Human Rights and Economic Development

During the 25 years of Singapore’s independence, two issues have dominated political dialogue in the post-war world. The first concerns the problems of economic development and the second, the protection of human rights. In 1860 J.S. Mill had said, “The deepest interest of mankind is to satisfy at any rate a minimum number of man’s normal desires after their basic needs are satisfied say for self expression, happiness, freedom and justice”. Today, in assessing the quality of life, debate is conducted in the languages of human rights and economic growth.

**Historical Context**

The interest in human rights arose from the revulsion felt when the full extent of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany on not only other nationals but also its citizens was discovered. The concentration camps at Dachau, Auschwitz and elsewhere remain grim symbols of the horror. For jurists there was a painful realisation that a system of positive law could be used to legitimize grossly immoral acts of the State — many of these atrocities having been committed in accordance with legally enacted Nazi legislation. It was also plain that the international law doctrine of national sovereignty which precluded other nations from criticising about, and intervening in, the treatment of people under sovereign domestic law, could be belligerently abused.

The end of the War also marked the beginning of de-colonization and the dismantling of several European empires. In 1945, the United Nations was formed with 51 member states. Today there are 158 members. In September, our ASEAN neighbour, Brunei will become the 159th member state. The majority are poor countries. The ‘Group of 77’ a metaphor for countries with no fully developed economies has now expanded to 120 members.

In all these countries the first flush of independence has been tempered by the sobering reality of under-development and the host of problems that accompany it. Without exception each newly independent state has been confronted with acute difficulties in achieving economic growth. Inflows of international aid are often dissipated through incompetence and outflows of bribes. Resources cannot be harnessed as factional interests compete to undermine the polity. The rhetoric of nationalism that prised sovereignty from the colonial masters has proved to be a poor substitute for effective government. The rhetoric has instead brought about unrealistic expectations that are readily exploited by demagogues, undermining the fragile democracy of newly independent States. For these countries which are absorbed in the daily struggle for a basic standard of living and stability, its political
and social objectives naturally focus exclusively on economic development.

Yet the debate about human rights and economic development at international forums is conducted in a way which naively assumes that the experiences in Western liberal democracies of two centuries of constitutional struggle, economic development and political strife can be condensed within three decades of independence. In assessing the achievements of the Third World countries, there is little regard for each country’s stage of development. The freedom and wealth of the West can be traced through at least two centuries of industrial development and constitutional struggles not to mention generous inflows of resources from the colonies. Slavery survived in America in spite of the Bill of Rights and a bitter Civil War. The blatantly racist “equal but separate” doctrine enunciated in the famous American constitutional case of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) persisted for another fifty years before it was over-ruled in Brown v. Board of Education in 1953. Women got their vote only in the 1920s. The formulation of fundamental rights was accompanied by strife and revolution. Nevertheless, these experiences provided a resilience that comes with development over time. This more often than not is the reason for the fragile democracy in new States.

Singapore

Twenty five years is a very short period in history but this seems an appropriate occasion to reflect on these two issues of human rights and economic development which have so drastically affected the style of diplomacy and the political morality of our time. With a clearer understanding, we can perhaps raise the level of the debate.

The economic success of Singapore’s development policies have been repeated many times and I am sure you will hear and be reminded of the statistics at many other dinners before the year is out. I will therefore not recite them for your benefit! Singapore is probably one country where the results have exceeded all expectations.

In many countries, lack of capital and educated manpower, inadequate public institutions, poor discipline and backward technology have hampered economic growth. There are additional constraints peculiar to Singapore — the size of the country, the lack of natural resources and an overwhelming dependence on other economies. At the same time, economic success has meant having to deal with rapid social transformation. There is the constant need to provide a social and educational infrastructure that will cope with an economy that regularly reaches higher levels of sophistication. As Singapore remains constantly vulnerable to changes in the world economy over which we have little influence, it is essential that we have the capacity to respond quickly by devising policy, organisation, modifying institutions and upgrading the talent of our people. This invariably creates a strain on society as values have to be reconciled with the constantly changing social arrangements.

