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METHODOLOGY OF ASIAN POLITICS

Introduction

In most of its characteristics, Asia is very much different from the West. It is inevitable that new problems arise as Western political scientists try to apply Western concept, model, theory and other tools for comparative purposes in the study of Asian politics. The new states in Asia are of a greater variety in terms of cultures, resources, size, institutional pattern and development and political orientation than the Atlantic - European - Commonwealth examples which provide the great majority of cases for comparative analysis¹. If Western approaches are to persist in the study of Asian political development and change, scholars need to modify the existing methodology or design a new one to suit the Asian context. The forceful implementation of Western tools to work on the Asian environment has been generating more new problems instead of solving them. Perhaps it is better to drop the Western line altogether and start new approaches of local origin with greater participation of Asian political scientists to comprehend the existing problems more effectively.

What then are the fundamental problems faced by the Westerners in the study of Asian politics? Can the methodology and approach developed by the West be used to appreciate the nature and solving the problem of political development and change in developing countries of Asia? Otherwise, what other alternative and theory

1. G.K. Roberts, *What is Comparative Politics?* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 15

can be recommended to study Asian problem and politics more effectively in the future? The principal purpose of this article is to answer some aspects of these questions. The first half of this article deals with the general problems confronted by the Western scholars in the study of Asian politics, such as conceptual, cultural, technical psychological and others in cross-cultural study, whereas, in the second half several Western approaches are introduced to assess their applicability.

Western Approaches to Asian Politics

There is a general lack of 'conceptual contention' which can be defined as the agreement on the precise meaning of the terminology used in the study of social science between the Western and Asian scholars. For instance, what 'development' means to Westerners may not be agreed among themselves; and even less so between them and the cross-cultural Asian counterparts. Since the concept of development is not at all native to underdeveloped area, but strictly a Western notion,² then how can the concept be first agreed upon and second appropriately used in Asian context without bias and doubt? It is often asserted that development like modernization³ in the West is a process of industrialization; but in many Asian countries it means socialization, politicization commercialization with or without the association of industrialization as in the Western sense. In newly independent and revolutionary Asian countries such as Papua New Guinea and China, industrialization as a key to development has been replaced by socio-political priorities. Political stability as a prerequisite to economic development has been put forward by many Asian states such as Pakistan and Indonesia.

2. J.P. Nettl, "Strategies in the Study of Political Development", in Colin Leys (ed.), *Politics and Change in Developing Countries: (Studies in the Theory and Practice of Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969) p. 15.
3. D.E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

Similar problem arises in the use of such words as modernization, westernization, nationalism, socialism and so on. One of the best ways to escape this problem is to avoid the use of these ambiguous terms which have different origins and meanings when applied to different culture and country. Nonetheless, if their use is inevitable in the study of Asian politics, it is necessary to define and refine their terminology accurately before using in order to avoid further confusion and miscomprehension.

Diversity of culture in Asia imposes yet the most difficult and problematic comparative studies for Western political scientists. Asia has not experienced 'unification of civilization' and 'structural transformations' under such phenomena as Industrial Revolution, and such arrangements as North Atlantic Treaty Organization, European Common Market etc. as the West did. Therefore, Asian culture remains traditional, individualistic and different from diet to politics. Even the two hundred years' reign of British empire in India has been unable to remove the 'caste' system and the British colonial administrator had to govern her largest colony through the local 'maharajas'. Also Western colonialism has resulted in a dual-economic, dual-cultural society in Asia,⁴ and further imposed various form of institutions and political systems in the region. It is almost impossible for a Western scholar to appreciate the cultural roots of ancient Asia, the process and forces of transition in Asian society and the psychology of its people which is vitally linked with development and change.

Despite the constraints, Western scholars have achieved considerable success in the study of Asian politics, as Lucian W. Pye⁵ did in examining Burma's political culture, explaining both the historical evolution of the society and the psychological reactions to change.

4. D.E. Apter, "Basic Problems of Political Development" in G. Almond and G. Powell, *Comparative Politics, A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little Brown, 1966).

5. L. W. Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building : Burma's Search for Identity* (London : Yale University Press, 1962).

