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Charismatic Political Leadership and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Malaysia: Power, Control, Stability and Defence

Suleyman Temiz*
Arshad Islam**

“You have to lead. You should be sensitive to what your followers think. But if you do exactly what they want, you're not a leader.”

Mahathir Mohamad (*Asiaweek*, May 9, 1997, p. 39)

Abstract: Prior to his renewed incumbency, as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925) was able to remain in power for a more prolonged period compared to his predecessors. He was actively involved in galvanizing political action immediately after the independence of Malaysia and did not abandon active politics until his 2003 resignation. Under Mahathir's leadership and guidance, Malaysia made remarkable economic and political progress. He oversaw many innovations in the fledgling democracy and was able to develop the country due to his exceptional leadership qualities. His style and attitude towards engaging with problems, particularly his stance during the Asian Monetary Crisis in 1997, was highly criticized by some, and labelled as dictatorial. This stigma did not detract him from the path he considered right for Malaysia, and under his leadership he garnered worldwide appreciation for his national efforts and success in overcoming the economic crisis. Mahathir is undeniably an excellent case study as a prime minister, as well as a highly

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productive person. He contributed to a better understanding of modern Malaysia and his own tenure as PM in a series of books and articles. One of the significant aspects of his political heritage is his influential charisma and leadership. In all of his undertakings he has attracted both passionate support and hatred from friends and foes, but his political footsteps have always been certain and directed toward Malaysia's national wellbeing. Mahathir is a politician with sharp views on many issues and he was profoundly brave in verbalising them in the public arena, within Malaysia and internationally. His clear posture and speeches without fear made him a world-embracing political personality. This descriptive research study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse historical information, documents, memoirs and articles, and books to better understand the leadership of Mahathir.

Keywords: Mahathir, Charisma, Leadership, Malaysia, National development.

Abstrak: Sebelum beliau memperbaharui jawatan yang disandang, Bekas Perdana Menteri Malaysia yang ke-empat, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925) merupakan Perdana Menteri Malaysia yang paling lama berkhidmat berbanding Perdana Menteri terdahulu. Beliau terlibat dalam politik Malaysia dengan aktif sejurus Malaysia mencapai kemerdekaan pada tahun 1957 sehingga beliau telah meletak jawatan tersebut pada tahun 2003. Dibawah kepimpinan dan bimbingan beliau, Malaysia menikmati kemajuan ekonomi dan politik yang progresif. Beliau membawa banyak inovasi kepada demokrasi yang masih baru dan membangunkan negara kerana kualiti kepimpinannya yang luar biasa. Sikap dan gaya kepimpinan beliau menyelesaikan masalah negara boleh dilihat terutamanya semasa Krisis Kewangan Asia pada tahun 1997. Krisis ini sangat dikritik oleh beberapa pihak dan beliau dilabel sebagai diktator. Walaubagaimanapun, stigma tersebut tidak mengalih perhatian beliau dari jalan yang dianggap betul untuk Malaysia. Dibawah pimpinannya, beliau mendapat penghargaan dari seluruh dunia kerana usaha dan kejayaannya dalam mengatasi krisis ekonomi tersebut. Tun Dr Mahathir tidak dapat dinafikan subjek kajian kes yang sangat terbaik sebagai seorang Perdana Menteri dan juga individu yang sangat produktif. Dalam beberapa siri buku dan artikel yang diterbitkan, beliau telah menyumbangkan kepada pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang Malaysia moden. Salah satu aspek penting dalam warisan politik beliau ialah pengaruh berkarisma dan kepimpinan. Semua usaha-usaha beliau telah menarik banyak sokongan dan juga membina sifat kebencian dari pihak musuh pada masa yang sama. Jejak politik beliau adalah selalu pasti dan terarah kepada kesejahteraan negara Malaysia. Tun Dr Mahathir merupakan ahli politik yang mempunyai pandangan yang tajam mengenai beberapa isu dan beliau sangat berani dalam mengutarakannya dalam arena awam, di Malaysia dan antarabangsa. Sikap dan ucapannya yang jelas tanpa rasa takut menjadikan

beliau personaliti politik yang dikenali dunia. Kajian penyelidikan deskriptif ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk menganalisis maklumat sejarah, dokumen, artikel, memoir, dan buku untuk lebih memahami kepimpinan Mahathir.

