

## **Introduction and Conclusion Paragraphs**

Issues pertaining to human rights have increasingly gained the attention of academia and the international community in recent years. The questions of how to address inconsistencies in human rights standards and how to deal with human rights violations are at the forefront of these issues. Essentially, certain regions' perspectives on human rights have enabled them to justify actions that are considered human rights violation by the international community. Southeast Asia is one such region. Its' position on human rights has been shaped by what is known as the 'Asian values' doctrine. After explaining the doctrine, this paper analyzes the case of Indonesia during the Suharto era in order to demonstrate how President Suharto's New Order government used the umbrella of 'Asian values' to justify a political agenda that included the performance of mass human rights violations. Therein, it will detail Suharto's ascendance to power, describe the reforms and measures that were initiated under his rule, and focus on the human rights violations that his regime committed against the Communists and East Timorese. The horrific picture that emerges will serve to highlight the implications of state-specific human rights standards and allude to the complexity of issues the international community faces in dealing with such states.

### **Asian Values:**

The "Asian values" doctrine puts forth a distinctive approach to human rights issues. As Langlois (2001) contends:

"[Asian values,] are said to have various sources-Confucianism and Asian interpretation of Islam prominent among them, along with more particularist cultural heritages such as those of Java and other sub-national groups. These values are said to be *cultural* values, and are understood to be at the heart of the 'Asian worldview'" (p. 12).

Certain aspects of the Asian values doctrine are shaped by individual country's particular cultural, ethnic and religious dimensions. Therefore, Thailand's understanding of Asian values is different than Indonesia's or Singapore's understanding as each of these countries has its own distinctive mindset. These understandings are all rooted in the different aspects of life in each nation, including education, family relationships, educational methods, social structures, political institutions, policy processes, and cultural values (Langlois, 2001). However, the Asian concept also functions as a general unifying theme for all Southeast Asian countries because they share similar cultural roots. Certain core beliefs and values thus manifest consistently in Southeast Asian interpretations of 'Asian Values'.

In introducing the foundation of Asian values, Neher & Marlay (1999) explain: "While details of proposed models [of Asian values] differ between countries, common features include Confucian-style values, patron-client relations, personalized authority, dominant political party, and strong state (as cited in Eldridge, 2002, p. 36). The literature further elaborates upon this foundation. As Christie (1995) argues, Asian cultures in general emphasize the importance of the community over that of individuals; prioritize economic development over civil and political rights; encourage great respect for and obedience to authority; and promote social and political stability in order to achieve a strong and prosperous state.

Southeast Asian leaders have often used these core Asian values to justify violations of human rights in their respective countries and to challenge the applicability of Western notions of human rights to Southeast Asian states (Chan, as cited in Tang, 1995). Most of these leaders draw upon the concept of Asian values in arguing that human rights have to be seen within the context of the diverse cultural, historical, and economic values that shape various nation-states. As the Bangkok Declaration clearly states:

“[Asian governments] recognize that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious background” (as cited in Tang, 1995, p. 25).

Southeast Asian states have stressed the importance of economics in justifying human rights violations, and scholars who have defended this position in human rights debates point out that East Asian economies need to prosper in the sense that Western economies are prosperous in order to embrace democratic traditions. Langlois (2001) clearly illustrates this point stating: “It is because of the distance between the conditions of Asia and the West ...that Asia is not able to provide democracy and human rights to the West’s standards. The implementation of human rights requires economic development; as Asia does not have this to the degree that the West does” (p. 33). In acknowledging East Asia’s need for economic developments, this view supports the region’s emphasis on the promotion of strong paternalistic governments that are able to provide an environment of law, order, and stability for investment in economic development (2001).

### **Conclusion:**

After taking firm hold of the reins of power in 1968, Suharto initiated various political reforms and established organizations to support them in order to ensure the survival of his regime: the New Order functioned as the cornerstone of an authoritarian government; Golkar became the main political party; the Komkamtip aimed to achieve security objectives; and *Dwifungsi* (dual function) justified military intervention in various social, political, and economic sectors. The Asian values doctrine provided a persuasive context within which to

launch his agenda, and as the Indonesian public admired the closely- related Pancasila as their state's official ideology, Suharto was able to easily sell them on its principles and promises.

This essay has demonstrated that throughout the era of his rule, Suharto used the Asian values doctrine to bolster various political goals, justify the mass violations of human rights, and shield his regime from international scrutiny. Suharto was thereby able to legitimate state intervention in the various social, political, and economic spheres of Indonesian society. His commitment to Asian values and the Pancasila, were most revealing in his extermination campaign against communists and the ethnic suppression of the East Timorese. Analyses of this campaign suggest that he justified the cleansing of Communists on the basis that they would eventually undermine security, law, order, and national unity—those very characteristics which were the means by which he would achieve the economic development that was central his agenda. The long suppression of the East Timorese was also justified within the context of Asian values as Suharto perceived an independent East Timor as a threat to the unity of Indonesia as a whole.

In essence, Asian values were a means by which Suharto ensured power and wealth with utter disregard to the welfare of those citizens in his charge. While this doctrine may have attributes that are desirable within certain contexts and does have deep roots within South Asian societies, the legacy which Suharto has left in its name is a travesty. The West does need to exercise caution in imposing its will on weaker countries, but the mass violation of human rights which has occurred in Indonesia points towards the need for universal rather than regional standards of citizen protection and human rights law.

