

Asia Do We Belong to the Asian Values of Human Rights?

By A.H. Monjurul Kabir

THERE is a popular conviction, both in Asia and in the West, that there exists an 'Asian challenge' to the notion of universal human rights. It is generally assumed that there is a distinct Asian approach to human rights, because some government leaders speak as if they represent the whole of Asia and according to their contention, their views are formulated from the viewpoints that stems from Asian culture, religion or norms. The 'Asian values' has become an important force in international relations.

In the popular literature on the region, the phrase 'Asian values' is taken to mean an emphasis on the community and societal harmony over the individual, a sense of loyalty and duty toward one's family, self-reliance, thrift, a general tolerance of benign authoritarianism, a stress on education, respect for the elderly, and respect for the accumulation of wealth. The governments of the People's Republic of China and Singapore have endorsed the necessity of Confucianism as a foundation of 'Asian values'.

Asian or East Asian Values?

The debate on Asian values is part of a larger discourse within the human rights movement between the universalist and relativist schools of thought. It has gained momentum in East Asia where politicians and academics alike are struggling with issues of sovereignty, cultural identity, and decolonization. Buoyed by their economic success, China and the other 'little tigers' (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong) have become known as 'little tigers' or 'little dragons' because of their economic success over the last two decades of the 20th century. The term is often also used to refer to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, which have been seething active in their condemnation of the 'double standards' of the western countries with prolonged background of colonisation and oppression. They have asserted their right to set their own standards, even if these offend human rights. The view of the Asian politicians is reflected in the Bangkok Declaration (1993), which asserts that 'while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds'.

The Vienna Declaration could not resolve the dispute around 'Asian values' and the univer-



Come On, Asia, Get Real

NEVER let the facts get in the way of a good story. That's the *mantra* of many a hack desperate to meet an inelastible deadline or dying to use a bombastic headline. Reality, after all, comes in shades of gray, deathly dull beside the high drama of black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. Yet in the year past, Asia's great stories told of how the face of political, business and social realities intruded into what seemed to be winning tales.

And there were tales aplenty to swoon over and debunk. After all, a new millennium was upon the world, and such a time cannot but bring with it hopes of a brave, new world emerging from the cross, brutish existence of centuries past. For Asia, moreover, 2000 came after the rebound of 1999, when the region's economic crisis quickly faded like some bad dream. In its place sprang a new excitement about starting over, discarding old, corrupt ways, embracing freedom and the marvels of the information age, and launching into a new miracle.

In sum, it was a perfect time perfect, that is, for a nasty dose of bitter reality. And that, in so many ways, is what the newsmakers of 2000 Presidents Joseph Estrada of the Philip-

pines and Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan, Nissans restructuring boss Carlos Ghosn, Indian anti-globalization activist Vandana Shiva, and the dotcom crash brought to Asia. They hogged magazine covers, front pages and primetime bulletins because they toppled from lofty pedestals some seemingly irrefutable notions and irresistible expectations.

For the sheer spectacle of stratospheric dreams being dashed on the ground, nothing beats the dotcom bust. As with other moments of comeuppance, the rude e-wakening began with grand illusions taking hold of the mass psyche. Internet-crazed investors thought online enterprises were beyond the laws of business physics. Stocks that went up didn't have to come down. Unlike matter, Net capital could be created out of nothing. And as alchemists of old vainly sought, dotcom mania had apparently devised a way to turn leaden stocks into golden shares. Even moribund Hong Kong developers thought they could just add an 'e-' or an 'i-' before a name or 'com' after it and the stock price would treble. For a while, it worked.

Seasoned global players like George Soros and Warren Buffett threw up their hands and professed bewilderment at the

markets. All the rules seemed changed forever until the Nasdaq tanked. That prompted millions of punters to ask themselves exactly what kind of ventures they were sinking money into. Most investors didn't like the answers and sold, sold, sold.

The dismantling of misconceptions and hype often starts not with a lacerating bite, but with tiny nibbles that are easy to ignore, laugh at and explain away. President Estrada 'Erap' to the adoring masses who

In 2000, the biggest stories told of how tough realities ripped through Asian fantasies... Ricardo Saludo writes

handed him the biggest election victory in Philippine history in 1998 mastered the trick of wriggling out of embarrassing controversies. Banking on his image as a man for the poor, the former action star weathered each brouhaha with his public ratings still high and his opponents unable to muster protests big enough to worry about.

