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"China is a free society"

Kishore Mahbubani (60) is considered one of the most brilliant Asian intellectuals. In his book The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Power to the East, the political scientist and diplomat from Singapore argues that the dominance of the USA and Europe is coming to an end. The son of Indian parents calls for Western societies to stop patronising Asian countries with regards to human rights and democracy.

T-ONLINE: Professor Mahbubani, are we moving towards a clash of cultures?

KISHORE MAHBUBANI: The good news is: we are not moving towards a clash of cultures. Partly, because the international economic crisis reminded us of the fact that we are all in the same boat. Partly, because President Obama offers a new hope: He can start a dialogue between the West and, for example, the Islamic world. This can be derived from the fact that he did his first interview with the television network Al-Arabiya. I also think that it has become clear that the West needs to work together with China in order to fight the economic crisis. But what worries me the most in view of a clash of cultures is that the Western way of thinking of the world still has the tendency to be too self-centred and self-righteous. The people in the West make up 12 percent of the world's population. 88 percent live in other places, but the West has lost its capability to listen to other cultures and civilisations. The West only ever views itself as part of the solution to a problem. But in many ways the West is part of the problem.

T-ONLINE: After all, the West has been trying to spread democracy for decades. What is wrong about that?

MAHBUBANI: I agree with this goal. I believe that in the long-run, all societies have to become democratic. But the lesson we have learned is that democracy has to grow slowly, like a seedling cultivated within societies. It cannot be imposed from the outside. Take a look at Russia: The Russians were pushed into democracy over night. The consequences: The standard of

living declined, the gross domestic product declined, ...

T-ONLINE: Because of democracy?

MAHBUBANI: Yes, the transition went too fast. This caused a social and economic chaos. Life expectancy fell, infant mortality rose. I can understand that Russians look at the West with bitterness. They have had enough of democracy.

T-ONLINE: What would have been better?

MAHBUBANI: It would have been better if Russia approached democracy step by step. China is changing its economic situation first before it change its political system. While the Russian economy went down, the Chinese economy grew dramatically. For the past 20 years, they have had the highest growth rate in the world. And despite the system not being changed fundamentally, Chinese society has opened up tremendously. Today, 21 million Chinese travel abroad every year - and then they return to China. This is great. It shows that China is a free society. It can allow people to leave and they are coming back.

T-ONLINE: You call China a "free society"?

MAHBUBANI: A free society in regard to personal freedom, not regarding political freedom. When I came to China for the first time in 1980, the state decided where you worked and lived, how much you earned - the state was in charge of all decisions concerning the life of the individual. Today, you can make all these decisions yourself. You have much more possibilities, can attend universities, travel abroad...

T-ONLINE: But you are still not allowed to say what you think.

MAHBUBANI: You should access the Chinese internet. The language mostly used is no longer English, but Mandarin. This is also spoken by many people in my home country Singapore. When I meet Chinese people in Singapore, they tell me how lively the Chinese internet is. I admit: The Chinese government is trying to censor. But it cannot do it - the internet is too far-reaching.

T-ONLINE: You are almost describing heaven on earth.

MAHBUBANI: No, it is not like this, but the West has a very outdated image

of China. Since 1949, China has been led by Communists. Today, 60 years later, the Communists still rule, but the society is changing dramatically. Just ask a simple question: Why do the leading universities in the world - Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale - want to establish cooperations with Chinese universities? If China was a closed society, this would hardly happen. When you speak to students, it is surprising how open-minded and well-informed they are.

T-ONLINE: What about the relations of the West with the Islamic world? So far, they always seemed to get worse.

MAHBUBANI: The West has done an incredibly bad job when it comes to its relations with the Islamic world. It has virtually made every possible mistake.

T-ONLINE: What was the worst?

MAHBUBANI: Well, there were so many. I will try to outline a couple of them: During the Cold War, the West supported the Mujahedin in the Afghanistan War. Once they had won, the West just turned away, the Mujahedin continued with what they were doing, and eventually Al-Qaida emerged from it. When you create a problem, you have to find a solution instead of just leaving it.

T-ONLINE: But the problem cannot just be traced back to the Afghanistan conflict.

MAHBUBANI: This was just an example. If you really want to fight the problem with the Islamic world, there is a magic remedy: Find a solution to the Middle East Conflict. The two-state-solution between Israel and Palestine has to finally come. With it, you would immediately eliminate 50 percent of your problems. This opportunity has to be seized at last. If the West was politically more capable, it would make every effort to immediately find a solution to this instead of letting the problem continue to get worse. Or take the war in Iraq: How could the United States believe that troops consisting of Christian soldiers would be greeted with roses on Islamic land in the 21st century? What an aberration.

