

Asian Peace Movements and Empire

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American war and its impacts

It started in a small way. In October 2001, a score of Asian social action groups, their coalitions and NGOs met in Hong Kong and agreed to establish an Asian regional peace network titled the Asian Peace Alliance (APA). [1] We were reacting to the massive US military invasion of Afghanistan, enraged by the showering of bombs on the Afghan people by the world's richest and strongest military power. We wanted an Asian people's concerted response.

There was a keen sense of crisis over the US military attack on Afghanistan. We were indignant about the American arrogance to call it a war to defend civilisation, disgusted with the conceit and hypocrisy of dropping 'humanitarian aid' packages together with lethal bombs. We strongly disapproved of the 9 / 11 attacks, but concurred that the most serious danger to peace and lives of the people came from the way the United States was reacting to 'terrorism'.

At the same time, we felt that organising effective peace action in Asia vis-à-vis the US war was not an easy task. In countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan, with large Muslim populations, Islamic fundamentalists had promptly and visibly taken to the street shouting anti-American slogans and carrying Bin Laden's portraits. Friends from Indonesia reported that it was difficult to stage independent civic peace action without falling into the Bush trap, "with us or with the terrorists". The Islamist demonstration was more forceful and photogenic, and media would either identify any peace action with the Islamists or simply ignore it.

War had been brought into a series of Asian countries. Pakistani friends then reported that under the Musharraf regime that pledged to support Bush, the rule of law had been obliterated. American FBI agents were running rampant, randomly arresting people as terrorist suspects, including tenant farmers and protesting landlords.

By that time, the war had already spread to the Philippines, opening the 'second front' of the American 'war on terrorism'. The US had sent its special military units to Mindanao and Basyylan islands allegedly for joint exercises with the Philippine military for the purpose of wiping out a small band of Islamist-turned bandits, whom the US branded as Al Qaeda-connected terrorists. [2] The whole locale was overwhelmed by massive presence of the US-Filipino military, shrouding the local communities with a climate of terror. This situation created serious obstacles to the peace

processes with Muslim forces that had been promoted patiently by local voluntary groups. In the fall of 2001, opinion polls showed that public opinion in Manila was still overwhelmingly supportive of Bush and his 'war on terrorism'.

The nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir issue was already serious and peace movements were preoccupied with it. In East Asia, the keenest social movement concern of South Korea was with national reunification, hopes for which, raised with the 2000 North-South summit, were eclipsed as Bush shifted the American North Korea policy from normalisation to hostility. In Japan, the hottest issue was the wartime legislation pushed forward by the centre-right government to break the constraints of the pacifist Constitution riding on the Bush crusade.

Situations, concerns, histories, and cultures varied by country and sub-region. Movement groups were fully preoccupied with their respective national issues. Given this diversity of concerns and issues, what could it mean to bring into being an Asian people's peace alliance rooted in the diverse Asian realities that is capable of confronting the imperial war of global pacification? What is the new context in which Asian peoples can emerge as forceful peacemakers effectively exercising their influence on the global centres of power? Answering these questions was a challenge faced and accepted by all of us.

Peace Re-defined

By the time APA held its founding assembly in August-September 2002, we began to understand what it meant to take this challenge. No longer in the guise of retaliatory war against terrorism, the United States was now claiming its right to rule the world as it pleased, feeling free to name sovereign states it handpicked as members of an 'axis of evil' - on which the US had the right to pre-emptively attack and destroy. Titled 'Kalinaw - Asian People Speak up for Peace!' the APA assembly was convened at this stage of the Bush war.³ Held in the University of the Philippines campus in Quezon City, northern part of greater Manila, Philippines (August 29-September 1, 2002), it drew 140 activists from 17 countries and 95 organisations. For months prior to its opening, the Philippines host committee worked hard to make it an event rooted in the local movements, and succeeded. In the Philippines, two major peace coalitions had already been set up, and including them, almost all major movement trends came together not only to host it but also to actively participate.

The assembly was a real activists' workshop not de-limited by institutional interests, and with all participants speaking up freely on an equal footing. The prevailing atmosphere was an intense urge for action in response to people's actual needs and concerns. As the assembly proceeded, it became an arena where Asian people's suffering was put centre stage, shared and thrashed out. We experienced a process in which national and local pieces fell into a full picture of an Asia placed under the US Empire and its war scheme.

The assembly had three agenda items: 1) The World under the War on Terrorism 2) Overcoming Conflicts and Violence among People, and 3) Hopes and Strategies. Workshops examined issues such as militarisation, nuclearisation and the role of the US; war and the economy; the erosion of international standards; media and public discourse; internal conflicts and peace processes; gender and violence in multi-ethnic

communities; religion, ethnicity, and the search for peace amidst a world at war; and the role of social movements.