Then Luis 'Chavit' Singson opened his mouth. The provincial governor admitted to illegal gambling operations and said he had

given Estrada millions of dollars in proceeds from the numbers game. As in scandals past, Estrada shifted into denial mode, denying all including the possibility of being convicted of bribery and removed from office. Will his nation believe him or his detractors? The thing about nibbles is that no matter how tiny they are, each takes a bite out of one's credibility. Eventually, little is left, and even a self-confessed crook like Singson becomes more believable than a president.

Still, image can exert a powerful grip on a nation's imagination. Estrada supporters among the poor cannot accept that the leader they had believed to be their defender has favored rich pals at the country's expense. A similar tension between ideal and real has dizzied Taiwan. Ending half a century of Kuomintang rule, Chen Shui-bian's presidential election triumph confirmed the full flowering of democracy on the island. His move to include elements of the KMT into his

administration further embellished the picture of a leader bringing together discordant segments of the citizenry to establish a true rule of all the people, not just those who voted for him.

An inspiring script, one must admit, but perhaps the tint on the movie lens was just a bit too rosy. Democracy, after all, is more often than not, messy and fractious rather than neat and harmonious (just ask Florida's election canvassers). So when Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party began having problems with their supposed partners in the KMT, no eyebrows should have jumped. The fantasy of democratic consensus was nice while it lasted, but petty politicking all around undermined the real task: making freedom, warts and all, work.

Reality's messy complexity would not surprise Indian activist Vandana Shiva. Tones of her words on paper, podium and prime time have lent intellectual depth and informed detail to the fiery exhortations of anti-globalization protesters worldwide. No one-sided, mindlessly rabid invective for this woman trained as a nuclear physicist; her reputation for rational balance has won her the respect

social system, cultural tradition, economic development, countries differ in their understanding and practice of human rights with those of other parts of Asia. Human rights record of this region, as an obvious consequence of the above-mentioned socio-political realities, is not very encouraging. Yet people of this region are democracy loving with a strong sense of respect for human rights. Among the seven countries of South Asia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives embrace democracy as the system of governance. Party-state dictatorship is not a popular connotation in South Asia.

South Asians do have firm family and community bonds but unlike East Asia that bondage has not created orthodoxy which does not allow challenging the authority. Movement for change whether for democracy, restoration of democracy, peace, communal harmony, economic emancipation, women empowerment, freedom of expression, freedom of association, so on and so forth set the tone of progressiveness in its societal context.

The doctrine of human rights sets only minimum standards; it should not be expected to solve all the complex moral, political and economic problems of contemporary societies. It is not in John Rawls terms, a comprehensive doctrine. It is, therefore, not an alternative as wrongly perceived by many in Asia, to such comprehensive doctrines as Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism, etc. Contemporary Asian individuals, families and societies face the same threats from modern markets and states that many western societies do, and therefore need the same protections of human rights. In principle, Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans - may be able to devise effective alternatives. But the prospect for 'soft' authoritarianism, party-state dictatorship or paternalism as foundation for alternative human rights policies and mechanisms in Asia is doubtful. More importantly whether such characteristics have a broad-based credible Asian acceptance, is truly questionable. It appears that the Asian values of human rights have essentially nurtured by the ruling elite of East Asian countries to counter the western critical approach against East Asian regimes. This are, indeed, not Asian values of human rights, rather, at best, East Asian values of human rights. Clearly other parts of Asia do not belong to the same values. South Asia with a long tradition of people's movement for human rights and democracy does not endorse the same.

Top 10 News Stories in 2000



NORTH KOREA North Korea has been one of the hot topics in South Korea in 2000 as the leaders of the two Koreas met for the first time in a landmark summit in Pyongyang in mid-June. As a result, many news stories on North Korea made headlines in South Korea. Following are the top 10 news stories on North Korea this year as selected by the Yonhap News Agency.

South-North Korea summit: South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il held a landmark summit on June 13-15 in Pyongyang, three months after President Kim proposed the meeting in Berlin. At the end of the meeting, President Kim and Chairman Kim adopted the 5-point South-North Korea Joint Declaration, which, among other things, outlined plans to reunite separated families and engage in inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation.

