

HAS FREEDOM A FUTURE IN ASIA?

A Study Outline

by

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The intended study will consist of three connected parts, each of which however would be able to stand on its own. The first will be a personal history, a partly autobiographical account of the Indonesian revolution for independence, based on my personal participation in the revolution and its aftermath, as well as on my observations as an eye witness to some of the historical events during that period. This part of the study would help bring out the perspectives that I bring to the two other parts of the study, as well as my personal biases, as they have been shaped by my personal experiences and reflections.

The second will primarily be a comparative study of some countries in Asia and the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural conditions that have stimulated or restricted individual freedom in these countries. It will also speculate - in light of their past experiences - how some of these countries will be affected by present demographic, economic and technological trends, and how the various responses to these trends may in turn affect the place of freedom in these societies.

The third study will deal with problems of international governance in a culturally pluralistic but interdependent world. Looking beyond present international institutional arrangements, it will focus on the different political cultures and their world views. It will try to show how profoundly different are the notions about the purposes of society and meaning of human existence that underlie some of the major political conflicts in our contemporary world, and how essential a much deeper level of intercultural understanding is required, before the search for a core of shared ethical values on which a more universally acceptable international system could be based would offer any hope for a positive outcome. Such an outcome may well be a precondition for the preservation and expansion of individual freedom in our increasingly crowded, interdependent and rapidly changing world.

An introductory chapter would provide the justification for the umbrella title for the three parts. It would do so by stating the reasons why it has become necessary to pose anew the fundamental questions about human life and society, about freedom and progress in the world's contemporary setting. It was these questions which fuelled the aspirations behind the postwar struggle for political and economic liberation in Asia, and which now need to be posed anew forty years later. What follows is a more elaborate presentation of each of the three parts.

I. From independence to freedom?

The purpose of the first part of this study is to trace the history of the commitment to democracy and freedom as a minor current in the nationalist movement for independence in Indonesia. It will try to identify the factors that led to its brief ascendancy and subsequent decline during the Indonesian revolution, as well as those that might account for its sustained resilience in the long period after the end of democratic government. It will deal with the circumstances that made it possible for Indonesia to emerge from its revolution with a pluralistic political system. It will try to draw the appropriate lessons from the experience of the first general elections especially, as well as from the subsequent ones. It will deal with the persistent constitutional problems, the entry of the army into politics, the periods of "guided democracy" and the "New Order" government, and their economic and international dimensions.

At the same time it will be necessary to bring out the interplay of the internal dynamics of the revolution and the post-revolutionary period with the shifting international environment. Such an analysis might bring out how much political space is at any given time available for local solutions that have international implications. Among others it would be useful to look at the impact of Cominform policies on revolutionary unity; at Ho Chi Minh's letter to the Indonesian Vice-President suggesting co-ordination of the two revolutions (was there an "Asian" revolution?); and at the impact of the "fall" of China on US policy towards the nationalist movements in Asia and on Indonesia specifically. The role of the UN in the attainment of Indonesian independence as well as the effectiveness of a strategy of negotiation while fighting should be considered also. Subsequent foreign interventions provide important lessons about political limits that have to be observed in the preservation of the space for self determination.

Apart from adding a few accounts to earlier historical studies of less known but sometimes crucial events and redressing to some extent some of the current historical falsifications, this study would illuminate some of the dilemmas in the struggle for democracy which would be of relevance to the broader, comparative second study, dealing more systematically with problems of governance in the new states, like the conflicting requirements for security, development and freedom; between traditional political cultures and modern political institutions; and between religion(s) and democracy.

II. Is there a future for democracy in Asia?

The second part will deal with the impact of accelerated change on the political systems of some of the poor and populous developing countries in Asia, and consider the possible directions of political development.

The dimensions of accelerated change include the demographic, comprising population growth, changing age structures and population movements such as rural-to-urban migration, transmigration, immigration and emigration. The resource dimension continues to command attention as deterioration resulting from the pressure of human numbers, maldistribution of resources and unsuitable techniques of production threatens to reach various points of no return. The growing incidence of unemployment, underemployment and consequent underconsumption coincides with the continuous importation of labour-saving technologies. Aggravated income disparities among classes, ethnic groups or regions seems to be a persistent accompaniment to development. The impact of communications technologies links all the sections of national populations, whether in conflict or co-existence, more closely than ever before.