Kata Kunci: Mahathir, Karisma, Kepimpinan, Malaysia, Pembangunan Nasional

Introduction

'Politics' is derived from Greek roots to mean 'task of state'. It is useful to clarify the position of leadership in the political context, as its imprint can be seen everywhere in this framework. While leadership must exist in politics, political leadership *per se* is a more comprehensive and inclusive field. History teaches how humanity has achieved progress by following leaders with political visions, and leadership is always political (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Indeed, leadership predates the creation of political institutions, and cannot wait upon them for entitlement (Weaver, 1991, p. 158); political leadership is the very origin of politics (Helms, 2012, p. 8). According to Blondel, it seems feasible to describe political control as the authority executed by one or a few people to the members of a nation towards movements (1987, p. 8). Concordantly, a political leader is a leader who correlates with followers, organising and preparing them to be ready for motion. Political leadership emerges from the connection between directed-managed relationships, which are generally accepted by the people every time in the past and future. Especially in democratic countries, such as Malaysia, political actors who want to manage the country notify the populace of their candidacy before elections. According to Lord and Maher, one must remember that in conflicts of leadership there is both a leader, or leaders, and a follower, or followers, and cognition happens between both leaders and followers (1990, p. 3). If there is a leader somewhere, there must be followers (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999). George and Brief (1992, p. 310) elucidate that leaders who feel zealous, passionate and vigorous themselves are likely to equally invigorate their followers, while leaders who suffer anxiety and antagonism are likely to pessimistically stimulate their supporters. Schmidt argues that it is not adequate for a leader to generate an image; the genuine trial of leaders is whether they

can convey their vision and scheme to supporters, communicating it to them clearly, and rallying their support (2007, p. 993).

If a leader is perceived as a role model, followers are apt to internalize the leader's vision and purpose, mission, and/or inherent values into their self-concepts (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993, p. 577). Intrinsically, leaders' action or ineffectiveness can have multiple effects on followers and others. Although leaders usually manage activities, this does not mean that all initiative comes from them. At the same time, followers have the capacity for making considerable additions to accomplished leadership. At every level in any organization, leaders are called upon to be responsive, as are followers (Hollander, 1992).

Moreover, the impact of leadership performance is normally précised by the proper execution of target-linked problem resolutions in related systems (Fleishman, Zaccaro, & Mumford, 1991). Concrete or intangible skills are the most indelibly associated features of leaders' appearance and competence (Bass, 1985, p. 274). Effective leadership might need some problem-solving capability, just as creative achievement in the arts and sciences might require heightened cogency (Mumford & Connelly, 1991, p. 290).

Charismatic Political Leadership

Some leaders are exceptional in their incredible influence on their supporters and wider social contexts, with particular leadership styles called charismatic, visionary, transformational, and inspirational, which are bound to inspire cohorts in ways that are more and superior in their diverse qualities (Yukl & Fleet, 1982). Charismatic leadership is the most common paradigm to understand exceptional political leaders. Magnetic leadership qualities are deliberated in different disciplines, for example history, management, political science, psychology, and sociology, to classify leaders who challenge modest groupings with available leadership constructs (Beyer, 2000). Weber's (1047) charismatic leader explanation creates a sophisticated, mystical model of personally magnetic and talented individuals (Avolio & Yammarino, 1990, p. 193).

Trice and Beyer (1986) have acknowledged that charismatic leadership can manifest in astonishing forms and roles during crises, offering a vital explanation and presenting decisive strength. Contrary

to the abovementioned principles, in Butterfield's understanding, charismatic leadership is neither a willingly visible marvel nor one that could be simply measured. The deficiency of a steady or broadly accredited classification of charisma exacerbates the problem of gauging magnetic leadership behaviour. It is similarly challenging that numerous prevalent descriptions of charm could not be interpreted into effective procedures (Butterfield, 1972). According to Bass (1985), charismatic leadership signifies one of the main concepts of the revolutionary, energetic formula of leadership. Bettin and Kennedy (1990, p. 227) identified three features of charismatic leadership: the impact of decision style, outcome, and observer characteristics. Characteristics of charismatic leadership are signalled by a clustering of behaviours, thus attributes of charismatic leadership are a matter of appraisal. Explication of the probability that a specific person will ostensibly be a charismatic leader is related to some fascinating behaviours or qualities accredited to him or her, the passion of a distinct behaviour, and the significance of the behaviour to the existing conditions (Deluga, 1997).

