.³ The majority of those alleging corruption in the election were primarily the Karen diaspora and a small number of western individuals that supported the faction of Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein and are closely linked to former Vice-President David Thackerbaw who had lost his position on the Executive Committee.⁴

Criticism of the leadership became increasingly virulent after the KNU under General Mutu decided to suspend its membership of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) an ethnic alliance led by the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) which decided policy for the grouping. The KNU had suggested that leadership of the block be rotated so that no group had total control over the policies of all the others. In addition, the KNU also proposed that for the block to be more efficient, it must seek a pragmatic political approach to the government through strengthening ceasefire negotiations and cooperation based on common interests rather than being an alliance that did not prioritise the needs of member organizations. The proposal was rejected primarily by the KIO.

After the rejection, the KNU delegation walked out of the UNFC Congress, and it was here that factional differences became more apparent as Naw Zipporah sought to strengthen her own faction's relationship with the UNFC. In defiance of the KNU leadership, Naw Zipporah issued an apology to UNFC members for her organisation's behaviour. In a letter titled 'The difference in views between KNU delegates on the UNFC constitution', she stated that:

We, the Karen National Union, will discuss and negotiate among ourselves over the disagreement between KNU delegates ... On behalf of the Karen National Union, I would like to apologise to the UNFC for delaying the conference.⁵

Naw Zipporah in commenting on her continuing commitment to the UNFC highlighted some reasons for her stance. She notes that the political problem in Burma is an ethnic political problem which cannot be solved by only one group or a few groups. Also, members of the UNFC are the same members of the former ethnic alliance the National Democratic Front (NDF), and many members fought against the Burma army alongside the KNU and had sacrificed their lives. Moreover, she notes, most importantly that what the Burmese military fear most is Ethnic unity.⁶

Given these concerns, the faction attempted to influence KNU decision making not based necessarily on the needs of the KNU or Karen people, but, it would seem, for the benefit of ethnic unity and the policies of the KIO controlled UNFC. The faction had been able to enlist to its cause KNLA Vice-Chief of Staff, and former 5th Brigade Commander Baw Kyaw Heh, who agreed to lead a new military alliance of Karen forces called the Kawthoolei

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Armed Forces (KAF).⁷ The KAF, which also included the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), under the command of Ner Dah Mya, was inaugurated on 13 October 2014.

The KNU defence department was quick to distance itself from the alliance, stating that,

1. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) are the Karen Revolutionary Armed Organisations that fully accept the political leadership of the Karen National Union.
2. Additionally, a policy for the unification of all Karen Armed Groups was laid down at the KNU 15th Congress. The KNLA General Officer Commanding (GOC) is leading and implementing the policy through the Unity Committee for All Karen Armed Groups.
3. The Statement that was issued on the 13 October 2014, regarding the Kawthoolei Armed Forces unification agreement, which was signed by the KNLA Vice-Chief of Staff and the Commander of the KNDO, was through their ideas.
4. The KNU will continue to negotiate and solve the political problems through political means, to establish lasting peace in our country.⁸

Gradually the KAF began to dissolve as the political climate changed.

There were clear differences between the two factions on how to move the peace process forward. As noted, Naw Zipporah had put ethnic unity, and therefore the needs of all ethnic groups including the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, as the core priority. These three groups were extremely problematic as the Government and Myanmar military were not prepared at the time to recognise their legitimacy in the peace process.⁹ Thus, it was this reasoning that could easily have delayed any progress for the Karen peace process because it was based on the needs of groups on the other side of the country with different objectives and motivations to the KNU.

Meanwhile, General Mutu had decided to move forward within the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) framework and sought to focus on four benefits for Karen State during an interim arrangement period after signing the NCA. These were Political, Economic, Social, and Military benefits.¹⁰

The 16th Congress

The divisions between the two factions had caused some consternation and to a greater degree some acrimony, especially with those Karen living abroad. Many of whom had, seemingly unable to grasp the fact that the KNU is a revolutionary organisation and not a democratic political party, wanted to vote at the election.