Although we spent 60 percent of our time and energy discussing Asia's own problems and issues, we also discussed the American war and the assembly took a clear position on the Bush war itself. All speakers, analysing the post-9 / 11 situation from different angles, concurred that the Bush war was the attempt to establish imperial rule over the world. We agreed that violence against civilian population such as the 9/11 attacks had nothing to do with any people's cause, and were conveniently used by the imperial centre to justify its global pacification scheme. We agreed that Bush's global war was integral to the neoliberal globalisation processes that were wreaking social, economic, cultural and environmental havoc on the world community, hitting at its most vulnerable segments.

But there was more to it. Listening to, and participating in the discussion, I began to ask myself, and imagine, what the scene would be if a peace conference of this kind were being held in Canada, Australia, or somewhere in the North. The basis and premise of discussion, in fact, the implication of the very word, 'peace', would be used significantly, if not totally, differently. The reasoning would be much simpler. Probably American policy and 'terrorism' would be discussed more straightforwardly. We would criticise them against our shared criteria and values and come up with a short resolution and plan of action. We would be grasping the war situation as external to us and responding to it to remove it. Differences of views would certainly exist but they would be resolved using the same, shared frame of reference, and the frame would stay intact.

I felt that the whole process would be much simpler because we would not be discussing ourselves as much as we did in Manila. We would be discussing peace, but to simplify peace largely would mean a return to the status quo ante.

In Manila, those of us who came from the vast expanse of Asia - South, South East and East - a different procedure was necessary to discuss the Bush war. We had to discuss ourselves as much as we discussed Bush. We had to examine the painful realities of the India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation, the rampant Hindu, Muslim and other fundamentalisms, other sectarian violence destroying communities such as the Gujarat massacre, military repression on separatist movements, constant human rights violations by the military, police and private agencies, economic violence wielded on the large bulk of the population in the name of neoliberal globalisation, refugees of all kinds, and notably patriarchy underlying all these cruelties.

In many Asian settings, vast numbers of people are deprived of peace and security. For them, peace is needed to create the here and now and not a state that existed before. In other words, peace means creating new relationships and situations out of almost hopeless realities.

I know that in essence, peace is not simply the status quo but the creation of new social, human and cultural relationships - in societies of the North and the Asian South.

In fact, the difference between them is a matter of degree. But in actual terms, the degree matters and makes the approaches asymmetrical. The situation where peace should be emphatically understood as a change from the status quo is certainly a negative situation for the people captive in it. But peace in our sense, at once can carry a positive significance, if we take its challenge, because it involves radical transformation of societies and cultures. This is

a crucial dimension of peace often missed in the northern peace movement.

The Bush war has been grafted on to this peaceless structural setting, transfiguring it, making it more violent and repressive, and multiplying the suffering of the already suffering people. Reflecting this over determined complexity of Asia, the founding declaration of the APA points out the relationship between the Bush war and Asia as follows :

In the past year, the peoples of Asia have experienced a significant rise in their already high levels of insecurity. From Korea in the East to Palestine in the West, from Central Asia in the North to Indonesia in the South, wars, conflicts and rising tensions have been our shared reality. The common source of our heightened insecurity is unmistakable : the winds of war unleashed by the United States in its pursuit of the so-called campaign against terror. This is based on a militarism that links physical coercion and patriarchy as the currency of power. [4]

The Bush war has conspired with local situations to make more vicious the 'already high levels of insecurity' that are accelerating militarisation and reinforcing antidemocratic forces all over Asia. The Declaration gives a glimpse into what I might call the "nexus of evil" that has grown between the global war machinery and local nodes of power after the Bush intervention. Let me continue to quote from it :

Confident of Washington's backing, Pakistani dictator Musharraf flouts rising demands for democracy, consolidates his repressive regime, and massacres unarmed landless peasants and fisherfolk. Taking advantage of Washington's rhetoric, the Hindu chauvinist government in New Delhi labels the Pakistani government 'terrorist' in order to close off any peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue and cover up its culpability in the barbaric pogroms that its own followers have carried out against Muslims. George W Bush's naming of North Korea as part of the 'axis of evil' has effectively scuttled the move towards rapprochement between the two Koreas and set back their eventual reunification.

The US push to enlist Japan in the anti-terror coalition has resulted in the Koizumi government compounding the violation by previous governments of the Japanese constitution by sending Japanese Self Defence forces to the Indian Ocean to support Washington's war on Afghanistan. In addition, the emergency military bill has been promoted. These moves have stoked legitimate fears of Japan's re-militarisation. In the Philippines, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has effectively overturned the Filipino people's decision a decade ago to kick out the US military bases by allowing US troops to return in force via the Visiting Forces Agreement. In the name of the war against terror, the Pentagon has renewed its aid to the Indonesian military, an institution notorious for its violation of human rights. In Malaysia, Mahathir has been emboldened to carry out more repression under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA).

