Panel discusses human rights in Asia

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The Asian Studies Concentration and the Center for Interdisciplinary and Special Studies sponsored a Human Rights Panel that was held on Feb. 26. The speakers included three notable and accomplished speakers who discussed problems involving human rights violations in Asia, especially in terms of religious freedom under the pressures that face a post-Sept. 11 world.

Christiano Wibisono represented the Indonesian perspective on the panel and addressed not only Indonesia's history as far as human rights are concerned, but also focused on the issues that are turning an Islamic majority against the state. Wibisono at one time was assistant to Indonesian Vice President H. Adam Malik, and came to play a large part in exposing the corruption of the Soeharto regime, which had ruled Indonesia from the 1960s until 1998. Wibisono also founded the Indonesian Business Data Center. He began by giving the audience a brief view of Indonesian history and the construction of its constitution, which eventually declared Indonesia a secular nation despite some protest from the adherents to Islam, the faith practiced by 90 per cent of the population. Wibisono went on to describe the decades of protests and rebellions against the new government, actions that ended what was essentially military control. Wibisono discussed Indonesia and its Muslim population in terms of the events of Sept. 11, believing that the majority of Muslims will not speak out against Osama bin Laden out of fear. Wibisono believes that Islam has been “hijacked by the extremist,” and that moderates don’t dare to speak out. He mentioned that, despite clashing ideologies, President Bush did invite Indonesian President Megawati to Washington D.C. to warn that the war against terrorism was not a war against Islam. However, with a broader look about human rights in general, Wibisono reminded his audience that “every day is 9/11 in other parts of the world.”

John C. B. Webster was the second speaker, and he represented India’s treatment of human rights issues, especially in relation to the condition of converts and Untouchables, or “dalits,” in modern India. Webster, among other accomplishments, is a member of the Worldwide Ministries. In particular, a project that Webster has been working on involves the fact that although dalits were discriminated against, the true persecution in India was against the dalits who had converted to Christianity. Despite the constitution’s declaration of the freedom of religion, dalits who converted to Christianity had their economic aid taken away. Eventually, this issue was taken to India’s Supreme Court, where this practice of removing the economic welfare given to most dalits from those who had converted to Christianity was upheld. The argument was that since dalits were peculiar to the Hindu religion, those who had converted were not eligible for such privileges. Therefore, the economic incentive in addition to the rising prejudice and violent atrocities has compelled many Christian dalits to convert back to Hindu. Webster describes the action against dalit Christians as “pent-up righteous wrath.” Webster argues that human rights activists must broaden their understanding of what violates human rights. While India’s constitution may appear legal and sound to many, the principles of the constitution are not upheld. Also, Webster advocates for people to understand the importance of religious freedom. Therefore, India’s constitution legally approves of many of the ideologies that Westerners embrace.

However, in practice and in civil society discrimination against dalits has increased, especially in recent years with the takeover of control in the Congress by the Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP), India’s Hindu Nationalist Party. The point Webster focused on was that although dalits were discriminated against, the true persecution in India was against the dalits who are Christian.

Webster discussed the hierarchical nature of India’s traditional caste system, which is a major part of the Hindu religious practice. The lowest of the castes are the “Untouchables,” or “dalits.” While the dalits were discriminated against for much of India’s history, modern times have required that the extent of their mistreatment and degradation in the ranks of society be eased. Therefore, India’s constitution directly prohibits the enforcement of “Untouchability,” and even constructed a sort of affirmative action program to help bring dalits into the modern workplace and allow them economic advantages. Webster also emphasized the fact that India’s constitution upholds the democratic notion of freedom of religion. Therefore, India’s constitution legally approves of many of the ideologies that Westerners embrace.

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