Pye's behavioural approach has opened new 'door' for Western political researcher and proved that though difficult, it is not impossible to use Western preconceived model and method in the study of politics of non-Western country in general and Asia in particular.

Thus, Pye's individualistic treatment to one political culture of a country over time is a viable and feasible approach for the study of Asian politics despite the diversity of culture in the region.

Culture is further complicated by "transitionalism" which characterises every society in Asia. The resulting "cultural strain"⁶ has created social tension and problems for nation building. Moreover, the cross-cultural change from traditionalism to modernism usually goes through a slow process of transformation in nearly all countries

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in Asia except China which experienced quick cultural transformation accompanying its revolution. Since it takes a long time for a traditional society to remove its traditional impediments and absorb new ideas, institutions and structural organizations to facilitate Western politics to work, it is extremely difficult to develop theories and models within limited time frame. It is, therefore, necessary to tolerate and watch the change for a longer period of time in order to evaluate sound judgement and conclusion for theorizing purposes. Transition also produces a gap between the modernised elite and the traditional public who often have conflicting political values different from those of the West. Thus the socio-political values of these interest groups must be fully examined before theorizing socio-political development for Asia.

6. See D.E. Apter, "Basic Problems of Political Development" *op. cit.*, p. 650.

The political values of many Asian countries are deeply rooted in ancient religions and philosophical believes. For instance, it is necessary to understand the interrelated ties of religion, military and statecraft before the political ideology of Islamic state such as Pakistan and the Gulf Arab states will make sense to a foreigner. Similarly, the criticism of confucianism and the condemnation of Lin Piao and the political purging of "the gang of four" in China require a study of the political philosophy and ethics of the Confucian era before the cultural revolution of China make more sense to the observers. Hinduism and the concept of "dharma" reincarnation and the "caste" politics in India too, demand the religio-political appreciation of the region. Thus, it is necessary for Western political scientists to study religions, philosophies and even mysticism of Asia in order to apprehend, for example, the role of Buddhism in Thai politics and mythomysticism Indonesian politics.

Complexity of languages in Asia too, has imposed a serious problem in studying Asian politics. It is ironic to be able to understand one's political culture without knowing one's language. Western scholars have long been depending on the translated and interpreted sources which are often inadequate and unreliable for writing even a post-graduate thesis, leaving alone the works of the professionals. If the knowledge of one's language is necessary in theorizing, it seems easier, in this respect, to encourage Asian born political science students to undertake the task or to educate Western scholars the relevant Asian languages before undertaking any field works in the area. Surely, it may be unrealistic to suggest that there should be as many Westerners knowing Asian language as Asians know English, but it is also certain that an effective way to ensure more useful study of Asian politics by Westerners would be through learning the relevant language.

Political vulnerability and instability in the newly independent and revolutionary Asian countries are subjected to political intimidation, anxiety and sensitivity. To the people of Malaysia, for

instance, there are many "sensitive issues" such as power and position of the Malay rulers, special privileges of the Malays, Malay as the sole national language etc., which are "forbidden" and even "dangerous" to talk about among themselves, let alone the possibility to discuss them with the foreigners. For the Western political observer and researcher to ignore this fact is to be disappointed by the 'reserved' attitude of the respondents. Moreover, interpersonal casual introduction but not the formal institutional recommendation is needed as a method to conduct more effective interviews. Although the psychological and attitudinal behaviour, varies from person to person, between urban and rural areas among occupation of the respondents; it is unwise not to take the political consciousness and sensitivity factor into consideration.

Apart from their reservation on politically sensitive issues, local residents in Asia usually look at the Westerners enviously and suspiciously. However, this perceived obstacle can be easily overcome. Technical problems in research interview arise for example, not only because there are political intimidation, racial discrimination, or linguistic misunderstanding, but also because there are the lack of fact, skill, diplomacy and preparation of western social researchers in their approach. Casualty rather than formality, friendship instead of obligation, courtesy but not eloquence, deserve sincere opinion, true feeling and accurate information from the Asian people. Just to say the least, a Western scholar wearing "batik" and able to speak a few words of local dialect in Malaysia or Indonesia will be benefited more than another, wearing "coat and tie" and keep saying "good morning" and "thank you", from the same sort of interview and questionnaire. In other words, since the "openness" of Asian peoples depends on the understanding of their culture, language, attitude and in fact, the culture, the way of life by the foreigner; it is worth the while for any western field interviewer to be acculturated a little if the end result for data collection and theorising purpose is important. Alternatively, nonetheless, it is

often feasible and advisable to have a few local friends with him when a Western researcher conducts his survey in a strange country like Mongolia and Laos. Only with effective interview, can the technical efficiency combine to produce correct, unbiased and good data and information for theorizing usefulness in the study of Asian government and politics.

