

Human Rights, Democracy and Globalization in Asia:

A view from the bottom

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Asian democracy

Asia is big; Japan through Turkey; Russia through Indonesia; that includes several sub-region, such as, Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific Islands. Often China is considered a sub-region of its own.

Asia has diverse culture. It has also a diverse system of the management of the statecraft that includes, among others, the following:

- ◇ Middle East (West Asia): Absolute monarchy, representative democracy, civilian dictatorship;
- ◇ Central Asia: Transitional system, representative democracy;
- ◇ South Asia: Absolute monarchy, representative democracy, military dictatorship, civilian dictatorship;
- ◇ Southeast Asia: Representative democracy, absolute monarchy, military dictatorship, monolithic system (people's democracy)
- ◇ East Asia: Representative democracy, monolithic system (people's democracy).
- ◇ China: Monolithic system (people's democracy).
- ◇ Pacific Islands: Representative democracy.

How Asian democracy looks like? There is no upper limit, nor is there any lower limit. It's often tailor-made. Different brands of Asian democracy are

- ◇ Democracy bottle-fed: Afghanistan, Iraq;
- ◇ Democracy bigot-led: Iran, Malaysia;
- ◇ Democracy royal-gift: Kuwait;
- ◇ Democracy under military boots: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand;
- ◇ Democracy marred by ethnic and religious conflict: India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia;
- ◇ Democracy with inner colony: Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts), India (Kashmir, northeast region); Sri Lanka (Jaffna); Russia (Chechnya); Japan (Ryukyu); Philippines (Mindanao); Indonesia (Aceh); Turkey (Kurdistan), Pakistan (Baluchistan);
- ◇ Democracy under US nuclear umbrella: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan.

In representative democracy, law of the majority is the rule of the game. The minorities are culturally at risk, politically excluded, socially discriminated and economically

deprived. This defines a context of vulnerability, powerlessness and insecurity. Democracy, nationalism and majority chauvinism are synonymous.

The core issue is the relationship between the state and the people. Here we come to the sphere of governance.

Governance

John Locke argued that the relationship between the government and the governed was in the nature of a contract – the Social Contract. By this contract, the people give their consent to be controlled by a government on condition that the government does not violate the natural rights of life, liberty and property. If any of these rights is infringed, the contract is broken and the people have a right to rebel to change the government.¹ Locke's political concept of natural rights produced the doctrine that the people as a whole should have complete control over their political destiny.

Locke's ideas were demonstrated in the revolt of the American colonies. In this context, the following words may be quoted from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

*We hold the truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and pursuit of Happiness. - That, to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, - That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.*²

The issue of governance is recently being addressed in development literature. In most Asian countries, fruits of development are often lost due to bad governance. This is manifested through corruption, harassment, humiliation and deliberate wastage of time, lack of respect for common people, unfriendly attitude, negligence to duties, plundering of public resources, nepotism and violence against minorities, women and children.

A major weakness in the governance system is lack of people's participation, which is in-built in public institutions dealing with development projects. This has been well reflected in a government document of Bangladesh.³

- The governance agenda has suffered from being insufficiently grounded in an understanding of where the governance 'needs' of the poor and of vulnerable groups including women lie and of the real-life constraints impinging on the initiative potential of political actors on governance issues.
- Burgeoning election expenditures has narrowed the field of political competition to a moneyed class and fuelled a propensity for corrupt practices to ensure 'recovery' of expenditures incurred.

¹ *Of Civil Government* (1689).

² Second paragraph of "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress Assembled", in Heater, D.B., *Political Ideas in the Modern World*. George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., London, 1967.

³ PDO-ICZMP. *State of the Coast*. Water Resources Planning Organization, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2006.

- An inherited colonial system of criminal and civil justice, which ensures ‘certainty of expense but uncertainty of results’ poses major barriers to the poor in terms of accessibility and affordability.
- Systems loss in the process of delivery of some services appears to be huge, making the system inefficient and ineffective.

It is widely agreed that good governance embodies participation, transparency, accountability and equity. It makes participation a right and hence ensures that voice of the poor and the excluded is heard. Moreover, good governance applies both to the North in their dealings with the South, as well as within the South itself, as the prevalent rampant corruption only keeps the poor and the disadvantaged, again, at the receiving end.⁴ Politics is being criminalized.

Criminalization and cleaning of politics

Whether we like it or not, our lives are controlled by political parties. They are now inseparable part of our system of governance. The first striking feature of the political parties is that these are person-oriented. Each party has a central figure, a main leader, the *Supremo*. In many countries, the main leader holds the office till her/his death. S/he cannot be replaced.

