

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

By A.H. Monjurul Kabir

THESE 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 scathing 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 universality of human rights. The nature of this challenge



and even its very existence are subject to much confusion. The lack of consensus among Asians about the character of Asian values contributed greatly to the confusion. In fact, in reaction to criticism by western democracies of human rights violations, the Southeast Asian states invoked cultural relativism. They assert that Asian values which stems from their distinctive historical and cultural legacy, differentiates them from western democracies and their human rights norms. Any effort to impose the latter is a form of cultural imperialism. East Asian states contend that, emerging from their particular culture and history, they are governed by different standards and principles. Human rights, as propagated by the West, are based on individualism and therefore have no relevance to Asia in societies, which are based on the primacy of the community. They dub civil and political rights as 'irrelevant' in Asia due to its economic underdevelopment.

Proponents of Asian values often initiate to weaken the force of human rights advocacy by emphasising the flaws of western democracies. But, as clarified by Githirwa, these flaws are themselves often violations of human rights. Similarly, the common argument that economic and social rights (or the right to development) should have priority over civil and political rights - which though commonly propagated by Asian elite, is not rooted in Asian culture - is intentionally applied not to strengthen the realisations of economic and social rights but to weaken the claims of civil and political rights. Ironically, the greatest threats to the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights are global capitalism and authoritarian government, two institutions to which the proponents of Asian values are strongly attached.

The debate has intensified because of the economic crisis of 1997, which spread throughout East Asia, affecting, among others Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea and Hong Kong. Many of these countries had attributed their success to "Asian values". Many critics pointed out the

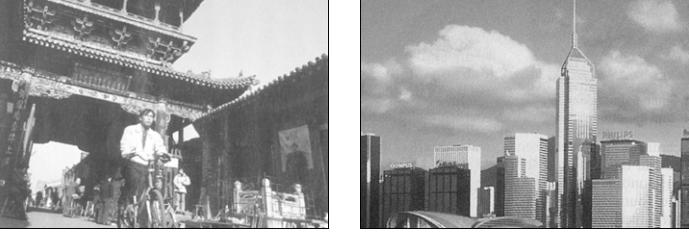
negative aspects of the myth of "Asian values" such as corruption, lack of accountability, nepotism and sheer disregard of the rule of law and formal procedures. The Economist summarised their negative view of Asian values in the following terms:

"But now some of the sins laid at the door of the regions economic systems look suspiciously like Asian values gone wrong. The attachment to family becomes nepotism. The importance of personal relationships rather than formal legality becomes cronyism. Consensus becomes wheel greasing and corrupt politics. Conservatism and respect for authority becomes rigidity and an inability to innovate. Much-vaunted educational achievements become rote learning and a refusal to question those in authority... What would Confucius say now? ('What Would Confucius Say Now?' The Economist, 25 July 1998, p. 23).

## The Standing of South Asia

South Asia is the land of one-fifth of the mankind, an agglomeration of diverse nationalities, ethnic communities and cultures, which inherited a common legacy from the centuries old pre-colonial and colonial period. Issues and politics in South Asia are different from other regions of Asia. The formers are more plural with specific parliamentary traditions. In term of Human Development Index, the countries of South Asia occupy almost the same position. Widespread illiteracy, lower position of women, child malnutrition, low wages, poor health services, heavy incidence of external debt, unfinished agrarian reforms, fallout of structural adjustment programme at the behest of WB-IMF, high military spending, discrimination against the indigenous peoples and the minorities, communal tension, ethnic conflict, migration - all these are but some of the problems facing South Asian region as a whole.

Due to differences in historical background, 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 bondage 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, etc 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. These 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.

## NORTH KOREA

# Top 10 News Stories in 2000



**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 Kims' summit in Pyongyang earlier that month.

**Inter-Korean exchanges:** Since the two Kims' 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 Panmunjom. 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 neighbouring 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 Panmunjom 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

# 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 desirous to meet an inelastic 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 facts, 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 crass, 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 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 Philippines and Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan, Nissan's 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 ratings. 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 handed him the biggest election victory in Philippine history in

Still, image can exert a powerful grip on a nation's imagina-

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.

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in kind, acknowledging the bounties of burgeoning trade and development, while demanding equity in the sharing of such goods and responsibility in redressing human and environmental costs of globalization.

The irony about illusion busting is that they could spawn new fantasies. In the push to oust Estrada or Chen, the simple-minded think changing leaders solves everything. The surprise success of restructuring at Nissan, led by its Brazilian-born, Renault-appointed president Carlos Ghosn, could make Japan conclude that their ways should now yield wholesale to the West's. Yet even Ghosn, in ending lifetime jobs, adopted gradual retrenchment, not mass layoffs, for most staff to be let go.

So remember: the truth is never simple. It combines opposites, embraces flaws, hates convenient, neat outcomes, never fits the hole of our expectations. Next time you come across a story that seems too good (or bad) to be true, it is. Make sure to find the facts that spoil it.

Courtesy: Asiaweek

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