Another case of the nexus of evil and escalation of violence under the global war on terrorism, is witnessed in an urgent letter from an Indonesian activist / scholar to her Asian friends, about the aftermath of the bomb explosions in Bali in October 2002 :
...this terrible incident occurred when President Bush is persuading many countries to join him to launch a "holy" war against Iraq, and unfortunately, the Bali event became food for his campaign. This event happened during the time when the US and the neighboring countries under US influence, had just been pressuring Indonesia to tighten its control over the radical Muslim elements in the country.

Does stopping terrorism mean increasing state repressive power ? Politically there is

global pressure on the Indonesian government to be more repressive. The government has hurriedly issued an anti-terrorist bill. Internationally this is considered an important requirement to make Indonesia a safer place for entry...The Urban Poor Consortium is now starting to mobilise a movement against this bill...What many pro-democracy activists fear is that the bill will increase 'state terrorism' instead. [5]

Peace Building

Building peace movements in Asia in the midst of this reality is a difficult but extremely challenging task. Peace movements that directly address global peace like in the North do not exist in most parts of Asia (with the exception of Japan with a long post-war history of anti-nuclear bomb movement). But there is great potential of the power of the people in Asia, whose occasional explosions from South Korea to Indonesia have brought about regime changes in the past couple of decades.

The Asian people's response to the war-making Empire would come as a comprehensive movement transforming the local and national repressive, exploitative, patriarchal, and violence-ridden relationships, and resisting and undermining the global imperial regime. In urbanised parts of Asia with growing middle class populations, traditional peace movements will emerge directly addressing world peace issues, and that will play an important role in broadening the vistas of national movements. But generally, the challenge is to let comprehensive Asian people's alliances emerge, resolving their issues autonomously and confronting and ultimately liquidating the global-to-local imperial meshes of power.

Why then is it a peace movement, instead of general people's movement against the global regime ? Because it represents intense efforts to bring into the various social movements, communities, families, and societies as well as global relations, distinct elements and cultures of peace and justice - de-militarisation of society, non-violent ways of resolving conflicts, and elimination of exploitative, repressive, patriarchal, and exclusive power relationships. The APA founding declaration thus stated :

The dominant militarist, statist and masculinist theory and regime of 'national security' and 'international security', in short, must be replaced by one that is de-militarised, peace-loving, feminist, universal, and people-centred.

People's Alliances for Peace

For the Asian peace movement to emerge, we are faced by the problematic that has been well expounded by Hardt and Negri, that of incommunicability and lack of a common language. The excesses and exclusivity of national political languages, or the national perceptual frames entrenched in Asian countries - while reflecting the historical rootedness of social movements - can also serve to narrow vistas and prevent a whole view of the landscape, unless encouraged to interact with one another.

Some examples of these are notions of national reunification for Korea, the peace constitution for Japan, and national democracy for the Philippines. In the same vein, the Indian understanding of themselves as the world's largest democratic country, though nothing wrong in itself, sometimes serves as an obstacle to imagining the

world beyond South Asian borders. These are the particular movement values and assets established through years of struggles and should not be cast away or replaced by a simple, cosmopolitan language. But it should be recognised that these do not provide the basis of trans-border alliances. To the contrary, they can keep us confined to the bilateral interpretation of events that the United States has been conveniently manipulating to maximise its strategic benefits. The Asian Peace Alliance will play its role in letting a new common language emerge through joint action, interaction, and exchanges as do the World and Asian Social Forum movement.

We are at the beginning of a long and challenging process of formation of global people's alliances, focusing our efforts on Asia. Under the impact of the American war with all its direct and dire consequences befalling us, we have stepped into this dynamic process. Asian social movements participated actively in the unprecedented international anti-Iraq war mobilisation on February 15-16, 2003 by holding street demonstrations in a number of cities. Compared with mobilisation in the West, the sizes of Asian demonstrations were small, but as the global situation develops, we will see fresh swells of a new type of peace movement arise throughout Asia.

Notes

1. The conveners of the Hong Kong consultation were the Asian Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), Hong Kong, and Focus on the Global South, Bangkok. The Tokyo-based People's Security Forum that had convened in 2002 - together with Focus and Okinawan groups - the Okinawa International Forum on People's Security in Okinawa, was also active in promoting the idea.

2 In March 2002, a 14-member Focus-APA fact-finding mission visited the war-affected areas of Basyilan and Mindanao. A full report of its findings is available from www.focusweb.org.

See, on ESSF website: [Report of the International Peace Mission to Basilan, Philippines, 23-27 March 2002](#)

3 The full documentation of the APA assembly and its activities, including the Founding Declaration, is available from www.yonip.com/YONIP/APA. ARENA in Hong Kong currently serves as the APA secretariat (arena.asianexchange.org).

4 Asian Peace Alliance, October 2001.

5 Ibid.

P.S.

* First published as 'Asian Peace Movements and Empire' in French, in "Multitude" no 13; forthcoming in English in "Inter-Asia Cultural Studies", Vol 4, No 3 (Routledge). In "The World Social Forum: challenging empires", Viveka, New Delhi.

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