North Korea-US relations: North Korea and the United States took the first step toward ending half a century of animosity when Jo Myong-rok, first deputy chairman of North Korea's National Defence Commission visited Washington. This visit was followed by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to Pyongyang in October. Based on the inroads made at those two meetings, the two nations agreed to work toward more peaceful relations and even exchanged letters between their top leaders.

Reunion of separated families: Family members separated by the Korean War got the chance to meet with their long-lost parents, children, siblings and spouses at the two rounds of inter-Korean family reunions held in Seoul and Pyongyang. Details for the reunions were set at the inter-Korean Red Cross talks on Mt. Kumgang on June 27-29, following the two Kim's summit in Pyongyang earlier that month.

Inter-Korean exchanges: Since the two Kim's historic meeting in Pyongyang, both Koreas have tried to expand inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation and realize the goals set at the June summit by holding a series of talks in a variety of sectors. They have so far held four rounds of ministerial talks in Pyongyang, Seoul and on Cheju Island to discuss political and social issues.

The first inter-Korean defense ministers' talks and two rounds of working-level meetings were also held on Cheju Island and at the truce village of Panmunjon. Many economic experts, tourists and heads of news companies also visited the North this year.

Kim Jong-il's visit to China and Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang: In late May, a short while before the June South-North summit, Kim Jong-il paid an unofficial visit to China at the invitation of Chinese supreme leader Jiang Zemin. Kim and Jiang agreed to bolster cooperation and exchanges between the two neighboring nations. Russian President Putin visited the North in July at the invitation of Kim. Putin and Kim came away from the meeting with an 11-point joint declaration. Both China and Russia appear to be lending their support to Kim's attempts to lead his nation out of the shadows and into the global community.

The North and South Korean Olympic teams' joint entrance at the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics: At the 2000 Sydney Olympics in September, the world was treated to the historic sight of the South and North Korean Olympic teams marching hand-in-hand in the games' opening ceremony, demonstrating that the Korean peninsula had truly entered a new era of reconciliation and cooperation. The joint entry came about three months after International Olympic Committee chairman Juan Antonio Samaranch proposed it to President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

North Korea's improved relations with western nations: Since January, North Korea has established diplomatic ties with several western nations such as Italy, Australia and the Philippines.

The North also joined the regional forum of the ASEAN in July and its Foreign Minister, Paik Nam-sun, held consecutive meetings with his counterparts from Japan, Canada, Thailand, France, Greece, the Netherlands and Spain.

Repatriation of North Korean spies: In a humanitarian gesture and a show of goodwill, South Korea returned 63 unconverted North Korean spies to the North via the truce village of Panmunjon on September 2. The spies received a warm welcome from their countrymen and the North Korean government says it has provided them with deluxe living quarters.

Inauguration of Anbyon Youth Power Plant and Youth Hero Road: North Korea finished the construction of Anbyon Youth Power Plant near Mt. Kumgang 14 years after ground was broken on the project in October, 1986. The plant can generate 810,000 kilowatts of electricity. The North also inaugurated a 40-kilometer expressway linking Pyongyang and Nampo called the 'Anbyon Youth Hero Road' two years after work on the project was kicked off in November 1998.

North Korea's sudden declaration of new navigational restrictions for South Korean vessels in the West Sea: North Korea's Navy command unilaterally announced the new restrictions on March 23. The six-point declaration contains newly designated sea routes around five islands near the military demarcation line in the West Sea.

- Asia Times online

Behind the Smiles

CHINA AND TAIWAN DREDGING through the tea leaves, it is possible to detect, if not a change of direction, then a change of tactics in China's attempts to get Taiwan back into the fold. At the time of the presidential victory in March of Chen Shui-bian, formerly an outspoken promoter of Taiwanese independence, all was sound and fury from the government in Beijing. These days the face that Communist China shows Taiwan is mainly smiles.

In the past few months Taiwanese officials, academics and businessmen have been coming in droves to the mainland at the government's invitation. It was announced this month that Wu Poh-ling, the deputy chairman of the Kuomintang which ruled the island for over five decades, and which still has a majority in the legislature to visit the mainland. Mr Wu will be the highest-ranking Taiwanese to go to China in years. He will be entertained by Qian Qichen, the deputy prime minister overseeing Taiwanese matters.

About a third of the members of Taiwan's 225-strong legislative yuan have now visited China since Mr Chen's inauguration in May. Most visitors are members of parties opposed to Mr Chen's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Frank Hsieh, then chairman-elect of the DPP and mayor of Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second-largest city, was invited to China, but a wary Mr Chen vetoed his trip.

