

East Asia in Transition

Lesson 4: Social Issues, Human Rights, and the Environment Update

East Asians face many social and environmental challenges. These challenges include widespread poverty, discrimination against women, crime and corruption, ethnic and religious conflict, human rights violations, and significant pollution. While some of these problems have existed for centuries, others have developed only in the last few decades. Indeed, the 1997 East Asian economic crisis aggravated some of the region's social ills. This lesson examines the complex web of developmental challenges in East Asia and the steps being taken to address them.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Like all regions of the world, East Asia faces a wide variety of social challenges. Here, we focus on poverty, gender issues, and crime and corruption.

Poverty and Homelessness

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In 2005, there were about 728 million East Asians living on \$2 or less a day. Almost 316 million of these people lived on less than \$1.25 dollar a day.¹ Many major East Asian cities have large slums. These slums frequently have inadequate water, sewage, and electrical services. It is important to note that there are significant differences between the more advanced countries, such as Japan and South Korea, and the poorer countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (formerly Burma). There are also large differences within countries, particularly between rural and urban areas. For example, China's poorer and more rural western provinces have not experienced many of the changes taking place in the more industrialized and urban east.

More than 460 million Chinese live on less than \$2 a day. This figure amounts to nearly a quarter of the country's population.² As many as 200 million of the country's rural peasants have moved into urban areas hoping to benefit from the economic boom.³ These laborers are often unable to find jobs and have become an army of rootless people moving from city to city. They are called the "floating population" by the Chinese government.

The social costs of the 1997 East Asian economic crisis were seen almost immediately. In Indonesia, the value of the currency fell nearly 85 percent.⁴ The banking system stopped functioning and many of the country's largest companies went bankrupt. At least three million Indonesians lost their jobs.⁵ Several million children dropped out of Indonesian schools.⁶ In South Korea, 23,000 businesses failed.⁷ Unemployment almost tripled in 1998, soaring to its highest level in over a decade.⁸ Some 5,000 South Korean children were left at orphanages because their parents could no longer provide for them.⁹ In total, the East Asian economic crisis pushed at least 15 million people below the poverty line and caused severe hardship for millions more.¹⁰

However, at the turn of the century, East Asia began to recover. Between 1999 and 2005, East Asia averaged over 9 percent economic growth per year.¹¹ This growth was faster than any other

region in the world. Because of this strong economic growth, the number of East Asians living in poverty declined significantly. By 2007, growth increased to 13 percent, but dropped to 9 percent in 2008 as a result of the global economic crisis.

Gender Issues

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East Asia has made progress in the area of gender equality.¹² However, the region still faces many challenges. In many countries boys are generally seen as more valuable. As a result, women receive less education and health care. The abortion of female fetuses is a significant problem. Many women fall victim to human trafficking. The spread of HIV/AIDS is also a growing challenge for women, especially in Southeast Asia.

In terms of employment, the traditional role of East Asian women has been in the home or in agriculture. Rapid industrialization, however, has placed many on the shop floor. For example, China's export industry depends substantially on female labor. Unfortunately, working women in China and elsewhere are often subjected to terrible working conditions, harassment, and abuse. Women are often penalized for pregnancy, and many cannot advance beyond "glass ceilings." Even in modern, secular Singapore, the government's official position is that a woman cannot legally be the head of a household, even if she is the major income earner.

Increasing numbers of East Asians are calling for a change in the treatment of women. Women's movements and organizations have developed throughout the region. Women are demanding equality in the workplace and society. In Japan, for example, women have initiated lawsuits against major Japanese companies. They seek equal employment opportunities and equal pay. Across the region, groups have spoken out against such things as child prostitution and the spread of AIDS. Many East Asian states have also made strides in closing the education gap between boys and girls. Finally, some progress has been made in the area of female political participation.

Crime and Corruption

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Crime and corruption are also prominent social issues in East Asia. Myanmar and North Korea are among the most corrupt and repressive countries in the world. Crime and corruption are also tremendous problems in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Widespread problems in governments, police forces, judiciaries, and businesses lead to human rights abuses, economic losses, and popular protests. Several governments have responded by establishing anticorruption commissions, especially after the 1997 economic crisis.

EAST ASIAN TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS

(insert on page 96 before "The Legacy of Japanese Imperialism")

Ethnic, religious, and nationalistic tensions also cause problems in East Asia. For example, there are still ill feelings over Japanese brutality during the 1930s and 1940s. Also, China's control of Tibet has left lasting strains between the Tibetans and Chinese. Here, we focus on examples from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. We also examine the issue of foreign workers in East Asia.

