

Nom del diàleg: Diàleg orient - occident
Data: 2 Juliol
Sessió: “Ètica i globalització: valors globals, valors locals”

Ponent: Jusuf Wanandi



Modernization Versus Westernization

Jusuf Wanandi

Co-founder, and member, Board of Trustees,
Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta

Introduction

In the beginning of the 1990's there was a debate about Asian values in East Asia, introduced by PM Mahathir and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who were looking for an Asian identity and trying to reject the notion that only Western values in the end are valid and be triumphant.

That was the time when there was a triumphant mood in the West after the Cold war was won at the end of the 1980's, when theories such “The End of History” (Francis Fukuyama's) and the “Clash of Civilizations” (Sam Huntington) have been espoused.

But the debate about modernization versus westernisation in many countries dated even earlier. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan had chosen westernisation, but mainly in forms and techniques, while the values remained mainly Japanese. And Japan has been able to maintain it while becoming the second largest economy of the world after the U.S. And only with globalization, where also values and world outlook have been touched and changed, the Japanese have been forced to change some of their archaic values that they still tried to embrace for over 100 years after opening the society to certain parts of westernization.

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In China the decision was to close the society from Western influence in the middle of the Ching Dynasty and the Chinese had to accept defeat after defeat against Western colonization efforts. Even during the Republican era there was continuing debate about whether westernisation has to happen and how that will happen.

In Indonesia, since the first Cultural Congress in the 1940's, the debate was whether Indonesia should be based on her own cultural and values system as has been laid down by history, with a rich cultural heritage based on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, or whether it has to westernise completely to be able to modernize the society. With globalization this question is no longer the monopoly of intellectuals and philosophers, but also that of the people at large who have to face the onslaught of this new phenomenon. The forces of globalization are so strong that they change all aspects of society: economy, politics, and culture.

While all these earlier debates were domestic in nature and were concerned only with the country and society, the debate, including the intellectual debate, that started in the early 1990's in which Kishore Mahbubani was the main proponent, is more regional in nature, namely on developments and change in East Asia.

As Kishore himself recognized in the preface on his book "Can Asians Think?", the debate was partly undertaken with an "arrogance", that was rather embarrassing on both sides when in 1997, East Asia's exuberant economy stumbled into a crisis, while the optimistic and quite strong views and attitudes in "The End of History" and "Clash of Civilizations" did not unfold as expected,

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This paper is not meant to recreate that same debate, because both sides have been somewhat arrogant intellectually in putting their views on the issue of modernization: whether it should be westernisation or something else. Even Kishore recognized that there will be fusion of cultures in the future and that Asians have to think about those future possibilities.

The main mistake Kishore has made is that he based his conclusions and proposals mainly on the exuberant state of the economies of East Asia. Although it is an important factor, it is not the only factor that defines the existence of a higher culture and values in East Asia that can compete with western cultures. The diversity and dynamism in East Asia is such that one cannot speak about one Asian culture. Also, the pace of change is so quick that cultural orthodoxies are being left behind by the younger generation, as they are looking for a more “universal” culture and values system through education, the mass media, as well as new technologies which are basically American.

Somehow, in later life they will mix some aspects of their cultural orthodoxy with the “civilization” they have acquired at school and in life that are mass-based American culture. In East Asia, for instance, they are going to maintain and give priority to such values as education as the main instrument for social mobilization, respect for the older generation, a consensus system in decision making, a sense of community besides individualism, having balance and order in society, putting economic development as a priority, keeping the communal safety net system as long as possible in a mix of preferred policies. But the real

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question is how long they can be kept. The greying of societies in Asia will made it difficult to maintain them.

The challenge of modernization for East Asia

There are two main streams in East Asian cultures, namely the Confusion-Buddhist tradition and values, and the Islamic civilization and rules

Between the two streams, there are also cross acculturations and influences. For instance Islam in South East Asia, particularly Indonesia, came through trade from Gujarat, India, and had to adjust and adapt for centuries to existing religions and cultures such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It was only after three centuries of proselytizing, before Islam became the religion of the majority in Indonesia and Malaysia, and of the minority in Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. As such it has elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism in their practices and interpretation of some of the rules which made Islam a less “rigid” and less “stark” religion compared to Islam in the Middle East, and has become more syncretic, tolerant and open to new ideas and developments.

This is critical because a moderate interpretation of Islam is so important in overcoming the threat of international terrorism of Osama bin Laden, which is based on the most extreme interpretation of Islam, where anybody, including innocents and Muslims could be sacrificed and killed or maimed to achieve their goal of destroying western, particularly U.S., civilization and power.

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In the fight against international and regional terrorism, the role of moderate Islam is critical in order to get at its root causes, because only if the moderate intellectuals are winning in the struggle for the right interpretation of political Islam can they win over the minds of the Muslim community, and prevent them to be influenced by extremist groups such as Al Qaeda. For this struggle to be won, they need support and assistance.

