

# Engaging Asian Reality: Its Ambiguities and Challenges

Benny Hari Juliawan, SJ

This is a tall order. Identifying and describing major social issues in a region with more than half of the world's population is certainly not easy. Being the most dynamic region, economically at least, adds to the task. In the face of this challenge I have chosen to focus on geographical areas and issues that are within my limited purview of knowledge. First of all, I focus on East and particularly Southeast Asia. Second, my main areas of expertise cover labour, migration, and democratisation issues. It goes without saying that the topics presented here are rather selective and may overlook some other significant characteristics of the region. A deeper analysis is also beyond the scope of this presentation and I suffice with describing the phenomena in question.

## **The Prospect of Warfare**

Let me start with offering some observations, which illustrate the kind of world we are living in today. In the beginning of 2018 the world woke up to two nuclear powers threatening each other in our midst without the slightest consideration for the rest of the world. The threat of Armageddon and annihilation of humanity was so real but then it quickly lost its fear factor when the leaders of North and South Korea held a peace talk, which was then followed by the unprecedented summit of the US and North Korean leaders in Singapore. Prior to these episodes of belligerent rhetoric, we had been tricked into thinking that nuclear war was a thing of the past, of the Cold War to be precise. The problem is, once the specialised knowledge of building nuclear weapons is mastered, the threat of nuclear confrontation and destruction will not disappear. The only thing that has so far stopped that from happening is the prospect of mutual destruction, and that of the world, in case of such a war.

Nuclear weapon is a direct result of innovations in military technology, a manifestation of the idea of progress that is well entrenched and celebrated in modern times. Even if existing nuclear arsenal was completely destroyed, the combination of science and weapon technology would still produce other forms of armaments as deadly as nuclear weapons. In fact, the industrial revolution dramatically increased the killing power of weapons and their production in large quantities. In other words, the industrialisation of war has proliferated the destructive power of that weaponry to virtually all corners of the world. The circulation of such weapons have helped fuel conflicts and wars since the end of the World War Two.

A major actor in many such conflicts and wars is the nation-state. Modern nation-states consolidate economic, political and military powers and deploy them in the constant struggle for defence, expansion and domination. Military technology was developed alongside and in conjunction with the needs of nation-states. Carl von Clausewitz, the classic interpreter of the relation between war and the nation-state, argued that "war was diplomacy by other means: it was what is used when ordinary negotiation or other modes of persuasion or coercion fail in the relations between states." (Giddens, 1999: 58) The international community does have systems of conflict prevention, dispute resolution, arbitration and criminal justice. I am not an expert in the international legal architecture, but suffice to say at this stage that these systems have proved increasingly inadequate to address cross-border conflicts and wars. Governments

seem to more readily reach out to military solutions when dealing with disputes with their neighbours. The world has not seen a major war since the end of the World War Two more than 70 years ago; the Cold War ended almost 30 years ago. But we now feel that the general sense of peace which has characterised our present world is under threat.

### **Inequality**

If we talk about everyday conflicts within societies perhaps the obvious cause or driver of conflicts is inequality. Societies with highly unequal distribution of wealth tend to be less stable and prone to conflicts for obvious reasons. I would like to quote two most recent publications on this subject matter. Oxfam International published a report in January 2018 saying that the richest one percent in the world pocketed 82% of the wealth that was created in 2017, while the poorest half of the world's population (3.7 billion) did not receive any increase in wealth. The 2018 World Inequality Report was launched with a stark warning: global inequality is on the rise. Income inequality has risen nearly in all countries, but particularly rapidly in North America, China, India and Russia. In 2016 the top 10% earners in Europe owned 37% of the region's income, 41% in China, 46% in Russia, 47% in US-Canada, and around 55% in sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil, and India. The Middle East remain the world's most unequal region where the top 10% capture 61% of national income.

The growing income gap reflects another phenomenon which is the falling labour share of income. The share of income paid to workers in both advanced and emerging/developing economies have fallen steadily in the past three decades. It fell from 54% (1980) to around 50% (2015) in the former and from 39% (1994) to 37% (2015) in the latter (IMF, 2017: 122). Declining labour share of income means that income grows more slowly than productivity. The productive workforce is not receiving their fair share of development benefit. It also means that a growing amount of productivity gains go to capital. Because capital tends to be concentrated in the hands of the top few, falling labour income share is likely to widen the income gap. In advanced countries this is a result of the adoption of technology especially in industries that employ middle-skilled labour. Automation has replaced many jobs and will continue to do so in manufacturing and certain service sectors. In addition, participation in global value chains shifts jobs to other countries with cheaper costs of production, leaving behind job polarisation between the high-skilled labour in capital intensive industries and the low-skilled labour in service sectors. Ordinary people are worried about their diminishing prospect of employment and social mobility, but political systems in many countries are slow to respond to them. In fact, the political establishment has ignored these growth patterns for so long.

