

Junta labels NC a success, as ethnic questions remain large

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September 4, 2007 – As the much maligned National Convention process ground to a halt, Lieutenant General Thein Sein offered a concluding speech to the participants, referring to the outcome of the National Convention as a success and stipulating the envisioned emergence of six additional self-administering regions.

Speaking yesterday, Thein Sein championed the result of the process, saying "this constitution vests national races with better rights on the basis of the prevailing conditions of the nation."

The Lieutenant General welcomed acceptance of a new self-administering division for the Wa, along with five self-administering zones for the Naga, Danu, Pa-O, Palaung and Kokang, respectively.

The question of rights for various ethnic groups within Burma, in addition to playing a crucial role in bringing the military into politics almost 50 years ago, again came to the fore by dominating the closing remarks.

Noting that the constitutional convention of 1947 included only 71 delegates, Thein Sein argued that the current National Convention process, with over 1,000 delegates from diverse regions of the country, was thus far more representative in voices and views.

The process has been harshly and repeatedly criticized by opposition voices inside and outside the country, as well as by several international organizations and governments.

Voices, ranging from those of ethnic groups to 88 generation student leaders to former British Ambassador to Burma, Vicky Bowman, have publicly stated any that referendums and elections following from the conclusion of the National Convention, in its present form, are by default without legitimacy and void.

Though the junta protests that the new constitution will guarantee more rights for ethnic groups than any previous document, several of the groups participating have voiced a staunchly opposite interpretation.

Speaking only last month, Kachin Independent Organization (KIO) General Secretary, Dr. La Ja, cautioned that the KIO remains committed to ensuring regional autonomy and that acceptance of the National Convention in its current state can only lead to renewed confrontation.

Speculation of upheaval is rife; with groups such as Burma Campaign UK warning that the conclusion of the National Convention could auger in a new era of violence in Burma's ongoing civil conflicts between the junta and various ethnic groups.

With at least a partial acknowledgement to the continued, and unresolved, questions of ethnic rights and autonomy, Thein Sein's speech included notice that the long-standing Three Main National Causes remain in effect: non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty.

In accordance with step number two of the junta's seven-step roadmap, the Lieutenant General reiterated the goal of establishing "a disciplined flourishing democracy," with a drafting of a new constitution to be the next step.

Ominously, for those who caution the process is only an attempt to legitimate military rule, one of the six founding objectives of the National Convention process, as decided on 15 years previously, is for "Participation by the Defence Services in a national political leadership role in the future state."

The opposition National League for Democracy party has remained outside the National Convention process since being expelled from proceedings in November of 1995.

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