First is to make it possible for them to establish states with Muslim majorities which are really democratic, achieving economic growth with social justice. In so doing they can show to the extremists that struggling to establish the Khalifah (Islamic state) or to implement the Shariah laws is no more relevant because the modern secular state can provide full opportunities for Muslims to implement their religion in a democracy where everybody, including Muslims, get the same political treatment and the same opportunity in economic well-being. That means that Islam could be compatible with the modern secular state, if they can show its relevancy to the Muslim community. For that they should get political and economic support, which is still not adequately provided by western countries, especially the U.S., that only think about a war and military approaches to overcome those terrorists.

Above that, the U.S. should be particularly sensitive on the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has become an identification problem for every Muslim across the globe. In that conflict they do see how they were treated by the West during the last one and half century. The West, the U.S. in particular, should have more balanced policies towards the conflict. This is critical to overcoming the despair of Muslims everywhere.

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Now, the Iraq War has become another reason why they hate the U.S. and its coalition, especially due to the abuses, but also because the U.S. has gradually been considered as colonizers. So, the only way to overcome this is to give sovereignty back to the Iraqi people as planned, and give legitimacy to the system by putting the U.N. in charge. The U.S. and coalition troops should be there for some time, until some security and stability could be re-established, but with the consent of the Iraqi government.

The high moral ground has to be maintained by the U.S. in the struggle. In almost all cases against Al Qaeda prisoners, the rule of law and human rights should be implemented. Some exception could be made for some time, but the balance between acts against terrorist and the rule of law should be calibrated with finesse. Otherwise the leadership of the U.S. and the West in the struggle will be forfeited in the future. The problem of poverty should be taken seriously. Although most of the perpetrators of 9/11 are middle class and intellectuals, their supporters and foot soldiers or the next generation in some other places like Indonesia are very poor and in despair. Paired with an extreme ideology the despair will become easily explosive. From the explanation of Islam and its manifestations and interpretation, it should be clear that it is possible to modernize itself. It has a history that shows how open they were, and were possible to be the conduit of Hellenistic culture during the Dark Ages of Europe to be transformed later into the Renaissance in Europe. It has to be admitted that a large number of Muslims have yet to overcome the complete closing of their minds and the inability of giving interpretation to the laws and to orthodoxy since the end of the Caliphate period.

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If Indonesia and Malaysia can be successful in reconciling Islam and modernity, democracy and social justice in the future, by developing states that are successful democracies with economic growth and social justice, they can become the beacon of Muslims elsewhere, and could become the model for Islam to reconcile with modernity. That means that Islam and modernization could absorb some elements of “westernization” as well. Although the basic idea of democracy might be mentioned in the Quran, but as a complete and viable system it has been created in and by the West. The principles of social justice are already present in the Quran and the Shariah, but how to organize a modern system will depend on models in the West. Some adjustments have to be made about the ways of implementing the ideas of democracy and social justice, but the names or symbols are intrinsic Islamic. In this respect, the secular state, while basically separate from religion, has to give support to religions to have a role in the society for the good of the society and its morality. But choice, implementation and adherence to a certain religion is a matter for the individual alone. Therefore, the Ataturk total secular model in Turkey might not be adequate or correct for them. Indonesia has a Department of Religious Affairs for that purpose, to give support whenever necessary to all the recognized religions: Islam, Christian, Catholic, Buddha, and Hindu.

The idea of fusion of cultures, as proposed by Kishore, has happened for a long time, also between Islamic and western cultures, although never completely harmonious. So the challenge in the future is how to find ways to have dialogues of cultures and religion that could be the conduit for a better fusion between the two. If Islamic culture could be acculturated with western culture, which seems

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to be possible as explained above, then we are not talking about who is superior or who is inferior.

Fusion could of course happen in a limited or in a deeper way, depending on the encounter, how long and in what way. If Islam as a civilization could be open to some elements of westernisation, while being considered as a “closed” religion, then this could happen more readily with Confucianism, which after all is a teaching on morality, and is already mixed with Buddhism.

Modernization in East Asia could be a fusion of Asian existing cultures mixed with westernisation. This has happened a long time ago, and it does not make any sense of arguing which one is superior to the other.

In general, eastern civilizations are more indirect, is not very rigorous in its analytical methods, more consensus oriented and communal in nature, while the West is more direct, very analytical, more individual in nature and more willing to take decisions based on a majority. In fact, in many instances fusion could be a better deal and the combination of the two could be very enriching as a result.

