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Rising Asia must unleash 'unused brainpower'

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Headlines

Asian countries have transformed greatly, and will further improve if they can unleash their brainpower and turn away from feudal mentalities, a prominent public policy expert said Thursday.

"Asia has the world's largest pool of brainpower, but it also has the world's largest pool of unused brainpower," Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore told a presidential lecture hosted by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta.

"China and India are succeeding and taking off because they are finally finding the right means of igniting the hundreds of millions of brains they have."

He said the best way to understand the revival of Asia, especially China, was by comparing it with Latin America, which experienced slower improvement because of its "social contracts between the governing elites and the population they governed".

"China's big advantage was that it had removed the feudal classes and the feudal mentality with the communist revolution. By contrast, the disadvantage of Latin American societies is that they continue to have either feudal elites or a feudal mentality.

"The ruling classes are more interested in preserving their special privileges, and not in helping the masses."

The dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore said the third largest pool of brainpower after China and India was the ASEAN region with its 500 million people.

"The success of ASEAN will be determined by whether we follow China and India's pattern and unleash the brainpower of the masses, or whether we

follow the Latin American path of nurturing the interests of the elite classes."

In Asia, the country with the most success in removing traces of feudalism is South Korea, with the Philippines at the opposite end, he added.

Mahbubani also praised Indonesia for playing a heroic role in the transformation of Asia.

"I have no doubt that Indonesia will be part of this great transformation of Asia. It has successfully made one of the most difficult transitions that any society has to make, the transition to a full democracy."

He said Indonesia had not retreated despite going through a wrenching financial crisis which shrank the country's economy and resulted in social and political turmoil, and that it had moved from "partly free" to "free" during Yudhoyono's tenure.

He said the tragedy was that Indonesia's remarkable story had not fully spread to the world because the international media was dominated by the Western media, which could not imagine Asia doing better than the West in many areas.

"Something remarkable is happening in Asia, but the world does not really understand what it is. Many Asians are also not aware of how remarkable the great Asian story is."

He suggested that to promote development, ASEAN countries should develop a win-win social contract between their governing elites and their masses and should prioritize education.

Yudhoyono said in his opening remarks that he shared Mahbubani's views on the revival of Asia, saying there was a shift of economic and political powers in the world, with a prediction that between 2025 and 2030, three of the four largest economies would be Asian countries.

"Those of us who have lived through two or three generations know by experience that the Asia of today is not the Asia of a few decades ago. We are seeing an Asia that is becoming more dominant, more confident and relevant in the world.

"China is growing five times faster than the average growth in the developed world and is now the world's third largest economy."

He said globalization would increasingly feature Asia because of changes in the region's geo-economics and geopolitics.

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