

**IPS-Nathan Lectures: Bilahari Kausikan on
“The Myth of Universality: The Geopolitics of Human Rights”**

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In his fourth IPS-Nathan lecture, Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan addressed an audience of 300 at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House on the topic of human rights, tying it to geopolitics in the region and its evolution as a foreign policy objective by the United States. The lecture was followed by a spirited question-and-answer session, moderated by Ambassador-at-Large Gopinath Pillai.

Questioning the Universality of Human Rights

Ambassador Kausikan began his lecture by citing *Rashomon*, the short story by Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa, to underscore the variety of perceptions that people can have of an issue. Human rights and democracy, he explained, are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon, adding that he disagreed with the notion of the universality of human rights. “In fact the evidence of our senses tells us that the most salient characteristic of the world we live in is diversity, not universality,” he said.

On the topic of human rights and democracy promotion as a form of statecraft, Ambassador Kausikan pointed out that the US has always seen itself as a beacon of human rights and democracy. But its foreign policy considerations during the Cold War meant that these ideas remained as propaganda, and not policy. These ideas did not play a key role in US diplomacy — which was premised on strategy, rather than notions of human rights and democracy — during the Cold War. Recalling a point he made in his last lecture, he reminded the audience that even the US had once sided with China and the Khmer Rouge against ASEAN.

By the late 1980s, following the re-introduction of *glasnost* and subsequent attempt at *perestroika*, relations between the Soviet Union and US improved. As the Cold War wound down, political events in the region also began to shape up. Martial law was lifted in the Philippines and Taiwan in 1986 and 1987, respectively, while

student demonstrations in South Korea pushed President Chun Doo-hwan from power.

Following this series of events was Singapore’s own Hendrickson affair, where the US Embassy’s then-First Secretary, Hank Henderson was found to be promoting opposition to the PAP government by promising assistance to local dissidents. Emphasising his belief that this was not due to ill-will on the American diplomat’s part or that the US and Singapore had suddenly become enemies, Ambassador Kausikan said that this was simply a reflection of changing US interests in the region. The US probably saw it as an opportunity to “nudge” Singapore in the political direction that the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan were headed, he said.

During the lecture, Ambassador Kausikan also questioned some of the fundamental concepts of the notion of universality. Citing the idea of value plurality by British political theorist Isaiah Berlin, Ambassador Kausikan agreed that “that there is not one Good but many goods each of which may have its own validity but which are not necessarily reconcilable or capable of simultaneous realisation.”

As an example, he cited the Bangkok Declaration in March 1993 that arose from the Asia Group preparatory meeting for the World Conference on Human Rights to be held that June in Vienna. Article 8 of the Declaration made clear that while Asian countries believed in human rights, they did not all agree with the concept of universal human rights, as “they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.” This was perceived to be a challenge to Western beliefs and provoked controversy after the conference, he said.

The idea of universality in human rights persists till today, he said, pointing out that liberals were, ironically, most likely to find a diversity of views on democracy and human rights hard to accept. China’s growth trajectory has challenged this way of thinking somewhat, as it has experienced vast economic growth despite having a tightly-controlled system of central government.

However, China too was facing its own challenges to governance, and so its model was thus not necessarily a real alternative, he said. Instead, it would be more productive to “free oneself from the “shackles of the false framework of Universality” and “take a practical and not ideological approach to human rights and democracy: to hold our beliefs in these values loosely, contingently and transactionally.”

The Ambassador added: “Human rights and democracy are not just desirable ends in themselves, but also means that should be evaluated and implemented on the basis of their utility.”



Question and Answer Session

The first few questions touched on adherence to international law. What could small states like Singapore do when a foreign diplomat, for instance, flouts local laws? asked a participant, citing the case of former Romanian Chargé d'affaires Silviu Ionescu, who fled home after a deadly hit-and-run accident in Singapore in 2009.

Ambassador Kausikan recalled how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put pressure on other European countries so that Dr Ionescu could not seek harbour elsewhere. “So in this case, some form of justice was extracted,” Ambassador Kausikan said. This was done through holding the European Union to the ideals it said it adhered to, such as rule of law, he said.

“Is it possible to come up with a labour migration treaty under the human rights convention of ASEAN?” another member asked. Ambassador Kausikan said that this

was difficult, as there remained a fundamental difference in interests between sending and receiving countries. “That is a circle that is not going to be squared in any satisfactory way,” he said. “All you can do is hope that the sending and receiving countries, within their own national frameworks, treat these people — whether they are sent out or received — in a fairly decent manner. That’s all you can do,” he concluded.

“How many democracies do you think there will be in the next 50 years, considering how there are many more democracies today than there were 50 years ago?” someone asked. Ambassador Kausikan said that he could not say for sure how many democracies there are going to be in the future because of the shifting definition of what a democracy is supposed to be. “Even if you say [it is] the ability to replace your leaders. I think I would have to qualify, peacefully, because I could replace a leader by shooting him in the head, which happens in many countries which still call themselves democracies,” he said.

A member of the audience pointed to what he described as the “universal pursuit of human rights” that led to the abolishment of the slave trade — a 300-year-old institution. Additionally, he asked what a multipolar world would mean for global human rights, citing President Xi Jinping’s [“Asia for Asians”](#) vision. While acknowledging that a specific type of slavery had been abolished, Ambassador Kausikan said that there still existed different types of slavery in various parts of the world, citing the case of Burmese slave fishermen in Thailand. To the second question, he replied saying that as a multipolar world develops, this could result in, for example, differing interpretations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While “no one would dismantle the immense apparatus of treaties and institutions that exist,” the “implementation and interpretation” of these concepts is more and more likely to be contested as long as there is a distribution of power, he said.

Ambassador Kausikan stressed, as he had during his lecture, that he was not saying that human rights or human rights ideals were unimportant. One had to realise that ideals may never be reached, and “the interpretation of the ideal is always going to be different and the differences are going to change over time.”

Andrew Yeo is a Research Assistant at IPS supporting the work of the S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Watch the full video of Lecture IV [here](#). Sign up for Lecture V on 25 May 2016 [here](#)

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