In a proposal that would no doubt complicate governance, and split levels of authority ad infinitum, ethnic group leaders have suggested that every significant minority be given their own little island of territory.

Mahn Htein Win Sein, vice chair of the Karen National Party, said that participants at the first national-level political dialogue in Kayin State’s capital yesterday were keen on the idea.

The proposal aims to protect and promote the rights of the various ethnicities, even if their population is small, dialogue participants told The Myanmar Times yesterday.

The idea builds off of a similar proposal put forward during the Mai Ja Yang conference in Kachin State last year, adding further divisions and subgroups.

The initial proposal envisions a federal Union composed of national states and nationalities states. The national states would be the current states, which are, at least as the proposal sees it, dominated by one particular ethnicity, such as Kachin and Rakhine. Then the nationalities states would encompass territories occupied by an assortment of various ethnicities, such as Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady.

Mahn Htein Win Sein said the suggestion offered at the Hpa-an dialogue involves further cleavages. Ethnic groups not big enough for their own state could occupy autonomous regions called “national areas”.

“The less populous races like Salone, Mro-Khami and Karen Phyu [White Karen] would be granted ‘national areas’ where their rights to determine economics, education, culture and literature would be promoted by the federal government,” he said.

“For example, Mon and Pa-Oh people also have small populations in Karen State. So, they should be granted autonomous regions within that state,” he added.

In order to ensure the fracturing doesn’t go on too far, and to maintain some unified structure, the legislatures at the Union and state levels would provide a governing check-and-balances measure, he said.

The participants at the dialogue yesterday also discussed forming a “Bamar State” as part of their idealised federal Union.

The attendees yesterday broke into discussion groups centred around one of the four topics included under the umbrella of the national-level political dialogues: politics, economics, social issues and land and environmental issues.

Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win, general secretary of the Karen National Union, said the brainstorming sessions were meant to collect “policy drafts” which will then be passed on the Union-level dialogue – the next 21st-century Panglong Conference scheduled to be held in February.

“[Today] we will review the policy paper drafts from the four topics and have a discussion about whether they are in line with federal principles,” the KNU official said yesterday evening.

The Hpa-an political dialogue involves the three Karen armed groups party to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, as well as five political parties, representatives from local civil society groups and individuals. Over 500 participants are attending the talks, which are due to conclude today.
Two more national-level political dialogues – one in Tanintharyi and another in Nay Pyi Taw – are scheduled to be held before the next 21st-Century Panglong Conference.