

# ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01 Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isasijie@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasijie@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## The 21st Century – Will it Belong to Asia?<sup>1</sup>

Ishtiaq Ahmed<sup>2</sup>

The great historian Eric Hobsbawm described the 20th century as the century of extremes. Burgeoning industrialisation, scientific breakthroughs in the fight against disease and the concomitant rising rates of human survival and economic growth, the end of colonial domination, and the spread of democracy were some of the outstanding achievements of that period.

On the other hand, during the same period, some of the bloodiest conflicts in history broke out, among them the two world wars, which killed millions of people. Also, despite enormous economic growth and end of colonialism, poverty and poverty-related forms of human degradation continued to afflict the wretched of the earth, most of whom were found in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The 20th century epitomised the leadership of the West. That leadership had become a fact of history from at least the beginning of the 19th century, when European powers completed their expansion into Asia and Africa, reached its zenith at the beginning of the 20th century. But then the empires received severe blows as a result of wars among them, as well as from the freedom and liberation struggles in the colonies.

These days, one hears quite so often that the 21st century is going to be an Asian century. Such optimism is justified because after several centuries Asian societies are exuding great dynamism and progress. East Asia, South-East Asia, China and now India are emerging as engines of economic growth.

Will this contagion also affect the mainly Muslim-majority countries of west and central Asia? But, more importantly, will an Asian 21st century, characterised by economic growth and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, be very different from the 20th century if it only replicates what was done in the last century?

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<sup>1</sup> This original article titled “An Asian Century?” appeared in The News on 15 January 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [iasia@nus.edu.sg](mailto:iasia@nus.edu.sg).

How will the 21st century not be a century of extremes, or perhaps of stark contrasts between the successful and the failed; the haves and the have-nots; the powerful and the weak? In other words, will it not be a continuation of the Western century but with some Asian trappings?

Some people have been talking about Asian values as distinctly different from Western values. In a nutshell, the difference is supposed to be between the individualistic ethos of the West and communitarian approach to life in Asia. It is only with urbanisation and overall improvement in standards of living that individualism became a central norm in Western society. So, communitarian solidarity is not only an Asian characteristic.

One can even argue that individualism is not bad at all, as long as it means that society accepts the rights of each person to make his or her choices freely. It does not mean that individuals cease to think in terms of their family and friends. On the other hand, community pressures can be very stultifying and oppressive. It is therefore important that the individual does enjoy autonomy.

I think the main strength of Asian societies has been their ability to handle cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism more successfully than Western societies. Pluralism in West Europe dates only from the end of the Second World War, while in the United States and Canada, as far as non-Europeans are concerned, it started only in the 1950s and in Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s.

In eastern and central Europe, the communist regimes strictly restricted the mobility of people, with the result that they were ethnically homogeneous and minorities were suppressed. Consequently, after the fall of the communist regimes, but especially when they opened up for tourism and to join the European Union, racist movements quickly appeared.

On the other hand, Asian civilisations were largely pluralist. The *dhimmi* system created space for Christians and Jews to live among Muslims, though not as equals. Moreover, the development of Sufi thought and brotherhoods mellowed down the harsh side of monotheistic belief. God was conceived more as an object of love than of fear.

In South Asia, the various sects of Hinduism provided scope for diversity notwithstanding the tyranny of the caste system. The fact that millions of gods and goddesses were worshipped, besides the main Hindu pantheon, encouraged great plurality of local beliefs and practices. Buddhism and Jainism provided outlets for further diversity, and with the arrival of Islam and Christianity, and indeed the birth of Sikhism, there was greater cultural heterogeneity.

The Chinese civilisation developed its own peculiar type of pluralism. While Confucianism prescribed a civic code of ethics and was patronised by the state, popular religion in the form of Taoism and Buddhism created a possibility for greater cultural variation.

Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have always been multicultural. Islam, brought to this region by Arab sailors and merchants, did not erase their Hindu-Buddhist traditions altogether and, therefore, Southeast Asia managed cultural and ethnic

diversity more successfully. Japan was the most ethnically homogeneous society in Asia, and one wonders if that explains why it was attracted to fascism more than any other nation in Asia. The main danger to Asian pluralism is the rise of religious fundamentalism in many parts of this vast continent. Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalisms negate pluralism and are, therefore, the contemporary protagonists of fascist ideas. They should not be allowed to hijack the Asian century.

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