

Let's have mutual cultural enrichment

I AM greatly honoured to be able to address this distinguished audience of academics, dignitaries and students at the Senate House of this famous university.

When I was told that I will be given the honour to speak at this old and prestigious university, no indication was made as to suitable subjects. You must therefore excuse me if the subject chosen is not quite right. I hope you will bear with me if I sound unnecessarily contentious and argumentative.

Because I am a Malay and an Asian, because the Asian values debate has so often been over-simplified and misunderstood, because there is a need for greater mutual understanding and regard among the peoples of this world and because I am speaking before an important audience in the West, I have chosen to speak on Asian values. Let me, however, argue for mutual respect. Let me urge mutual enrichment.

Let me begin by offending the many Western universalists who insist that there are only universal values, that there is no such thing as 'Asian values', that Asia is too diverse to have common values and that proponents of 'Asian values' are doing nothing more than justifying authoritarianism, dictatorship and uncivilised behaviour.

There are many, of course, who believe that the world has seen such a convergence of cultures and values that there is no longer any value in talking about 'Western values', 'Eastern values' and so on.

What I have found striking in recent years — especially after the end of the Cold War and the so-called 'end of history' — is the aggressiveness of this line of thinking and the intolerance for those who beg to differ.

The demise of communism and the discrediting of Fabian socialism have not impressed the Western universalists on the need to be a little circumspect, on the need to be less insistent that the West is always right. They still insist that what is right for them is right for the world.

There is no denying that over the last few hundred years, especially over the last half century, there has developed enormous areas in which the degree of common values and attitudes is remarkable and stunning — and historically unprecedented. Yet it seems equally clear that there are great areas of difference. There are major areas of potential friction. And there are some areas of serious political discord.

You will be surprised the number of times I have been reminded by the French people that when I speak of 'the West', I should not confuse 'the West' or identify it with the Anglo-Saxon world or the Anglo-Saxon way. Italians have told me the same. Swedes have told me this. Even I have often told myself this.

I often wonder, therefore, why there is such ferocious emotional denial of cultural pluralism and such intense intellectual denial of the obvious — although I have my suspicions.

Asia is, of course, a much bigger continent than Europe. The diversity of its civilisations is much greater and older. For every generalisation, however, some exceptions can be found. And yet, there is a body of common values and beliefs that most us in Asia hold on to in order to guide our way in the world.

With regard to East Asia, David Hitchcock, the former director of East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the United States Information Agency, has actually conducted the first ever quantitative survey comparing East Asian and American values.

Last year he asked Americans and East Asians (Japanese, Thai, Chinese, Koreans, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indonesians and Filipinos) to choose six 'societal values' and five 'personal values' which they regarded as core and critical. The results were published a few months ago in a publication called *Asian values and the United States: How Much Conflict?*

The survey found that the six societal values most valued by the East Asians were: first, having an orderly society; second, societal harmony; third, ensuring the accountability of public officials; fourth, being open to new ideas; fifth, freedom of expression; and sixth, respect for authority.

On the other hand, the six most important for the Americans polled were: freedom of expression, personal freedom, the rights of the individual, open debate, thinking for oneself and sixth, the accountability of public officials. Interestingly slightly more East Asians emphasised the importance of 'new ideas' and public accountability than did

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Americans.

Despite Hitchcock's interest in discovering commonalities between East Asians and Americans, he found fundamental differences also with regard to personal values.

The five most important personal values stressed by the Americans polled were: self reliance, personal achievement, hard work, achieving success in life, and fifth, helping others. Whereas the sixth most important core value stressed by East Asians — 'fulfilling obligations to others' — was stressed by 39 per cent of the East Asians, only 19 per cent of the Americans polled emphasised this.

Whereas 59 per cent of the Americans stressed 'achieving success in life', half as many East Asians did so. Whereas 59 per cent of the Americans stressed 'personal achievement', only 33 per cent of the East Asians did so.

On the other hand, whereas 69 per cent of the East Asians emphasised respect for learning, only 15 per cent of the Americans did. Whereas 48 per cent of the East Asians stressed self discipline, only 22 per cent of the Americans did.

