

## ASIAN VALUES - THE SCOURGE OF THE WEST

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For a diplomat, Kishore Mahbubani is refreshingly rude. According to Mr Mahbubani, who is the top civil servant at the Singaporean foreign ministry, "American society is breaking down and falling apart." As for Western Europe, its "socio-economic policies are fundamentally untenable" and its foreign policy is blind to the "ring of fire" surrounding the continent from Algeria to the former Soviet Union. East Asia, meanwhile, is having an "explosion of confidence" based on the realisation that Asians "can do anything as well as, if not better than, other cultures or societies."

Mr Mahbubani comes from the school of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's former prime minister, but over the past year has developed a distinctive voice of his own. In a series of articles and speeches, he has made a sustained and energetic attempt to develop an "Asian" critique of the West.

Paradoxically - since Asian values are said to eschew excessive individualism and confrontation - Mr Mahbubani has got a reputation for being a confrontational individual. But his claim that his views give "an honest feel for what many East Asians really think" carries weight. Echoes of his views can be heard in countries as distinct as Japan and Malaysia.

Mr Mahbubani cites a battery of statistics to support his belief that the United States is falling apart. In the past 30 years, he claims, America has experienced "a 560% increase in violent crime, a 419% increase in illegitimate births, a 400% increase in divorce rates, a 300% increase in children living in single-parent homes and a drop of almost 80 points in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores." America also ranks first among industrialised countries for murders and rapes, and is sinking ever more heavily into debt. Meanwhile, says Mr Mahbubani, using purchasing-power parity "East Asia's GDP is already larger than that of either the United States or the European Community." He says "it will exceed that of both of them combined in the year 2005."

Much of this will seem familiar to western readers. America has its own vocal school of "declinists" and Europeans routinely fret about unemployment and uncompetitiveness. Even western liberals may find themselves nodding in agreement with some of Mr Mahbubani's points, such as his argument that fear of crime in America places considerable practical restrictions on personal freedom.

The West's problem, as Mr Mahbubani sees it, is an excess of democracy and an overdose of freedom. An obsession with individual fulfilment has led to the breakdown of the family. An over-vigorous press has destroyed respect for institutions. Democratic politics are unable to produce the necessary responses.

Mr Mahbubani is something of an Asian Toynbee, preoccupied with the rise and fall of civilisations. India and China were once humbled by the West, he argues, because they were closed societies impervious to fresh ideas. Today, while Asia is absorbing the best of the West, the West clings blindly to outmoded ideas. Americans "worship the notion of freedom as religiously as Hindus worship their sacred cows. Both must be kept absolutely unfettered, even when they cause great social discomfort." Western journalists are unable to learn from Asia because they "see themselves as representatives of a superior civilisation." Western academics who speculate about the possibility of civil disorder or war in Asia may be indulging in wishful thinking, because they fear the rise of East Asia.

Might there be a similar influence on Mr Mahbubani's thinking? Although he presents his arguments as friendly advice to the West, it is difficult to miss the triumphalism in his writing. As he notes, many Asians still bear the psychological scars of colonialism, and the wish to see Asia gain the upper hand may colour some of Mr Mahbubani's conclusions.

Mr Mahbubani's writings contain significant gaps. Although he is eloquent about the defects of the West, he is vague about which freedoms he thinks should be curtailed. His only firm suggestions to Americans

appear to be the introduction of gun control and detention without trial for "criminals, terrorists, street-gang members and drug dealers". When it comes to elaborating the implications of his arguments, he shies away, insisting that he is not arguing for a "totalitarian or authoritarian system".

Mr Mahbubani's political masters in Singapore show a similar unwillingness to push the argument to its logical conclusion. When Singapore is accused of deviating from liberal ideas - such as an independent judiciary or freedom to oppose the government - its leaders do not respond by arguing that such ideas are alien western impositions. Instead, they furiously insist that they respect these liberal principles. They also sometimes prosecute those who attempt to prove otherwise. At times, they seem to lack the courage of their own restrictions.