

*“Asian traditions and cultures born centuries before christianity . . . still persist today . . . There are differences in social class structure, and in religious attitudes. But the varieties and individual characteristics of many of the countries of Asia have withstood the leveling effect of (the) common influences of landscape, imperialism, and social and political changes.”*

## THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE—A SURVEY \*

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THE INSIGHTS WHICH Mr. Teodoro Locsin<sup>1</sup> presented to us this morning only show that the products of the University just like the products of a fine brewery or a distillery improve with the years. In contrast, I would like to say that my remarks this morning were organized with some desperate haste, haste that is relative to the scope of the problem that I had unwittingly assumed for myself. Therefore, I can only provide you with a panorama of the background and atmosphere in which the politics of Southeast and South Asia are evolving. First of all, I would like to invite you for a look at the landscape. A passenger from a plane going over Southeast Asia, bringing with him a view of the Philippines, and crossing the waters to Indonesia or to the mainland, will be struck by the uniformity, the similarity between the geographical configuration of the Philippines and the natural landscape of mainland Asia; he will see the land broken up by mountain ranges, blanketed over by vast expanses of forests, deep valleys and wide plains broken by very slender ribbons of roads and highways, many of them just traces of trails. A huge cosmopolitan center, the capital city—that is the legacy of western colonization in the area, with only one or probably two smaller, very much smaller, satellite cities.

When we look at this landscape, the vastness, the underdeveloped character of the natural surroundings, relatively undisturbed in modern times, seems almost to engulf the limited incursions of man into his natural environment. So we have here one common characteristic of Southeast Asia.

Going now to South Asia, we find essentially the same characteristics, except that when we go into the fringes of Pakistan and India, we find

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. to “Our So-Called Two-Party System” by T. M. Locsin, in this issue.

more formidable and vast natural formations. But this does not inject any important difference into the culture of South Asia. Having essentially a common landscape, the peoples of the region respond to essentially similar natural challenges, with the same answers, that is to say, they have developed basically the same technology. As a result of this similar technological response to the challenges of nature, the human relationships in South and Southeast Asia, of course with regional variations, have also been the same. The way people look at nature, the way people set up social relationships for intercommunication and interrelationship with each other; essentially these cultural elements have been the same.

In addition to the similarity of the physical, cultural and technological landscapes, we also find that these regions experienced identical institutional impositions from without—the subjection to Western dominance. The West came to this part of the world from the 18th to the 19th centuries, and imposed institutions of colonialism upon the entire region, with the notable exception of Thailand. It must, however, be noted that with the advent of Western imperialism, and this is not often pointed out, Thailand lost something like 90,000 square miles of its territory and was also compelled to extend many concessions to the surrounding colonial powers such as France and Great Britain. We have thus, essentially the same natural, cultural, technological landscape superimposed by a similar political pattern of a colonial character.

Finally in more recent times, another influence came to these areas, the forces of change brought about by the world war. The defeat of Western colonial powers in the hands of the Japanese imperial forces and the occupation of the area by the Japanese disturbed the *status quo*. The subsequent liberation of the regions by the Allied Powers brought about social and political changes of far reaching consequences. There was an increase in the movements of population from the rural to the urban centers. Social relationships—whether it be between farmers and owners of land, or whether it be between workers and employers—and political relationships, had been destroyed, rather disturbed, in the sense that the attitudes of the citizens or subjects had been changed in relation to those who governed them. And with eventual withdrawal of the West, we find this region experiencing an identical process of liberating political and social forces.

On the other hand, I would invite you to look at the individual character of each of these peoples. Asia is a vast continent. Many of the cultures and civilizations of Asia are very much older than Western culture and traditions. Long before the advent of the West, Asian cultures and civilizations had been firmly rooted in the lives of the peoples. These

traditions and cultures, born centuries before Christianity, continue to be strong in many Asian societies. Ancient traditions in India, Indonesia, in Burma and in Indo-China, still persist today; they distinguish each country from all the other countries in the region. There are differences in social class structure, and in religious attitudes. But the varieties and the individual characteristics of many of the countries of Asia has withstood the leveling effect of these common influences of landscape, imperialism, and social and political changes. In addition to these differences, there is the historical fact, that after World War II, the politics of the West, that is to say, the politics of the divided West, made its impact on Asia. Indeed many of the countries of Asia responded to this politics of a divided West, through selecting their alignment with either the Western bloc or the Russian bloc. These alignments, let it not be forgotten, including a neutral response, i.e., the response of non-commitment to either military bloc, have also divided or distinguished the countries of this area from each other.

By and large the result of the impact of these common characteristics on the one hand and of the dividing or individualizing factors on the other, had been to complicate the picture.

However, there are still very discernible, very obvious, common characteristics; and one that distinguishes all of these countries together is nationalism. Nationalism in the sense of emancipation, still more profoundly, in the search for their own destiny. For example, the identity that India is seeking for itself, is, of course, different from the identity that we in this country are seeking or trying to discover. And the same goes for each of the other countries. And yet although nationalism in this sense is an individualizing force, it is common to all these countries.

Another significant thing that is common to most countries in the region is that these countries, after the attainment of independence from the West, have adopted, with slight variations here and there, the political institutions of the former colonial powers. Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Malaysia and India have adopted the political and parliamentary institutions of Great Britain. The Philippines has adopted the American political pattern. And Indonesia owes very much more than what is usually acknowledged to the political and institutional practices of the Netherlands. Although this behaviour has been pervasive on all the countries of the area, we have here a different and unique response. It is a healthy sign that the response of these countries in their adoption of institutions from the old metropolitan powers have been selective. In many cases of adoptions, adjustments have been made. India, for example, does not have exactly the same pattern as that of Great Britain. She has introduced a

number of modifications which are different from Britain. Pakistan has certainly adopted many adjustments in the parliamentary system from the mother country. This is the same thing with Burma, Cambodia, and, of course we in this country, as Mr. Locsin has so clearly stated, are going in somewhat different direction than that which the institutions we borrowed from the United States would have indicated.

Aside from this broad panorama or presentation of uniform characteristics and individualizing tendencies, there are a number of historical events that have happened in the last 14 or 20 years in these various countries in Southeast Asia. These historical events have exerted a powerful influence on the developments of these countries. While considering the factors discussed, it is imperative to keep these historic events in view to set in proper focus the contemporary Asian landscape.