

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 29
Issue 3 *Winter*

Article 2

1999

Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law in the Asia-Pacific Region

Jose Ramos-Horta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ramos-Horta, Jose. "Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law in the Asia-Pacific Region." *The Iowa Review* 29.3 (1999): 1-9. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5184>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Jose Ramos-Horta

HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY, AND THE RULE OF LAW IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION*

Madame President, Mr. Provost, members of the faculty, students: first I would like to thank you very much for the kind invitation you have extended to me. And I want to thank you too, very much, for coming out this evening, knowing how the weather is. I have to confess, in your place I would not venture to go listen to anyone. So you are better people than I.

Before I start I would like to do a sort of ideo-political tour d'hORIZON to place the East Timor issue in its proper historical-political context. Not that I would focus only on the issue of East Timor, but East Timor is a fairly important case study—a telling example from which we can draw many lessons. Lessons of international hypocrisy, lessons about the tragic consequences when government actions are dictated only by pragmatism and realpolitik, lessons of endurance and survival and the hope of small nations, lessons of the eternal conflict between human rights and national interests—but national interests as the policy makers define them. Often we hear of “national interests” and “strategic interests.” But who defines them? Who would say that the United States’ interests were at stake in Guatemala during the Cold War and so would lead the U.S. to support one of the most brutal dictatorships in Latin America, enabling a civil war to go on for thirty years, resulting in the death of at least 150,000 people? What kind of national interest is that? And what are the strategic interests that would compel a country—the U.S., the British, the French, the Germans—in the late 1970s to support Iraqi intervention in Iran? Following the fall of the Shah, there was an Islamic revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Saddam Hussein, seizing on all the internal instability and chaos that is natural in a post-empire situation, tried to recover certain lost territory to Iran, and in the ensuing war more than a million people were killed in the course of eight to ten years. Chemical and biological weapons

* Mr. Ramos-Horta, co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, spoke at the University of Iowa in April 1999 as part of a year-long series commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This transcription was made from the tape of his talk.

were used for the first time since World War I, on Kurdish children and women. And yet the U.S. and the other western countries believed that their perceived strategic interests were with Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

So that's why I ask who defines, and what really are these national interests that have caused so many wars? Of course I'm not talking only about the perceived national interests of the United States or the western countries. What are the national interests of the ex-Soviet Union that led them into Afghanistan and into sponsoring revolutions in other parts of the world? East Timor is very revealing of all of that—revealing also of the extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice of people fighting for human rights, democracy, rule of law, even in the Asia-Pacific region.

I say *even* in the Asia-Pacific region because often we hear from leaders in Asia that human rights are a western concept, alien to so-called Asian values. But then we see courageous people in Burma, led by that extraordinary woman Aung San Suu Kyi, trying to restore democracy in that country. We saw the Philippines struggle for twenty years against Marcos' dictatorship and succeed in overthrowing it and building a form of democracy. Thailand is the same, and now the new generation of people in Indonesia—after 32 years of a brutal dictatorship, with extraordinary difficulties, with a lot of bloodshed, a lot of suffering—are trying to rebuild a country along the lines of democracy and human rights.

When we talk about human rights—or I talk about human rights—I'm not talking only about an academic concept. When I talk about it, or when Aung San Suu Kyi and others in Burma and the Philippines, or in Latin America, or in many regions of Africa talk about it, we talk about the actual lives of people, people who do not wish to be tortured, people who do not wish to be arrested for no reason, or to be locked up without trial, without legal processes. These are real human rights that we talk about. And these human rights are actually universal rights, not an exclusive property of some western Christian civilization.

For if we look into the teachings of Islam, Buddhism, or any other Eastern philosophy or religion, we find that there is much common ground with other religions when it comes to justice, to human freedom, to humility, to modesty, to forgiveness. Between the Koran and the Bible, I sometimes wonder who plagiarized whom. So I reject the notion that there is something totally different in Asian cultures, different from what Europeans, South Americans, and Africans value.

