

Shared Values and Democracy in Asia

By Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo

Over the last many years, our Asian community has continuously evolved towards a stronger sense of regional identity, harmony, and of shared values such as democracy. The co-organizers of this symposium have long been doing their share in this evolution. Nikkei has been both chronicler and participant, as the world's largest financial publication. The Japan Foundation is widely known – for more than 45 years, it has been promoting cultural friendship between the people of Japan and other peoples, such as the Filipino people. The Eastern Institute of Dr. Hajime Nakamura has been spreading the message of peace and Buddha's teachings for close to 50 years now. The Vivekananda Foundation, since its formation in 2009, has been spearheading research that furthers the cause of a strong and prosperous India within a peaceful and harmonious world.

I accepted your invitation with the sentiment that I belong to a people that were perhaps the earliest in Asia to manifest their aspirations to democracy in the classical format – in a constitution duly approved by a Congress with duly elected representatives. The Philippines may perhaps be unique in our part of the world in being able to trace its background and experience in a democratic system from as early as the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This is how that democracy was born: In 1896, a colonial revolution in the Philippines gave birth to the first republic in Asia. It was spearheaded by a troika of revolutionaries. The first of the troika was a poor man, Andres Bonifacio, now referred to as the Great Plebeian, who sparked the revolution. The second was a fighter, General Emilio Aguinaldo, who, on June 12, 1898 declared the Philippines independent of its colonial father, Spain. Seven months after his declaration of independence, the revolution had made enough headway to enable the proclamation of a new constitution for the new nation. The democratic character of that constitution can be attributed to the third member of the troika, Apolinario Mabini, who was the recognized "brains" of the revolution.

The declaration of the First Philippine Republic coincided with the Spanish-American war of 1898, which was settled by the Treaty of Paris wherein Spain ceded ownership of the Philippine islands to the United States. Thus, for more than 3 years, the Filipinos had to fight the Philippine-American war. The Filipino people paid dearly for their aspirations – with a population then of 9 million, it is estimated that nearly two million Filipinos lost their lives in that war.

In April of 1902, the last Filipino general standing, Miguel Malvar, surrendered to the American forces. Within a year, the American Congress enacted the Philippine Bill of 1902 establishing a Philippine Assembly with members to be elected by the Filipino people themselves. Thus, from America's early magnanimity was born a tradition that lives to this day, wherein Filipinos freely elect their national and local officials.

But America never had to bring the spirit itself of democracy to the Philippines – the Filipinos embraced democracy, and they spilled their blood for democracy, all on our own.

Since 1896, democracy has been our only experience in post-colonial governance, until martial law was imposed in 1972. That was just an interruption. In 1986, a peaceful "People Power" revolution propelled Corazon Aquino to the Presidency, and within months, the democratic rule was restored that Filipinos enjoy to this day.

I will share a historical footnote to illustrate how our founding fathers embraced democracy over a century ago: One of the American generals in the Philippine-American war was Joseph Wheeler, a veteran of the American Civil War wherein, ironically, he had fought on the side of the Confederate rebels. Apolinario Mabini wrote him a letter to explain the revolution that Wheeler was now trying to extinguish. These were Mabini's words: "The popular desire of the people (is) to have a government that would assure to the Filipinos freedom of thought, conscience and association; immunity in their persons, homes and correspondence; popular representation in the drafting of laws and imposition of taxes; equality of participation in public offices and public benefits; respect of laws and property; and the progressive development of public welfare with the help of means offered by modern progress." If Thomas Jefferson himself, who wrote the American declaration of independence, had written a

defense of the Philippine revolution, he could hardly have done a better job than Mabini.

This brings me to the underlying question that we seek to answer in this symposium: Where does this aspiration for democracy come from? Are there values we share in Asia that sustain this aspiration? Let me make 5 assertions.

My first assertion is that it is universal. Tradition dates the concept of democracy back to the ancient Greeks, then to historic symbols such as the Magna Carta, the French Revolution, the American Revolution. And then it flows further to national events unique to each of the countries represented in this conference who now enjoy democracy. Thus even if the early milestones of democracy are by tradition Western, we should note that represented in this conference are two of the great democracies in today's world – India, the world's largest democracy, and Japan, among the world's most advanced democracies.