Through the KNU Constitution, the organisation has created its administrative structure in territory under its control. It sees its constituents for the Congress based on seven districts and brigades, and a 'central constituency' comprised of CSC members plus one each from the 14 departments, depending on the leadership agreed, including additional representatives if the department has several branches. Therefore, altogether there are eight constituencies represented at the Congress.¹¹

At the Congress, each of the seven KNU Districts sent 20 voting delegates to join those from the central constituency, comprising CSC members, and department representatives. There were fourteen departments' representatives, including one representative from the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) and three from the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), which are organisations under the KNU Information and Organising Department.

To oversee the election, the KNU formed an Election Commission. The head was Mahn Aung Pyi Soe (Vice-Chair of Plone-Sawaw Party) and secretary Nan Paw Gay (Karen Information Centre/Karen News). Another member was from the Kayin National Party. Voting took place through a secret ballot, on a 'voting stage', in front of the

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Congress delegates and observers. Sixty candidates were nominated, and the following day the constituencies then voted for forty-one CSC members out of the sixty nominated the previous day. The seven districts Chairs and seven Brigadiers already make up fourteen CSC members, as per the KNU Constitution. The KNU Election Commission retained the ballot papers for inspection, for two weeks, to allow for election complaints.

Those living abroad and attending the Congress asked to vote, but the Congress Committee denied their requests because the KNU Constitution states that diaspora, refugee camps, and inside communities are not a constituency under the constitutional provision.¹² Many Karen also live in Yangon, the Ayeyarwady Delta, and areas of Bago Region and these people were also affected by the decision.

One of the main problems in relation to overseas Karen getting the vote lay with a decision, during the 15th Congress held on November 26, 2012, that allowed overseas Karen to vote, however, this was eventually overturned. It was suggested that the decision to prevent overseas Karen voting had been taken to prevent further votes for the Naw Zipporah faction. These Karen and many within the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)/Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and local NGO community had been seen as likely to support Naw Zipporah who had canvassed these groups before. According to Naw Zipporah when asked if she had relied heavily on CBO and Karen diaspora support,

Yes, I relied on CSO and Karen Diaspora and not only those groups but also Karen parties inside. I believe that the KNU belongs to the whole Karen Nationals, whether in Burma, abroad or on the border because KNU represents the Karen people. The KNU has a mandate from the Karen people, and when the KNU began to enter the process, the consultation is the most important, and it should be done. The Karen CSO/ CBO are the tools for KNU.¹³

Many within the KNU had begun to fear that constant in-fighting within the KNU was damaging the organisation. Some also believed they would see a shift in the dynamics of KNU leadership under Naw Zipporah from a revolutionary approach to a much more community/NGO based leadership.¹⁴

Voting blocs

As is often the case at recent KNU Congresses, three distinct voting blocs emerged, one supporting Naw Zipporah, one supporting General Mutu, and a third influential bloc that remained non-partisan. It was this third bloc that needed to be canvassed to decide which faction would eventually be appointed. The KNU Constitution states that Congress delegates have the right to campaign and that prospective candidates may campaign freely but must not disturb the voting. In all the previous KNU Congresses this has been done, opposing groups would campaign and try to persuade undecided voters.

Such a scenario had happened in the 2008 Congress following the assassination of Padoh Mahn Sha, and the death, due to ill-health, of President Ba Thin. In what was expected to be a victory for a group led by Saw Htoo Htoo Lay, then acting General Secretary, the three-week long 14th Congress, held in October 2008, saw the appointment of the 88 years old Tamla Baw as President. His daughter, New Zipporah became the first female General Secretary, and David Thackerbaw was elected vice-president. Saw Htoo Htoo Lay had already withdrawn from contesting the election due to ill health.¹⁵

With the appointment of General Mutu in the position of chairman and Naw Zipporah Vice-Chairperson at the next Congress in 2012, allegations of fraud aside, it would appear that the third bloc had decided to try to bring together both factions. However, due to later frictional strife between the two which threatened to undermine the organisation, the third bloc at the 16 Congress had decided not to risk the same situation and many of those belonging to the Naw Zipporah faction lost their positions.¹⁶