Those of you who are familiar with U.S. foreign policy in southeast Asia in the 70s will recall a picture that made headlines in 1975. It was of an American helicopter trying to land on the rooftop of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, trying to rescue U.S. diplomats, C.I.A. officials, South Vietnamese collaborators, and so on. It was the end of the American presence in Vietnam. Better than a thousand words, that particular picture illustrated the humiliating U.S. retreat from Indochina. Soon after, Laos and Cambodia also fell. It was the confirmation of the so-called domino theory, I believe first articulated by Lyndon Johnson and which served as the strategic rationale for U.S. intervention everywhere. In the African continent, other dramatic events took place: the Portuguese empire collapsed, Cuban-Soviet forces joined with one of the national liberation movements in Angola, the NPLA. On the other side of the ideological or strategic spectrum, the C.I.A., Mobutu in Zaire, and most of Europe supported UNITA and FNLA, subjecting the peoples of Angola to one of the most brutal wars since World War II. The consequences of the Cold War still drag on in Angola today. In Mozambique also a national liberation movement took over and installed a Marxist-oriented government, which was not kindly viewed by the West. The peoples of Southern Africa were again victims of the conflict between East and West. Certainly 1975 was a nightmare for the United States. It seems that the domino theory was at work everywhere.

It is against this background that then-President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger visited Jakarta and their most loyal friend, the Indonesian dictator, General Suharto. December 5-6 was the visit; December 6 President Gerald Ford and Kissinger took off; within twelve hours of that departure, Indonesian troops invaded the tiny nation of East Timor—700,000 people, colonized by Portugal for 500 years, an area of only 19,000 square kilometers, roughly the size of Kuwait, Israel, or El Salvador. Ninety percent of the weapons used in the invasion were supplied by the U.S. These are not rough estimates; it was the official admission by the State Department in testimony to the U.S. Congress in July 1977. In the following weeks and months, tens of thousands of people died, from outright massacres, from summary executions, from being thrown off helicopters into the sea. In the following months, people died of starvation caused by the war. Napalm was used; cluster bombs were dropped on the people of East Timor. It was a war of aggression against a small nation of fewer than a million people.

Twenty-three years after these aggressions, after Kissinger's visit, the picture is the following in the region. The myth of economic growth in the region—in South Korea, in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia—exploded. Indonesia is imploding. Beginning in July 1997, first the Thai currency was devalued, and within weeks the disease caught the entire region. Economies that were the envy of the rest of the Third World—economies that raised so much appetite in the West—totally collapsed. Millions of people went into unemployment lines. Per-capita income in Indonesia nose-dived almost fifty per cent. Half of the country lives below the poverty line. Today Indonesia is one of the most destitute countries in the world.

A few weeks ago, I was in Australia and watched on television Secretary of State Madeline Albright visiting Indonesia. She did not only confer with the new Indonesian President Habibie, but also with Xanana Gusmão, the Nelson Mandela of East Timor, the leader of the resistance who has been in prison in Indonesia. For me, watching the news and seeing Madeline Albright embracing Xanana Gusmão, I felt quite contradictory sentiments. I could not help but look back at Kissinger's visit to Indonesia in 1975, giving the green light for the invasion and the ensuing genocide. Then, twenty-three years later, with the rest of the world completely changed, the Berlin Wall collapsed, the Soviet empire disintegrated, the Communist fear evaporated, Madeline Albright embraces the East Timor resistance leader, who until recently was a sort of common criminal. I was touched.

This year is the first time in many years that the meetings of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights have taken place in Geneva and I am not there. I used to go every year, and in Geneva, I would try to speak, or to lobby, sometimes bully some diplomats, sometimes be nice to them, but lobby them to speak out on East Timor. Now though there is a whole new generation of East Timorese doing the work right there. Youngish people in their twenties, in their early thirties, a bit nervous. What should we do now? they ask. I don't care, I say; *you* know. And they are doing an outstanding job. But they get very nervous when I'm not around. And this is the first time in many years that I do not accompany them.

In Geneva I used to drive every morning to attend the Commission meetings, and every morning at eight o'clock sharp I tuned in to the B.B.C., the best thing the British ever invented. The news that particular morning was startling. It was telling us the story of a Soviet cosmonaut who had gone into space a few months earlier, when the Soviet Union was the most feared

empire in the world—the evil empire, in the words of Ronald Reagan. Then, after several months in space, at the end of his mission, he prepared to return to Mother Earth. It was then that the startling news came from Moscow: his commanders in the space center somewhere in Khazakstan told him, Do not come back, your country no longer exists. Actually this is what they told him: the Soviet Union has ceased to exist. The authorities, the country that sent him into space were no longer there. And who was going to bring him back? Because actually the discussion in Moscow was that it cost millions of dollars, and who was going to pay for it? And someone, a nicer person in Moscow, told him, Well, circle the earth a few more times. That's what actually happened until they figured out what to do with the cosmonaut.

