

API SPEECH

At Regional Workshop in Thailand in November 2011

By Tatsuya Tanami

First I would like to thank our hosts for their gracious hospitality and for all their hard work to make this gathering a success.

We are here to congratulate the 10th batch of API fellows on completing your fellowship tenure, and to welcome you into the API Community. Your fellowship is over but your membership of the API Community begins here. We hope it will last a lifetime.

Your fellowship period, from 2010 to 2011, has coincided with a truly momentous period for the world.

There has been the revolutionary wave of protests known as the “Arab spring”. According to my Middle Eastern friends, “Arab spring” is a romantic concept of Westerners unfamiliar with the Arabian climate. There is no “spring” in Arab world, only “sand storms.” My friends tell me that the “Arab reawakening” is the proper description.

Beginning with a citizens’ uprising in Tunisia last December, authoritarian rule in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East is crumbling and democracy is beginning to take root. After years of Western domination and the rule of dictators, a new era has begun. However, a citizens’ movement without a clear leader has to overcome many challenges and we must watch

developments closely. Nevertheless, this clearly marks the first step in a major transformation.

Turning now to Asia, a massive earthquake and tsunami struck Japan's northeast Tohoku region on March 11. This was a disaster on a historic scale. Over 20,000 people were killed or remain missing. Many who barely survived have no homes to return to. They are forced to live in temporary housing in difficult circumstances.

This disaster also triggered a crisis at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant. This is now coming under control, but many questions remain regarding radiation and health risks. And the Japanese people have some big decisions to take regarding the future direction of energy policy.

Speaking of the Japanese people, we do not have words enough to say thank you for all the encouragement and support we have received in the wake of this disaster. From all over the world, from rich and poor alike, have come messages of sympathy and offers of assistance. The Thai people, and the API Community, have also been extremely generous.

This experience has taught us that we are not alone, that people of the world live in close proximity to one another, and that our lives are interdependent. It has also taught us the importance of increasing international exchanges and of deepening mutual understanding. So, from the bottom of my heart, I offer a very sincere thank you.

Many other developments have been taking place in Asia. There is no time to list them all, but they include the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar and signs that Myanmar's new administration is inching toward democracy. There are still many issues to be resolved, however, including the release of political prisoners, so we need to watch the situation in Myanmar closely.

Here in Thailand, the country has been hit by massive flooding, posing a major challenge for the new prime minister soon after she took office. The flood damage has affected many companies, including Japanese companies, and disrupted the production and supply of parts and automobiles. This has impacted the whole of Asia and world markets. But it reminds us how central Thailand is to the supply chain, and it shows us just how closely interlinked are cross-border business and production activities.

The world is changing. Our institutions and systems are changing. We are becoming more interdependent. We are witnessing the beginnings of a global society where people support each other.

But not all change is positive. Because of globalization, economic downturn affects every region and country. The gap between rich and poor is widening. There are growing numbers of poor people. Unemployment among the young is worsening. Europe faces a debt crisis and the way ahead is unclear. The consequences for the world economy are potentially very serious.

Here in Asia, there are concerns about the environment, migration and other emerging problems that go beyond borders. Asian nations have to deal with many issues, and finding solutions will be difficult.

In May last year, we held an event to mark the 10th anniversary of the API program. We asked fellows what they felt were the major challenges facing the region. We received many replies. Top of list were poverty and inequality. This was followed by: the environment and climate change; violence and the suppression of civil liberties; threats to cultural diversity; management of resources; and underdevelopment and unemployment.

A lot of these are problems that politics and governments alone cannot solve.

The API program was started in 2000 for people who are actively seeking solutions to problems – problems directly affecting communities, regions, countries and Asia as a whole. We called these people public intellectuals.

There were two objectives.

The first was to get outstanding public intellectuals to research issues of common concern among Asian neighbors and to provide individuals with opportunities to implement their projects.

The second was to get like-minded leaders who shared the goal of bettering society to form into a group and act collectively – and become a community that makes its collective voice heard.

Today, over 300 API fellows belong to this community, and it is reaching critical mass.

A debate is now under way on the role of the API community after its first decade. What collective, collaborative and proactive activities are taking

place among the fellows? What linkages are there with networks beyond the API Community? How can the advocacy, the appeals and the solutions coming from the API Community be strengthened?

You, the 10th batch of API fellows, are now joining this unique community of public intellectuals. You are joining this debate. We have high hopes for your future activities. You are working for the public good, and we expect you will contribute to the public good.

I urge you not to be armchair intellectuals, shut away in your research labs or in your studies. Please take yourselves into the community. Meet with the people who are affected by the issues. Listen to them. Get to the essence of things. Be active public intellectuals.

The question put to you is: “How do we make Asian societies places where human beings can enjoy safe, stable and peaceful lives? The times are difficult and the issues are complex. But with your wisdom, knowledge, experience, and your solidarity and collaboration with other members in the API community it will be possible for you to find solutions that may lead us to a better world for us all.

In the API Declaration drawn up by the API's founding father in 2000, it is written: By promoting mutual understanding and shared learning among Asian public intellectuals, the API Program aims to contribute to the growth of public spaces where effective responses to regional needs can be generated.

I hope all you API fellows will go forth with such dreams in mind.

Welcome all to the API Regional Workshop and congratulations to the 10th batch of API fellows on the successful completion of your tenure.

Thank you, and good luck!