

Ethics in action workshop

Religious Groups for Human Rights desk, Asian Human Rights Commission



The Religious Groups for Human Rights, a programme of the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), held a workshop in Hong Kong from 9-14 December 2007, which concentrated on bringing ethics into action. Eighteen participants from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand attended, representing the faiths of Buddhism, Islam

and Christianity. The participants discussed grave situations of instability, insecurity, and repression that exist in their countries. While participating in discussions, they also joined religious services.

The major theme of the discussion was how to bring basic moral and ethical principles into actual practice. Participants realized that despite much talk of morality in their countries, there are in fact serious forms of abuse of power within the policing, prosecution and judicial systems, which make up the justice administration mechanisms.

The ultimate question is how individual morality can be sustained when the justice administration system does not provide opportunities for people to settle their disputes in a peaceful and rational manner. Many civilian disputes lead to extraordinary violence and crime as society's normal dispute settlement mechanisms have been undermined. When people find that the usual complaint mechanisms are no longer working, there is a tendency to settle problems through violence and crime.

As a result, new forms of insecurity have developed in societies. Kidnapping for ransom for instance, has become a very common phenomenon. This affects all classes of people, particularly women and children. People feel that law enforcement agencies are unable to deal with this problem; in fact, they suspect certain sections of law enforcement agencies of cooperating with those engaging in organized abductions. This is particularly the case in remote areas of many countries, where women are trafficked by organized groups.

The police in many countries are not equipped to deal with the increase in criminal activity seen in many societies, because their criminal investigation capacity is limited. While social circumstances have rapidly changed, police mentality remains at a backward stage. They are unable to cope with sophisticated populations and modern technology. The police often resort to torture to solve crimes; torture remains the foremost method of criminal investigation in many Asian countries. Police also tend to arrest innocent individuals from poor communities as substitute criminals. If these persons are not given civil society support, they may languish in jail for many years for crimes they have not committed. It is thus the poor and marginalized sections of society who bear the brunt of the problems created by bad policing systems.

Those individuals and groups concerned with moral issues therefore cannot ignore the problem of policing in their countries. The police force is the most direct state institution that all citizens come in contact with and its presence is spread into even the remotest village areas. Its own rational behavior would significantly influence the rest of the population. Its terrorizing behavior on the other hand, will terrorize the population and set a negative example.

The nature of policing can change through civilian involvement in monitoring and critiquing police activities. In this way, while the community can help the police to function decently, the police—by their good behavior—can contribute to the development of a society that upholds moral values. Part of the work of those concerned with religion must include enabling citizens to discharge their civic duties towards the community and the state. Mere talk of general moral principles will not suffice; it is necessary to understand their practical implications. Given the circumstances in their countries today, it is important for persons representing different religions to understand the actual justice administration mechanisms in their countries. They must articulate the problems faced by ordinary people in accessing these mechanisms, and create a social dialogue. Only through such dialogue and debate can reform be initiated.

In many Asian countries, democracy is often talked about only as the parliament and elections. The result of overlooking the system of justice administration is that the electoral process becomes so corrupt that democracy is defeated even with multiple elections. A strong justice administration system is vital for a viable democracy. This issue needs to be discussed much more effectively in these countries, and made part of the mainstream political discourse.

Religious groups can play a significant role in building viable democratic principles and preventing the development of corrupt political systems. At the same time, the use of religion in a partisan way will negatively affect democracy and can lead to divisions in society. To truly serve the well being of individuals, religious thought and practice must be rooted in understanding the issues of justice administration. If popular discourse on moral and ethical principles is combined with the discourse on justice administration issues, religious groups would greatly contribute to their society's emergence from grave and complex problems.