In a society of unequal, politics is a convenient tool for a small section of the people to establish and perpetuate their individual and clan interest. This is manifested in the dynastic regimes at all levels: local government, parliament and central leadership of the political parties. In many Asian countries, we observe third, fourth or even fifth generation of family rule legitimized through elections. The entire process has been criminalized.

Still we observe popular participation in elections. The members of the electorate still go to the polling booths with twin objectives. First, they like to exercise their right of franchise, which in many Asian societies has been earned after prolonged struggle and bloodshed. Secondly, the voters want a change. However, there are many who cannot vote. For example, the vulnerable groups, such as, religious and ethnic minorities, the *dalits* (lower caste, untouchable) and women are not allowed to cast vote by the power elite in some countries. Women's participation in the political process is hardly allowed in West Asian countries with few exceptions like Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel.

Parliamentary election has become a big industry with high investments and even higher rate of return. Money and muscle power is now *sine qua non* for elections. The increasing participation of the “new rich” in elections reinforces this hypothesis.

Transitional and liberal democracies limit themselves merely in the right to franchise and that are also being interrupted frequently in the pretext of national security (examples are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia). However, there are few cases, where the civil society-political parties' convergence attempts to break the

⁴ LDCWatch. *Civil society concerns of the implementation of the Brussels Program of Action for the decade of 2001-2010 at the high level meeting of the UN General Assembly on the mid-term review*. 18-19 September 2006, New York.

barrier. The recent democracy movement in Nepal (2006 and onward) is a unique example where conventional political parties have transcended beyond stereo-typed politics and prejudices and forged a greater alliance with the Maoists and have agreed on several radical propositions that may eventually change the history of Nepal. They not only agreed to abolish monarchy and establish secular democracy, but also pledged to implement land reforms and have addressed the issues of ethnicity, caste and gender for the first time. They also agreed to have a federal structure to bring parity among disadvantaged regions. The Maoists, for the first time in the history of Nepal, challenged the ruling elite representing the higher castes. Amongst the rank and file of the Maoists, there are thousands of poor peasants and a large number of them are women.

It is interesting to note that the role of the civil society has been ambiguous in many countries in addressing the issue of national security vs. human security. The civil society has been sharply divided in this respect. This has been manifested in the legitimizing nuclearization of India and Pakistan, glorifying military-monarchy alliance in Thailand and political cleansing in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Whereas in Nepal, common people have dictated terms and made the civil society, as well as the politicians, behave. However, the Nepal situation is still volatile.

Democracy, human rights

The core issue of human rights is to proclaim that human beings are subjects and not objects. In a system of governance institutionalized through the state, democracy in terms of human rights connotation simply means to what extent the state lives up to the expectations of the people.

Under the dictum of the state, human rights often refer to material and spiritual conditions of living and are boiled down to rights in the form of access to food, health, housing, labor, participation, freedom of expression and to have a life with dignity. All these together define a framework for human security. These cannot be conceived in isolation, but are directly related to the system of macro and micro level management of the state.

Many people are poor. They are not merely income-poor, but also vulnerable. Here poverty is vulnerability. An income-rich woman can be poor in a hostile society. An income-poor person can be rich in terms of happiness. Lack of capacity to cope with exogenous conditions, conflicting values, doctrines and lifestyles imposed by others create, enhance and perpetuate vulnerability and thus affect the state of human rights.

The domain of democracy has been narrowed down to a right to franchise and a level-playing field in terms of opportunities has been offered in the form of market. Ground realities are different.

Omar Khoiyam, the great Persian poet of the medieval era, wrote:

*A glass of wine and a piece of bread
A companion and a book of poem
What else you need in your life
If you want to be happy.*

A piece of bread is still missing for millions of people. In 1970 the first the first UN summit of LDCs (least developed countries) was held. At that time the number of LDCs was twenty-five. In 2001, the third UN summit of LDCs was held. The umber of LDCs rose to 50 of which fifteen are in Asia. More than a billion LDC citizens hardly obtain anything from the market.

What is democracy to them: right to food?

What is democracy to them: right to work?

What is democracy to them: right to housing?

What is democracy to them: right to fair price?

What is democracy to them: right to participate?

What is democracy to them: right to protest?

What is democracy to them: right to live with dignity?

These are basic human rights and, if denied, are not compatible with democracy. Asian democracy is largely insensitive to these crude conditions of existence that denotes a state of denial of human rights and denial of democracy. People live in a state of utmost insecurity. States are not delivering and democracy is an empty word.