The need to respond effectively involves tremendous transitional costs. One cannot afford to have as much debate or discussion as one would like. One cannot afford to give people as much choice as they would like because if 2,000 engineers are required, we must divert 2,000 students who might prefer to be doctors or historians. Our smallness also makes our economy more fragile although this tends to be obscured by our success. Growth takes place step by step but economic decline in particular for small countries, is a spiral which once started is difficult to check. To encourage investments, there must be confidence. But expectations, as Keynes realised, is an unruly beast, a loss of confidence would be a cumulative disaster. Investments flow into Singapore because we enjoy the confidence of others. If we lose this advantage, we will lose the cause of nationhood.

Before I move on to the protection of human rights, a point has to be made about the nature of development policies. In economic jargon, economic development is a macroeconomic concept, that is to say, it works on an aggregate basis. It is essentially utilitarian in approach and seeks to maximise opportunities and rewards for the greatest number of people. It is not primarily concerned with how particular individuals will fare, it more or less assumes that if the economy expands, there will be something for everyone.

Twentieth Century Human Rights

Twentieth Century Human Rights is to an extent a more comprehensive equivalent to the Eighteenth Century ‘Rights of Man’. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who promoted the use of the expression in the 1940s when she apparently discovered that rights of men were not understood in some countries to include the rights of women!

Human rights are often defined tautologically as rights which all persons equally have insofar as they are human. They represent reasonable demands by an individual upon the rest of humanity. As a political conception, they are natural rights which are rationally justified demands for protection from interference by other members of society. Legally, human rights or fundamental rights represent restrictions on sovereignty for the benefit of the individual.
In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, a landmark, human rights are classified as a bundle of economic, social and cultural, civil and political rights. These are no longer abstract entities. Over the forty years since the War, in many countries these abstract rights have been translated into positive legal rights whereby individuals can make various claims upon the state. The law has become the chief means of protecting human rights. These rights are secured mainly by national constitutions, legislation and international conventions. Thus what once served merely as political rhetoric and exhortations have been translated into legal principles giving individuals actionable rights that are articulated, specified and protected by the courts. As such rights are often stated in very broad terms which often seem vague to the layman, judicial articulation is necessary to protect individual rights.

**Constitutional Guarantees**

Historically there have been many attempts to protect fundamental rights. The first may well have been the Magna Carta given by King John in 1215 to placate the barons. Chapter IX of the Magna Carta enumerates the liberties of free men and in fact bears a striking resemblance to two other great charters of Human Rights protection — the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Declaration des droits de L’homme 1789. Since then, the device of constitutional guarantee has become the chief means in the domestic laws of various countries to protect human rights.

A proliferation of Constitutions accompanied the creation of independent nations. Most Commonwealth countries have constitutions that follow the Westminster model which articulate the separation of powers, the Rule of law and fundamental rights. Its effectiveness has prompted two distinguished British judges, Lord Hailsham and Lord Scarman to advocate the enactment of a Bill of Rights in Britain which, unique among the Western liberal democracies, rely on an unwritten Constitution.

The protection of fundamental rights is secured by a formula common to most Constitutions and that is to make all legislation inconsistent with the Constitution void. In Singapore this is set out in Article 4 of our Constitution. This is in direct response to the possibility that laws which though formally enacted, display such a fundamental disregard for basic moral integrity that they should not be regarded as laws. In one case, Oppenheimer v. Catermole (1976) AC 249, the House of Lords refused to recognise a Nazi Law that deprived German Jews living abroad of their nationality and confiscated their property. They took the view that the law was “so grave an infringement of human rights that the courts of this country ought to refuse to recognise it as law at all”.

In two recent appeals from Commonwealth countries, ([Ong Ah Chuan v. PP (1981) A.C. 648 and Minister of Home Affairs v Fisher (1980) AC 3 19]) the Privy Council has also set out guidelines in the interpretation of Constitutions of the Westminster model. They have stressed the need to ensure that the interpretations are consistent with fundamental principles of natural justice inherent to the common law and principles of legality common to all democracies. All these recent judicial pronouncements accept that there must be a “higher law” than positive law. The notion was first articulated by Chief Justice Coke in Dr Bonham’s case (1609) where he said:-

“... in many cases the common law will control Acts of Parliament and sometimes adjudge them to be utterly void: for when an Act of Parliament is against common right and reason, or repugnant, or impossible to be performed, the common law will control it, and adjudge such Acts to be void . . .”

