

Prospects of Peace in Assam

UDDIPTA RANJAN BORUAH

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Uddipta Ranjan Boruah (uddiranbx@gmail.com) is a doctoral scholar at the Department of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi.

ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia's extradition and release seems like a careful electoral strategy in a poll-bound state. His release may have a moral impact on the peace talks, though the strategic gains could be minimal.

Now that several of the most wanted men from Assam have been released from prison, the governments at the centre as well as Assam are busy working out effective negotiation strategies with the organisations they represent. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) general secretary Anup Chetia's (alias Golap Barua) extradition by Bangladesh and eventual release on bail in December 2015 has created quite a stir. Chetia was one of the founding members of ULFA in 1979 along with Paresh Baruah, the commander in chief, and Arabinda Rajkhowa among others. Chetia was arrested in 1997 by Bangladesh on charges of illegally crossing the international border with a forged passport and being in possession of illegal foreign currency. Chetia was sentenced for a 7 year term in prison in Bangladesh but remained there for longer in the absence of an extradition treaty between India and Bangladesh, until one came up in 2013. Anup Chetia was handed over to India by Bangladeshi authorities on 11 November 2015 and the Indian side reciprocated by extraditing Nur Hossain, one of Bangladesh's most wanted men, from a West Bengal prison. This is perhaps a great leap in the diplomatic relationship between the two South Asian neighbours and is likely to eliminate the decades-old trust deficit between the two countries.

Immediately after Chetia landed in India, he was detained in New Delhi (for four different cases) and was finally brought to Assam on a transit remand. The government's interlocutor for peace talks with ULFA, P C Haldar, had earlier pushed for a "calibrated approach" towards Chetia in a communication sent to the home ministry. It was obvious that Chetia would be granted an unconditional bail and all the criminal proceedings would be subsequently discontinued. The Additional Sessions Judge in Guwahati granted a bail to Chetia on 24 December 2015 on a personal bond of Rs 1,00,000 and sureties from two individuals.

The Politics of Peace

The Congress led Assam government's limited role in the negotiation process involving the extradition makes it clear that the campaign was steered primarily by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in New Delhi. The release of Chetia is a continuation of several electoral strategies in the poll-bound state—including the release of census showing rise in Muslim population in Assam, naturalisation of Hindu refugees, talks for granting scheduled status to six tribes from Assam etc.

The move to release Chetia is expected to boost the ongoing peace process between ULFA and the Indian government. The peace negotiations are already underway with the pro-talk ULFA leaders Arabinda Rajkhowa and Pradip Gogoi among others. The inclusion of Chetia is expected to further isolate the Paresh Baruah led anti-talk faction. Chetia is known to be close to Paresh Baruah who is opposed to talks without ULFA's founding objective of "*swadhin*" or "sovereign Assam" being placed on the table. It also requires mention that Baruah is Chetia's cousin. Chetia claims he inducted Baruah in ULFA in 1979 at a time when Baruah used to serve the Indian Railways and was a football player in the Northeast Frontier Railway team. Chetia has agreed to speak to Paresh Baruah if need be but has refused to involve the media in the process. Even though it is clear that all this is nothing more than electoral calculations, the people in Assam are optimistic about sunny days in case a peaceful settlement is reached.

Will Peace get a Chance?

The return of Anup Chetia and his desire to join the peace process has been presented as an event that will bring peace to Assam. However peace could remain a pipe dream. The militant wing of the ULFA is sufficiently active and away from peace talks with Paresh Baruah untraced as of now. There is no official word from Baruah on whether he wishes to participate in the peace talks.

ULFA has been involved in violent activities during the period when Chetia was already in prison in Bangladesh—the 2004 Independence Day blasts in Dhemaji and the 2008 serial bomb blasts in Guwahati are still fresh in people's mind. The ULFA has a militaristic structure, which has stood in the way of inner-party democracy and has often led to lack of proper coordination on policy matters. The military wing under Paresh Baruah has always been the more influential and powerful, mostly acting autonomous of the political wing since the very inception (Misra 2009).

The advocates of peace might recall that it was not very long ago in 1992 when a similar round of optimism was in the air. The ULFA leadership had agreed to a ceasefire and peace talks when the outfit was cornered by the Indian Army in Operation Bajrang and Rhino. Anup Chetia (arrested for the first time during Operation Bajrang) was granted bail in a similar manner.

In March 1992 Chetia was a part of the delegation that went to meet the then Prime Minister of India PV Narasimha Rao. He also attended a human rights conference at Geneva

alongside Paresh Baruah in the same year. History shall not forget and for that matter the advocates of peace should also keep in mind the way in which Chetia backstabbed and disappeared until his re-arrest in 1997. Chetia on his release has apologised for his act in 1992 and has assured his unconditional support so far.

The ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa alias Rajiv Rajkonwar has been around since his arrest in 2009 but not much has been achieved in terms of signing a comprehensive peace agreement. Rajkhowa, Chetia and other senior leaders of the outlawed outfit have for now agreed for unconditional peace talks and have dropped the initial objective of attaining a sovereign Assam. But, the commander in chief and the present leader of the armed anti-talk faction has time and again made clear their stand that there would be no peace without the issue of sovereignty being placed on the table. Thus, the inclusion of Chetia into the pro-talk group is expected to produce some moral impact but the strategic impact and outcome of his extradition, release and desire to engage in peace talks is blurred as of now.

References

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