Thus, the stirrings of democracy do not seem to arise from geography or race. At its most dramatic, the inherent human desire for freedom, and in a civic sense, democracy, is awakened whenever and wherever those who govern use their power oppressively. But it could also just begin with the simple sense of realization by a people that they have become a community bound together by ethnicity, common values, common history, or simply by the land that they have come to embrace as their homeland.

A national literary artist of the Philippines, the late Nick Joaquin, wrote of an anecdote that illustrates this innate sense of democracy. The people of the Philippines refer to themselves as "Filipinos". But it turns out that the first to use the term "Filipino" were not the indigenous natives of the Spanish-era Philippines, but a group of Spaniards and creoles who had come to view themselves as of the Philippine islands first, then as Spaniards second. In the late 19th century, the Spanish Empire convened a conference of its worldwide colonies, where the Spanish delegates from the Philippines proudly declared themselves to be Filipinos. Thus, this sentiment cut across ethnic lines – whether indigenous or of Spanish descent, they were all Filipinos.

My second assertion is that there are indeed certain shared core values in Asia, and these have helped sustain the evolution of Asian countries into modern democracies.

Some possible core values have been suggested by the background theme of this conference – consideration for others, self-restraint, mutual respect. The question is, are these unique to Asia? I normally avoid using stereotypes, but in some instances the respectful use of stereotypes can be illuminating.

The typical Westerner is said to be more direct, more effusive, less sensitive to the feelings of others, less bound by tradition. These are traits that tend to promote pragmatism in order to achieve quick and clear-cut results. The Oriental is said to be indirect, more self effacing, more considerate to the feelings of others, more respectful of old traditions and of elders. These are traits that tend to promote social harmony, and longer patience in achieving results.

The implied conclusion is that democracy in the West can differ from democracy in Asia, not in its essence, but perhaps in the pace of its evolution. I cannot speak for any other country represented in this conference, but I do know Philippine democracy. The Philippines is a functioning democracy, but in the practice of it, it probably has many differences from the practice of democracy elsewhere, whether in the West or in the East. Those differences arise from the unique culture, history, and temperament of the Filipino people, and therefore they represent the collective choice of our people as of this point in time.

My third assertion is that the power of democracy is magnified by the power of education. In his book "Asian Drama" the historian Gunnar Myrdal observed that at the end of its colonial rule, the Filipinos were a uniquely educated people. The foundations were laid by the superior Spanish colonial policy towards mass education. It is interesting to note that our University of Santo Tomas was established by the Spanish Archbishop of Manila, 25 years before Harvard University.

Myrdal adds that "during both the Spanish and America eras, efforts were made to improve the status of women, as a result of which the literacy rate in the Philippines not only (was) high but differs relatively little between the sexes."

My fourth assertion is that standards do exist for what constitutes a developed democracy, like the standards described by Mabini in his letter to Wheeler. Standards against which progress can be measured are always very helpful to guide us all. Standards also help to fact check regimes that may style themselves to be democratic when in fact they are not.

My fifth assertion is that while I believe in democracy in its purest sense, I would at the same time doubt that there exists any perfect democracy anywhere in the world today. Rather, as each democratic country goes through the evolution of its civil society, the march of history tends to bring that country closer and closer to, rather than away, from the pure, ideal democracy that we all hold dear.

Sometimes it seems to be one step back then two steps forward, but the tide of history is relentless. Over time, the spread of education and enlightenment, of information technology, of social media, of globalization – all combine with economic progress and the steady rise of the middle class, and together all of these create pressure for more and more individual freedom and personal dignity in the day-to-day life of the population.

To the credit of the most advanced democracies in the world, they are closer to the pure ideal, and understandably they think they have thus earned the right, and perhaps even the obligation, to encourage further democracy in the countries that are farther behind along the road to the ideal. I would only urge that no country blindly impose its own standards on any other country, because each democratic country has arrived at its time and place in the evolution of its civil institutions based on the democratic choice of its people.

In conclusion, the desire for harmony is perhaps the most important commonality we share in Asia. Harmony brings other cultural factors into play, such as the influence of the family, the tribe or linguistic or ethnic grouping, the influence of traditional leaders and of elders, and perhaps generally, the tendency to bring about change gradually rather than rapidly, in order not to disrupt the harmony of the status quo. This shared value of the desire for harmony is perhaps the value that most defines the evolution of sustained democracy in Asia.

But I am still a student on the various Asian democracies, so I look forward to the other views that will be presented during this conference. Thank you.