I do not know how accurately this American study reflects reality. But Hitchcock gives figures to support the intuitive assumptions of most East Asians and those who really know East Asia.

I do know that these values are sometimes more honoured in their breach than in their practice. I do know that many of these 'Asian values' were once also 'Western values'. Some are a function of our stage of development and will be

challenged and discarded as we move forward.

I hope that my exposition on Asian values so far has not by any stretch of the imagination justified dictatorship, authoritarianism, anti-democratic practices, the suppression of human rights, the denial of democracy. I hope that my arguments also do not in any way justify torture, the exploitation of child labour, the suppression of women and the wanton destruction of the environment.

Having offended the universalists, the most militant of whom are congregated in the West, let me now be permitted to offend the authoritarians, so many of whom are said to congregate in 'the East'.

The first thing that might usefully be said is that atrocity anywhere must not be tolerated. It should be punished. No one should be allowed to hide behind the cloak of cultural relativism.

Secondly, many Asian values should obviously be destroyed.

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there is excessive anti-materialism; there is extremist spiritualism, or what passes for spiritualism.

In some societies, there is the ethic of fatalism. In others, the dominance of contentment, smugness, even arrogance. Feudalism is still very much alive so that in some Asian democracies and even communist states leadership is inherited and confined to neo-royal families, or the new aristocracy.

In far too many Asian countries, there is excessive deference to authority. There is social and psychological authoritarianism.

The record of Asia with regard to fundamental economic, social and cultural rights has too often been as bad as the Asian record on fundamental civil and political rights.

Inequality, the repression of women and the weak. The economic, political, intellectual and social disempowerment of millions. A deep psychological sense of inferiority. The lack of self confidence and the sense of self worth.

Uncaring societies that have not an iota of love and regard for God's living creatures, for the infirm, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, the physical environment which man holds only in trust.

Undiluted adherence to tradition, superstition and magic. Deep and widespread corruption and tolerance of corruption — equally deep and widespread. The list is too long even to enumerate.

A third point is equally obvious. If 'Asian' does not mean 'good' exclusively, 'Western' does not mean 'bad' exclusively either. Asia's process of learning from the best in the West is far from complete. There are many Western values, found in the best Western societies, which we should adopt or internalise more deeply.

I remember in my country's own history, that we had to do a lot of persuading before we were granted the right to have elections and to vote. It was we, Malaysians, who were denied democracy and many of our human rights. But in the end the powers that be relented and retreated without scorching the earth when doing so. We took over our country largely intact. Our neighbours did not fare so well.

When Malaya became independent in 1957, our per capita income was lower than that of Haiti. Haiti did not take the path of democracy. We did. Haiti today is the poorest country in all of the Americas. We now have a standard of living higher than any major economy in the Americas, save only for the United States and Canada.

We could not have achieved what we have achieved without democracy. Let me reiterate this point because there are so many young Malaysians in the audience. Never forget. We could not have done it without democracy. This is why, for example, a resolute commitment to democracy is such a central pillar in Malaysia's 2020 Vision.

We could not have achieved what we have achieved without Malaysian democracy, which owes more to British democracy than American democracy. I suspect that given the excesses of some democratic practices, we could have become one of those countries where incessant street demonstrations, strikes and frequent violent changes of Government have resulted in near anarchy and economic regression.

When people speak of democracy, they assume that democracy must mean their country's special and particular brand of democratic institutions and practices. Other forms must be undemocratic or less democratic. Yet even among the champions, concepts and practices of democracy differ widely.

Obviously, it is often difficult to distinguish the democrat from the anti-democrat, the honest leader trying to do an honest day's work and the dishonest politician who has his own agenda.

But there is a need to be fair and not to demonise those in less than ideal circumstances who do not want gridlock democracy, weak and cowardly democracy and democratic practices and forms that over-emphasise the individual and neglect the community, that glorify combat, that foster unbridled conflict, that guarantee against harmony, consensus and cohesion, that threaten to destroy order and democracy itself, and that engender the prospect of total chaos.

