

**Asia Leadership Fellow Program Special Symposium:**  
**The Future of Civil Society in Asia**  
**(Summary)**

Date: 6 February 2013

Venue: International House of Japan, Tokyo

## **Summary**

### **[Panel 1] New Politics and Civil Society in Asia**

#### **Chito Gascon (Office of the Presidential Political Adviser/LIBERTAS) / Philippines**

Mr. Gascon reflected on new politics and civil society in Asia from a Filipino standpoint and pointed out how the Philippines illustrates how merely transitioning from an authoritarian to democratic system does not necessarily mean society and politics are functioning well. The key point is continuing to build the necessary economic and political structures to ensure that democratization is sustainable. The Philippines' colonial past has significantly impacted its politics meaning contestation of power has occurred among sections of the political and economic elites, while the great majority has been excluded from decision-making. The instability resulted in a shift from a democratic to an authoritarian regime, which, in turn, gave rise to new social movements creating alternative centers of power outside of the state. Since then, despite various ups and downs, the Philippines has experienced a democratic renaissance with the emergence of politics, governance and democracy frameworks aimed at sustainable democratic reform. Finally, other countries in Southeast Asia have undergone similar experiences and there is a need for international support and solidarity.

#### **Imtiaz Gul (Centre for Research and Security Studies) / Pakistan**

Mr. Gul stated his belief that civil society is being torn between the two forces of ruling elites trying to maintain their grip on power, and the middle and lower class breaking out from the status quo. The emergence of mass media, communication, and social media and the failure by governments to address the needs of society have helped promote a common rise in civil society activism and solidarity that can be seen in numerous countries. While we have witnessed numerous revolutions in recent years, there still exists a huge difference between haves and have-nots. The primary question in light of the Arab Spring, is whether this can bring about socio-political change and people-focused politics. Japan and the prosperous members of ASEAN could also contribute to this goal by fostering capacity-building among civil society and helping create a human network in Asia. While the immensity of the task is discouraging, we must continue to struggle on.

#### **Vinod Raina (Center for the Study of Developing Societies) / India**

Dr. Raina spoke about the global situation regarding politics and civil society noting that civil society in Asia cannot be separated from global happenings. In particular, three

“imperialisms” (which are called crisis in the UN) are evident today, namely economic “imperialisms,” ecological “imperialisms,” and the “imperialisms” of war and militarism. Another challenge is to understand that these issues should not be examined separately but all together. Dr. Raina also highlighted the blurring of the categories of oppressor and oppressed, and haves and have-nots, citing the Occupy movement in developed countries, or the rise of non-traditional hegemons among the BRICs countries. He also mentioned the regime changes achieved by young students in Asia and Africa, without relying on the power of traditional hegemons, as a source of hope. Finally, Dr. Raina urged that, democracy is a good idea, but not yet a good practice. To bridge this gap, we need to move beyond the traditional framework of the sovereign state, and place our hopes in the rise of civil society.

### **Huang Ping (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) / China**

Dr. Huang was invited to comment on the preceding presentations. He noted that while many people are talking about the “Asian Century” Asia is still the region with the least integration economically and in terms of identity. While its size and recent economic growth give rise to optimism, Asia faces many problems, too. Globalization and the flow of information have brought about many new possibilities but Asia remains in the shadow of international politics. There still exist problems between countries within countries themselves. At the same time, despite their advanced development, Western countries have suffered as well, as witnessed in the polarization of US politics or the disintegration of the EU. Nevertheless, we face a number of non-traditional challenges that civil society cannot tackle on its own. We need new politics and frameworks, and a new networked society that works together to address these issues.

### **Q&A**

In the ensuing Q&A session, the first topic to be discussed was the impact of investment in education and social capital on civil society with panelists agreeing that education should not be merely limited to preparing workers for the labor market. Furthermore, greater access to education is required and knowledge should not be commodified. Panelists also discussed the need for cross-border alliances to address modern, cross-border issues that cannot be solved by sovereign-state action alone. The concept of “frenemies” (friend+enemy) was also raised. The panelists acknowledged that the term may represent an effort to go beyond traditional binary definitions of relationships. For example, while countries could experience conflict on a state-to-state level, their relationship on a human level could be one of friendship. At the same time,

relationships were not always necessary a half-and-half “frenemy” combination.

**[Panel 2] The Future of Asia, the World and Humanity from Japan after 3.11  
Ohashi Masaaki (Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation) / Japan**

Prof. Ohashi spoke about the lessons from Fukushima for people and CSOs. He began by outlining the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In the ensuing aftermath, there has been a breakdown in the reliability of government-led action and trust in the government. As a result, the role of civil movements and NGOs has expanded to fill that space, particularly in the fields of victim support, radiation monitoring, and recuperation. Prof. Ohashi also stressed that nuclear power is unstable. Not only should Japan find alternative means of power generation, but it should also stop its plans to export nuclear power plants to the rest of Asia and to developing countries around the world.

**Lee Seejae (The Korea Federation for Environmental Movement) / Korea**

Dr. Lee questioned whether Fukushima will open the way for a sustainable future and focused on contending forces in the struggle for a post-Fukushima future. The post-Fukushima future demands many changes to civilization, not least a nuclear free energy system. Nuclear power is no longer safe and the Fukushima accident was not a freak accident, but a normal one. Worldwide there has been a shift in the attitude towards nuclear power with a rise in civil movements calling for its abolition. Nevertheless, strong promotion of nuclear power generation continues to take place in Korea, Russia and China. Similarly, despite responses by the Japanese government, many so-called “nuclear-power villagers” with vested interests remain, holding back the movement away from reliance on nuclear power. Still, a breakthrough is possible, but given the various contending forces and geopolitical interests, we must rely on civil society.

