

**ISLAM IN THE EAST-WEST DEBATE**

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## FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union were indeed major upheavals that changed the world political landscape. Major political landmarks which formed the basis of a bipolar world had given way to a newly evolving reality. While much attention was given to the forging of new alliances in the multi-polar world with economic matters becoming a major preoccupation among thinkers, not enough attention is given to the very nature of international relations which is based on the converging and conflicting interests of the major players in the world arena.

Parallel to the development is a major concern resulting from the implications of new dynamics taking place in the world. The world is presented with *(a)* the prospect of declining Western economic and political power, *(b)* the rise in economic power of the Asia-Pacific region and *(c)* the Islamic resurgence, and *(d)* the re-emergence of ethnic-based conflicts in many parts of the world. Western public opinion is not fully equipped to face the new reality. There are doubts expressed by certain quarters that the West is prepared to face it with new confidence.

The communist dragon had all but been slain but in its place was a greater "threat" of greater longevity. While the demise of Soviet Union resulted with a much

weakened former American foe, on the other side of the hemisphere a new threat is emerging. China is embarking on massive economic development. In the long run, the collective rise of China with other dynamically evolving Confucian-based countries like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, will pose a formidable challenge to Western pre-eminence.

Ever since the OPEC oil embargo that jolted Western economic stability, the world is seeing a more assertive Muslim world. Serious Western political observers have yet to fully understand the real undercurrent that followed the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical leaders; the Iraq War; the defeat of Soviet forces in the hands of the Afghan mujahiddin; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Libya under Ghaddafi, Sudan with Hassan Turabi, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Tunisia and the defeat of secular government in Algeria in the hands of a fundamentalist political party. While countries forming the Central Asian Republics are grappling with the question of how to mould their future with their neighbours i.e. Pakistan, Iran and Turkey with each, I believe, eager to offer their respective systems as models, it is thus too early to speculate their ramifications. Meanwhile the West is seeing a more assertive and vocal Malaysia.

The world, indeed, is facing a major transition. Will this transition lead to a reversal of Western-dominated values and lifestyles or would a Confucian Asia and Islam provide a possible alternative? Or will the coming century see the world transformed into a mixture of the three mutually influencing traditions? In my view, the economic

factor will play a dominant, if not a decisive, role in the reshaping of the new world.

### The East-West Debate

For the purpose of this discussion, I will not use the strict geographical definition of East and West because the focus here is related more to ideas, principles and political philosophies than to mere geographical divisions. Suffice to say that West here is defined as those sharing Western doctrine; beliefs and postulations pertaining to values as expounded by the American and European political philosophers which place the rights of the individual over those of the society; democracy; freedom of expression and human rights. East or Asian here refers to those who believe in consensus, discipline, commitment to collectivism and group social values, rights of the community over those of the individual, respect to elders, commitment to family cohesion and the placing of a high premium on education and savings.

To those following this debate closely, the central issue is the relationship between democracy and economic development. Proponents of the West insist that democracy with all its "intrinsic" characteristics such as human rights, freedom of choice and expression and economic development must go hand in hand. This is rejected by a number of Asian leaders. While the West would like to see communism replaced by democracy because it is not only "the right political system, but by and large, it is the best one" those rejecting this thesis say that it is not necessarily so.

Mr Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Soviet specialist and a former national security adviser in the US under President Jimmy Carter's administration originally thought that it would

take five years to transform post-communist societies. Now, he believes it would take 10 to 30 years. In my view, given the dynamics of the current situation in Russia and the fact that it lacks the historical precondition worsened by the political and institutional preconditions for such a change which are almost non-existent, it could take much longer than anticipated.

The West wants the whole world to believe that the correct route to development and modernisation is via its model. The sad Russian episode proves that the West has not been quite right and the yet-to-succeed former East Germany's effort to better its people's standard of living despite massive injection of funds from Bonn had further weakened the Western argument.

The key reason for this is the history of the changing society itself. Donald Kagan, in an open criticism of those bent on imposing the Western brand of change appealed to Americans to engage in self-examination (AWSJ Dec 24 '94). It is a lengthy discourse but an illuminating one.

He said, 'US is a country that was never a nation in the sense of resting on common ancestry but one that depend on a set of beliefs and institutions derived form Western traditions.'

"Western civilisation was not the result of some inevitable process through which other cultures will automatically pass. It emerged from a unique history in which chance and accident played a vital part. The institutions and ideas that provide for

freedom and improvement in material conditions cannot flourish without an understanding of how they come about. The many civilisations adopted by the human race have shared basic characteristics. Most have tended toward cultural uniformity and stability. Reason, though employed for all sorts of practical and intellectual purposes, lacked independence from religion and the high status to challenge the most basic received ideas. The standard form of government has been monarchy. Religious and political institutions and beliefs have been thoroughly intertwined in a mutually supportive unified structure; government has not been subjected to secular, reasoned analysis."

