GDN-32
A UNESCO Seminar
  on Leadership

12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaysia
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

    Developing countries and international conferences certainly dominate
this decade. It must be a rare major city that is not host some time during
the year to a meeting of one or more of the alphabet soup of international
organizations. And it is a rare conference that is not in some way concerned
with the problems of those areas variously called, developing, underdeveloped,
emerging, or new states. The range of topics staggers the imagination: root
diseases, child development, soil conservation, juvenile delinquency, oriental
culture, world tensions, or economic planning.

    Early this month Singapore played host to two conferences running
simultaneously. The U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) held a
conference on Pig Production and Diseases in Developing Countries, and the
U.N.'s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) collabor-
ated with the University of Singapore to hold a seminar on Patterns of
Leadership and Authority in Modern and Traditional Societies. Singapore
is probably the one city in the world most suited to both conferences. It
combines industrious but technically underdeveloped Chinese pig farmers
with a dynamic leadership whose power is based on an acceptance by both
the very traditional and the very modern elements in the population.

    Both meetings appear to have been quite successful. I cannot speak
from direct experience on the pig conference, but friends who attended
told me it was highly stimulating. I did participate in the leadership
seminar however, and that had all the indicators of success. Limited to
two dozen participants, it was small enough to allow for a lively exchange
of views. Papers had been prepared and distributed before the seminar,
eliminating the boring process of public readings. In a high ceilinged
air-conditioned courtroom atop the university's administration building
we sat through nine sessions of more than two hours each and found (to my
amazement) that we had as much or more to say to one another at the end of
the last session as at the beginning of the first. The first sessions were
characterized by rather more polite exchanges as everyone displayed an
acute sensitivity to the sensitivities of scholars at an international
meeting. After this initial shake-down everyone seemed to feel more secure
and it was possible to be more critical; debate became sharper and the
exchanges more rapid. Most sessions had to be terminated by the rotating
chairman calling attention to the fact that we had gone overtime and lunch
or some other engagement was waiting.

    The participants made the group truly cosmopolitan. Some of the more
notable figures included political scientist Robert Scalapino from California;
sociologists Edward Shils from Chicago, Ralph Dahrendorf from Tübingen, and
K. Busia, the exiled opposition leader from Ghana; Southeast Asianist
William Skinner from Cornell; California's controversial historian of the
industrial revolution, David Landes; G.S. Sharma, an Indian authority on

constitutional law; Tokyo's Chie Nakane, our only representative of
the fair sex; Malaysia's Wang Gung-wu and the Philippine political
scientist Jose Abueva. We even had one Indonesian whose status as an
international civil servant allowed him to slip through the Batik
Curtain that separates his unhappy land from Malaysia. Another invited
Indonesian scholar was not so well situated and was not allowed leave
to be with us.

What did we talk about? What did twenty people find to say to one
another for more than twenty hours on the same topic? Any summary would be
far from adequate (the entire proceedings will probably soon be published),
but I might single out what I found to be three major issues that seemed to
attract a great deal of attention through the week-long discussions.

1. William Skinner introduced the issue of leadership in the immigrant
communities of Southeast Asia, drawing attention to what he called the
Kapitan China system. This is a common system in Southeast Asia, where
the Chinese community is largely controlled by a powerful local Chinese
"businessman", the Kapitan China. He also acts as the main link between
external native or colonial rulers and the Chinese. Especially to the
colonial rulers the Chinese were a mysterious and unmanageable group. Far
better that they be made to work out some control over themselves than that
the colonial officers be forced to apply their unworkable law and their
insufficient police force to the dark alleys of Chinatown. Found in every
country in the region the Kapitans were generally colorful men in a colorful
period. They stayed in power originally by the use of strong arm gangs and
entrepreneurial ability, holding monopolies of such lucrative trades as
opium and prostitution, and opening tin mines or in other ways taking part
in the general economic development of the area. As native or colonial rulers
brought increasing law and order the Kapitans became more respectable, but
always they were in a delicate position, because they faced two masters.
They had to protect and advance the interests of the Chinese and to hold
their confidence, and they had to satisfy the external rulers, keeping
visible disorder at a minimum and providing sufficient taxes to make the
Chinese as a community welcome. Satisfying the external rulers generally
required that the Kapitans lose some of their distinctive Chineseness.
They sent their children to Thai schools in Thailand, learned to take
whiskey and soda and to dine Victorian fashion in Malaya or became fluent
in Dutch in Indonesia, and by so doing were better able to advance the
interests of their community (and their own interests as well). Thus a
kind of paradox emerged in which the Kapitan's influence among the local
Chinese was often greater the less distinctively Chinese he was.

Many elements of the Kapitan system remain, but Wang Gung-wu noted that
other aspects of Chinese leadership have altered radically. The Kapitan was
the leader in an epoch in which only the lowest classes of Chinese emigrated
and leadership could be held by the merchant class. The more recent arrival
of the scholar bureaucrats and their autochthonous growth in the immigrant
Chinese communities put this class in a position to displace the old merchant
leaders. The Japanese war and independence have hastened this process as
some merchants lost influence because they collaborated with the Japanese
occupation forces and, far more, were tainted by the support they gave to waning
colonial masters. Even more important than this, at least in Malaysia, was
the emergence of representative government in which the Chinese were
enfranchised. Now the dilemma of the Chinese leaders is really severe.
On the one hand they must retain a distinctive Chineseness in order to be
elected by Chinese constituencies. At the same time they must make

compromises and must cooperate with the leaders of other ethnic groups in order to advance Chinese interests, and this, of course, forces them to be less distinctively Chinese.

