

## Leaders with Many Traits but a Singular Purpose: Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad

Ishtiaq Hossain<sup>1</sup>  
International Islamic University Malaysia

**Tom Plate, *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew: Citizen Singapore: How to Build A Nation*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011. 211 pp. ISBN 978-981-261-676-0.**

**Tom Plate, *Doctor M: Operation Malaysia: Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011. 243 pp. ISBN 978-981-4276-63-4.**

“Leadership” is multi-disciplinary concept. It has been studied from the perspectives of Political Science, Public Administration, International Relations, Political Psychology and other related disciplines and sub-disciplines. However, despite attempts to come up with a universal definition, the concept still remains elusive (Elgie). A huge step towards understanding it was taken in 1978 with the publication of James Burns’ book *Leadership*. In it, Burns explained: “If we know all too much about leaders, we know far too little about leadership. We fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age and hence we cannot agree even on the standards by which to measure, recruit or reject it” (2). In order to remedy the situation, Burns “re-evaluated the concept of leadership by describing various leaders, e.g., Woodrow Wilson, Mao Ze Dong, V.I. Lenin, Adolf Hitler, not in order to ‘solve’ leadership problems or necessarily to predict what kind of a leader a person might become, but to raise questions inherent in the complexity of leadership processes” (25). Burns provided a general definition of leadership when he wrote that it is a mixture of motives and purposes, mobilisation, and competition and conflict; it involves institutions, politics and psychology, and seeks to arouse, engage and satisfy followers (Elgie).

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<sup>1</sup> Ishtiaq Hossain is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. Prior to joining IIUM, he was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. He was also a Visiting Professor at George Washington University, USA and Waikato University, New Zealand. One of his most recent publications is “The Muslim *Ummah*, International Organisations and Human Development in the MMCs,” in Samiul Hasan, ed., *The Muslim World in the 21st Century: Space, Power and Human Development*, New York: Springer, 2012: 299-316.

On delineating the nature of political leadership, Max Weber's contributions are the most significant. He classifies political leadership into three types: traditional, legal-rational and charismatic. As Verzichelli points out, charismatic authority is that particular feature of leadership which explains the development of single figures and new styles of command, justifying exceptional changes in political life. Legal-rational rule, on the other hand, is the ideal type for continuity, constraining the behaviours of the rulers.

Although "political leadership" is perceived in many ways, it is most commonly linked with the exercise of power, command, influence and control. As Edinger explains, "Political leadership is seen as focusing directly on governmental control over public policy decisions at the intra- and interstate level, and indirectly on control over the sources and consequences of such decisions" (257). The subjects of Plate's two books, Lee Kuan Yew (or fondly dubbed LKY) and Mahathir Mohamad, are embodiments of Edinger's definition of political leadership. During their long tenure as Prime Ministers of Singapore (from 1959 to 1990 for LKY) and Malaysia (from 1981 to 2003 for Dr. Mahathir), both leaders exercised singular influences over public policies in their respective countries, whether it is meritocracy in the case of Singapore or Malaysia's handling of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997. Plate's books, based on his conversations with these two leaders, demonstrate a fascinating insight into their thinking and offer some explanations for their policy-decisions which continue to affect the social, political and economic circumstances in these two neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

LKY and Mahathir have been widely credited for building their nations and as such are respected both at home and abroad. However, it needs to be pointed out that they also have their fair share of criticisms. They have been described as being authoritarian, intolerant of opposition and criticisms, anti-democratic, suspicious of civil society groups and non-believers in press freedom and so forth. However, Plate's books under review do not provide an academic or scientific analysis of styles of leadership of these two leaders. Instead, they record conversations of these two leaders with the author, which bring into focus many qualities of their leadership and could thus eventually spur further studies by other scholars/researchers.

There are eight main theories concerning leadership. These are: 1. "Great Man" theory, 2. Trait theory, 3. Contingency theory, 4. Situational theory, 5. Behavioural theory, 6. Participative theory, 7. Management theory and 8. Relationship or Transformational theory. "Great Man" theory asserts that great leaders are born to lead. This theory puts emphasis on heroic qualities such as great vision and courage. Trait theory of leadership gives credence to certain traits and qualities such as personality and behavioural characteristics of the leader. Unlike these two theories, Contingency theory of leadership argues that success depends on qualities of both leaders and followers, and specific aspects

of the situation. Participative theory highlights factors ignored by other theories. For example, this theory points out that an ideal leader is one who takes into account the inputs from followers and tries to make sure that groups are committed to decisions. However, the theory takes pains to point out that this participatory process does not necessarily mean that the leader loses control over decisions. On the contrary, Participative theory makes it clear that finally it is up to the leader to accept or reject inputs from his followers. In other words, the leader remains in control of the policy-making process. Management theory is usually associated with business organisations. This theory stresses reward and punishment of employees by business leaders. When the employees are successful they are to be rewarded, but they ought to be punished when they fail to perform. Management theory also highlights supervision, organisation and performance of the groups. It is in these latter areas that one can perhaps find the relevance of the Management theory of leadership in the political arena. Relationship or Transformational theory points out that transformational leaders are tremendous sources of inspiration for the people. They are able to motivate people with their transformational policies. However, transformational leaders also expect every citizen to perform to the best of his/her ability.