Unfortunately, many who pass judgement do not have the time to even master the basics, still less the complicated picture. There are many who have passed judgment on me who believe that my name is "Mohamad". There are those who have passed judgment on Malaysia who do not even know how to pronounce the name of my country, and indeed where in the world it is.

I have said a few things on Asian values and on cultural pluralism. Let me now say a few words about mutual respect and mutual enrichment.

Before I insist that 'the West' must have more respect for other values and other cultures, let me concede that we outside 'the West' also need a balanced perspective on 'the West'. If it was ridiculous for so many of our elites to once believe that everything was good was in the West and everything that was in the West was good, it is equally ridiculous to now believe that everything that is in the West is bad.

Mutual regard is simply that. There is much in the West that commands respect.

At the same time, it is right and it is time that Asia too is accorded the regard and the respect that is its due.

Mutual respect demands an acceptance that those who have a different view are not necessarily misguided or evil. Mutual respect demands a minimum level of humility on all sides. The countries of the West have a right to their preferences. But they have no right to ram their preferences down anyone's throat.

In a recent speech at the "Europe/East Asia Summit" organised by the World Economic Forum, I half jokingly said that in their more exuberant moments, there are many Asian leaders who think they can solve the problem of Serbian atrocities in Bosnia, the Basque problem and the income inequalities between northern and southern Italy.

In many Western societies there are massive problems of drug addiction. There are teachers afraid of their pupils. There is chronic vandalism.

There are some societies where there are more illegitimate babies than legitimate ones. There are countries where large numbers in their 30s or even 40s have never worked for a single day of their lives. There are places where an unemployed person is better off not working than if he found a job.

There are some democracies where political leaders are afraid to do what they know is right for one reason or another. And the people and their leaders live in fear, fear of the free media which they so loudly proclaim as inviolable.

Indeed they are quite literally oppressed by their own media, the way people in feudal societies are oppressed by their rulers, knowing their unfortunate situation but not daring to raise their voices against an established institution, to curb its excesses if not to revolt against it.

Many Asian leaders, in their moments of levity, I hasten to add, believe that they have the answers to such problems. If some European countries want their help and advice, I said, "I am sure they would be willing

to give such help and advice." But so far, it has not entered the mind of any Asian leader to threaten sanctions if any European country fails to put its house in order.

No Asian parliament I am aware of has passed a single resolution calling on its Government to take steps should a European country not reform itself.

If any Asian leader were to so threaten or if any

Asian parliament were to so act, the West would regard them as mad. The West would regard the whole idea as preposterous.

If it is preposterous and mad for Asian leaders to threaten sanctions when Europeans fail to measure up to their standards and norms, could it not be a little preposterous for Europeans to threaten sanctions when non-evil and non-uncivilised Asian countries prefer their own standards and norms and not Europe's?

To this and many other questions I asked, I did not get a response. All I received was a public admonition. Although what I said about Europe might be true, came the rebuttal, it was 'unacceptable', I repeat 'unacceptable'. It was not 'unwise' not 'injudicious' but 'unacceptable' that I should have publicly mentioned some of the ills found in Europe.

A European Press correspondent asked me afterwards whether I thought that the European participants at the forum came to be lectured to by me. The free Press which lectures all the time to the world obviously did not think I have a right to free speech.

The famous political scientist, Samuel Huntington ended his equally famous essay, *The Clash of Civilisations*, with the call for the civilisations to co-exist. I call not for co-existence but for mutual cultural enrichment.

We in Asia have learnt a great deal from the West. We will be unnecessarily constraining our full potential if this process were now to be stopped. At the same time we have to learn a great deal from 'the East', from the rest of Asia, from Africa and Latin America — and from the best that our own histories and cultures have to offer.

I believe that Europe too may find some value in this message of enriching each other, of mutual enrichment, of rejuvenation and of self discovery. Asian values are Asian values; European values are European values. The twain can meet and from the meeting there might be some understanding and appreciation of the wisdom of each, and hopefully a wedding of the good and rejection of what is bad or evil. God willing. Let us all admit that no one has a monopoly of wisdom.