

East Asia in Transition

Lesson 4: Social Issues, Human Rights, and the Environment

East Asians face many social and environmental challenges. These challenges include widespread poverty, discrimination against women, crime and corruption, ethnic and religious conflict, human rights violations, and significant pollution. While some of these problems have existed for centuries, others have developed only in the last few decades. Indeed, the 1997 East Asian economic crisis aggravated some of the region's social ills. This lesson examines the complex web of developmental challenges in East Asia and the steps being taken to address them.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Like all regions of the world, East Asia faces a wide variety of social challenges. Here, we focus on poverty, gender issues, and crime and corruption.

Poverty and Homelessness

In 2006, there were about 550 million East Asians living on \$2 or less a day. Almost 150 million of these people lived on less than \$1 dollar a day.¹ Many major East Asian cities have large slums. These slums frequently have inadequate water, sewage, and electrical services. It is important to note that there are significant differences between the more advanced countries, such as Japan and South Korea, and the poorer countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Burma). There are also large differences within countries, particularly between rural and urban areas. For example, China's poorer and more rural western provinces have not experienced many of the changes taking place in the more industrialized and urban east.

More than 340 million Chinese live on less than \$2 a day. This figure amounts to nearly a quarter of the country's population.² As many as 200 million of the country's rural peasants have moved into urban areas hoping to benefit from the economic boom.³ These laborers are often unable to find jobs and have become an army of rootless people moving from city to city. They are called the "floating population" by the Chinese government.

The social costs of the 1997 East Asian economic crisis were seen almost immediately. In Indonesia, the value of the currency fell nearly 85 percent.⁴ The banking system stopped functioning and many of the country's largest companies went bankrupt. At least three million Indonesians lost their jobs.⁵ Several million children dropped out of Indonesian schools.⁶ In South Korea, 23,000 businesses failed.⁷ Unemployment almost tripled in 1998, soaring to its highest level in over a decade.⁸ Some 5,000 South Korean children were left at orphanages because their parents could no longer provide for them.⁹ In total, the East Asian economic crisis pushed at least 15 million people below the poverty line and caused severe hardship for millions more.¹⁰

However, at the turn of the century, East Asia began to recover. Between 1999 and 2005, East Asia averaged over 7 percent economic growth per year.¹¹ This growth was faster than any other region in the world. Because of this strong economic growth, the number of East Asians living in poverty declined significantly.

Gender Issues

East Asia has made progress in the area of gender equality. However, the region still faces many challenges. In many countries boys are generally seen as more valuable. As a result, women get less education and health care. The abortion of female fetuses is a significant problem. Many women fall victim to human trafficking. The spread of HIV/AIDS is also a growing challenge for women, especially in Southeast Asia.

In terms of employment, the traditional role of East Asian women has been in the home or in agriculture. Rapid industrialization, however, has placed many on the shop floor. For example, China's export industry depends substantially on female labor. Unfortunately, working women in China and elsewhere are often subjected to terrible working conditions, harassment, and abuse. Women are often penalized for pregnancy, and many cannot advance beyond "glass ceilings." Even in modern, secular Singapore, the government's official position is that a woman cannot legally be the head of a household, even if she is the major income earner.

Increasing numbers of East Asians are calling for a change in the treatment of women. Women's movements and organizations have developed throughout the region. Women are demanding equality in the workplace and society. In Japan, for example, women have initiated lawsuits against major Japanese companies. They seek equal employment opportunities and equal pay. Across the region, groups have spoken out against such things as child prostitution and the spread of AIDS. Many East Asian states have also made strides in closing the education gap between boys and girls. Finally, some progress has been made in the area of female political participation.

Corruption

Crime and corruption are also prominent social issues in East Asia. Myanmar and North Korea are among the most corrupt and repressive countries in the world. Crime and corruption are also tremendous problems in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Widespread problems in governments, police forces, judiciaries, and businesses lead to human rights abuses, economic losses, and popular protests. Several governments have responded by establishing anticorruption commissions, especially after the 1997 economic crisis.

EAST ASIAN TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS

Ethnic, religious, and nationalistic tensions also cause problems in East Asia. For example, there are still ill feelings over Japanese brutality during the 1930s and 1940s. Also, China's control of Tibet has left lasting strains between the Tibetans and Chinese. Here, we focus on examples from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. We also examine the issue of foreign workers in East Asia.