It was also observed that many leaders in the new states are in the same delicate position between traditional and modern elements of the population. They must appeal to the isolated, traditional elements that numerically dominate the political scene. Thus the English educated Prime Minister of Singapore (Cambridge, double first) LEE Kuan Yew had to go back to learn Mandarin (then Malay and now Tamil) in order to provide acceptable leadership to the people of Singapore, and Malaysia's Tungku Abdul Rahman must maintain the image of a good noble Malay and a reasonably regular Muslim in order to be acceptable at home. Yet both leaders must also be oriented toward modernization and must themselves be modern in order to gain the crucial support of the urban commercial and bureaucratic elite.

2. The gentle K. Busia, standing out with his deep African blackness, provided a live account of one of the major problems of leadership in the new states: the inability to accept opposition and the seemingly inexorable move to oligarchy. Exiled because he led an articulate opposition in a land where the rule of law was being slowly eroded, where many of his colleagues are now in prison, he talked of the pattern of paranoia in the new leaders with no trace of bitterness. The new leaders want to be loved, to be accepted by the people, to feel that they are leaders in an effective and cohesive state. They have a tragically insatiable appetite for the constant public affirmation of the status and prestige that should go with their high offices. It is this that leads to mass rallies, providing the leader with the opportunity to bask in the glory of his own charisma. It is this that leads to decrees that all cars must come to a halt when the leader's car drives by. It is this that makes the leader remove judges or any others who oppose his often emotional demands.

I have seen another dimension of this personal insecurity in Southeast Asia. One of the major differences between Malaysia's Tungku Abdul Rahman and Indonesia's President Sukarno is the deep personal security of the Tungku and the apparently great insecurity of Sukarno. This has made it possible for the Tungku to share power, certainly one of the most important elements accounting for Malaysia's success in public investment. Sukarno has always been too concerned with being loved, too unwilling to do the unpopular to give to others the support and the power they needed to move the country economically. It has been suggested that the Tungku's security derives from his position as a prince of the royal family of Kedah, one of the old Malay states; Sukarno on the other hand is a _parvenu_. The Tungku's security in his status comes from a lifetime of popular deference to his title, made more secure by the absence of direct British rule in his home state. He grew up in an environment in which his fellow aristocrats were in direct control, where they were the district officers and the state secretaries, and where they were not constantly defined as inferior by exclusive European clubs and cliques. Sukarno rose by his own dogged skill, first as an engineering student and later by his skill at holding crowds spellbound. Though there is much to commend this kind of mobility, it also leaves its mark in personal insecurity. Sukarno has constantly refused to take a responsible stand as a _party_ leader; the Tungku emerged as and has always been a party man, accepting both the power and the responsibility that this entails.

3. Keith Buchanan of New Zealand presented an intelligent and sympathetic defense of Prince Sihanouk's Cambodian policies, which often seem only irrational to westerners.   In this Buchanan opened one of the deep issues of the seminar: to what extent is the western experience relevant for the non-western world?

Sihanouk's Royal Khmer Socialism has strong traces of a utopian rejection of western formulae. It bears the mark of the prince himself, of his ability to provide personal leadership to his people and of his attempt to give his country a distinct and non-western form of the welfare state. Similar anti-western reactions can be found in most states. Busia echoed some of these when he objected to the use of western labels – conservative, radical, liberal, socialist – to identify leaders of the new states. "You do this only to make it easier for you, to avoid thinking by the use of stereotyped phrases." The rejection is strong, pervasive, and often emotional. It is a two-sided phenomenon.

On the one hand it must be taken seriously. It is partly a wish to stay out of the great ideological battle that is the cold war, a wish to remain uncommitted in a fight that must often seem irrelevant or at best concerned only with the self-aggrandizement of major powers. In addition, it is both a search for a distinctive self-identity and a hope that higher standards of living can be achieved without what are still seen to be the horrors of early industrialization.

On the other hand, perhaps this rejection of the west is not so unique. It is, after all, not unlike the rejection of modernization that we saw in the early utopian movements in the west, in both the violence of the machine breakers and the romanticism of the Owenite rejection of profit. And these utopian movements were the predecessors of the trades unions, cooperatives and socialist parties that have brought about a greater equalization of wealth in the industrial state. However, it was not until these utopian movements accepted the industrial (capitalist) system that they were able to work with it for the rewards it could give. From this view one could argue that the leaders of the new states will have to accept the modern industrial state if they hope to gain higher living standards for their people. Even more, like the past utopians, they will ultimately have little choice; they will accept the industrial system and in the process will reject much of their own traditional values. This is, of course, precisely the kind of proposition that brings forth reactions from the new leaders.

The search for benign and effective leadership of societies in the throes of transition to modernity is a long and difficult search. It is doubtful that the air-conditioned discussions of a handful of observers could do much to further the search. Still this is part of the normal intellectual introspective exercise of an open society, and I think there is reason to believe that in the long run it will help us better to understand and to obtain the kind of leadership we want.

Sincerely,

Gayl D. Ness