**Huang Jiansheng (Yunnan University of Nationalities) / China**

Dr. Huang Jiansheng presented on knowledge fragmentation, sense of risk and their implications in community life. According to Ulrich Beck, we are living in a time of the risk society, in which perception of risk is socially constructed. Moreover, modern social risk is invisible and unclear to the majority of average citizens. When news of the Fukushima nuclear accident reached China, two main forms of reaction were visible among the population. One was of irrational panic, while the other was of total indifference. Both responses further threaten human safety and are indications of

knowledge fragmentation. Three factors contribute to this fragmentation of traditional knowledge which was once very significant in the process of decision-making for individuals. In China, these are modern education, labor migration to urban centers, and development that is catered towards tourists. In conclusion, the institutional fragmentation of knowledge leads to public uncertainty, confusion about catastrophes, harm to human beings, and the inability to adopt proper approaches to prevent such harms.

**Diana Wong (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) / Malaysia**

Dr. Wong summed up the preceding presentations and offered complementary remarks. There once existed a flying geese paradigm of industrialization that stressed economic growth at all costs. However, in the aftermath of 3.11 and the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, that model has since been shattered. It is also clear that there no longer exists a lead goose to set an example for the rest of the world to follow. Furthermore, despite the rise of Asian nations and rapid economic growth in the region, the subsequent emergence of a sense of Asian triumphalism is no longer valid either. It too risks trapping Asia in a mindset that is geared towards Western thought and models. Finally, in light of the irrational and also indifferent nature of the public, as well as the short term memory of the public, public intellectuals have a major role to play in terms of ensuring that conversations necessary for positive change are continued.

**Q&A**

After the various presentations, a Q&A session was held. One of the major topics of discussion was ways in which Japan could continue to contribute to Asia going forward. In this regard, Japan can set an example by shifting away from reliance on nuclear energy. Furthermore, it was pointed out that we live in a world of mutual interdependence and that all countries could engage in knowledge sharing and promoting mutual understanding. The inherent risks in society were also raised as pressing issues. In particular, there exist man-made risks in Korea and accidents that are waiting to happen. Additionally, the panelists noted that technology and the spread of information has helped promote mass mobilization and improved the ability of NGOs to correctly identify urgent needs.

**[Panel Discussion] Challenges and Possibilities of ALFP: What Can Civil Society in Asia Do for the Next Decade?**

**Fouzia Saeed (Mehergarh) / Pakistan**

Dr. Saeed discussed civil society and its balancing act in Asia and started by noting that various region-wide issues exist in Asia, including tensions between countries, internal tensions within countries, and lop-sided development. She also listed positive trends in Asian civil society such as collective bargaining and the willingness to demand change. However, the success of civil society has been limited. There are many issues that are yet to be addressed. In particular, it is necessary to ensure that revolutions that have been brought about are retained. Furthermore, civil society should not merely perform a criticizing function but should also provide constructive solutions to problems. Above all, the most important role that civil society should play is to act as a balance between various forces and needs, and help avoid excess.

**Goenawan Mohamad (Tempo/Komunitas Salihara) / Indonesia**

Mr. Mohamad shared the experiences of Indonesia's development. In particular he spoke of the problems associated with economic growth. While Indonesia is currently experiencing healthy levels of economic growth, this has also brought with it growing economic disparity. Moreover, despite a return to democracy in 1998 corruption among politicians and parliamentarians is on the rise and there exists an oligarchy that results in the exclusion of sections of society. In the context of these issues, we should consider potential alternatives to the current way of doing things, including mobilizing support among NGOs and civil society, and working continuously to make change sustainable.

**Marco Kusumawijaya (Rujak Center for Urban Studies) / Indonesia**

Mr. Kusumawijaya focused on the topics of urbanization and sustainability. To begin, he noted that in many areas, while conservationists had a good understanding of what not to do, they were far less certain about the best course of action to ensure sustainability. Mr. Kusumawijaya also pointed out that the future of Asia and the future of urbanization were intimately tied. Rapid population growth in the region is also a pressing matter. In addition, more attention should be paid to the responsible use of energy and materials. Overall, a new model is required. This is where civil society and Asian intellectuals can make a significant contribution because leadership from governments is lacking.

**Chandra Kishor Lal (Independent Columnist and Commentator) / Nepal**

Mr. Lal discussed the disparity in power between the 1% or even the 0.1% and the rest

of society, particularly in terms of economic and political power. He also emphasized the fact that there has been a dominance of Western thought throughout Asian political systems and revolutions. These ideologies are no longer applicable. It is time to stop relying on borrowed ideas and come up with a new vocabulary and metaphors. As for the role of civil society, Mr. Lal described it as being the back wheel on the bicycle of democracy, helping to propel it forwards.

### **Q&A**

During the final Q&A session of the day panelists addressed the issue of how to shift growth trajectories onto a more sustainable path. First of all, leadership can come from richer countries like Japan, whose example and opinions may carry more weight. Secondly, if we are to change towards more sustainable growth, everybody needs to be involved and many initiatives can fail without partnership and support from civil society. The panelists were also asked to comment on civil society in Japan, to which they responded that the diversity of civil society should be acknowledged and that it would be a mistake to stereotype a people or society.

(End)