Last but not the least, Asian countries not like that of Europe are geographically far apart from the Western metropolis. It is financially expensive to travel and return to the same country in order to recollect or re-test the findings. Partly because the transport and communication infrastructure is poor and mainly because political scientists are not well funded. Although in recent years there is a significantly rising trend in public and private sponsoring of research projects including field trips, there is always a gap of communication due to the physical distance. Most of such field visits are for short periods which are enough for no more than general orientation and get-to-know rather than any in-depth study of the factors involved. Moreover, sponsorship is more often than not limited to either scholars of established repute leaving little room for fresh blood, or scholars who would conform to subjective aims of the sponsors at the cost of objectivity.

With these apparent constraints, what have Western political scientists contributed to the study of comparative politics for the developing countries in the last twenty years? And how useful are their approaches to the understanding of Asian Governments? The rest of this article turns to these questions.

Application of the Western Approaches

In spite of the above mentioned and many other problems, Western political scientists have advanced some approaches and theories useful for the study of political development and change in Asian countries. Among these, Easton's systems analysis, Almond's structural functional systems frameworks, Kautsky's Neo-Marxist school approach,

Frank's underdevelopment thesis and Pye's psychological behavioural theory will be briefly examined below. Their application in Asian context will also be assessed.

In Easton's conceptual framework⁷, he suggests that political systems comprise three main controlling units : political authority, political regime and political community ; each of which is complementary to another. By political authority, he means various kinds of political institutions e. g. administration, bureaucracy, government, political party, legislature and so on. Political regime is a system of political practice such as democracy, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, militarism etc. And political community refers to political mass whose loyalty and devotion are directed to the solidarity of the country. He views politics as the authoritative allocation of values for a society and political life as a system surrounded by a variety of environments. Political systems exist in the changing environment by its adaptability in achieving authoritative allocation of values such as an equal distribution of political power, fundamental needs for human survival and economic well-being. The process continues as outputs are communicated to the public by means of feedback channels and hence may affect future demands and level of support.

Turning now to Almond's structural functional framework⁸, it may be observed that he proposes to identify the common property of all political systems. He notes that all political systems possess political structures and political functions and the structure of a political system may differ depending on i) the degree to which there is differentiation or specialisation of political roles, structures and subsystems ; and ii) the autonomy of subordination of those rules, structures and subsystems to each other. From his analysis, he concludes that there are four characteristics which all political systems have in

7. D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (London: Wiley, 1965).

8. G. Almond and J. Coleman (eds.) *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, (Princeton University Press, 1960).

common, and in terms of which they may be compared. Firstly, all political systems have legitimate patterns of interaction. Secondly, the same general functions are performed in all political systems, though with different frequencies and by different kinds of structures and in different styles. Thirdly, all political structures, no matter how specialised, are multifunctional, though in different degrees in different systems. Finally, all political systems are mixed in the cultural sense, containing elements of both modern and traditional cultures and structures. Moreover, he asserts that all political systems may be compared at three levels of functional analysis. Those are in terms of the systems capabilities ; the conversion functions which transform inputs into outputs, and system maintenance and adaptation function.

Both Easton's and Almond's system frameworks are rich in concepts, each provides a language for comparative analysis. Since they aim at "universal level, they are sufficiently general to be applicable to any political unit, regardless of size, period, degree of development or other factors"⁹. They are useful in Asian countries.