Extraordinary story. I stopped the car. In the best of circumstances I'm the worst driver you can ever meet, and in that particular moment I felt it advisable to stop and think. I could not help but reflect on how, throughout history, the greatest empires always fall apart, from the Roman Empire to the numerous China dynasties and the most recent empires or dynasties; and all were built—significantly built—on falsehoods, on myths, on lies, on arrogance, on repression and on fear. In spite of all the weapons at their disposal, the strategic missiles, the tanks that parade through Red Square every year, and the warning to the citizens of the rest of the world of how mighty they are—in spite of all of this, those intercontinental ballistic missiles, those tanks could not help prevent the liberation of Poland, or the Czech Republic, and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. If I had any doubt then about whether a small nation like East Timor could ever prevail over such a major power, I thought Indonesia, too, will follow the fate of the Soviet Union. Democracy will come to Indonesia.

Year after year, for the past twenty-three years, one word I have learned. The word is *realism*. I have been told so many times, by policy makers, diplomats, sometimes even by journalists—Be realistic. They mean, Accept your fate. Accept the fait accompli of military occupations, of dictatorships, of military conquests. Against the might of the armies, you cannot succeed. I tell you frankly, this word, *realistic*, I have heard it so many times. And I wonder how often that fragile, gracious-looking, but strong and determined lady, Aung San Suu Kyi, must have heard it also. Surrounded by tanks, by the army in Rangoon, she should be realistic, compromise, and forget about the elections her party won. How many times Nelson Mandela must have heard this in the past, too, that apartheid will always be there.

I first arrived in New York soon after the invasion of East Timor, December 1975. Let me tell you, before I came to New York I had not been to too many cities in the world. Where I was born and grew up, there were no cars, no electricity, no running water. Suddenly one day I was told to leave the capitol building before the capitol falls. To take some people with me, go to New York, and lobby the U.N. So I went. By the time I arrived, East Timor had been overrun. Manhattan was covered with snow, the first time I saw snow in my life. By the courtesy of newly independent countries, Mozambique and others, I was introduced to the U.N. and given a diplomatic passport to enable me to begin the lobbying process. The Security Council discussed the issue for ten days, and to my astonishment, to everybody's astonishment, we managed to secure a unanimous resolution of the U.N. Security Council condemning the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia, recognizing our right to self-determination, and calling on Indonesia to withdraw its troops from the territory. This was a unanimous decision of the U.N. Security Council. All five permanent members and the other ten non-permanent members voted for it. I thought I would soon go back to East Timor in triumph.

But I learned another thing soon after. I learned about the word *hypocrisy*. The same countries that voted for that resolution of the Security Council, instead of exerting the pressure incrementally, as the charter says, in order to bring about the implementation of that resolution—instead as Indonesia ignored the resolution and continued occupation, increasing its troops in the territory—the same countries that voted for that resolution sold more weapons to Indonesia. That was my first lesson in international hypocrisy. That's why so often the U.N. is weakened, is discredited: because of the practice of selectivity and the hypocrisy of the member states. Some people have more rights than others. The Kosovars under threat by Milosevic seem to have more rights than the people of East Timor. The people of Kosovo seem to have more rights than the Tibetans, if you judge from the way that the powers-that-be respond to different human suffering around the world.

But that is not the only problem. If non-action by the Security Council, by the U.N., on a given conflict—if indifference, lack of action, passivity were the only thing that was going on, then maybe not everything would be so bad. If we, the East Timorese, were simply ignored by everybody, if everybody were just indifferent, that alone would be already something good. But these countries, members of the Security Council, entrusted by the world, by the peoples of the world, to look after peace and stability in the world, are the

ones who sell more weapons to every conflict situation in the world. The five permanent members are the five largest weapons producers and exporters in the world.