Indonesia

In 1975, Indonesia invaded and took control of East Timor. After this invasion, there was periodic violence between the East Timorese and the Indonesian army. Then in 1999, after the fall of the repressive Suharto regime, a referendum was held. The East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence. Anti-independence militias, many with ties to the Indonesian

army, then went on a rampage that took hundreds of lives. The violence forced 270,000 of East Timor's 800,000 people to flee to the Indonesian side of the island.¹² Virtually every village and town across East Timor was looted or burned. An Australian-led, United Nations-sanctioned peacekeeping force eventually brought stability. In May 2002, East Timor formally became an independent country. The bulk of the United Nations peacekeeping forces were removed in 2005. However, many returned in 2006 because of continued instability.

East Timor has not been the only site of ethnic or religious violence in Indonesia. For example, separatists in the province of Aceh have long fought the Indonesian government. The government has responded with force, but has never been able to stop the insurgency. In 2003, the Indonesian government declared martial law and started a brutal crackdown against the secessionist movement. However, a devastating tsunami in December 2004 killed over 130,000 people in the province and interrupted the war.¹³ A cease-fire agreement was signed so the area could recover. This fragile cease-fire continued into 2007.

The Philippines

In the Philippines, Islamic rebel groups have plagued the southern end of the archipelago for decades. They have sought a separate Islamic state for the country's Muslim minorities. One group, Abu Sayyaf, has gained international notoriety for its reign of terror in and around the South China Sea. This group, which is thought to have ties to al Qaeda, is known chiefly for kidnappings, massacres, and extortion. In 2004, it placed a bomb on a passenger ferry, killing more than one hundred people.

In August 2006, U.S.-backed Philippine troops launched a major operation against Abu Sayyaf. Dozens of militants were killed, including the group's top leader, Khadaffy Janjalani. The government hopes that the group has been permanently disabled, and vows to wipe out poverty, which helps breed extremism in the area.

Thailand

Thailand's population is primarily of Thai heritage, and is mostly Buddhist. However, in three southern provinces bordering Malaysia, the majority of the population is Muslim and have Malay heritage. A conflict in the area between local groups and the central government has been simmering at least since the 1960s. After 2001, the insurgency became more radicalized. Subsequent heavy-handed tactics by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government, including deaths of civilian protesters, intensified the Muslims' feelings of isolation in their own country. Since early 2004, more than 1,700 people have died due to the conflict.¹⁴ However, in 2006, Prime Minister Thaksin was ousted in a coup, raising hopes for eased tensions.

Foreign Workers

One result of the different income levels among East Asian countries is the large flow of migrant workers within the region. Richer countries attract workers from poorer neighbors. For example, many Filipinos and Indonesians work in Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. Burmese, Cambodian, and Southern Chinese workers often seek employment in Thailand. Much of this migration is illegal, and many workers toil in dirty and dangerous settings.

Foreign workers, whether legal or illegal, often have few or no legal protections. They often do not know of the protections they do have, or are reluctant to exercise their rights for fear of abuse, deportation, or loss of livelihood. For example, after the devastating December 2004 tsunami, some Burmese foreign workers in Thailand did not visit aid stations because they were afraid of deportation.

Another problem has been that some local populations feel suspicious of foreign workers. A 2005 poll showed that more than 70 percent of Japanese blame foreign workers with rising crime in Japan.¹⁵ These feelings exist even though the country faces a growing labor shortage. In 2005, Malaysia began rounding up and deporting almost 400,000 undocumented foreign workers because of Malaysians' growing objections to their presence.¹⁶ However, the country has since had to come to grips with a chronic labor shortage. It has worked to streamline its system for bringing in legal foreign workers.

Despite these issues, remittances from foreign workers remain a very important source of income for many countries in the region. For example, remittances from the Filipino foreign workers accounted for over 14 percent of the Philippines' gross domestic product in 2005.¹⁷

HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

Singapore's former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has maintained that "Western concepts" of human rights do not apply to East Asia. He argues that East Asian states have a strong cultural preference for order, stability, and the collective good of society. This preference, he says, legitimizes limitations on individual rights in favor of group rights. This argument goes against the traditional Western approaches to human rights, which are centered on democracy and the rights of the individual.

Taking the opposite view, former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung has argued that Lee Kuan Yew's "view of Asian cultures is not only unsupportable, but self-serving."¹⁸ He does not accept that "Asian values" legitimize limitations on democracy and individual human rights. While this debate has taken place, countries such as China and Myanmar (Burma) have maintained that how they treat their people is an internal matter, and that they are applying East Asian values to East Asian issues.

China

In China, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre was the most notorious instance of human rights violations in recent decades. During this massacre, the Chinese military killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pro-democracy demonstrators. The slaughter captured global attention and was condemned by countries around the world. But China countered that other countries had no right to interfere in China's internal affairs.