**International Law of Human Rights**

Notwithstanding the use of Constitutions to protect a range of fundamental rights, the most radical development has been the formulation of a catalogue of human rights which could be incorporated into binding international law and the emergence of the International Law of Human Rights.

Before the War, there had been various ad-hoc attempts to create international human rights instruments, for example, the Slavery Convention of 1926 forbade member states from trading in slaves and the Geneva Convention sought to eliminate the sufferings caused by wars and to regulate the treatment of prisoners. The International Labour Organisation was also established in 1919 to protect industrial workers from exploitation and to improve their working conditions. But the establishment of a coherent set of rights is a post-war development.

The impetus was provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Since then, there have been a whole host of multilateral treaties. The UDHR is merely a declaration and not a treaty which creates binding rights. The rights enunciated in the UDHR are protected by international law through two covenants: the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, 1966 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, both of which entered into force in 1976. Following and similar to the Universal Declaration came the first comprehensive international human rights instrument, the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom 1950 commonly known as the European
The emergence of the international law of human rights is another response to experiences of the war. Until then how a sovereign state treated her own citizens was in international law, a matter exclusively for its sovereign determination and beyond the scope of legitimate criticism by other states. Today that is no longer the case. Such matters are now the subject of legitimate concern of all mankind and capable of objective assessment and judgment by reference to common standards of internationally agreed and legally binding rules.

In its most radical form, an individual has remedies against his country which are personally enforceable by him in an international forum. This is the effect of the European Convention which established two institutions, the European Commission of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. Individuals who claim to be victims of the violation of rights provided by the Convention by his country may address a petition to the Commission if that country is a contracting state that recognises the competence of the Commission. Most of the countries have done so. The Commission will investigate the matter and seek a friendly settlement. If that fails, the Commission prepares a report for the Committee of Ministers or exercise its right to bring the country to the European Court. This is not just an elaborate bureaucracy which accords no substantive rights. There have been a substantial number of petitions from the United Kingdom ranging from convicted prisoners like Golder to institutions like The Times who have managed to obtain rights denied them in the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, courts apply a rule of statutory interpretation where it is presumed that legislatures do not intend to derogate from rules of international law and that unless the language is clearly to the contrary, national legislation should be construed so as to be consistent with a State’s obligation arising from international treaties.

Two of Britain’s greatest judges, Lord Reid and Lord Denning have looked to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights in construing British legislation. In *AG v. BBC* (1980) 3 W.L.R. 109 Lord Fraser and Lord Scarman both said that the European Convention of Human Rights though not part of English law, the United Kingdom and its courts, should have regard to the provisions of the Convention and to the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights where domestic law is not firmly settled or if the issue should ultimately be a question of legal policy.

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Let us now look at the catalogue of rights in the Universal Declaration which with few exceptions represent the set of rights subscribed to by all democracies. Discussions of human rights tend to emphasise only civil and political rights. Indeed that is the popular conception of Human Rights. But the Universal Declaration also prescribe a set of economic, social and cultural rights. Even Amnesty International accepts this formulation in principle e.g., Clause 1(b) of the Amnesty International Trust defines human rights as meaning “the rights laid down by and contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948”.

The rights and freedoms guaranteed are classified in the following ways: physical integrity, that is to say, the right to life, the right to liberty and security, the right to remain free from arbitrary arrest and detention, inhuman and cruel treatment, the right of asylum and the right of freedom of movement. There are also rights to a fair trial, equality before the law, protection from retrospective penal laws, rights to privacy, freedom of thought, self-expression, conscience, religion, democratic government, nationality, self-determination and equality. These are commonly characterised as civil and political rights. The economic and social rights are a right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health and family, the right to work, the right to decent conditions of work, rest and leisure, freedom from slavery, social security, the right to education, the right to property, the right to form associations and the right to participate in cultural life. These are not absolute rights.