T-ONLINE: This was not the West but the Bush administration.

MAHBUBANI: You are right. But from the perspective of the rest of the world it happens to be a "Western country" that causes problems for others. Or take Pakistan: During the Cold War, Pakistan was used and then dropped.

Today, after 9/11, it is used again. Now everybody is worried that Pakistan is turning into a "failed state," although the West is, for the most part, responsible for this. In my book, I talk about the march into modernity which started in the Asian tiger states. The Islamic world is actually ready for this. But a long-term strategy is needed, not this back and forth.

T-ONLINE: When listening to you, one gets the impression that the West is not just doing everything the wrong way, but that all mistakes in the world are made by the West. Are other cultures making mistakes, too?

MAHBUBANI: Of course. I always say that countries getting into trouble should stop blaming others for it. This never helps. One has to always look for one's own mistake first. If Asia does not make any progress, Asians themselves are to be blamed. At the same time, the West always blames the rest of the world, as if all problems originate there and the West itself only ever provides solutions. But this "rest" is anxious to work together with the West and does not want to fight it. Asians even want to copy it.

T-ONLINE: With all of this, do you want to say that the West should stop denouncing human rights violations?

MAHBUBANI: I believe in universal human rights. I believe that torture is wrong, and so are arbitrary arrests, death squads, and making people disappear. However, the best way to change a society are not sanctions, but to allow societies to change themselves. China's economic leaders of today have mostly been educated in Harvard, Yale or Princeton. They are the ones changing this society. So, when China is moving into the right direction, why do you always lecture China? What gives the West the moral authority to harass the rest of the world, when many of its measures are also unjust?

T-ONLINE: For example?

MAHBUBANI: It came as a big shock to me that the United States was the first modern country that wanted to reintroduce torture. Irene Khan of Amnesty International described Guantánamo as the Gulag of our time.

T-ONLINE: And this is supposed to be typical of the West?

MAHBUBANI: No, not typical. But: When it happened, human rights groups and, for example, German newspapers criticised America for it. But not one of the European governments had the courage to lead a charge against the USA at the UN Human Rights Commission. Although they usually do so at

every opportunity - however, only when it concerns weak countries. This would have been the perfect opportunity to prove its moral credibility. This is what justice is all about: Same rights for the weak and the strong. Sudan is being criticised for its human rights violations. But when it comes to the USA, everybody remains silent.

T-ONLINE: So it is wrong to denounce human rights violations?

MAHBUBANI: No, but whoever applies double standards is no longer taken seriously. If you are unfaithful, you can hardly accuse somebody else who is doing the same thing. It is the same with human rights. Different standards never help anybody to move forward. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty fought against it and rightly enjoy moral authority. Western governments, on the other hand, have never helped to catch people. One thing should not be forgotten: The rest of the world has become very intelligent by now. The big global shifts, which the West is unaware of, have made the "rest" just as insightful as the West itself - if not even more. This is a tremendous change. When the West lectures them about human rights, they laugh at it. They know: if it will serve their interests, the West remains silent.

T-ONLINE: Here, it oftentimes sounds as if you are laughing at the idea of human rights altogether...

MAHBUBANI: No, not at all. Believe me: All humans want to live in societies that respect human rights. I definitely do not want to live in a society that uses torture. But by applying different standards, the West appears unreliable. The West seems just like the monarch in "The Emperor's New Clothes," who considers himself glorious, but in reality is naked.

T-ONLINE: What will the world look like in the year 2050?

MAHBUBANI: I am very optimistic: The whole world will modernise itself. There will be a strong middle class everywhere. They will have the same goal Western societies have today: Security and prosperity for all, a roof over their heads and a good education for their children. Middle class societies all over the world - this is a wonderful and positive vision. What my vision distinguishes from the West's, however, is the following: This modernisation is synonymous to a "dewesternisation". Asian societies rediscover their own cultures. They will not be copied images of the West. They will be more Chinese, Persian, Russian, Indian - not more Western.

T-ONLINE: And Europe?

MAHBUBANI: United, it will be one of the big powers. But in the past not one of the European societies has been among the top four by itself. In future, they will hardly be among the top ten by themselves. Despite the ones mentioned, it will include Russia and Brazil, but only very few European countries.

T-ONLINE: Is the European Union an example for the rest of the world?

MAHBUBANI: Yes, when it comes to regional economic cooperation. And it gives the world a great example: There are no internal wars. Wars between EU-countries are even unimaginable. This is a wonderful achievement of civilisation. In South Asia, there are also no wars, but the possibility that they break out cannot be ruled out. When it comes to this, Asians still have to learn from Europe.

Questions were posed by Christian Kreuzer.

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