

Political Changes Across Asia – Are We Better or Worse Off?

Saturday, 20 February 2016

- Chair: Tom G Palmer, Atlas Network, USA
- Rajesh Jain, Free a Billion, India
- Steven CM Wong, Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia
- Kriengsak Chareonwongsak, Institute of Future Studies for Development, Thailand
- Rohan Samarajiva, LIRNEAsia, Sri Lanka

“Change minds and channel hopes; demand for freedom”

- Rajesh Jain

Rajesh Jain, of Free a Billion in India, spoke first at this breakout session. He began by expressing his thoughts on India’s fight for independence in the 20th century. Mr Jain listed several errors which were associated with the struggle.

These errors contributed to a flawed government system and constitution at present. Despite many political changes in the recent past, many strict, socialist policies that limit individual freedom remain. Mr Jain spoke of his goal to revamp India’s constitution by 2020 and create a new republic. He also envisions this new constitution to include stronger elements of non-discrimination, limited government, non-interference and justice - all of which are inspired by a desire to constrain and curtail government power.

To garner public support for this campaign, Free a Billion utilises technology to communicate to the public that a strong and large government could potentially become a dangerous enemy.

Steven Wong, who spoke next, explained that there are two main trends occurring in Asia at present. First is an opening up of democratic space. Second, that policy elites are continuously taking advantage of institutional processes, even within democratic systems, to strengthen their hold on power. Mr Wong cautioned against expecting the

growth of democracy to always be good for societies; since it does not always equate to greater inclusiveness and order. The typical mind set in Asia of “What can my government do for me?” and “The government must do more for me.”, must also be conquered, said Wong. This change in thought process must happen before communities can begin to assume responsibility to determine the political direction of their countries.

“An increase in globalisation promotes democracy in many ways”

- Dr Kriengsak Chareonwongsak

Dr. Kriengsak Chareonwongsak concurred that democracy is on the rise in Asia, and that it is growing in both form and substance. The voice of the people has come to hold greater importance, and governments are recognising this fact. Dr Kriengsak attributes these developments to globalisation - as political ideals, economic policies, and societal values are shared quickly from one country to another in this modern era. He also noted that global superpowers, in particular the U.S., have become increasingly adept at using soft power to coerce Asian nations to embrace free trade and democracy.

Taking the discussion to a local level, Rohan Samarajiva analysed the recent political developments in Sri Lanka. The country had, in the past, embraced many protectionist policies and the government became highly centralised. Trade agreements often failed to come to fruition. The election of Maithripala Sirisena in 2015 has raised prospects for greater trade liberalisation and economic reform for Sri Lanka. Mr Samarajiva, however, was adamant that while political changes create opportunities - such opportunities cannot be realised unless the people step up to the plate and demand for the right reforms.