More specifically Easton's general level, despite the lack of empirical testing and support, is sufficiently applicable as a basic framework to study all political systems in Asia without much difficulty. But, Almond defines politics as "the integrative and adaptive functions of a society based on more or less legitimate physical coercion"¹⁰. Here his model demands greater degree of generality in scope and universality in application. Thus his model faces more problems when applied in Asia. First, new nations in Asia are characterised by weakly legitimized Governments¹¹ after independence and revolution such as Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh and Vietnam. Hence, their political systems cannot provide sufficient legitimate patterns for Almond's framework to work. Second, since political decision making process in Asian societies is characterised more by interpersonal and inter-group relations than organisational, structural and

9. G.K. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p 14.

10. *ibid.*, p 42.

11. D.E. Apter, "Basic Problems of Political Development" *op. cit.*, p. 647

functional issues as distinct from their Western counterparts, Almond's approach is destined to face more problems than Easton's.

Among the historical approach introduced by Western scholars Frank's thesis on the "development of underdevelopment", in Latin America¹² is a good example in the study of politics in underdeveloped countries. From his historical observation that Latin America suffers from a colonial underdevelopment which makes its people economically, politically and culturally dependent, not so much on themselves or on each other as on a foreign metropolitan power, Frank develops his central argument that underdevelopment in Latin America is the result of the colonial structure of world capitalist development. Latin America suffers from the two developmental structures that of neo-colonial structure and internal class structure at international, national and local level. Thus, Frank identifies two principal enemies of development in Latin America, namely, the bourgeoisie, who condemn the majority of Latin Americans to ever deeper underdevelopment, and the imperialists who suppress the development of Latin America under the world capitalist system. Frank favours in his work those who are interested in formulating revolutionary theory to serve their revolutionary practice in Latin America in particular, and other parts of the oppressed world, in general.

How helpful then is Frank's approach in Asia? Although Asia also experiences certain aspects of economic and political manifestations of imperialism by the West, it does not suffer the type of underdevelopment as in Latin America. Moreover, colonial and capitalistic influence varies widely among Asian countries and thus cannot be grouped and generalised for Frank's theory to work at the continental level. Countries like Thailand and China were not colonialised though the latter may be considered, at the most, as being "semi-colonialised", and countries like India and China are more socialistic than capitalistic. Frank has overstated the effect of North American overseas

12. A.G. Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

economic and political policy in Latin America, and since Asia's external dependence in terms of economic and military assistance and its political orientation is more diversified than Latin America where the US is nearly the exclusive external influence factor, Frank's approach, based strongly on the individual history of Latin America can hardly be generalised to be applied in Asia.

Kautsky's Neo-Marxist approach¹³ attempts to develop some very broad generalizations and hypotheses about the politics of societies undergoing the process of change from agrarianism to advanced industrialization. As he argues strongly for the case of industrialization on political change, Kautsky ignores the effects of non-economic factors like culture and personality which clearly affect politics significantly. Basing on the historical evidence and the stages of economic development as experienced in Western Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union, Kautsky tries to account for the political development and change in developing countries along these lines. For example, his chapters on "Nationalism" and "Communism" are very Western in origin. Can Kautsky's broad generalizations and hypotheses and their formulation without data analysis and interpretation be used to study Asian political experience ?

Although Kautsky's analysis is dynamic and thus useful to Asian countries undergoing transition including social, economic and political change, there are many shortcomings. First, Asian countries have experienced importation, commercialization and transfer of technology from the West and therefore have not experienced the similar stages of autonomous transition from agrarianism to advanced industrialization. Second, socio-political priorities are increasingly regarded as the key factors in political development and change in many new nations in Asia. Thus, economic variables alone are not sufficient to determine political development in Asia. Thirdly and

13. J.H. Kautsky, *Political Change in Underdeveloped Countries : Nationalism and Communism* (New York : John Wiley and Press, 1962), see also his *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America : Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York : Monthly Review Press) 1967.

most obviously the political ideology of Asian people is usually both anti-Western and anti-Russian in nature in terms of nationalism, communism and totalitarianism which have hardly any parallel elsewhere. Therefore, Kautsky's approach is more applicable to

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some countries in Asia than the others, it is only partly useful in the study of Asian politics.

