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Mistake to link economic problems with 'Asian values'

John Teo

SOME commentators and self-appointed analysts in the Western media have been quick to pronounce East Asia's current economic problems as the death knell for so-called "Asian values". They could not be more off the mark.

"Asian values", to be sure, have come to mean different things to different people. It is perhaps safe to say, though, that the raging debate on this issue centres on the preponderance in Asian societies to give priority to economic rather than political development.

Indeed, our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has given voice to perhaps the silent majority in East Asia which is wont to believe that our current economic problems - while they may have been brought about by some home-grown shortcomings - are in fact a tacit "consequence" visited upon East Asia for its temerity to challenge the "conventional wisdom" that economic and political developments necessarily have to happen almost simultaneously.

Hence, the understandable tendency for Western observers to gloat that East Asia is now paying the price for a lack of attention to political development.

Such Western arguments have to go a long way still before the "Asian values" group will concede to their persuasive power.

All around us, despite the current economic situation, evidence still points to the direction of economic development having to take root first before political development stands a chance.

Where countries placed priority on political development such as the likes of India and Sri Lanka, their economies stagnated. Worse, as evident in India, democracy is no insulation against the scourge of corruption.

Today, India stands at a critical juncture as democracy looks increasingly likely to be carried to its populist extreme with the anticipated election of what used to be an extremist Hindu fringe party into national office.

And what has democracy advocates to say of what it has wrought in Sri Lanka today?

Even nominally "fully-democratic" countries such as Japan, South Korea and Thailand have not been spared the lashings of economic travails. The greatest irony is that "democratic" South Korea and Thailand have been as much besmirched as the rest of East Asia and hardly a Western observer lays the blame at the door of "democracy".

Of course, the "Asian values" debate can easily get out of hand and "democracy" itself gets blackballed as a result. We must not forget that a liberal democratic society represents the ideal for every country. Even Westerners will concede that for democracy to run smoothly and to everyone's best interests, it has to be universally adopted.

The puzzling thing is if it is in the West's best interest to spread democracy globally, why are Westerners against ensuring its adoption in the quickest possible time by encouraging countries which adopt rapid economic development policies? Don't they know that economic development, by its very nature, ultimately liberates the human individual in all senses?

Isn't there a case to be made for the recent political evolution of Taiwan and South Korea after they had attained a certain level of economic and social maturity?

Is democracy up to the task of saving itself? With the spectacle of East

Asia teetering on the economic brink and West Asia as usual threatening fiery conflagration again while the Western media daily rivet on the minutiae of the alleged sexual behaviour of the American President, somehow one cannot help wondering.