### **Labour Migration**

Migration is a major political, economic, social and cultural concern in Asia Pacific. Countries in this region are major sources of migrants for the world. China, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia are among the world's top 25 suppliers of migrants, with China and the Philippines in the top 10. Most of these go to other countries within Asia and to North America. Asia Pacific is also home to a large number of immigrants, with more than 10 million migrants, many of whom are from other countries within the region. Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand are among the top 25 countries in the world with the highest immigration rates. If internal migration is added to the picture, the number and proportion of migrants would increase greatly, especially in rapidly urbanising countries like China and Vietnam.

The dominant driving force of migration has been economic. The bulk of migrants in Asia Pacific are transient workers taking up blue-collar jobs that are shunned by locals in developed and industrialising countries. The label “dirty, dangerous and difficult” or 3Ds aptly describes the work of migrants. Typical jobs include domestic workers, construction workers, plantation workers, factory workers, fishermen, health care aids and hospitality workers. To illustrate, Asia Pacific is home to around 21.5 million domestic workers (ILO, 2013), which makes up about 41% of all domestic workers in the world today. According to official statistics the state of Sabah in Malaysia employs 272,157 foreign workers (2012), mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines in the oil palm industry. Overall registered migrant workers made up 21% of Malaysia’s workforce (2010), and this is excluding irregular or undocumented migrant workers, for which one estimate puts the figure at around 1.3 million (Devadason and Meng, 2014).

Cross-border migration either in search for work or political asylum always carries extra risks associated with being a foreigner with limited means. For migrant workers in particular the vulnerabilities are multiplied these days by the general preference of capital movement over that of labour under globalisation. When countries do feel the need for foreign labour, they treat migrant workers as supplementary labour and subject them to “temporariness” regime. What it means is that the presence of migrant workers in general is assumed to be temporary to address labour shortages and they are not eligible for rights and provisions which otherwise would be available for citizens or permanent residents.

This does not apply to foreign professionals apparently. The Taiwan Council for Labour Affairs, for example, defines the role of “foreign professionals” as to enhance technological level and competitiveness, whereas “foreign labour” is to supplement labour shortages. Expatriates in Malaysia are allowed to bring in their families but contract migrant workers are not. South Korea does not even recognise domestic work as employment, and therefore foreign domestic workers are exempt from provisions sanctioned by the law. In fact, 61% of all domestic workers in Asia and the Pacific are not covered by the country’s standard labour laws (ILO, 2013). Hong Kong relies on a highly flexible labour regime in general, which applies to all workers but especially to migrant workers. Migrant domestic workers have to leave the country within two weeks after their contracts expire if they cannot find new employers. Indeed, temporariness regime is manifested in short or fixed term contracts and exclusion from labour laws.

Temporariness also plays into the hand of agents or middlemen both in sending and receiving countries. These include private agencies (legal and illegal) in host and sending countries as well as government officials in certain countries like Vietnam which play the middlemen role. Legislative frameworks to regulate this role are limited. According to several NGO reports, a substantial portion of migrants’ problems originate in the actions of middlemen (Asian Migrant Center, 2004). These include provision of inadequate or false information, charging of exorbitant fees which cause the migrant to be in a debt-bonded situation, trafficking and outright deception.

### **Populism**

At this point, let us move to the political arena where power and policies that shape societies are contested. The phenomenon that is sweeping across different political contexts at the moment is the rise and rise of populism. Defined as anti-establishment ideas, this strand of politics takes advantage of the failures of the political system to address the worries mentioned before. The elites that oversaw the widening inequality and the loss of jobs did not

react and are now portrayed as a major part of the problem and therefore rejected. People feel that they are abandoned and unable to effect changes through existing democratic institutions. So when certain leaders, usually from outside established political circles, promise a shake-up of the whole system, people fall for them. Armed with personal charms, fiery rhetoric, and policy plans that favour the so-called ordinary people, instead of the elite few or the “one percent”, these politicians rise to power.

In Europe, populist parties have increased their votes significantly since the 1960s, from only 5.1% to 13.2% by 2012. In terms of seats in the legislature, the figure jumped from 3.8% to 12.8% (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). These parties did not always win seats but they managed to shape public debates during elections and put pressure on established parties. We in East and Southeast Asia can easily relate to this story.

The first victim of populism is usually democracy. Populist leaders often come across as strong figures who claim to embody the will of the people. They favour more direct forms of representation such as referendum or plebiscite. This combines with the contempt that people have for political institutions such as political parties, media, elections, and the legislature, fuelling the desire to do away with these institutions. Political freedom that forms the basis of meaningful democratic institutions is at risk of being overrun by popular sentiment. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are increasingly seen as a luxury by people whose priority is stable employment and mortgage payment. In place of liberal democratic values, populism is promoting political conservatism. In a region where democracy is relatively new and always struggles in the face of authoritarianism like in East and Southeast Asia, this often passes with considerable ease.