The functional integration of the global economy has reduced the scope for autonomous decision-making at the national level to the point where the content of national independence must be seriously questioned. A similar process has been in train, though more unevenly, in the political sphere. The homogenization of cultures is perhaps the most disturbing trend of all.

That the nation-states of Asia have been unable satisfactorily to deal with the negative manifestations of accelerated change is evident in the persistent and intensifying problems of contemporary Asian societies. The frustration and despair of many of the young, the rise of urban criminality, widespread corruption, the growing resort to violence in all sectors of society (including the government), and above all the inability to arrest the spread of poverty engender a deep sense of malaise.

A serious erosion of the legitimacy of the state is both a cause and a consequence of the above trends. The first justification of the modern state was national liberation, the achievement of independence - or, in the rare case of the uncolonized country, the defence of national independence. The second justification was development, the achievement of a level of living that would permit people to realize their potential.

In many ways, both national liberation and development are now seen to have failed, or at least to have been severely compromised. With economic policy dictated by the international creditors and economic performance in the grip of commodity markets and currency exchanges, with the room for political maneuver severely constrained by the regional interests of larger powers, with the people becoming more familiar with the cartoon characters of the West than with the figures of the myths and legends of their own cultures, the sense of autonomy that national independence was assumed to bring has faded.

The great integrative ideologies that impelled the political movements of the early part of the twentieth century have lost their power to inspire, and no new ones have arisen to take their place. Yet the ground for political radicalization, born of the earlier-mentioned failures, remains extremely fertile. In combination, the two have meant a rise of protest movements with a deep conviction that the present system is unacceptable, but without a positive vision of the future on which they can build a programme capable of inspiring, convincing and building bridges to others.

Some groups faced with this dilemma have become violent and nihilistic, content to work on the destruction of the current system while leaving aside the question of what to put in its place. Others have delved back into the primary loyalties of religion, ethnicity, or race in an attempt to rediscover a meaningful source of social coherence and public morality. Others have plunged into progressive grass-roots activism, generating new social movements disassociated from the official political parties or formal political structures and quite uninterested in developing links with them. All of these forms of response are manifestations of a higher level of political consciousness among the poor and marginalized elements of society. They have given rise to new actors on the national scene who will both complicate and enrich the process of political development. To ignore their urge to be heard, to influence and participate in national development would be to squander a potential source of social and political energy and to create explosive new tensions within the polity.

Many such groups fundamentally reject "modernization," along with the goals and the means of development, both as processes that have failed to deliver on the promise of a better life for the many, and as processes directed toward the achievement of a concept of "the good life" that is at variance with the moral constructs of Asian traditions and cultures. Yet traditional norms and ethical values - or at least the traditional expressions of these norms and values - have lost much of their relevance in the greatly changed circumstances of life in the late twentieth century.

The fundamental question confronting Asian societies is how they can recover, preserve and enhance their capacities to respond creatively and authentically to rapid change, without either giving themselves up to or closing themselves off from external influences. How can they select what is useful and compatible with society's goals and reject what is destructive without relying on a rigid, authoritarian bureaucracy that squeezes rather than enlarges the space for freedom? A public philosophy and civic culture based upon endogenous moral and ethical traditions is a necessary starting point for meeting this challenge.

The political systems of the immediate post-colonial era were modelled on imported processes and institutions. Perhaps it was for this reason that they have had a high mortality rate. Some countries have managed to adapt the imports to their own traditions in a manner that may permit an evolution toward more open systems without inducing culture-shock. But the pattern

remains that in a number of countries, the democratic systems of Washington or Westminster have been grafted onto political cultures that had no basis for supporting them, and have not survived for long.

Too often, the reaction to the failure or erosion of imported democratic institutions is to "write off" democracy and freedom in Asia - and in much of the rest of the Third World by the same thinking. This conclusion is, in this writer's view, hasty and ill-founded. The process of evolving democratic institutions from a feudal, authoritarian past is a lengthy one. In most of the countries of Asia this historical process was interrupted by the colonial experience. Asian societies are called upon to pick up in mid-stream the process of working out their own culturally consistent definitions of freedom, responsibility and rectitude in civic life, and building indigenous notions of democratic participation upon these. It is inevitable and desirable that both the definitions and the forms of participation will be culturally specific.

