

An Asia That Can Say No

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Mahathir, Mohamad and Shintaro Ishihara, *The Voice of Asia* (translated by Frank Baldwin), Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995, 159 pp.

One of the more successful gimmicks that extreme Right wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen deploys in his bid to legitimize racism as a political issue in France is the slogan, “He says out loud what others only think silently.” Politically-correct sentiments can go hang: in the demagogues estimation, a fascistic counter-hegemony’s time has come around at last. Le Pen’s party, the National Front, has met phenomenal success in southeastern France, where some of that country’s biggest immigrant populations are found; this may be taken to be a fair endorsement of his xenophobic discourse.

Speaking out loud, in the name of an imagined Asian heterogeneity, against a domineering Christian West (and against the USA in particular), is the objective of the slender volume jointly written by the Malaysian prime minister and a prominent member of Japan’s durable Liberal Democratic Party. Judging by the attention it has received in Western (and Asian) media. *The Voice of Asia* has exerted the same kind of shock appeal, but appeal nevertheless, distilled in Le Pen’s slogan. Could the non-hypocritical approach of *The Asian duo* be the reason why?

As Mahathir and Ishihara are aware, many an Asian intellectual and/or nationalist has felt resentful over Western governments’ new-found zeal in using as a politico-ideological weapon. As if violations of these same human rights had never figured prominently in these counties’ respective colonial pasts, and as if less economically developed countries could cultivate overnight the sociopolitical values which the West took centuries to consolidate. Left-wing, right-wing and centrist regimes in this part of the world can easily identify with Mahathir-Ishihara’s critique of the

unproblematized Western superiority complex. Post-modernists and partisans of Edward Said's "Orientalist" thesis may find comfort in Mahathir-Ishihara's rejection of the Western master narrative and its claims to conquest. Finally, it is not impertinent to cite here South Africa's abiding admiration for the "Malaysian model" of development, as reported in a recent *Time* magazine article (17 March 1997 issue). Mahathir may be a bugbear for p.c. people, but one of his biggest fans is the freedom fighter Nelson Mandela; most Asians and Africans have no problem comprehending that.

The US government's and media's meddlesome attitude on the matter of human rights was sooner or later bound to get its "comeuppance." This earnest, commonsensical broadside does not fail in this regard, but its approach may be too tame. Its call for a united stand to constitute the *Asia that can say no* (the book's original, Japanese-version title) errs on the side of presumptuousness, but it is a useful reminder to the rest of the world about the realities accompanying the changing balance of global power. Late 20th century developments conspire to give added weight to Mahathir-Ishihara's argument. The booming Asian economies, most of whom have little or no use for Western recipes for growth, continue to promote a sense of self-confidence that is admittedly an exhilarating experience for the region's elites. Ishihara visibly wishes to orient this new impulse towards a dispensation which would retain, if not perpetuate outright, Japan's pride of place in Asia. For his part, Mahathir seems only too willing to indulge his co-authors anti-American bent. Indeed, their joint writing venture must be seen in the context of their geopolitical connivance: it is no secret that conservative Japanese circles have a stake in Mahathir's pipe dream of an East Asian Economic Caucus, which intends to shut out Western powers from Asian affairs.

One imagines that *The Voice of Asia* will pose at least an intellectual challenge to the Filipino reader whose basic instincts gravitate around the received idea of Western superiority. Mahathir-Ishihara's attack on so-called Western values, especially those which glorify freedom of the individual, may disturb those who are unaware that in traditional societies these values have a negative connotation, as they imply antisocial egoism, hedonism and permissiveness. In his chapter entitled "Western Modernism vs. Eastern Thought," Mahathir's kind words for not-so-liberal" and less-

than-liberal” Asian nation-states which have nevertheless achieved stability, prosperity and international respect, might rub Filipino audiences the wrong way, conditioned as the mainstream national, community in the land of EDSA is to dithyrambic accounts of this people’s fierce defense of freedom and democracy at all costs.

And yet, a Filipino reading Mahathir-Ishihara in early 1997 cannot help but judge this book’s message on the basis of his/her perceptions of the fortunes, since 1986, of EDSA’s self-proclaimed ideals. More than a year before the elections that should install in the presidency a new chief of state, president Fidel V. Ramos, his advisers, supporters and relatives have all gone on record being in favor of amending the post-Marcos Constitution either to allow the “indispensable” incumbent to occupy his seat a second time, or what amounts to the same thing, to create a strong presidency so as to compensate for the weak State the country has always had. These declarations have a Marcosian sneakiness to them, to be sure. But wasn’t it precisely on the strength of their anti-Marcos credentials that the Aquino and Ramos regimes were voted into power? Today, it no longer comes as a shock that the patented anti-Marcosians have started sounding like the defunct dictator, or for that matter that a drive to rehabilitate Marcos posthumously has been launched by people in the Ramos camp.

This is a good read if only for the amount of reflection it provokes. Moreover, it is an excellent introduction to the issues of multiculturalism, relativism and political correctness presently bedeviling relations between certain Western and Eastern civilizations. There is nothing here that critics of the West have not already said or written, but Mahathir and Ishihara are careful not to let their rhetoric degenerate into name-calling, or their moralizing into xenophobia. Their attitude, simply put, is one of “live and let live.” Ishihara argues:

We may wear Brooks Brothers shirts and eat *foie gras*, but we remain Asian and that will never change. By the same token, no matter how enamored Europeans and Americans become of the Orient, there is a limit to what they can absorb. That is the way it should be (p. 107).

The Japanese politician’s logic may not be exactly impeccable, but the debate over cultural values has a way of disregarding the fine points of argumentation. What ultimately wins the day for one or the other of the

protagonists is hegemony in the Gramscian sense: the timeliness of the value change to be effected, and the non-coercive means employed to bring it about. But what is it they say about Asians exquisite talent for patience? ❁