LKY and Mahathir Mohamad do not belong exclusively to any particular *one category* of leadership as specified in the above list of theories. In fact, both of them possess a combination of characteristics contained in the different theories. Both have been guided by great visions for their country and have been courageous in the face of adversities both from home and abroad, making them thereby candidates for the Great Man theory. They also demonstrate characteristics of the Participative theory. While in power, they showed tendencies of paying heed to their colleagues but never actually lost control of the policy-making process. Both LKY and Mahathir were the leaders of their teams, leading and managing the affairs of Singapore and Malaysia respectively. LKY is often accused of running Singapore like an incorporated company. Looking at Singapore from outside, it might seem true but that would be a myopic view which ignores the charismatic qualities of LKY. He might look aloof but he is at ease when he speaks with the people. He can be persuasive and show spark when he speaks. He has gained quite a reputation as a charismatic leader among his people. A cab driver in Singapore once asked the author of this review about the differences between LKY and Goh Chok Tong, the man who succeeded LKY in 1990 as Singapore's Prime Minister. Sensing the author's reluctance to provide an answer, the cab driver gave his own answer: Goh Chok Tong and his cabinet colleagues were all managers. They were picked up by LKY from the public and private sectors. They had no experience with the people because they did not rise through the ranks of the party. LKY, according to this cab driver, was a true leader, one who could talk

directly to the people, sway their opinion and ultimately convince them to follow him and his cabinet.

The political life of Mahathir is also somewhat similar to LKY's. A charismatic leader, Mahathir can raise the emotions of his people and can, unlike others, also control their emotion. Moreover, he provided strong leadership to the country at the time of crisis. He would go ahead with a policy if he thought it was the right one for his nation. He paid no attention to the existing wisdom of the day. The case that exemplifies this was his decision to peg Malaysian Ringgit to the US dollar, and control the flow of capital in and out of Malaysia during the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997. He was severely criticised for doing it at the time, but his policies to tackle the economic crisis are being re-evaluated now and as Plate justifiably says, "he was right about the destabilizing danger of capital flows and the need to reform our international financial structure" (22).

Since neither LKY nor Mahathir can be lumped into a single category of leadership, one could suggest that they be termed as modern day nation-builders, who won over their people with their vision for the nation and shared a strong bonding with their followers. They were not mere dreamers but dreamer-doers; they know how to act upon their dream for the nation. Thus, Tom Plate describes Mahathir as a "big-time doer" (*Doctor M: Operation Malaysia* 40) and LKY as "a giant of Asia, no matter how tiny his country [is]" (*Citizen Singapore: How to Build a Nation* 44). They were more action-oriented than ideology-led. LKY acknowledges that he is "not great on philosophy and theories" (46), and adds, "I get things done and leave others to extract the principles from my successful solutions" (46). Plate uses the examples of the hedgehog and the fox to describe the leaderships of LKY and Mahathir Mohamad. He writes, "[T]he fox knows lots of things, lots of different ways of surviving. The Hedgehog only knows one major thing, but the one that the Hedgehog knows is a really big deal – it is central to his life and that of everyone else" (45). In this sense, both leaders can be described as hedgehogs. They were determined to modernise their countries and chart a clear path for their people to embrace a life-style that was at par with many advanced nations.

The similarities between the two leaders end with their vision for their respective countries. Plate's books also underscore the differences in their worldviews. LKY was deeply interested in China. Plate describes this quite eloquently in the following words, "LKY would be the first to admit that he is riveted by China. After his Singapore, he probably thinks about nothing else more, though rising India has lately been high on his radar screen" (57). This is so perhaps because of the fact that "No matter how Westernized Lee Kuan Yew became at Cambridge, his DNA is millennia-deep Chinese" (42). Perhaps because of this unique characteristic, LKY understood the prospects of a post-Mao China better than any other Asian leader. He was convinced that the

world, and Asia in particular, stood to gain greatly as the Chinese leaders began to open up the country's economy. LKY always thought that political stability was a priori for economic development in China. Therefore, when the students began their protests for democracy in Beijing in 1989, LKY was not sympathetic to their cause. He believed that the students of Beijing did not enjoy a country-wide support and if the demonstrations were to continue, there was a possibility that China would be ruled by different warlords once again.