"The first and sharpest break from this common experience came in ancient Greece. The Greek city-states were republics. There were no kings with the wealth to hire mercenary soldiers, so the citizens did their own fighting. As independent defenders of the common safety and interest, they demanded a role in the most important political decision; in this way for the first time, political life came to be shared by a relatively large portion of the people."

Although the West is very much influenced by the Judeo-Christian traditions, the toppling of the weakened Roman Empire by the Germanic tribes had created a situation filled by endless conflict among secular rulers and between them and the church, thus allowing some space for the concept of freedom to grow and in towns and cities, modern world began to take form. Although the people were Christian, their life and outlook become increasingly secular.

"Francis Bacon, influenced by Machiavelli, urged human beings to employ their reason to force nature to give up its secrets. He assumed that such a course would lead to progress and the general improvement of human condition. Such thinking lay at the heart of the scientific revolution and remain the faith upon which modern science and technology rest.

Hobbes and Locke applied a similar novelty and modernity to the sphere of politics, discovering "natural rights" that belong to man either as part of nature or as the gift of a benevolent and reasonable God. Man's basic rights -- life, liberty and property - - were seen as absolute."

Kagan's analysis holds truth with regard to the evolution of a distinct tradition for modernising Asia. Yet the West insists that Asia has to follow its footsteps. They cite the South Korean, Taiwanese and colonial Hong Kong experience which they claim as increasingly becoming more democratised while improving their standard of living. Those familiar with the recent history of these places and understand their close economic ties with US and Britain will understand it better.

Look at what happened to a number of countries in Africa when Western democracy and the one man one vote system was introduced to what used to be tribal-based societies? It brought about violent conflict, deaths and destruction. India, the biggest democracy in the world, is struggling in its attempt to forge a consensus on improving the people's lot. In less than one generation, Sri Lanka has gone down the path of destruction as a result of populist policies implemented in the name of



democracy. Closer to us, the Philippines which was modelled after American democracy is facing great difficulty in improving the standard of living for its people. The world should accept that in introducing democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and the rights of the individual, one cannot but bear in mind the importance of local context, local condition and local history and the stage of development of the society.

The way I see it, as the Americans and Europeans face a slow decline in their economic dominance and as their confidence in facing changes taking place around the world is gradually eroded they become more active and aggressive in preaching their values and are increasingly high-handed in dealing with Asia. The East-West debate will be louder and the exchange more robust. Asian countries, buoyed by their newly found confidence through their economic successes, will become more assertive in defending their right to choose. Time will be the final arbiter.

To the ordinary Americans and Europeans, the debate may be of less significance. However, we had seen how these people, faced with moral decline, corruption of Western values, increase in violent crimes, family disintegration and increase in burden of state welfarism seek solace and peace of mind by looking towards the East.

Will there be a major shift of thinking among the Western intellectuals? I believe that apart from being nationalists and xenophobics, they are also capable of being pragmatic. For Western professionals, managers and businessmen who will be drawn by new opportunities to work and live temporarily in Asia, their perception

understanding of Asia and the Asian way of life will be very much shaped by their own personal experience. They may not be seen as good opinion multipliers but whatever they see and experience could have a positive lifetime impact. We in Asia must try to cultivate these people.

### **Where is the position of Islam?**

Prior to the resurgence of political Islam and the collapse of communism, the Western perception of Islam was very much influenced by ignorance, confusion and misinformation. This is worsened by the self-righteousness of the Western media and bias postulations by their intellectuals. While the 800 million muslims may form one-fifth of the world's population, they had never become a major preoccupation to Western policy planners and strategists. Despite its long drawn conflict, the Palestinian issue and its related problems was seen strictly as a Middle East issue, not a world-wide phenomenon.

In Asia and among the Asians, the Islamic threat tends to be viewed in the light of the Indo-Pakistani armed conflict and the Moro armed struggle in the Philippines with the rest of the South-East Asian Muslims forming the moderate lot.

However, rightly or wrongly, the Western perception is changing rapidly. There are a number of reasons attributed to this shifting viewpoint.

Firstly, while the Muslim world in general remains committed to a moderate view, there has been greater intellectual ferment taking place in some Muslim countries.

