Human Values and Social Change in Asia

Magsaysay Awardees Assembly

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It is a great honor to have been invited to present the
keynote speech at this first Magsaysay Awardees Assembly.
The occassion is a momentous one. It provides us with an oppor-
tunity to look at ourselves as a group, and at our role in
the continuing evolution of our respective countries. More-
over, now is a good time to reflect on the significance of
the award to us and to the general public.

When we look back at the past thirty years, we realize
how much has changed in Asia as a whole. Certainly we are
still engaged in the same efforts as then -- efforts at nation
building and at forging our national identities. But the deep
ideological fissures that ran through much of Asia, and which
polarized so much of Asia, no longer seem as threatening as
before. The ravages of the wars and conflicts of that period
are, however, still with us. The large number of Asian refugees
now spread in many parts of the world are testimony to the
human cost of these conflagrations.

Asia obviously will still have a long way to go until
its aspirations are realized. In one respect, however, there
has been significant change. Asia has very much come into its
own. No longer are Asian countries looked at as mere chess-
pieces, to be moved according to the calculations of superpower
interests. No longer are Asian countries simply considered
as powerless dominoes to be shored up by external force. There
is now, all around, a greater recognition and respect for
the autonomous character of the internal dynamics of the

countries in Asia.

Major economic chages have also taken place. In several countries a vigorous entrepreneurial middle class has emerged. The economic dynamism in the region has become a fact of modern life, unevenly spread though it still is. Many people in and outside Asia have begun to look at the Asia-Pacific region as the area of potentially most dynamic economic growth. Some even speak of a shift of the economic and political center of gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and foresee an Asia-Pacific era in the 21st century. There is, however, nothing automatic about the realization of such a scenario. In several of our countries economic progress has very much deepened the gap between the rich and the poor. In fact, in those countries, the rich have more in common with the lifestyles and intellectual preoccupations of people in the affluent industrial West than with the poor in their own countries. While tremendous expansion of the educational system has taken place, the absolute number of illiterates in Asia as increased rather than decreased. Our failure in the area of rural development is very much responsible for the massive urban crisis that is now upon us in Asia. The rise of urban criminality and the phenomenaAof "street children" are simply expressions of our growing incapacity to stay on top of our urban problems. Environmental degradation, unemployment, oppresiveness or lack of security has led to massive migrations within countries as well as across national boundaries, often sparking additional conflicts.

In the course of three decades, we also have had to shed many illusions we had about ourselves. We now realize, for instance, that national cohesion and unity did not come as naturally as we had assumed. We now know that we are as capable of oppression and violence towards our own people as had been our former colonizers. Many of our countries have gone through tremendous convulsions, leading in some cases to the fragmentation of the state, and in others to the collapse of the political system or to major shifts in ideological orientation. Too many among us remain insensitive to the plight of the poor, the powerless and the marginalized in our own countries. As a result of our failure to overcome endemic poverty, and all too glaring inequality, the youth in many of our countries is profoundly alienated from the prevailing political system. In part, this may be a result of the rapidity of social and cultural change, but massive unemployment has also been a major factor, further aggravated by the impact of new labor-saving technologies. These factors have strengthened the tendencies of the young towards political radicalization -- increasingly along the fault-lines of race, ethnicity, religion and language.

It has in fact become clear in the last few decades that the more technology changes the functioning of our societies, the more ethical judgements become necessary, if we are to retain at least some degree of control over our future. We now know that technology choice is ultimately a cultural choice. It is through hard choices of that kind that we determine the kind of society that we want to live in and want our children to live in. These are therefore choices that

we cannot afford to leave to the technicians alone. Indeed

one of the lessons we have learned, I believe, is about the

centrality of culture and human values in development. Culture

is the bedrock from which reality is perceived, aspirations

are articulated, and choices defined -- including those related

to development. In a world of exceedingly rapid social change,

whether driven by development or not, questions of the preser-

vation, regeneration and adaptibility of cultures therefore

assume great urgency. The setting of goals and priorities,

and the choice of means in development, therefore, are ulti-

mately ethical issues. It is in this regard that the develop-

ment effort cannot be dissociated from our search for national

identities.

This search turns around the question of who we are as a nation

and what kind of society we want to live in and work towards.

Our answers to these questions will determine both level and

content of Asia' civic cultures: conscience, artistry, civic

courage, responsible criticism, public service , tolerance, and

compassion, ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓.

The balance we strike between liberty and responsibility,

between rights and obligations, between efficiency and jus-

tice, progress and equity, stability and change, preservation

and innovation, security and risk, openness and closedness,

will shape our national identities as well as the value confi-

gurations that are particular to each of our countries.

The search for national identity is bound to be long

and difficult. There is in the first place the need to recon-

cile the often conflicting demands of modernity and authen-

ticity. Secondly, we will have to define ourselves in our
own specificity as a nation in the context of an interdependet
world. This means that our sense of human solidarity should
not only encompass all of human beings on this globe, but
should also reflect our obligations to the interests of future
generations of humankind. Recognition of the centrality of
cultural factors in development also highlights the need for
a persistent search for common values across cultures, within
and between countries. The highest common values, rather than
the lowest common denominators of self-interest, should form
the ethical basis for cooperative action and mutual tolerance
across differing cultures, ideologies and systems.

In this, it is the strength of our value commitments
that shapes and sustains our national identities. The signifi-
cance of the Magsaysay Award does not only lie in the recogni-
tion of those individual commitments -- important though it
is --, but also in the encouragement it gives each of us.
Getting to know each other, as this occassion makes possible,
and knowing more about each other's work is bound to lead
to the mutual reinforcement of our efforts. I hope that we
will find ways to keep up with each others' endeavours, so
that we can draw strength and inspiration from them.

We are in a sense a brotherhood and sisterhood in our
common effort to insist on the primacy of human values in
forging our national identities in the larger concept of human
solidarity. It is this awareness that gives us pride of mem-
bership in this brother-and-sisterhood of the Magsaysay award.

To help lay the foundations for a shared sense of values in Asia; to keep alive those values and aspirations that will allow a country to emerge from turmoil, oppression and corruption with a strong civic culture, is a daunting task. The growing complexity and vulnerability of our societies in this period of transition, the uncertainty and unpredictability of the national and international conditions in which we will have to work, will surely test the strength of our faith and convictions. The awareness that we are not alone in our efforts, and the yearly additions to our community, constitute a source of strength that we owe to the existence of the Magsaysay Award, an existence for which we want to register our gratitude.

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