UNFC’S ROLE IN THE PEACE PROCESS AND ETHNIC UNITY

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After a wave of resignations, especially of bulwark member Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), most observers thought the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) might not survive as an umbrella coalition of ethnic armed organizations. Its political bargaining power was expected to weaken significantly. However, after its 2nd Congress, the UNFC is still largely seen as holding a key role in building cohesiveness among ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), ethnic political parties (EPPs), ethnic civil society organizations (CSOs) and community based organizations (CBOs) by providing a forum to build common understanding on policies and political goals.

Revamping the Organization

In April 2017, KIO, TNLA, and MNDAA joined the UWSA-led ethnic coalition known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) or the Northern Alliance. In the UNFC’s 2nd Congress, held from June 20 to June 29, the membership resignations of the KIO, Wa National Organization (WNO), Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) were formally accepted. However, despite its resignation as a full member, the KIO remains a “strategic ally” of UNFC with two special representatives in UNFC ensuring continued cooperation. The UNFC also considered accepting applications for membership from several EAOs. Two provisional members were accepted with full membership to be decided in due course.

Divisions in the Ethnic Community & UNFC’s Unifying Role

As Burma’s political landscape changes, the composition of ethnic alliances has also changed. Currently, EAOs are divided into three main blocs: the NCA signatory groups, the UNFC, and the FPNCC. Ethnic political parties are also divided into two blocs: United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) and Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF). It is no doubt that ethnic divisions generally weaken the ethnic position in the political negotiations. In the recent 2nd Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong (UPC-21CP), NCA Signatories struggled to fully represent the entire ethnic community in negotiations.

Although the resignation of key members has weakened the UNFC, it remains an important player in the peace process. It holds a key role as a political forum for unifying EAOs, EPPs, and CSOs/CBOs.
The UNFC retains close relationships with the other ethnic alliances. It is currently working closely with NCA signatories to review the Framework for Political Dialogue and continues to meet with ethnic political parties and ethnic CSO/CBOs. The UNFC also retains a good relationship with the Northern Alliance, four of whose members retain some level of membership in UNFC.

Conclusion

The strength of the UNFC will ultimately depend on how it adapts to changes in the political climate and maintains relationships with all ethnic stakeholders. In a time of political instability and a divided ethnic community, the UNFC’s role as an ethnic unifying force in the peace process is more important than ever.