Poverty and vulnerability

For poor people, vulnerability is both a condition and a determinant of insecurity, and refers to the ability of people to avoid, withstand or recover from the harmful impacts of factors that disrupt their lives and that are beyond their immediate control. This includes shocks (sudden changes such as natural disasters, conflict or collapsing market prices), seasonality (low demand for farm labor between plantation and harvesting periods) and trends (gradual environmental degradation, oppressive political systems or deteriorating terms of trade). In Bangladesh and many Asian countries, a wide range of vulnerabilities is identified. These are:

- ◇ the threat of floods, cyclones and storm surges that causes deaths and destruction;
- ◇ the threat of land erosion that causes untold sufferings and dislocation;
- ◇ deterioration and the declining viability of many distinctive and threatened ecosystems;
- ◇ widespread poverty, limited livelihoods opportunities and poorly developed economic linkages;
- ◇ poor levels of services that make the isolation of many communities worse;
- ◇ highly unequal social structures, with a small powerful elite dominating the mass of people, allied to high levels of conflict and poor law and order;
- ◇ changing patterns of land use (rapid urbanization and industrialization) that are causing displacement and dislocation;
- ◇ resource degradation.

These vulnerabilities affect the livelihoods of the communities, particularly living at the fringe. Their significance, however, vary greatly between localities, occupational groups and sexes. Also important is the ways in which vulnerabilities interact with each other, with most households, and especially the poor, facing multiple vulnerabilities that compound each other in terms of both the impact of specific events and the capability to recover from these events when they do strike. For example, the poor infrastructure and remoteness of many localities means that the immediate impact of a major cyclone is likely to be more severe and relief efforts are hampered. Subsequently, when the survivors are rebuilding their livelihoods after the disaster, poor access to market, credit and other services, institutional weaknesses and the deterioration of the coastal resource base delay and hamper the recovery process.⁵

Bangladesh belongs to the category of least development countries (LDC) under conventional UN yardsticks. The profile of human deprivation reveals that about half of the population is income poor. Therefore, a development strategy in Bangladesh essentially encompasses interventions in 'poverty alleviation' and enhancement of the 'material standard of living'. Many NGOs and Banks have been facilitating access to capital through micro-credit. This access filter is very important in the perception of the people who need it. Micro-credit has increasingly been used as a tool of generating self-employment among the poor and thus helps millions of poor people to survive when economy is increasingly being privatized and the human welfare is no more the main domain of the state.

In recent years, there has been a greater consensus and demand from the civil society in Bangladesh that more and more authority should be delegated to the local government, where the principal role of the central government should be that of facilitation. At present, local government functions at the bottom, but without any administrative and financial authority. This works like an extension of the central bureaucracy.

Human rights and human security

Security has a number of dimensions. One is physical - security of persons in terms of safety, freedom from risk of physical violence. To this may be added freedom from environmental insecurity. A second concern is security of livelihood. Thirdly, it refers to protection against contingencies -accident, ill health, etc. Insecurity of livelihood is linked to the exclusion from land, market and human rights.

The notion of exclusion links both social rights and material deprivations. It encompasses not only the lack of access to goods and services, which underlie poverty and basic needs satisfaction, but also exclusion from security, justice, representation and citizenship.⁶ In fact, democracy is refined and redefined in terms of security that it can deliver.

We live under the dictum of the state. We create states to deliver services and they emerge as super institutions to regulate us. Governance becomes state-centric and not

⁵ Water Resources Planning Organization, Bangladesh. *Living in the Coast - People and Livelihoods*. Dhaka, 2004.

⁶ International Institute for Labor Studies, UNDP. *Social Exclusion - Rhetoric, Reality, Responses*. ILO, Geneva, 1995.

people-centric. National security is a state ideology and human security is people's aspiration.

In Asia, human rights and human security, both individual and collective, are under siege because of various factors. These have been well summarized in a recent ARENA⁷ document.⁸ These are:

- ◇ multilateral corporate greed (Bhopal);
- ◇ governmental lawlessness (Gaza, West Bank);
- ◇ single superpower imperialism and unilateralism (Iraq, Afghanistan);
- ◇ exclusion and discrimination (Indonesia, Japan);
- ◇ manipulation of ethnicity and identity (Lebanon, Sri Lanka);
- ◇ religious fundamentalism (India, Philippines, Saudi Arabia)
- ◇ wanton degradation of the environment (Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia);
- ◇ developmental monstrosities (Narmada Dam in India, Pak Mun Dam in Thailand);
- ◇ degrading human poverty that becomes fully exposed only as a result of tragic earthquake (Surat in India, Qom in Iran);
- ◇ plight of the migrant workers (from all over Asia).