In June 1998, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president to visit China since the Tiananmen Square massacre. During his visit, he debated human rights issues with President Jiang Zemin on Chinese television. He also agreed with President Jiang that both countries would promote and protect human rights in their countries. However, in October 1998, China closed its first-ever human rights conference by declaring that it would not embrace Western definitions of civil

liberties. The country's leaders argued that the rights to economic survival and development must come first.

There is a wide range of human rights problems in China. Suspects can be placed in "reeducation camps" for up to four years without trial. Reports of torture while in official custody are common. Practitioners of Falun Gong (a new-age spiritual movement with millions of followers in China) face mass arrests, beatings, and even killings. The government considers Falun Gong an "evil cult." Internet censorship is the rule. There are as many as 30,000 Internet police.¹⁹ They block any Internet content that they think is sensitive or inappropriate. AIDS outreach workers complain of harassment and arrest when they speak too openly about the epidemic.

However, even as China attempts to restrict the emergence of a stronger civil society, protests against corruption, environmental degradation, and poverty are growing in number and size. There were over 87,000 popular protests in 2005. This figure is a tenfold increase since 1993.²⁰ Local sit-ins have closed polluting factories. Villagers have grabbed headlines when protesting land seizures and local corruption. Some have even begun to take the government to court.

Myanmar

Myanmar (Burma) is another state that rejects external criticism of its human rights record and argues for the need to apply local standards. Since 1958, the country has been ruled by a hard-line military dictatorship. This regime has often violently suppressed pro-democracy efforts.

Myanmar's poor human rights record has gained international attention partly because of the efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi won Myanmar's 1990 presidential elections. However, the ruling military junta ignored the victory. Since 1990, Suu Kyi has regularly faced arrest and harassment. She was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize because of her pro-democracy efforts.

Aung San Suu Kyi is the spokeswoman for the thousands of Burmese suffering harassment, imprisonment, torture, and death for their political beliefs. Because of its repressive actions, Myanmar is treated as an outlaw country by most states outside East Asia. Most East Asian states have been critical of the military regime, but they sometimes work with it in the hopes that ongoing interactions will promote change. China sees Myanmar as a potential ally and has worked closely with the military regime on many issues.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

As in many regions of the world, environmental degradation is a significant problem in East Asia. Smog is so thick in some cities that people wear masks to protect themselves. Many cities have open sewage systems, oil-slicked waterways, garbage piled along roadways, and overflowing landfills. In many corners of the region, plants and wildlife are disappearing.

As economic crisis swept across East Asia in the summer and fall of 1997, another disaster was unfolding. Hundreds of fires were burning in the forests of Indonesia. Many of the fires were deliberately set as a cheap way to clear land. The fires were particularly bad on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. A blanket of smoke covered an area almost half the size of the United States. The fires affected not only Indonesia, but also Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. The eerie, health-threatening haze left high-rise buildings barely visible, schools

and airports closed, and life miserable for millions of people. While such fires had been set before, this time drought conditions turned the situation into an unprecedented ecological disaster. In subsequent years, ongoing forest fire problems and illegal logging have continued to threaten Indonesia's tropical forests, which are among the richest in the world.

Another environmental issue attracting a lot of attention is China's Three Gorges Dam project. This project is the world's largest-ever hydroelectric and flood-control undertaking. It was begun in 1994 and is scheduled for completion in 2009. It will eventually lead to the submersion of an area nearly 400 miles long and the resettlement of up to 2 million people.²¹ Critics argue that it is causing widespread ecological and archeological damage. But supporters say it is necessary to provide energy for China's booming economy and to control the floods of the Yangtze River.

In December 2004, an enormous earthquake in the Indian Ocean led to a massive tsunami. In East Asia alone, more than 176,000 people were killed.²² Hundreds of thousands more were left homeless. The force of waves crushed coral reefs, destroying fish habitats and residents' food supplies. Importantly, places with intact mangrove swamps and extensive coral reefs suffered less tsunami damage than other places because these natural defenses protected shorelines.

In June 2001, the Asian Development Bank released a report on environmental issues in East Asia. It stated that rapid population growth, urbanization, and government inaction are posing severe threats to the Asia-Pacific region's environment. Despite a growing recognition of the need to protect the environment in East Asia, as well as isolated cases of effective policy, "environmental degradation in the region is pervasive, accelerating, and unabated."²³ The seriousness of the situation can be seen in a 2004 BBC poll, in which East Asians listed the environment as one of their top personal concerns above war, terrorism, disease, and education.²⁴

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¹ The World Bank: East Asia and Pacific Region, "East Asia Update," November 2006, Appendix Table 7: Regional Aggregates for Poverty Measures in East Asia,

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