Articles 29 and 30 of the Universal Declaration give explicit recognition to the necessity of reconciling the exercise of any particular human right with all other human rights and the aggregate common interest.

International conventions have also spawned several international organisations such as the UN Human Rights Committee, the European Commission of Human Rights, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the UN Economic and Social Council, the UN Secretariat’s Division of Human Rights, UNESCO and the UN High Commission for Refugees.
Domestic Legislation

In addition to the human rights that are legally en- forceable rights protected by Constitutions and by inter- national law, there are pieces of municipal legislation which specifically protects certain rights. For example, the right to privacy is protected by making telephone tapping illegal except where there is a threat to national security and a need to prevent the commission of dangerous crimes. In many states, legislation provides for specific social and economic rights, for example, the Central Provident Fund Board and Housing and Development Board Acts.

Welfare states provide even more comprehensive legislation. The welfare state represents in legal terms the incorporation into the law various social and economic rights. A wide range of benefits in law is made available to the citizens as of right by the State. At the same time it enhances the power of the bureaucrat since the benefits thus provided are inadvertently administered by government departments. This in turn has led to the creation of a body of administrative law which allows individuals to go to court to check the unreasonable use of power by the government departments.

In England the list of welfare benefits covers more than 40 different sorts of benefits covering every incident in the human life span from cradle to grave — child benefits, special allowance for children of divorced women, sickness benefit, mobility allowance, death grants and so on. Every Briton is in the words of Lord Scarman, “to be born in comfort, to die in dignity and to be supported at all stations in between as a matter of rights”. However, claims are effective only if there are resources upon which claims can be made. There is no point suing a bankrupt for damages. Creation of the welfare state was accompanied by the optimistic belief that economic growth would be readily achieved. As experience has shown one cannot legislate for economic growth. It depends on economic policies and individual commitment.

Similarly, Constitutions or Bills of Rights are not automatic guarantees of liberty. Their effectiveness depends on the integrity of the institutions which apply them and ultimately on the determination of the people to preserve and enforce their rights. The Soviet Constitution for example has a list of rights longer than that of the American Declaration but no one for one moment could suggest that the Russians have more rights. Many poor developing countries also have constitutions to match grandiose economic projects, ultimately mere symbols that do little to improve the human condition of their citizens.

The use of law to protect human rights has meant that an increasing number of issues have been left to be determined by the courts who have to balance public action with private interests. Human rights insofar as they express moral ideals represent a source of law in cases which invariably involve questions of politics and morality. To the individual, human rights represent a means of restricting administrators who may be overzealous in the quest for efficiency.

So far I have discussed the historical background to the emergence of human rights, the methods by which these rights are protected and the appeal it has for individuals who are confronted with a faceless bureaucracy. It does not, however, explain the inherent tension between the protection of human rights and economic development. To do so, one has to delve into the intellectual history of human rights. Human rights is grounded on a conception of natural rights. Development policies are generally utilitarian in approach. The tension in fact represents an unresolved philosophical debate between utility and rights and it remains to be seen which concept expresses more adequately the essence of political morality. For a long time, it was widely believed and held that government must be based on some form of utilitarianism but in the last twenty years academic discourse has concentrated on examining and explaining various theories of individual rights of which human rights is the popular conception.

Natural Law and Natural Rights

There is now a resurgence of the interest in natural law tradition and a disenchantment with utilitarianism and positivistic theories of analysis, theories that had dominated much of political and moral philosophy. These philosophers had concentrated on the formal aspects of rights and had little to contribute to the substantive nature of rights. There was little attempt to discover the core of fundamental principles which are common to every civilised society. There were also weaknesses in utilitarianism which ignored the moral separateness of persons.