East Timor

In 1975, Indonesia invaded and took control of East Timor. After this invasion, there was periodic violence between the East Timorese and the Indonesian army. Then in 1999, after the fall of the repressive Suharto regime, a referendum was held. The East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence. Anti-independence militias, many with ties to the Indonesian army, then went on a rampage that took hundreds of lives. The violence forced 270,000 of East Timor's 800,000 people to flee to the Indonesian side of the island.¹³ Virtually every village and town across East Timor was looted or burned. An Australian-led, United Nations–sanctioned peacekeeping force eventually brought stability. In May 2002, East Timor formally became an independent country. The bulk of the United Nations peacekeeping forces were removed in 2005, but returned in 2006 because of continued instability and remain deployed in 2010.

In February 2008, President Jose Ramos-Horta survived an assassination attempt by a rebel, who was a follower of former military commander and fugitive Alfredo Reinado. Ramos-Horta was airlifted to Australia where he underwent treatment and recovered from his injuries. The national parliament declared a state of siege, implementing curfews and curtailing freedoms. These measures were lifted as conditions stabilized over the following weeks.

Indonesia

Since 1976, separatists in the Indonesian province of Aceh have fought for their independence from the Indonesian government, prompting forceful military response. Some 15,000 have died in the conflict, including a brutal crackdown in 2003. However, a devastating tsunami in December 2004 killed over 130,000 people in the province and interrupted the war.¹⁴ A cease-fire agreement was signed in 2005 so the area could recover. This fragile cease-fire continued into 2010.

The Philippines

In the Philippines, Islamic rebel groups have plagued the southern end of the archipelago for decades. They have sought a separate Islamic state for the country's Muslim minorities. One group, Abu Sayyaf, has gained international notoriety for its reign of terror in and around the South China Sea. This group, which is thought to have ties to al Qaeda, is known chiefly for kidnappings, massacres, and extortion. In 2004, it placed a bomb on a passenger ferry, killing more than one hundred people.

In August 2006, U.S.-backed Philippine troops launched a major operation against Abu Sayyaf. Dozens of militants were killed, including the group's leader, Khadaffy Janjalani. The government hopes that the group has been permanently disabled, and vows to wipe out poverty, which helps breed extremism in the area.

Thailand

Thailand's population is primarily of Thai heritage, and is mostly Buddhist. However, in three southern provinces bordering Malaysia, the majority of the population is Muslim and have Malay heritage. A conflict in the area between local groups and the central government has been simmering at least since the 1960s. After 2001, the insurgency became more radicalized. Subsequent heavy-handed tactics by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government, which

have resulted in the deaths of civilian protesters, intensified the Muslims' feelings of isolation in their own country. Since early 2004, more than 1,700 people have died due to the conflict.¹⁵

Recently, however, this ethnic struggle has been largely overshadowed by political crises that have revealed a split between rich and poor. In 2006, the Royal Thai Army staged a coup d'état against Prime Minister Thaksin. Immediate causes were identified as Thaksin's alleged corruption and vote buying, but underlying conflicts between the rural poor, who support Thaksin, and the urban elite, who supported the junta, were the primary cause. In January 2007, the junta released an interim constitution and military law was subsequently revoked. The new constitution was approved by referendum and democratic elections were held in December 2007.

Conflict continues between pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin supporters, with the latter supporting current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who assumed office in December 2008. Violence continues to break out, including an April 2009 incident that left two dead and hundreds injured.

Foreign Workers

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One result of the different income levels among East Asian countries is the large flow of migrant workers within the region. Richer countries attract workers from poorer neighbors. For example, many Filipinos and Indonesians work in Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Burmese, Cambodian, and Southern Chinese workers often seek employment in Thailand. Much of this migration is illegal, and many workers toil in dirty and dangerous settings.

Foreign workers, whether legal or illegal, often have few or no legal protections. They often do not know of the protections they do have, or are reluctant to exercise their rights for fear of abuse, deportation, or loss of livelihood. For example, after the devastating December 2004 tsunami, some Burmese foreign workers in Thailand did not visit aid stations because they were afraid of deportation.

Another problem has been that some local populations feel suspicious of foreign workers. A 2005 poll showed that more than 70 percent of Japanese blame foreign workers for rising crime in Japan.¹⁶ These feelings exist even though the country faces a growing labor shortage. In 2005, Malaysia began rounding up and deporting almost 400,000 undocumented foreign workers because of Malaysians' growing objections to their presence.¹⁷ However, the country has since had to come to grips with a chronic labor shortage. It has worked to streamline its system for bringing in legal foreign workers.