Secondly, there exists among Western observers on Islam a belief that Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise. They attribute this to the inroads made by the fundamentalists (generally described as a group of persons who pursue the objective of creating an Islamic state ruled by syariah law through aggressive campaign or use of force) in a number of Muslim countries. They see the continuous rule in Iran by the Shiite clergy and the defeat of the secular government in the hands of a fundamentalist political party in free elections in Algeria and the violence following the reinstatement of a military-appointed government as a new threat. The success of the Rafah Party in Turkey's mayoral election is seen as fundamentalists making inroads into the bastion of the long held secular state. The role played by Sudan in supporting fundamentalist groups among its neighbours is viewed as a collusion with Libya to undermine secular Egypt. Similarly, the Hindu-Islam conflict centred on Babri Mosque in the Indian subcontinent is regarded as a major phenomenon. The reaction of the Muslim world to Bulgari's treatment of its Muslim citizens is being regarded as unjustified. The bombing of World Trade Centre, the involvement of "Afghans" in violence-related incidents, the attacks on tourists in Egypt and the more vocal opposition to some Islamic rulings in Saudi Arabia are seen as an Islamic conspiracy.

Thirdly, the violent Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie and to a much lesser extent, Taslima Nasrin's blasphemies had jolted the minds of Western liberals.

Fourthly, the alleged Iraqi and Libyan attempts to acquire nuclear arsenals and the potential threat they pose to world peace has added a new dimension to the issue.

Fifthly, the higher profile taken by the OIC on the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the loud protest on what it viewed as Western hypocrisy on human rights has caused a greater sense of guilt in the West.

While these developments have altered the Western perception of the Muslim world, some among them have called for swift and forceful handling of the Islamic "challenge". The "fate" that have befallen Iran, Muammar Ghadaffi and Saddam Hussein are examples of the West's resolve to deal with what they see as international "delinquents".

How does Confucian Asia see Islam?

In my view, given the geography, distance and nature of interaction between the two, there seem to be mutual acceptance that each is not a threat to the other. The Chinese may have among them Muslims but compared to its billion population the number is quite insignificant. The waves of Islamic resurgence in other parts of the world did not reach the shores of communist China, Korea, and Japan the way the charismatic Christians did.

In these and other parts of East Asia, the number of Muslims are too small while the economic and trade links between them are always mutually benefiting.

This does not mean that the relationship between monotheist Islam and part agnostic and part Buddhist or Confucian Asia is totally problem-free. The long-severed Silk

Route connection had set the two traditions apart and created a gulf of ignorance and mutual distancing between the two. Herein lies the future danger. As both become more assertive against the West and as Confucian Asia becomes a major player in world affairs commensurate with its economic power, the absence of mutual "rediscovery" between Islam and Confucian Asia could lead to future problems. Encounters between the two, though in a much limited scale and under distinct local conditions, have taken place in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

In places where the relationship is carefully and sensitively managed, there is hope that it will bring about the mutual maximising of each other's potentials. On the other hand where the handling is poor or if it fell into momentary lapse, conflict may occur.

### **Conclusion**

- (1) Whatever the future scenario, at world and regional levels, the West, the East and Islam will have to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate their relatively new found position and power. The extent to which one tradition can influence the other will depend on its economic strength and its ability to attract others to accept its agenda.
- (2) However, as the East, West and Islam are not homogenous and each has its own constituents representing shades of viewpoint with the rightists forming the core of the concentric circle, the mutual exposure to each other's tradition will result in the creation of overlapping of circles. We must, in theory, work

continuously but carefully towards enlargement of the overlapping areas.

- (3) In each of the three civilisations, there always exist the ultra groups or the extremists. They may have engaged themselves in violent campaigns and destructive acts but they are a minority and their actions should not be taken as representing the majority.
  
- (4) For the Muslims, the current challenge from the West and the possible emergence of a powerful Confucian Asia is something that is not new. This would be another cycle of experience. Following the fall of Islam in Spain, the collapse of the Ummayyad and Abbasid dynasties and rise of Western civilisation, Islam had continuously made adjustments in line with the changing environment. There are a number of reasons leading to their successful adjustments. Firstly, the teaching of Islam itself which is universal. Secondly, through the ages, the role played by the "ulama tafsir" or Islamic expert in interpreting the Holy Quran and the revelations had been crucial in guiding the ummah to overcome new circumstances or new innovations affecting daily life. Thirdly, while from time to time there had been attempts to cast aside the use of reason (*ijtihad*), there were more exceptions than the rule. By and large, the practice of *ijtihad* remains very much alive and has helped to forge acceptance of new circumstances. Fourthly, Islam is basically a religion of peace and it rejects the use of force except under extenuating circumstances.

- (5) To avoid possible misunderstanding arising out of ignorance or misinformation, there is need for greater dialogue among the intellectuals from the three great traditions.
- (6) As extremism thrives on well-publicised violent acts and are encouraged by passive reaction from within the societies, a well-coordinated effort to control and eliminate them must be mounted.
- (7) The issue at hand is not as seen by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington -- human conflict based on a showdown over culture. It will be a period of great exchange that holds great promise for the moderates.

***ABOUT THE SPEAKER/WRITER***

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