There are about thirty to forty conflicts in the world today. These conflicts have caused thirty to forty million displaced persons. If you want to find a common denominator to these conflicts—I do not wish to oversimplify their often complex causes—they all have one reason why they are not controllable. Every time there is tension in one given region, or a conflict erupts, arms merchants immediately find a market and aggressively pursue weapons sales. That's why a group of innocent, naïve Nobel Peace Prize laureates—I say innocent and naïve because we are called that by people in Washington, London, Paris, and elsewhere—have come together and proposed one thing to the members of the Security Council, the arms-producing countries, as our modest vision of how to make the twenty-first century a better world. Not perfect, not much better, but slightly better. An international code of conduct on arms transfer should be adopted by every country in the world. By weapons-producing countries and non-weapons-producing countries. But primary responsibility is with the Security Council members, the weapons-producing countries. This international code of conduct would prohibit weapons export to countries that violate human rights. Very simple. No need for too much investigation. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the State Department each publishes an annual report of human rights violations in the world. On the basis of this compelling evidence countries listed should not be able to purchase weapons from anywhere. Countries that systematically violate human rights standards, that are not democratic, that engage in wars with others, countries that spend more on weapons than on education and health care should not receive weapons.

I find in fact a telling analogy between the supplying of weapons and drugs. Drugs come to the U.S. from Colombia or Burma and other places in the world, which Americans complain about and do more than that, pulverizing wide areas in Colombian jungles trying to destroy the crops. Meanwhile the drugs that kill us are your weapons. Drugs produced in Burma and Colombia cross paths with the bullets and the M-16s (and worse) that come in the opposite direction, and with at least equally vicious effect, to our countries.

A year or two ago, I picked up *The New York Times* and was struck by the front page story. President Clinton had said he was ordering the cancellation of importation into the U.S. of 600,000 assault rifles from China. He also put

on hold the applications for some million or two million more. "I will not allow foreigners to turn our cities into war zones," he said. He was referring to the consequences of handguns, assault rifles in this country. I could not agree more with the President, and I thought to myself, what a great human being, what a courageous man. But then I thought also, a man of such sensitivity, and so many men and women of sensitivity in Washington, D.C., in the U.S. Congress, who are appalled by the killings in the streets of the United States, would be appalled by the consequences of American weapons exported elsewhere that are killing our people and devastating our economies. They must also be appalled when Angolans lose their legs with land mines, and would certainly ratify the land mine convention. So far the United States has not done that. But let me not be misinterpreted; I'm not saying that the U.S. is the only culprit, or Britain and France are the only culprits. Unfortunately there are many other culprits. Russia and China, the other two permanent members of the Council, are also reckless exporters of weapons to many countries in the world.

If we wish to contribute towards peace in the twenty-first century, this would be a first step. Costa Rica does not have an army. It contributed to peace in Central America precisely because it does not have an army. It has the highest standard of living in Central America, the highest rate of education in Latin America. Monies that are saved from armies, from weapons, from land mines, can be used in education, in health care, in clean water. Please remember, even if the cure for AIDS were only a drop of clean water—just imagine, one day a scientist discovers that the cure for AIDS required only one drop of clean water—most people in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Haiti, India, Indonesia, or Thailand would not have access to this miracle cure, a single drop of clean water. Millions and millions of people in our region of the world do not have clean water, do not have health care and education. That's why I find it so immoral, so unethical, that the Western countries that go to war to rescue the Kosovars, that go to the Gulf region to rescue the Kuwaitis from Saddam Hussein, that talk so much about human rights and democracy, keep sending weapons to the rest of the world. Sometimes overseas aid is even sent out with the condition that it include subsidies for purchasing arms.

All this being said, I do not wish to make too sweeping judgments about U.S. policies. In the case of East Timor in the last few months, there have been historical shifts, and we are thoroughly grateful for that. And I must say,

in spite of my often deep skepticism about what the U.S. claims to stand for, or what the Europeans claim to stand for, in spite of my reluctance to condone the intervention in Kosovo, I still would say my greatest fear is of NATO tumbling down, losing credibility. If the U.S., and Europeans in general, end up thoroughly discredited, weakened by the Kosovo experiment, it would be disastrous for the rest of the world. Dictators and oligarchs around the world would take this opportunity to have free license to wage wars of their own and repress their people. Fortunately—or unfortunately—with the end of the Cold War, there is one superpower, and in spite of all the criticisms, all the faults, the U.S. still has the capacity, the inherent good will, because of its extraordinary people, to do extraordinarily good things for the rest of the world. If the U.S. is discredited and weakened, I'm afraid of what's going to happen in the years to come.

I thank you.