China still considers Taiwan to be an unruly province. Earlier this year, Taiwanese businessmen were told by China that if they had connections with the island's 'independence forces' (that is, the DPP) they could not do business on the mainland. That kind of threat is impossible to enforce. Still, it sent a chill through Taiwan's businessmen, who for their part have kept politics out of their dealings on the mainland. And when the warning was repeated in Hong Kong, it was even more unsettling, since the Chinese seemed to be dragging that territory into cross-strait politics.

Yet since then, China has been bluster-free on the matter. Even military pressure has been played down. What appears to be going on is as follows. After Mr Chen's victory, which came as a shock to China's leaders, much heart-searching has taken place in Beijing. At the least, the Taiwan-watchers who are meant to keep President Jiang Zemin and his cohorts informed about what goes on across the strait have taken the rap. Out has gone Tang Shubel, the long-standing frontman on Taiwanese affairs, to be replaced in the Taiwan Affairs Office by a relative cosmopolitan, Zhou Mingze. More heads are expected to roll.

It is believed, however, that an unusual admission was made at the annual summer conclave of China's leaders in the beach resort of Beidaihe. Military threats from China, some leaders apparently concluded, had merely turned the Taiwanese further from thoughts of reunification. However, such reports should be treated with caution.

Wang Zaixi, an army officer with a reputation as a hardliner, was also appointed to China's Taiwan Affairs Office, along with Mr Zhou. Soldiers will continue to have an important say in cross-strait matters.

On the other hand, not too much should be read into a comment in China's defence white paper, published on October 16th, that the Taiwan situation is 'complicated and grim'. The white paper adds no new conditions to existing ones for the possible use of force against Taiwan, and much of the white paper concentrates on China's military backwardness. In gauging its ability to set the pace towards Taiwan's eventual reunification, says Yang Lixian, the deputy director of a Taiwanese think-tank, China has to adopt a 'realistic attitude'.

Were it to do so, China could hope that stronger trade links would bind Taiwan closer. Already, with no direct links yet allowed, cross-strait trade is growing by over 30% a year. Disquisitions about reopening shipping links are rumoured to have begun. And China can hope that by wooing Taiwanese legislators, it will be able to drive a wedge between President Chen and the political establishment. Already Mr Chen is complaining that all the Taiwanese flocking to meet mainland officials do not understand China's real motive. Enticing its opponents, creating a united front: now those are tactics the Communists really understand.

Courtesy: The Economist of London

Forget? Hell No!

By Louis Beam

VIETNAM EVEN after all this time there seems to be no way we can forget or let Vietnam descend into the past. I for one can not, nor would I—even if it were possible. Why should we?

When we came home they threw blood in our faces, and feces on our caskets. No excuses now will change that. It could have been prevented. But there was no desire to prevent it. It was allowed, encouraged, and even promoted by the very people who sent us over there. Now they think they can bury some poor soul in Arlington National Cemetery, and at the same time bury the guilt along with their conscience. Never! They can erect all the black marble slabs they want, have all of the fifteen year late parades they care to, but it will change nothing. Nothing at all.

Even now I see the sun shining down intensely upon us. So many thousands. In the distance men sweating in the sun, looking for shade, but unable to find it, never obtaining relief from the oppressive heat, which bakes all, like so many leaves of bread. The choppers drone overhead in their relentless search for Charlie, the sound of the blades mixing with our thoughts. Each of us is alone, yet seeking comfort in numbers.

Night, pitch dark, darker than anything you have ever seen. Somewhere out in the blackness there are men. In the air over the jungle I am suspended in an ocean of darkness. A sense of desolation surrounds me, heightened by the fact that the helicopter is fifteen hundred feet in the air. Looking down into the darkness I pray the ship will hold together, somehow remaining in the air rather than fall into the blackness below.

A few seconds later the skids of the ship hit the ground hard, hands grope in the darkness, reaching for the ammo and supplies yanking them off the ship. Pitch dark, the only light is that of bullets and mortars exploding. One of the grunts yells 'clear!' The pitch on the blade changes and they grab for hot air, slowly, ever so slowly, the ship rises above the trees. Finally, 1500 feet up and the trip back to the base begins. For the grunts, they now have all they need to live twenty-four hours more, or perhaps, more than they will need.