LKY's prediction on the aftermath of handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 was quite prophetic. Many believed that after the handover Hong Kong's economy would lose its sovereignty and begin to stall and even collapse. Lee Kuan Yew was among a small number of those who argued the opposite. He believed that Hong Kong, as China's window to the world, will flourish and bring economic bonanza for China. Beijing's policy of "one country, two systems," under which Hong Kong was allowed to keep its own economic and political system for fifty years, reassured the local business entrepreneurs as well as foreign investors. As a result, just as Lee Kuan Yew had predicted, Hong Kong's economy did not suffer at all, and although it faced more international competition, it continued to grow and remain one of China's main financial hubs. For example, in spite of the global economic recession in 2009, Hong Kong's economy grew by 2.9% that year.

Lee Kuan Yew's knowledge about China drew respect from world leaders, including those from the US. He takes pride in the fact that his small island nation could become an inspiration for the Chinese leaders. On this issue, Plate quotes LKY as follows: "The Chinese knew I have helped them in the past. The ideas that Deng Xiaoping formed, if he had not come here (in the 1970s) and seen the western multinationals in Singapore producing wealth for us, training our people so as a result we were able to build a prosperous society, then he might never have opened up... the coastal SEZs [Special Economic Zones] that eventually led to the whole of China opening up by joining the World Trade Organization" (61-62).

Partly because of Mahathir's experience as an "outsider" in relations to the establishment, "Mahathir challenged the rules and conventions, whenever they appeared to make no sense, or got in his way. He revelled in being a contrarian, doing what was popularly forbidden" (Wain 4). For example, in a letter written in 1969, he did not flinch from criticising the government of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's founding father. For this act, he was expelled from the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). Undaunted, in 1970, he published his most famous book *The Malay Dilemma*. In this book, he described the Malays as indigenous people of the country and demanded that they be granted special rights. He returned to UMNO following the Tunku's resignation as the country's prime minister, and quickly rose to power. In 1983, merely two years into the prime ministership, he clashed with the country's

royalty over their power to declare state of emergency in the country. Going against the sentiment of majority of the Malays, in 1998 he dismissed Anwar Ibrahim as his Deputy. When Malaysia was caught in the Asian economic crisis in 1997, he went against the prevailing conventional wisdom by deciding not to seek help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Instead, he put a cap on the movement of capital both in and out of Malaysia. When the ruling BN lost its two-thirds majority in parliament in the wake of the 2008 General Elections, he called for the resignation of Abdullah Badawi, who was handpicked by Mahathir himself. Mahathir resigned from UMNO, and returned to its fold in 2009.

“Mahathir is a troubling paradox... he is almost precisely the kind of cosmopolitan Muslim leader the West has been searching for” (Plate 192). Yet, he has been demonised by the West because of his alleged anti-Semitism. The basis of this allegation is the famous 2003 speech at the 10<sup>th</sup> summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Kuala Lumpur. He said, “They [the Jews] survived 2,000 years of pogroms not by hitting back, but by thinking. They invented and successfully promoted socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so that they may enjoy equal rights with others. With these they have now gained control of most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power. We cannot fight them through brawn alone. We must use our brains also” (*A Doctor in the House* 770). Mahathir’s policies demonstrated that he was not against the Jews or Israel but against the Israeli policies on Palestine. Portions of his speech were chosen selectively and quoted out of context in the Western media to paint him as a dangerous Muslim leader who, given a chance, would destroy Israel. Nothing could be further from the truth. What Mahathir did in his speech was to point out the dangers of excessive control of capital by any one particular group of people, and he berated the Muslims for lagging behind in this respect. The Western media conveniently left out Mahathir’s angry words against his fellow Muslims. We should mention here that in 1997 Malaysia allowed an Israeli cricket team to take part in the International Cricket Council’s (ICC) Trophy which was held in Kuala Lumpur. When the Israeli team arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Mahathir was in Saudi Arabia receiving an award for his services to Islam. On his return home, he responded to his local critics by saying that the visit would allow the Israeli players to see for themselves how the different races of people lived together in peace in Malaysia ([http://www.usa.cricinfo.com/db/ARCHIVE/WORLD\\_CUPS/ICCT97/ARTICLES/MUSLIM\\_PROTEST\\_26MARCH1997](http://www.usa.cricinfo.com/db/ARCHIVE/WORLD_CUPS/ICCT97/ARTICLES/MUSLIM_PROTEST_26MARCH1997)). Mahathir was not appreciated in the West for his bold act in allowing the Israeli cricket team to take part in the ICC Trophy.