Despite these issues, remittances from foreign workers remain a very important source of income for many countries in the region. For example, even as the world economic crisis unfolded, remittances from the Filipino foreign workers were equivalent to 10 percent of the Philippines' gross domestic product in 2008.¹⁸

HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

China

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In June 1998, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president to visit China since the Tiananmen Square massacre. During his visit, he debated human rights issues with President Jiang Zemin on Chinese television. He also agreed with President Jiang that both countries would promote and protect human rights in their countries. However, in October 1998, China closed its first-ever human rights conference by declaring that it would not embrace Western definitions of civil liberties. The country’s leaders argued that the rights to economic survival and development must come first.

There is a wide range of human rights problems in China. Suspects can be placed in “reeducation camps” for up to four years without trial. Reports of torture while in official custody are common. Practitioners of Falun Gong (a new-age spiritual movement with millions of followers in China) face mass arrests, beatings, and even death. The government considers Falun Gong an “evil cult.” Internet censorship is the rule. There are as many as 30,000 Internet police.¹⁹ They block any Internet content that they think is sensitive or inappropriate. AIDS outreach workers complain of harassment and arrest when they speak too openly about the epidemic.

However, even as China attempts to manage the emergence of a stronger civil society, protests against corruption, environmental degradation, and poverty are growing in number and size. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 80,000 strikes of 100 people or more occur yearly.²⁰ Local sit-ins have closed polluting factories. Villagers have grabbed headlines when protesting land seizures and local corruption. Some have even begun to take the government to court.

Myanmar

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Myanmar is another state that rejects external criticism of its human rights record and argues for the need to apply local standards. Since 1958, the country has been ruled by a hard-line military dictatorship. This regime has often violently suppressed prodemocracy efforts.

Myanmar’s poor human rights record has gained international attention partly because of the efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her prodemocracy efforts. Suu Kyi’s party won Myanmar’s 1990 general elections and Suu Kyi was poised to become prime minister. However, the ruling military junta ignored the victory. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in 1989 during the run-up to the elections, and has been under house arrest on and off since this period. On August 11, 2009, her detention was extended for an additional 18 months.

As a result of Myanmar’s human rights abuses, its international influence is very limited. Western countries generally consider Myanmar’s ruling military junta as illegitimate, and many states have levied sanctions, including the United States, Japan, and European Union member states. East Asia, on the other hand, though critical of the regime, has engaged Myanmar as a partner in the region. China and Myanmar are engaged in bilateral trade, and China (with Russia) has consistently blocked efforts by Western states to enact UN sanctions.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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As in many regions of the world, environmental degradation is a significant problem in East Asia. Smog is so thick in some cities that people wear masks to protect themselves. Many cities have open sewage systems, oil-slicked waterways, garbage piled along roadways, and overflowing landfills. In many corners of the region, plants and wildlife are disappearing.

As economic crisis swept across East Asia in the summer and fall of 1997, another disaster was unfolding. Hundreds of fires were burning in the forests of Indonesia. Many of the fires were deliberately set as a cheap way to clear land. The fires were particularly bad on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. A blanket of smoke covered an area almost half the size of the United States. The fires affected not only Indonesia, but also Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. The eerie, health-threatening haze left high-rise buildings barely visible, schools and airports closed, and life miserable for millions of people. While such fires had been set before, this time drought conditions turned the situation into an unprecedented ecological disaster. In subsequent years, ongoing forest fire problems and illegal logging have continued to threaten Indonesia’s tropical forests, which are among the richest in the world.

In December 2004, an enormous earthquake in the Indian Ocean led to a massive tsunami. In East Asia alone, more than 176,000 people were killed.²¹ Hundreds of thousands more were left homeless. The force of waves crushed coral reefs, destroying fish habitats and residents’ food supplies. Places with intact mangrove swamps and extensive coral reefs suffered less tsunami damage than other places because these natural defenses protected shorelines. Likewise, a 2008 cyclone caused catastrophic damage in Myanmar, including 138,000 fatalities.²²

In June 2001, the Asian Development Bank released a report on environmental issues in East Asia. It stated that rapid population growth, urbanization, and government inaction are posing severe threats to the Asia-Pacific region’s environment. Despite a growing recognition of the need to protect the environment in East Asia, as well as isolated cases of effective policy, “environmental degradation in the region is pervasive, accelerating, and unabated.”²³ The seriousness of the situation can be seen in a 2004 BBC poll, in which East Asians listed the environment as one of their top personal concerns above war, terrorism, disease, and education.²⁴

China

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Another environmental issue attracting a lot of attention is China’s Three Gorges Dam project. This project is the world’s largest hydroelectric power plant. Begun in 1994, the dam began operation in 2008 and is expected to be fully completed by 2011. It will eventually lead to the submersion of an area nearly 400 miles long and the resettlement of up to 2 million people.²⁵ Critics argue that it is causing widespread ecological and archeological damage. But supporters say it is necessary to provide energy for China’s booming economy and to control the floods of the Yangtze River.

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