

No clear-cut, single definition of human rights: Bilahari Kausikan

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American presidential hopeful Donald Trump has gained much traction in the race for the White House because of the gap between what American elites desire and what everyday Americans are comfortable with, according to ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan.

In his fourth lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' SR Nathan Fellow yesterday, he noted the "outrageous" comments Mr Trump has made on women and minorities.

He said these "tap into the anger of his white working class base who feel culturally as well as economically insecure because a once familiar America... had been 'stolen' from them by liberal elites and mainstream political leaders who have promoted women's rights".

The veteran diplomat cited the reasons for Mr Trump's surprising popularity as a backlash against pockets of Americans asserting their human rights, such as women's rights.

Another dilemma from the assertion of human rights, albeit in a different context, had ballooned into a crisis in Europe, he noted.

Europeans are now torn between welcoming the hordes of refugees from Syria, which befitted their championing of human rights, and exposing themselves to the risks of doing so.

This included their feeling less secure where they live, he said.

Citing recent remarks by former Italian premier Mario Monti at a conference in Switzerland, Mr Kausikan said the European Union itself was an utopian idea that Europeans themselves could not grasp.

Hence, they were increasingly thinking short-term and were not supportive of ideals like human rights, even for refugees.

"It is good to abide by international law. It is good to take care of refugees. It is good to ensure that one's own citizens feel secure and comfortable in their own country. Can all three goods be simultaneously realised? I doubt it," he said.

These crises, he explained, are symptoms of just how fuzzy the ideal of human rights was, and that there was no single definition to go by.

"Every country must find its own balance in the context of its particular circumstances," he said.

"What I am deeply sceptical about is the assumption that when we speak about rights or democracy, we will always mean the same thing just because we use the same words, and that the same words will always be applicable in the same way everywhere."

He noted, for example, that people disagreed on even the most fundamental ideas, such as the right to life, the death penalty and justice.

Why then bother to talk at length about such rights?

Mr Kausikan said that was because, since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, Western powers touted human rights and democracy as if these were the panacea for the world's ills.

In fact, all they were doing was using these to try and influence nations, including countries like Singapore, to develop in ways that suited these powers' interests.

It was not uncommon for Western diplomats to threaten to otherwise withhold much-needed aid.

He also pointed out how Washington went from hailing embattled former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as their staunch ally to "unceremoniously abandoning" him within a week.

Noting that the United States also treated former Indonesian president Suharto in a similar way, he contrasted their fate against that of former Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, whom the US gave safe passage to Hawaii when he fled his country in 1986.

The stark difference between how the US treated Mr Mubarak and Mr Suharto and how they helped Marcos showed the rest of the world how unreliable the US' commitment to human rights could be, said Mr Kausikan.

He added: "Democracy and human rights are not magical incantations that, when uttered, make all problems vanish.

"They are important but contested and sometimes internally contradictory concepts that may create new problems even if they solve others."

Bilahari Kausikan on...

CONTESTED CONCEPTS

Although the idea that humans have rights of some sort has won general acceptance, most specific rights are still essentially contested concepts where superficial agreement, sometimes no more than agreement over vocabulary, masks deep conflicts over interpretation and implementation.

This is true even with something as basic as the right to life where there is fundamental and visceral disagreement over capital punishment, mandated by syariah, and abortion which some Christians equate with murder. If life itself can be disputed, how much real agreement over the ever-expanding range of other ideas claimed as rights can we realistically expect?

WHAT ARTISTS OF CHARLIE HEBDO MAGAZINE AND THEIR KILLERS HAD IN COMMON

After the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, it struck me that there was a similarity in the modes of thought of the terrorists and the cartoonists, not moral equivalence in their actions

because there is clearly none, but a similarity of thought processes: Both held their values so absolutely that they thought it justified anything.

Murder is wrong. But is lampooning a religion right? The fact that the terrorists held a completely mistaken view of Islam is beside the point. The point is that they believed in it, believed in it as fervently as the cartoonists believed in freedom of expression.