In Mahathir’s own words, “When I assumed office, few people had heard of Malaysia or even knew where it was” (416). He changed all that. Under

Mahathir's long 22-year prime ministership, Malaysia emerged on the international scene as a confident middle-power. By the time Mahathir retired from office, Malaysia had become a strong voice in Southeast Asia, the Muslim world, and among the developing countries. In conducting his foreign policy, Mahathir did not totally discard his predecessors' emphasis. Like them, he continued to pay attention to his country's close relations with Southeast Asia. He was instrumental in getting Myanmar into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 23 July 1997, despite strong criticisms from the US and the European Union (EU) for Myanmar's appalling human rights record. He argued that Myanmar needed to be engaged rather than isolated. He did not hesitate to express his frustrations at the slow pace of change in Myanmar's human rights record. Although Mahathir was interested to protect Malaysia's national car project, *Proton*, he continued to push for the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

Mahathir has always been misunderstood in the West for voicing his position on a number of world issues. One such issue is the Palestinians' right to establish their own state. He fully supports their right to a statehood, and like many ordinary Muslims, he wishes that "the Islamic world [would be] united enough to demand changes in US policy toward the Middle East.... He's frustrated that UN Security Council demands for Israeli observance of past resolutions meets a US veto every time" (Plate 206). Despite his often open criticisms of Washington's policies toward the Middle East, he was pragmatic enough not to let it affect Malaysia's diplomatic and economic ties with the US. On August 2, 1990, when Iraqi troops invaded and occupied Kuwait, Malaysia, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, supported a resolution that required the Iraqi troops to withdraw from Kuwait within a specific deadline, failing which the UN member-states were given the authority to take steps to implement the UN Security Council resolutions on the issue. Although Kuala Lumpur supported the resolution, it did not agree to send troops to take part in the coalition to oust the Iraqi troops. "Operation Desert Storm," designed to force the Iraqis to withdraw from Kuwait, began on 17 January 1991, and as the air-strikes on Iraq intensified and civilian casualties began to soar, Mahathir began to criticise the American policies. He maintained that while Malaysia had no objection to let the US force the Iraqis out of Kuwait, it did not support America's systematic destruction of Iraq. In a similar vein, Mahathir became increasingly bitter about America's invasion of Afghanistan following the horrific 9/11 attacks.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, Mahathir personally went to the American Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to sign the condolence book opened there in honour of lives lost in the bloody incident. He also cancelled his September 12 trip to Germany. During his prime ministership, the post-

9/11 relationship between Washington and Kuala Lumpur especially in the fields of economic and security affairs deepened (Sodhy). The balance of trade between the two countries was in favour of Malaysia and it emerged as one of America's top ten trading partners. Malaysia and the rest of the ASEAN member-states signed an agreement on August 1, 2002 for cooperation to combat terrorism. A Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) was set up in Kuala Lumpur in July 2003. Although Mahathir would support the US to fight terrorism in Southeast Asia, he did not hide his distaste for certain American policies, which were in his view unsupportable. He was opposed to America's decision to wage war in Afghanistan, and later Iraq. Mahathir was convinced that US invasion of Iraq would not contribute to the fight against terrorism and would, in fact, be utterly counterproductive (*A Doctor in the House* 733). He questioned America's right to invade and occupy another sovereign nation simply because its administration thought that the country posed a threat to its security for presumably having weapons of mass destruction. In any case, no such weapons were ever found in Iraq.

The Look East Policy initiated by Mahathir soon after he assumed office in 1981 was designed to emulate Japan and other East Asian countries in making Malaysia a developed nation. He describes the origins of such a policy in the following words: "My early travels to Japan... convinced me that Malays and Malaysians could learn a great deal from that part of the world. By the time I became Prime Minister, Japan had become a great industrial power and South Korea was emerging as an industrialising country. It did not take long for me to decide that Malaysia should look to these countries as models of national development, and this was how the Look East Policy was formulated and launched" (*A Doctor in the House* 369). According to Johan Saravanamuttu, a commentator on Malaysian foreign policy, Mahathir's "Look East Policy embodies the Prime Minister's proclivities. It represents the two-pronged approach to lift Malaysia's economy on the road to rapid industrial growth, and at the same time, to prod its predominantly Bumiputra population into becoming economic achievers" (2). Only history will judge how successful the Look East Policy was.

There is no getting around the fact that Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad have been the main impetus behind the modernisation of, respectively, Singapore and Malaysia. Love them or hate them, there is absolutely no doubt that their reach and profile on international issues transcend their territorial borders. They are not only giants in their own countries but are two of the modern giants of Asia. They are so because they were leaders with many traits but a singular purpose of building and modernising their nations.



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