Natural law has appeared in a series of historical forms. In Roman law, it was equated with ius gentium i.e., the common core of rules which all communities observe. With the spread of Christianity, natural law was expressed as and equated with divine law, partly revealed and partly ascertainable by reason. Secularisation did not lead to the demise of natural law theories. Grotius declared that even if there was no god, there would still be natural law. Although there was no god to command, the rational element shared by mankind allowed man to construct a system of natural law which was universally valid. Law as defined was not a expression of authority and will but of reason or “common right and reason” as Coke will have it.
With Locke, natural law was linked with the concept of natural rights through the schematic device of the social contract i.e., the notion of an agreement between individuals which is the basis of civil society. This contract is not an anthropological or historical fact which can be verified empirically. Its starting point is the individual and seeks to explain the relationship between the individual and the State in terms of contract. Locke’s theory states that rights exist in the state of nature but are necessarily insecure. To protect them, the individual consent to cede to the state authority and conferring legislative power on the state for the purposes of government. The social contract had as its intent the protection of natural rights by establishing justice and promoting general welfare. If the contract was violated the people may assume the power they gave up.

However, natural rights lacked definiteness and was inefficient because it could not provide a clear basis for decision. Furthermore, with greater secularisation came moral diversification and ethical relativism. It was difficult to set down a common core of principles. Its most vehement enemy, Bentham, denied that there were natural rights and he ridiculed the concept in this manner:

“Rights, is the child of law; from real law come real rights; but from imaginary laws, from ‘law of nature’; come imaginary rights . . . Natural rights is simple nonsense . . . rhetorical nonsense, nonsense upon stilts.”

Bentham was an articulate critic and at the same time advocated with great effectiveness the principles of utilitarianism. He derided the natural rights theories underlying the French Declaration of 1789 and the American Declaration of Independence 1776 which involved, in a few brief sentences, the famous doctrine that all men are created equal and possessed natural inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Government was justified insofar as they used their powers derived from the consent of the governed to secure these natural rights. Three months before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Bentham had in his first book “A Fragment on Government” formulated his famous principles of utilitarianism the notion that government and the limits of government were to be justified by reference not to individual rights but also the “greatest happiness of the greatest number”.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century right up to the Second World War, theories of the rights of man were discredited in legal and philosophical circles. When in 1914, the great jurist, Wesley Hohfeld directed his students at Yale Law School to analyse the word ‘right’, it made him so unpopular that his pupils even petitioned for his removal from his professorship!

Utility vs Rights

The unresolved intellectual debate of utility versus rights underscores the conflict between those who advocate economic growth and economic efficiency which are policies based on utilitarian principles and those who rely on theories of natural rights to enlarge the protection of civil and political rights. Apart from the different philosophical positions of development and rights advocates, they are invariably influenced by personal experiences. Bentham for instance feared the possible anarchical consequences of a political philosophy based on natural rights. This was vividly brought out by the contemporary horrors and excesses of the Jacobin Terror in France. His advocacy of utilitarianism was not only an intellectual belief but also a response to events of his time and a personal abhorrence of anarchy. Many today similarly mistrust the sentiments of those who demand free and inalienable rights.

Likewise, there are those who are interested in human rights because of clear evidence that many societies proclaim laws for the purposes of oppressing its own people. Hefbert Hart the reknowned legal positivist and former Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford University has for example observed that:

“... during the last half century man’s inhumanity to man has been such that the most basic elementary freedoms and protections have been denied to innumerable men and women guilty, if of anything, only of claiming such freedoms and protections for themselves and others, and sometimes these have been denied to them on the specious pretence that this denial is demanded by the general welfare of a society. So the protection of a doctrine of basic human rights limiting what a state may do to its citizens seems to be precisely what the political problems of our own age most urgently require, or at any rate they require this more urgently than a call to maximise general utility.”

Which Rights

However a realistic conception of human rights that can play a useful role in our political dialogue must take into account its many weaknesses. Its place in the history of Western civilization at a time when almost all the countries have fully developed mature economies has skewed the dialogue in terms of civil and political rights. In Asia and Africa where the economic and demographic conditions are entirely different, the need to strive for economic development has influenced the interpretation of human rights. In these countries where the problems of poverty, unemployment, tribal conflicts persists, the implementation of development plans
might legitimately occasion restrictions in the exercise of certain civil liberties.