Later, still in darkness, but this time in the quietness of a hooch laying in a cot, I wonder at the fact I

am alive. This is what it feels like to survive. I sense that somehow in the mist of all this I am growing up. Turning older, not in years, but in days.

I can't help but think about the sergeant. I never met him—at least not in whole. I don't even know his name, nor can I remember if I ever did. Sergeant Teeth. That's all I know. Sergeant, with the white teeth. While I was lying today a new replacement came into the company. Fresh from the world on the other side of the earth. They dropped him off at the H.Q. building. He walked into the orderly room with his hat in his hand to report for duty. There he stood announcing his presence to the orderly when he ceased to exist. A mortar came crashing through the roof by the front door.

When I got in they told me about the new sergeant. Three days in country, five minutes in our company. I looked at the place where he had been standing. Blood, blood, and teeth. Sergeant Teeth. That's all I will ever know about him. I flew out to the Fifth Mechanized Infantry, area of operations today. One hell off a battle going on. From the air it looked like we were winning. But when we landed a grunt said the C.O. cracked up, then the X.O. Hot, sweat, blood, always the blood.

Years later, I discovered that I, along with thousands of other soldiers, have been poisoned by the chemical defoliant Agent Orange.

There seems to be no end to it all. I wonder if stress can be defined as wanting to machine gun all the people who sent us over there, along with the ones who spit on us when we returned. Or, is perhaps stress something more simple like crying out for justice in the name of the mangled dead, and not being heard? Or is stress more of a mathematical function, like trying to figure out how much blood 57,673 bodies can hold? Let's see: three gallons to the body, times fifty-seven thousand six-hundred and seventy-three equals...

It is not the death and destruction that makes one unsettled inside. It's the death and destruction for no reason. If these political whores who rule in Washington, think that by laying some mother's son to rest in Arlington, while mouthing a few empty words, that everything will be forgiven—or forgotten—then they have less brains in their head than Bill's friend. Forget? Not even if I could.

Courtesy: AsiaWeek

Another Drama

By David Swartzentruber

THAILAND WITH the political saga in the United States just concluded, another one is unfolding in Thailand.

Since he kicked off his new party, Thai Rak Thai with an American-style political rally, billionaire communications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra, has been the frontrunner in the upcoming Thai general elections to be held January 6, 2001 and a subject of great controversy.

Detractors, including a number of newspaper columnists, have raised the issue of an immensely wealthy candidate 'buying' the election and in effect the country. Mr Thaksin's defence has been he has made his fortune legally while his opponents have obtained their funds by illegal means. He maintains, to put a damper on the many vote buying and other questionable practices that have permeated Thailand's young democracy, the new Thai Constitution established a National Counter Corruption Commission.

A committee of the commission has been investigating Thaksin's declaration of assets made before and after his brief tenure as deputy Prime Minister, which ended on December 4, 1997. It's been reported that the committee has determined that Thaksin deliberately concealed his wealth consisting of shares worth hundreds of millions baht in 17 companies by transferring ownership of them to various persons such as his household staff.

To counter this, Thaksin has requested the Constitutional Court to determine if the

National Counter Corruption Commission has the power to investigate his financial matters.

All of these developments play out before the voters of Thailand who, unlike the American population, are required to vote.

Recent polls indicate that a vast number of voters, as high as 57 per cent, are still undecided as to what party will best serve Thailand. The current Thai government headed by the Democrat Party and its leader, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, is seen by some as old and tired with no fresh ideas. The Democrats, themselves, have been hit by the graft commission as one of its top leaders, Major General Sanan, has been barred from politics for five years. The new Thai Rak Thai party and its leader Thaksin were seen by many voters as a panacea to Thailand's economy. After all, couldn't such a successful business tycoon lead the country into better times?

More thoughtful observers looked askance at some of Thaksin's populist proposals, such as a three year moratorium on agricultural debt, as serving to get votes but not helping the country substantially. All of this appears only to add to a large degree of uncertainty and confusion as the January 6 election draws closer. This is further enhanced by the finding of the National Counter Corruption Commission that Mr. Thaksin had deliberately attempted to conceal his fortune. Mr. Thaksin plans to continue his candidacy.

Thai politics are never dull and this general election is especially lively.

Courtesy: The Bangkok Post