



Social cohesion, democracy and human rights

By Shada Islam

Building an inclusive society where all citizens have access to jobs, health, education and housing, where democracy prevails and human rights are respected remains the over-arching goal in most parts of the world. As the economic crisis takes its toll, however, achieving social cohesion is getting even more difficult, both in Asia and Europe.

Austerity measures and budgetary cuts to ease many European states' high debt burden are prompting social unrest, as workers protest over cutbacks in wages and welfare benefits. Asian economies have rebounded faster than Europe and are notching up impressive growth rates. But the continent is still home to almost one billion poor people and progress in achieving United Nations development targets is becoming ever more difficult.

Discussions on ways to build a more cohesive society and questions of human rights and democracy have often divided Asia and Europe. Asian policymakers want to advance social cohesion without damaging economic competitiveness and argue that Europe's generous welfare benefits prevent workers from adapting to changing labour market conditions and erode Europe's competitiveness in a globalised world.

When the going gets tough, Asians argue that as "lean countries" like theirs are able to react more quickly and deploy public resources more flexibly than the industrialized "fat countries" of Europe which have committed high levels of resources to welfare benefits.

Europeans counter that Asia must do more to protect its workers, improve working conditions and mobilize additional internal resources to meet the Millennium Development Goals, especially as regards health, education and the situation of women.

Arguments over democracy and human rights have been even fiercer between Asia and Europe. Asian governments dislike Europe's public commitment to promoting human rights and democracy, denouncing it as meddling in countries' internal affairs. However, this is not the opinion of Asian civil rights activists in Asia who say the EU is not as active and as consistent as it should be in defending the struggle for democracy.

Such disagreements may make for eye-catching newspaper headlines and interesting stories, but they are a distraction from the real challenge of living together in a rapidly-changing, globalised and interdependent world.

No one country or region today has a monopoly on the most effective way of tackling key political, societal and economic concerns. And in any case, some of the challenges we face – climate change, poverty alleviation, employment - need to be tackled collectively, not by individual states.

When they meet in Brussels on October 4-5 therefore, ASEM leaders should therefore switch the focus from what separates them and take a fresh look at the challenge of building more democratic, rules-based and inclusive societies in both Asia and Europe.

Both sides have made a start. At the last ASEM summit in Beijing in October 2008, leaders agreed that “sustainable development and social cohesion are mutually supportive, and it is through sustainable development that the wealth of society will be increased, people’s lives and human rights will be improved and respected and social equity and justice will be guaranteed.”

More recently, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, an ASEM development conference noted that “food, income security and equal access to quality education and health services are the foundations of social cohesion that could be best obtained by full and productive employment and wide participation of citizens in wealth creation.”

Translating these aspirations into concrete policies and actions is difficult – but Asia and Europe face a common predicament: ensuring continued economic development to achieve high level of employment - but doing this without endangering competitiveness. The two regions should therefore share experiences, make comparisons and learn from each other.

As Rehman Sobhan of the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh points out, the European social democratic welfare state, founded on the economic goal of high levels of employment, universal access to education and the state provisioning of safety nets for unemployment pay, sickness insurance, old age pensions, housing and infrastructure provisions, can only function correctly in times of buoyant economic growth and macroeconomic stability. It also faces structural problems of aging populations which put enhanced pressure on public budgets. Current reforms in Europe therefore aim to share the state’s fiscal burden with employers and individuals.

In Asia, social cohesion is conceived as social protection and is traditionally the responsibility of the family, with the poor and particularly women acting as the main unpaid care givers in the family, says Sobhan. A systemic commitment to social protection is a more recent phenomenon in Asia and is conditional on prevailing political circumstances and resources in specific countries. Asian social protection programmes are vulnerable to resource cutbacks due to the global recession and also depend on the availability of foreign aid. Significantly, an increasing number of civil society groups are stepping in with social protection projects to compensate for government inaction.

Discord over democracy and human rights has also long marked Asia-Europe exchanges, with disagreements most pronounced on policy towards

Burma/Myanmar. Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have made no secret of their dislike of the EU's policy of targeted sanctions against the ruling junta. Yet, neither the EU stance nor ASEAN's policy of engagement has produced any change in the military rulers' conduct. In fact, the EU is under pressure to review its sanctions policy while many ASEAN members increasingly see Myanmar's military rulers as an embarrassment and a tar on the region's global standing and reputation.

As in the past, ASEM leaders in October will certainly make a joint statement in support of democracy and free and fair elections in Myanmar as well as the release from house arrest of iconic pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi. However, as ASEAN crafts its own agenda for improving human rights, it may be time to forge a bolder, joint ASEM policy of increased pressure on the junta.

The ASEAN Charter, which entered into force on 15 December 2008, commits its members to promoting and protecting human rights, including through the establishment of the ASEAN human rights body (AHRB). Indonesia, which will chair ASEAN next year, has said it will push for the drafting of an ASEAN human rights declaration by the AICHR. Such a declaration will not, however, be legally binding on member states.

Also, although ASEAN countries tend to be reluctant in addressing human rights violations taking place in other member states, during the violence in Thailand last month, Indonesia called for ASEAN to push Thailand to settle the conflict peacefully, while Vietnam and Cambodia recommended establishing a summit to coordinate a resolution. The moves show that ASEAN's non-interference policy is beginning to show cracks.

China also has the tradition of responding angrily to EU public statements on its treatment of minorities and dissidents.

Such differences will not disappear. But Asia and Europe can find common ground by shifting the focus from democracy to good governance and the need to establish and respect the rule of law. There should be less use of megaphone diplomacy and more emphasis on behind the scenes discussions. Europe can also provide its experience and expertise to Asians as regards the training of judges, prison reform and police training.

Asian and European share a common interest in ensuring their countries grow and develop and their citizens become more prosperous. That common challenge can only be met through dialogue, not arguments and confrontation.

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Note: **ASEM** was launched in 1996 as an informal forum for discussion between Asian and European countries. The current ASEM partners are: Austria, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania,

Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, The Netherlands, The Philippines, United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission.

Shada Islam is a journalist in Brussels with a long experience of EU-Asia relations. This is a part of a series of articles being published by "Particip" an independent, internationally-recognised consultancy, which is under contract to the European Commission, to look at different aspects of the multi-faceted Asia-Europe relationship. Other articles of the series can be found on the ASEM 8 website: <http://www.asem8.be/related-documentation>. This article represents the views of the author and does not commit the European Commission in any way.

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