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According to KNU sources, the newly elected leadership had attempted to appoint Naw Zipporah to a position as Minister for Education, a position which they say she turned down, however, she denies this stating that,

I was not offered to take any position of the department head by the new elected Executive Committee (EC). . . one of the Standing Committee members had a new proposal for the head of Education Department it should be (me) instead of the decision made by the EC, one of the standing committee members supported the motion, but one of the EC members responded that " I said that I will resign " I don't know why he answered for me. I was not asked by anyone, and I did not respond to any proposal that I resign.¹⁷

For some observers, the outcome of the election was seen as a quiet coup against the New Zipporah faction which saw many of them, including Naw Zipporah Sein, former joint secretaries Saw Thaw Thee Bwe and Padoh Mahn Mahn, ousted. That said though, the voting at the Congress is regarded by the majority of attendees, including critics of Mutu, as fair, even though unsubstantiated rumours of tactical voting, including using inexperienced candidates, remain. While it has been suggested that there was less support from delegates, both civilian and military, from brigade areas which are often seen as being close to Naw Zipporah, this has been denied by the KNU leadership.¹⁸

It would appear that factionalism within the KNU has now been reduced, but not completely eliminated.¹⁹ While the current KNU leadership is more than willing to support a much more inclusive peace process, it is unlikely to allow such demands to take priority over Karen interests slowing progress in areas under its control. While critics will continue to portray the leadership as pro-Government and business orientated, the fact remains that the Karen's destiny will be decided by the Karen alone.

Notes

¹ See 'Changing the Guard - The Karen National Union, The 15th Congress, and the Future', Paul Keenan, BCES Analysis Paper No.6, January 2013

² These factions have been given various labels denoting perceived goals, to avoid such stereotypes and resultant characterisation this paper refers to them as the Naw Zipporah Sein faction and General Mutu Say Po faction.

³ The only evidence presented to the author are a couple of photos showing people counting votes (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1671575149734876/permalink/2116469115245475/?match=ZXZpZGVuY2U%3D>). The fact that there are numerous camera phones being used in the pictures while the main picture used as evidence, that of Robert Htwe, the election committee head, counting, was taken from across the table – hardly suggests an attempt at anything surreptitious.

⁴ See any number of posts on <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1671575149734876/>

⁵ 'KNU suspends membership of ethnic alliance' Angus Watson, DVB, 1 September 2014

⁶ Email correspondence with Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein, 5 May 2017

⁷ The KAF was heavily aligned to the UNFC's Federal Army.

⁸ KNU Department of Defence Statement 1/14, 14 October 2014

⁹ This stance later changed when the three groups were allowed to attend the Union Peace Conference as observer, at China's behest, on 24 May.

¹⁰ Personal conversation with Saw Ta Doh Mu, General Secretary, KNU, 19 April 2017

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Email correspondence with Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein, 5 May 2017

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Saw Tah Doh Moo, General Secretary, KNU, 19 April 2017

¹⁵ Personal conversation with Saw Htoo Htoo Lay in 2014

¹⁶ Naw Zipporah, former joint secretaries Saw Thaw Thee Bwe and Padoh Mahn Mahn, and Gen Saw Baw Kyaw Heh were not re-elected.

¹⁷ Email correspondence with Padoh Naw Zipporah Sein, 5 May 2017

¹⁸ Personal conversation with Saw Tah Doh Moo, General Secretary, KNU, 19 April 2017

¹⁹ A new group 'Karen National Union Concerned group' led by Zipporah Sein emerged to further challenge decisions by the KNU leadership in a 8 June statement, see <https://www.bnionline.net/news/mon-state/item/3132-knu-affiliate-calls-for-thorough-review-of-the-peace-process.html>, and

<http://www.dvb.no/news/zipporah-sein-questions-knus-commitment-accord/75981> accessed 19 June 2017