There are many within Asian societies who are looking for ways to accelerate this process and to bring as many people and groups into it as possible. They recognize the importance of establishing in the polity a coincidence of purpose among individuals, households, communities and the state. But the effort to establish such a consensus about the governance of society is taking place in the vortex of change referred to earlier, and amidst powerful pressures from without and within. It is a process that can only be regarded as fragile, and its chances of proceeding along a smooth course are slim. The means and the tendency to lapse into violence abound, and the mechanisms for conflict resolution at the local and the national levels are weak. A space for freedom can only be preserved within a sensitive and dynamic balance between change, order and justice. The purpose of the second volume of the proposed work is to examine the impetus behind the obstacles in front of democracy in Asia.

III. The governance of the international system

The third volume will examine the rationale and the prospects for agreement among nation-states on changes in the operation of the international system which would allow them better to respond to the pressures that confront them. There are a number of tasks that no nation can hope to carry out successfully in isolation. One is the preservation of peace and security. A second is the achievement of economic property. A third is the maintenance of ecological stability. There are no doubt others. In all of the three areas mentioned, nations are painfully subject to the actions of others, though of course some are able to insulate themselves to some degree. But no nation, even the superpowers, are truly independent in these spheres. All rely to a considerable degree on the restraint of other states, and suffer the consequences when it is absent. The spillover of armed conflict, economic recession or environmental pollution across border, or even throughout the international system, is a fact of interdependence.

Many of the actors in the transnational processes referred to above are non-state actors. They are private corporations, individual landowners, local governments, commodity brokers, foreign exchange dealers, popular movements, guerillas, drug traffickers, private investors, religious groups, and so forth. Their activities are very often beyond the control of governments. There are few instruments and institutions, governmental or non-governmental, to ensure the necessary degree of social accountability on the part of these agents. The means to mediate between national and international needs and policies are few and weak; so are the means to mediate between short-term and long-term objectives.

Many countries, especially in the developing world, face the imperative to change their social and political structures in order to move toward greater freedom and democratization. This is a painful and risky process, but a prerequisite for stability, security and progress in the long run. One of the question marks that hangs over this process is the degree of freedom in the international system for such processes to unfold in the national context without becoming entangled in a web of competing interests, fears and ambitions of external powers. How can the international system enlarge the political space for these evolutionary or revolutionary processes to take place without outside intervention?

No single global concept or system is going to provide comprehensive answers to these questions. The reinvigoration and support of regional organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, can make an important contribution to autonomous development within regions, by mediating between the international system and the nation-state.

Both nations and regions go through cycles of introversion and extroversion. The dynamics of this cycle may be at odds with the need to keep in constant touch with the pace of change in the external environment, or with the need to monitor closely the interaction of internal social and cultural

processes with externally driven political and economic developments. Again, regional organizations may have a role to play in moderating the effects of this cycle, while yet respecting it.

The current way of thinking about international organization is too much a prisoner of the nation-state. Given the erosion of the state's ability to control events, from above by the processes of transnationalization and from below by the proliferation of new actors independent of the state, the attempt to regulate events in the international system by working exclusively with states is no longer adequate. A dense network of associations crossing countries and regions needs further development, comprising academics, professional associations, popular movements, religious groups, environmental activists, labour unions, peasant associations, and so forth. Such groups can be the vehicles for "social learning," in which diversity of expression is honoured even as unity of purpose is forged.

The problem of creating channels through which the voices of non-state actors can be heard at the international level has not been satisfactorily resolved. Some prominent NGOs, mostly based in the North, have achieved a high level of recognition and even influence. Again, no single mechanism is likely to provide a solution. But it is worth giving serious thought to methods of opening the official institutions of the international system to the voices of people unmediated by national governments. In the more systematic interaction of governments and non-governmental actors there can begin a process of searching for a core of commonly held values around which a new consensus on the governance of the international system can be built.

This question of governance can no longer be avoided. The autonomy of the nation-state, which is the foundation of the current international system, has been eroded to the point where it is in many areas a fiction. A mode of governance is needed that can protect the integrity of nations without autonomy, that can insist on a degree of accountability both from states and from actors beyond the reach of states, and that can provide channels for states and peoples to work together on the large and urgent tasks that none can accomplish alone.