The link between human rights and development in the Third World was examined in two United Nations Seminars, in Kabul, 1964 and at the UNESCO ‘Round Table’ conference in Oxford in 1965. Discussions focused on the fact that failure to achieve social and economic rights often precluded enduring respect for other human rights. Secondly, it was clear that the Universal Declaration for Human Rights at least up to Article 21 reflected the individualistic value system which grew out of Western political philosophy and the rise of capitalism in Europe.

It was also evident that the full implementation of the civil and political rights requires a society which has yet to emerge, even in the West. In other parts of the world, social and cultural norms such as the existence of rigid social hierarchies, the pre-eminence of obligations to the family and to the community represent an approach that conflicts with political arrangement conceived by the human rights ideals. This weakens the effectiveness of any rights-based theory as it fails to gain universal acceptance as a standard of assessment. In its crudest form, it creates resentment and provokes charges of neo-Colonialism.

Furthermore, it is unclear whether there is an a priori conception of which rights should assume priority given the stage of development. Common sense however suggests that one must take care of basic material needs. In 1977, there were still 1.2 billion people in the world who do not have access to safe drinking water. Another 700 million are seriously undernourished. 550 million were illiterate and another 250 million did not have adequate shelter in urban areas alone. Hundreds of millions were jobless. Economic development policies represent means of securing the economic and social component of human rights. In this sense economic development does not conflict with the protection of human rights. There is however the question of priority of basic rights to food, home, jobs and personal safety. Basic rights are a priori requisites to the enjoyment of all other rights and must thereafter assume priority over other rights which may have to be sacrificed to secure basic rights.

The reliance on the legal system to protect economic and social rights is also open to criticism. This arises from the methodology of the legal process which is designed to restrain wrong-doing and to compensate those wronged in other words, negative rights. It is generally inadequate as a means of promoting good acts. As civil and political rights are conceived as negative rights that limit public acts, they are well-served by law as judges decide whether individuals have been wronged by government agencies. No court, however, has the competence to devise policies which ensure economic growth that satisfy the economic and social rights of a citizen.

The popular method of protecting human rights by judicial remedies is also largely Western in conception. In societies which are culturally inhibited about taking formal legal action, where avoidance of conflicts in social relations is important, mediation may serve as a better means of securing justice. In Japan for example, the Civil Liberties Bureau of the Ministry of Justice established in 1984 is empowered to take action with regard to various human rights infringement by organisations, individuals and public officials. Social conflicts are reconciled by Civil Liberties Commissioners with regard to both individual dignity and communal harmony.

It is only in recent years that moral and political philosophers have directed their efforts at elucidating the theoretical basis of the natural rights asserted by the human rights movement. The implications of Rawls’ ‘A Theory of Justice’ (1971) and Dworkin’s ‘Taking Rights Seriously’ are still being worked out, as witnessed by the volume of academic literature, books, articles and graduate thesis and dissertations. Nevertheless, in many countries, the doctrine of human rights has, at least, temporarily replaced the doctrines of utilitarianism as the prime philosophical inspiration of political and social reform. Like the nineteenth century utilitarians, they are motivated by the belief that sound and properly understood theory of rights would change the practices of governments for human good.

The protection of Human Rights and the problems of economic development are therefore key issues which bring into play fundamental concepts of democracy, sovereignty, morality and legality. Questions of human rights invariably raise the problems as to how the conflict between individual, private interests and the public interest or general welfare, should be resolved. What then should be done when there is a conflict in the prescription for growth and the enjoyment of rights? Governments are obliged to devise policies to encourage growth. The means of implementing such policy may however affect the civil and political rights of individuals. There is no easy formula for resolving such a dispute.

Social conflicts arise when people exercise their fundamental rights without regard to others. The problem is compounded by a glaring omission in human rights doctrines. There is no single, comprehensive theory which sets out the relation of the individual to society. This is an area of human rights doctrine to which we can further explore and contribute. We can afford the lux-
ury of thought and reflection as long as there exists a harmony of integrity, commitment, ability and wisdom in our people and leadership. This confluence of factors may well in reality turn out to be the most effective safeguard of our civil, political, economic and social rights—that bundle of rights which are characterised as human rights.

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