For instance as a concrete example, let us take the idea of democracy and its relation to economic growth. According to the East Asian model of development, economic growth is paramount in the first instances, because a democracy cannot be sustained for long without a middle class and adequate political and social institutions. In the West the idea of a middle class and economic viability has been taken for granted because it has already been



achieved decades ago. And therefore, they stress on individual liberties and political rights.

But the East Asian experience also showed the importance of introducing some flexibility in the political system from the beginning, because an economic crisis or a socio-political one could always be expected in a developing nation. Without that flexibility it could not adequately respond to a potential crisis. The longer political development is postponed, the more dangerous it will be if the system gets stuck and the crisis becomes more dramatic. This happened in Indonesia in 1997-1998. So, the East Asian model of political development is no more adequate. It has been used as an excuse to resist change and political development. Some limits are necessary in the space that is open for political development at the start, but the space should be expanded with development.

And in the end, a commitment towards democracy is critically important, because only democracies can change regimes peacefully and constitutionally. In a democracy, people's wishes are being expressed regularly, where non-performing or bad governments can be thrown out. To depend only on the leader's personal decision to step down if he/she is tired or is unsuccessful, is very precarious. The strength of the Western model is that change can happen peacefully.

Thus, a balance between the East Asian model of political development with the western one is ideal. To depend only on leaders who personally guarantee good governance and the rule of law will not provide adequate guarantee. Here the

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rigor, transparency and limitations of the western model have to be brought into the fusion model. The financial crisis in East Asia has shown the limitations of the East Asian model of governance. That means that economic development alone is not adequate for a sustainable political or even economic system. Political development is a critical part in any model of development.

Concluding Remarks

Kishore Mahbubani thought that the Asia Pacific will become the most important part of the world in the future, especially based on its economic performance, but also because it opened up a possibility of fusion between the U.S. and East Asia, which could really be dramatic for the region and the world.

In the meantime, Europe, which he somewhat underestimated, has moved forward to consist of 25 members, having a new constitution soon, having their own currency to compete with the US dollar, and having a common defence and foreign policy in the future, with a standing army to back it up for peacekeeping and peace-building.

On the other hand, regional organizations in the Asia Pacific, including APEC, the ARF and even ASEAN, got stuck and are not moving as fast and as urgently as they should. Of course, the Asia Pacific is more diverse. Open regionalism has led to individual opening up and liberalization of the economies of the members. This has been the easier part. The harder part, of deepening integration, has still to be negotiated. Here the European Union has excelled but again it could not be

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emulated in the Asia Pacific because of the different political culture. East Asia is not yet ready to negotiate to move forward. Now it is high time to entertain this idea in order to move again. It will not go as far as Europe has moved, but some aspects of the European integration could be negotiated.

A new development is East Asian Community building, now still based on the ASEAN+3 process. This is primarily a regional arrangement for economic cooperation but its ultimate objective is strategic. Firstly, it is to accommodate China's peaceful rise as a great power. Secondly, it is to assist in the normalization of China-Japan relations, which has been rather strained due to a deep sense of nationalism on both sides. Both are important leaders of East Asia. Third, it can help prevent future confrontation between China and the U.S. In the longer term China-U.S. relations could become strained or could be confrontational. The U.S. may not accept another superpower besides her, but on her own right in the longer term, China could become one. The region could help convince the U.S. that China is not a threat to her, or that China will not oppose her presence in the Western Pacific.

But East Asian Community building is not going to be exclusive, because it is based on open regionalism, and also will be part and parcel of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation). It is essentially as a caucus in APEC. In the end an exclusive arrangement will not be acceptable to the US. Indeed, East Asia continues to promote APEC, because the US is an important member in that regional arrangement.

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At the end of this discussion, it should be clear that modernization in East Asia is mostly westernization (that includes American culture and value system as well) but with the added value of Asian values and wisdom. Western thinking and values have become universal and acceptable to East Asians. The examples given by Kishore about double standards on human rights (which could happen anywhere), and whether democracy can be transferred to developing societies or not (of course, yes!), are minor questions compared to the big questions that only rigour and straight forward thinking of the West can answer. This is what East Asia really needs. Open and direct expressions are important. Consensus is fine, but it is not adequate to reach the truth and the decisions that are important to have a realistic assessment of what is needed.

While westernization embraces the truth and the ways to decide on what to do, the Asian way brings nuance, inclusiveness, compromise, informality, and finesse that is sometimes needed to make the decisions acceptable and therefore could be implemented consistently. In that sense fusion between the two ways indeed could provide more correct solutions to problems and at the same produce more acceptable solutions.

In any case, western methodology and logic, rigour, honesty and transparency will be universal and acceptable, while East Asia will add her own “specialties” to its culture and modernization process: the sense of community, primacy for education, consensus building, less legal but more personal approaches, seniority principles etc. These traits could change, but some might be still relevant in the longer term. That is the way to enrich cultures and to move forward in human history.