Another victim can be found among those who are considered as outside the ordinary people or the majority of the population. Populist leaders have a monolithic view of the people, which conjures up a portrayal of the typical citizen. This narrow perspective ignores diversity found in modern societies and dislikes minorities. It unnecessarily agitates societies and reintroduces deep-seated prejudices and sentiments against each other.

### **Religious Radicalism**

One popular form of populism in parts of Asia is based on certain religious sentiments. Using cultural idioms associated with the majority religion in their countries, politicians mobilise a religious political identity in contestations over power and resources. “This political identity makes available a cultural resource pool from which cross-class alliances might evolve to bind a section of the populace in their grievances against perceived economic and cultural oppressors or sources of threat, whether domestic or foreign.” (Hadiz, 2018: 567) Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia and Cambodia have witnessed the efficacy of such mobilisation.

Whilst religions have always been central to the lives of the population in those countries, this form of populism strongly advocates for a greater role of religious dogmas in policies and public institutions. In case of, but not exclusively, Indonesia the rhetoric follows a predictable script in which the country is described as failing to bring prosperity and dignity to the people and therefore should be reorganised according to Islamic laws. In particular the perceived failures are related to democracy, economic welfare and communal solidarity. Democracy is supposed to favour Muslims as the majority but instead it has fragmented the *ummah* into rival factions. In other words, democracy has failed Muslims. In terms of economic welfare, the majority population has not benefited from the economic development

that has seen the rise of big conglomerates. Economic resources are firmly in the hands of “asing” (foreign entities) and “aseng” (a reference to Chinese Indonesians) while Muslims live on the edge of survival. This narrative of failure is often combined with a narrative of the global marginalisation of Muslims by Western powers. These powers are the common enemy of Islam, which prevents the glorious revival of Islam worldwide. Instead of nationalism, they call for international Islamic solidarity to rectify the situation.

The so-called “conservative turn” in politics is aided by the fact that in many Southeast countries the ideological repertoire is very limited. The legacy of the Cold War stigmatises leftist and other class-based ideologies and renders them outside the acceptable political narratives. To counter the attraction of religious fundamentalism the state and civil society forces often resort to the familiar i.e. nationalism spearheaded by the military, which is unquestionably non-democratic. Minorities and those who are worried with the threat of religious radicalism readily buy into this narrow ideology and justify persecutions of suspected radical elements in society committed in its name.

### **New Media**

The political agitation by populist politicians coincides with technological advancements in communication. In the past decade social media in particular has replaced mainstream media channels as the main source of information. The migration to alternative media is expedited by the diminishing trust on existing media platforms. Mainstream media channels, print and electronic, are often affiliated with or owned by certain political groups and powerful business conglomerates, exactly the kind of elite that people accuse of manipulation. During elections these media outlets are perceived to act as mouthpieces for their patrons and owners.

As newspaper and cable TV subscriptions fall, young people particularly are turning to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Line, Youtube or the internet generally for their daily dose of information and entertainment. These new media outlets create and offer alternative perspectives on reality more suited to the need and belief of the user. This is possible thanks to the algorithm that works behind the screen to identify users’ preferences and deliver fragments of information accordingly. Young people also like them because they allow users to create their own versions of reality, a feature that does not exist in the traditional media. The self-generated content completes the algorithmic enclaves, and built in their smartphones, these media platforms know no spatial and time boundaries, creating round-the-clock personal media services. What used to be thought as a big wonderful open space for everyone, the internet has now turned into enclaves of opposing camps with their own versions of reality.

In many Southeast Asian countries where digital access is still relatively costly, the rise of new media can be problematic. As an illustration, in 2017 Indonesia had 143 million internet users, 10 more million than the previous year. Thus every year there are millions of new users and very likely they are people with cheap 2G android smartphones. For them the internet is really Facebook and WhatsApp. In her best-selling travel book across the archipelago *Indonesia Etc.* (2015) Elizabeth Pisani wrote, “110 million live on less than US\$2 a day ...and are on Facebook.” The fragmented and partial nature of the information in circulation through social media combines with low digital media literacy. This turns social media into platforms for generating misleading information, and in election time this often provokes conflicts among the already agitated electorate.

Governments often seem ill-equipped to respond to the power of the new media. They issue bad legislations that aim to curtail the excess but in the end undermine the freedom of expression. Malaysia's Anti-Fake News Law of 2018 and Indonesia's Information and Electronic Transactions of 2008 are a case in point. They have been accused of targeting dissents and government critics, and in encouraging people to report on their neighbours of suspicious online activities, they help turn citizens against each other.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, my task is simple. This is a region characterised by dark legacies and a promise of bright future. Its dynamics flow mainly from rapid economic development and the struggles to wrestle with its consequences. It may not have the widespread destitution of the sub-Saharan Africa or the warfare that continues to wreck the Middle East, but it certainly has its fair share of troubles.

This presentation is just an effort to situate a conversation on the often aloof subject of the divine in a societal context. The final reflection is entirely yours to explore.

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