Last but not the least, is Pye's psychological behavioural approach a more appropriate tool to study Asian politics? The answer is more positive than any of the methods mentioned above. Basically, Pye's research is a multidisciplinary work including, psychology, anthropology, sociology and of course, political science in the study of political development of a transitional society such as Burma. He examines the political culture of Burma in historical perspective from colonialism to nationalism and the psychology, personality and behaviour of politicians, administrators and ex-communists within the changing social structure and setting in Burma. Significantly, Pye has applied Western political theories and practices to a non-Western country with such flexibility and adaptability that his approach can successfully provide a more sensitive basis for appreciating the general problems of political development throughout the developing world, especially Asia. As Pye has confidently stated in his preface, his work "really represents an attempt to explore the consequences of the basic functions" of 'political socialization' and 'recruitment' in the development of a political process"¹⁴

Pye's superior methodology and technicality can be summed up as follows: firstly, although Western tools are usually static i.e., they

14, L.W. Pye, *op. cit.*, p. XIX.

focus more attention on states of affairs rather than on processes of evolution, Pye is able to modify these tools for the process of historical change to study the transitional politics of Burmese society successfully. Secondly, Pye has not forced his pre-conceived model rudely into the Burmese case study. Moreover, his method can be used to test other cultures in Asia more efficiently. Above all, throughout his field research, extensive interviews, written tests and questionnaires, Pye has given allowance to the attitude, behaviour and sentiment of his respondents such as fear, anxiety and other psychological inhibitions in his research techniques and data collection. Pye's approach is particularly useful in Asia on two accounts: firstly, Asia is characterised by transformation from tradition to modernity in their nation-building and thus Pye's transitional approach is widely applicable. Secondly, Since Asian cultures differ from one country to another, Pye's country-to-country and culture-to-culture approach is useful to Asia. In suggesting the use of the characteristics of non-Western political process,¹⁵ Pye has set a specific case of the application of Western approach in the study of Asian Political Science.

In sum, two conclusions about the applicability of Western approach can be derived: in the first place, Western approach is only partially useful in Asia ; secondly, there is no single theory and/or approach that can be applied throughout Asia as it may be possible when used in Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Since social science is always changing, it is important to continue formulating and reconstructing socio-political theories of development despite the present impasse as pointed out by Nettl.¹⁶ It is desirable to depart from the Western experience and associate more closely

15. L.W. Pye, "The Non-Western Political Process" *Journal of Politics* vol. 20 (August 1958), pp. 468-486.

16. J.P. Nettl, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

with the Asian characteristics if the end result is to profit Asia. For instance, Nettl has re-evaluated the Western notion of development and argued that socio-political rather than economic priorities are desirable for Asian developing nations. As value changes, like other factors in socio-political development, prescribed Western models become inappropriate, problematic and even destructive. And if attempt is made to replicate them without proper consideration of local values and factors, the models themselves are discredited.

Some of the following examples may throw light on the need of new theories of development within Asian context. First, a theory of interrelated world can be constructed. All Asian countries, even the 'self-sufficient' China which has opened itself to four modernisations, have diplomatic, economic commercial and cultural relations with one another. Thus, the development of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a good example. A revival of the Afro-Asian solidarity and the Bandung spirit of the 1950s can provide the premise for more theories of the interrelated world. The increase in international trade and cooperation will solidify Asia in the future. Secondly, a theory of stabilization as a prerequisite to Asian development is necessary. Asian countries are characterised by transitional changes and for these changes to work, stabilization is necessary in these countries. Thirdly, Asia is overpopulated with few exceptions, thus a theory of linking human resources development with politico-economic growth will be useful. In countries like India, Bangladesh and Vietnam, the effects of demographic explosion on political consequences are significant. For example, in India and China the failure and success of population control have resulted in different degree of economic developments and indirectly affected the political stability of both the countries. Moreover, population in Asia has always been a psycho-political threat to many countries including Australia. Finally, Asian nations are characterised by ethnic problems with their cross-border implications. Ethnic issues have created social tension and economic problems distorting the process

of nation-building in many countries like Malaysia, India and Sri Lanka. A theory of ethnicity and its role on political consequences will be useful in the study of Asian governments and politics.

Apart from knowing the general problems in using the Western approach and formulating new theory to study Asia, it is perhaps most appropriate to consider the encouragement and development of Asian born political scientists to undertake the job. Since there is increasing indigenous participation in politics and economics in Asian countries, why not the same in the study of political science and its methodology ?