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The sermons of cowards

The west is squandering authority on democracy and human rights:
it fails to practise as it preaches

Kishore MahbubaniThe Guardian, Friday 28 March 2008

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Something remarkable has happened in the struggle for greater freedom and democracy. The world's most powerful nation and the traditional beacon for democracy, the United States, has slid backwards. One of the world's poorest nations and the world's most populous Islamic state, Indonesia, has moved distinctly forward. And yet western discourse largely ignores this development, as evidenced by the sweeping speech on democracy delivered by the foreign secretary, David Miliband, last month.

The first flaw of western discourse is its inability to practise what it preaches in this respect: to speak truth to power. This is revealed in the reluctance of western governments to discuss the most catastrophic reversal in the field of human rights: the decision by the US government to defend the use of torture. In the evolution of human rights there have been two quantum leaps: the first was the universal abolition of slavery; the second, the move towards abolishing torture.

Ten years ago, if any one had suggested the US would reintroduce torture, the answer would have been "impossible!" Yet the impossible has happened. Amnesty International has described Guantánamo as "the gulag of our times". Despite their history of condemning human rights violations, no western nation has condemned the US government for Guantánamo. Miliband's speech rightly applauded several brave Burmese people for standing up to the military government. They spoke truth to power, and at great personal risk. Sadly, even though he faced no personal risks, Miliband could not muster the courage to speak truth to power regarding Guantánamo.

Even more tellingly, in the US there has been a broader reversal on many civil rights issues. In the face of threats from terrorism, the population has, in effect, accepted a reduction of civil liberties, symbolised by the Patriot Act. In so doing, Americans have revealed that in a crunch they behave no differently to other societies. When they feel threatened, they too are prepared to sacrifice civil liberties - thus providing a new negative role model for others.

The second flaw in western discourse is the refusal to recognise its track record of double standards in the promotion of human rights and democracy. When a western country has to choose between promoting its values or defending its interests, interests always trump values. No western country promotes democracy in Saudi Arabia. Too many interests would have to be sacrificed in doing so. But in states such as Burma and Zimbabwe, where no major western interests are at risk, values can take primacy. When Tashkent agreed to host a valuable American military base in the battle against terrorism, the British

ambassador, Craig Murray, was forced to resign in protest against the silence of his government on human rights abuses in Uzbekistan.

We are moving toward a more intelligent world. Globally, the number of highly educated people, especially in Asia, has never been higher. They can now make well-informed judgments about what the west does with human rights. Hence, while the west conducts a self-congratulatory conversation on the subject, the rest of the world sees an emperor with no moral clothing.

The third flaw in western discourse is that when presented with a choice between doing good and feeling good, the west almost always chooses the latter because it costs less. Burma exemplifies this best. History teaches that sanctions and exclusions have never succeeded in transforming societies. Engagement and dialogue over time lead to change. The tragedy of 20 years of isolation of Burma has done no good, even though the politicians of the west have felt good condemning the regime.

A prominent Burmese intellectual, Thant Myint-U, grandson of U Thant, the former UN secretary general, wrote in the International Herald Tribune: "What outside pressure can bring about democratic change? And why, after nearly two decades of boycotts, aid cut-offs, trade bans and diplomatic condemnation, are Burma's generals apparently more in charge than ever before? Are we really looking at Burma - a country of 55 million people - in the right way?"

The paradox here is that engaging Burmese generals will require political courage from western politicians. They will have to justify this to their own people and perhaps pay a political price as a consequence. To avoid any risk, western politicians heap praise (as Miliband does) on Burmese dissidents, lauding their courage - while simultaneously demonstrating their own moral and political cowardice.

The time therefore has arrived for a new discourse between the west and the rest on freedom and democracy. In December we will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This may well provide an opportunity for the west to change course; nothing can or will prevent it lecturing the world on human rights. But it could nevertheless learn to do something new: to listen to the voices from the rest of the world.

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