Human security is premised on freedom from want and freedom from fear. Thus it innately questions models of national security that states follow; rejects development models that makes development a predator of peoples' security and advocates social justice based on equity.⁹ "Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity."¹⁰

It may be mentioned that ARENA launched a book project on human security under its "war and militarization" program and the draft papers were discussed in a workshop held in Bangkok in May 2006. This has been one of the milestones of ARENA programs that tried to articulate the notion of human security, as summarized in the following paragraphs.

Human security discourses argue that security can be empowering if it is linked to human rights and human development. The convincing argument is made that states that do not accept these social ethics cannot protect people from critical and pervasive threats and situations. (Human security now) In many countries that accept the concept of people's rights, women's rights are still not included

⁷ ARENA (Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives) is a regional network of 'public intellectuals' that has been trying to develop alternative discourses on development and empowerment. Its secretariat is located in Seoul.

⁸ Dias, Clarence J and Qazilbash, Ali M. *Human Security under Global Siege*. Compiled in ARENA (2006), *Putting People at the Centre -Human Security in Issues in Asia*. Ed. Anuradha M. Chenoy. Asian Exchange, Vol. 22, No. 2 / Vol. 23, No. 1,

⁹ Chenoy, Anuradha M. *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Mahbub ul Huq, quoted by Chenoy. *Ibid*.

*in the democratic and human right discourse. The goals of human security will be further widened, if special efforts are made to include women and the marginalized at all levels of institutions and policy planning.*¹¹

.....States are being forced to accept the human security concept as the find traditional security insufficient to cope with security needs and in order to increase their legitimacy and role in international affairs. However, peoples' movements and NGOs need to re-appropriate the concept to its original meaning of peoples' security and pressurize states to accept it in its entirety.

When states become people-excluding machines and resort to 'homogenization', religion is politicized and other views are branded as separatist and terrorist. This has happened in Thailand, Philippines, India and Bangladesh. Nepal seems to have overcome this standoff.

Global scenario

Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s coined the phrase “the end of history”. His notion is that we are now witnessing the end of years and of nations, which will become a global community that has resolved its differences and, as such, history. The end of history reveals itself in the omnipresence of capitalism, and national histories dissolve in the limitless time of the globalized world. This means, we shall reach the paradise, the never-ending era.¹²

What do we see today? Global scenario is manifested through increasing prosperity, as well as abject poverty. Clash of cultures is the order of the day.

Now we confront neo-liberal terrorism, militarism, corporate globalization and debt slavery. Every child in Bangladesh is born with a debt obligation of US\$ 140. Debt service pushes poor people further out of the fringe. The debt situation is grave in Philippines and Indonesia. Much of the debt is odious, illegitimate and immoral.

International financial institutions (IFIs) are major violators of human rights. People protest against violation of human rights. Civic actions take place against the prejudicial acts of the government and the multilateral agencies. There are different languages of protest. Protesters are not just local kids. They assemble from across the region. Solidarity is a strong weapon for them to achieve freedom. This is manifested in, among others, world social forums.

What is needed is a fair distribution of the fruits of globalization. The central issue is inequality: inequality within nations; inequality between nations.

Globalization in itself is not a folly. It has enriched the world scientifically and culturally and benefited many people economically as well. Over thousands of years, globalization has progressed through travel, trade, migration and dissemination of knowledge. The question is not just whether there exist some gain for all parties, but whether the distribution of gains is fair.

¹¹ Chenoy. *Op cit.*

¹² *The World Guide - an alternative reference to the countries of our planet 2003/2004.* New Internationalist, Oxford, 2004.

The use of the market system is consistent with many different institutional conditions, and they can produce different outcomes. Market economy can generate many different results depending on:

- ◇ How physical resources are distributed;
- ◇ How human resources are developed; and
- ◇ What “rules of game” prevail?

The world has changed since the Breton Woods agreement in 1944.

At that time

- ◇ Most of Africa and Asia was colonized;
- ◇ Tolerance of insecurity and poverty was greater;
- ◇ Idea of human rights was weak;
- ◇ NGOs have not emerged yet;
- ◇ Environment was not seen as an important issue;
- ◇ Democracy was not seen as a global entitlement.

Now we live in a different world. The world has changed. Both policy and institutional changes are needed. The balance of power that reflected the status quo in the 1940s has to be reexamined. To replace one form of dominance with other is no answer.¹³

The evidence of contemporary global struggles strongly suggests that people will fight to maintain their rights despite the force of globalization. Solidarity is a positive and powerful form of globalization that the people has been using and shall use more vigorously.

¹³ Sen, Amartya. *Ten Theses on Globalization*. New Perspectives Quarterly, Vol. 18, No 4, Fall 2001.