Viewers infer hazardous behaviour as a mark that leaders are devoted to satisfying their notions. This position strengthens followers' confidence in the leader and trust in unusual tactics. Good leader's actions inspire positive reactions in followers. Charismatic leadership comprises a set of special features that other people perceive to be astonishing (Conger, 1989). A critical mass of people is drawn to leaders who demonstrate such dynamic potentials, ability, and ability to generate enthusiasm. People might be in admiration of leaders who possess such attributes and are very much driven and stimulated by them. These features, which cause a delicate relation to the leader, are considered the stuff of charisma. One of the most vital roles in the leadership is strong decision-making capability. This attribute of charismatic leadership gives the leader the authority to make decisions, validate proficiency, and demonstrate firmness in circumstances that have indeterminate consequences (Puffer, 1990). According to House and Howell, there is a very strong and deep connection between personality traits and charismatic leadership (1992, p. 82). If we look at Malay political history, we can easily see that Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903-90) and Mahathir are very good examples of charismatic leaders. This paper explores the charismatic political leadership of Mahathir in Malaysia.

Heredity - Family Value

The notion of Malay leadership has roots in early history as well as cultural practises that played an important role in influencing many of the elements of perceptual knowledge (Shome, 2002, p. 13). Traditional cultures believed that great leaders are born, not made. More modern analyses posit the potential to develop leadership skills, but some authors still consider leaders' traits to be inherited and unchangeable (Zaccaro, 2007, p. 6). When it became clear that some traits could be learned, analysts started to investigate behaviours and later into situational factors that affect leadership effectiveness, and outcomes show that any effect of traits on leadership behaviours depend on the contextual situation in which leadership occurs (Funder, 1991, p. 33).

Mahathir's style was not archetypally Malay; while approving of conservative Asian values such as family, consensus, and deference, his own personal political style was confrontational and, in a sense, Western (Sheridan, 1995, p. 215). According to Lucian Pye, Asian leaders in general tend to cling to power. Objectively, continuity of leadership – up to a point – may be advantageous to good governance, as Mahathir himself does not neglect to point out. “Asian” leaders are implicitly “traditional” in some senses, and leadership implies status but does not involve heavy responsibilities (Mohamed, 1985, p. 225). Mahathir himself notes the role of his education, culture, and environment in his leadership. For him, the most important factor in his life was the education he received from his family. His father was a very disciplined and serious person who educated his children in this way. As Mahathir reminisced:

“My father was a strict disciplinarian and was not much liked by his students. He was equally strict at home. Because he demanded that we study hard. My brothers, sisters and I lived in awe of my father, even though he never laid a hand on us. I was the luckiest one because my father gave me the highest level of education. That is why I was better off than all my siblings. I was closer to my mother than to my father, and as a result, she shaped my personality more. She taught me very clearly that if I wanted something, I had to work for it.” (Mohamad, 2011, p. 12).

According to Mahathir, he owes everything to his mother (The Star, 2019). When he became Deputy PM and PM, according to his

statements, under no circumstances did he move any members of his staff for poor performance, as was the normal custom. As an alternative, he made efforts to carry out tasks that he expected them to achieve, leading by example, and thus winning their dedication. Consequently, they raised their skill to advance their performance to the satisfaction of their superiors. He strongly believes that it is the duty of a leader to work with the team to achieve the optimum from them (Mohamad, 2011, pp. 12-23). This is a very elementary level of charismatic leadership behaviour, driven by a vision, and nurtured by education. Mahathir always wanted to be a leader, and his life and experiences strengthened this wish.

“I wanted to be a leader so that I could get this done. At school, my schoolmates had readily accepted me in this role, but it’s not acceptable for orderlies. I decided that the only way I could get them to listen to my ideas and opinions was to improve my credentials.... I had never seriously considered medicine and it was clearly not my first choice, but fate had played its hand. I was appreciating its intervention greatly in later years, as medicine would prove to be a strangely appropriate education for a political career. My medical training, for example, came in useful when tackling the problems of administration. Running a country is not just about debating in parliament or making laws, but also about curing social, economic, and political diseases. At least in principle, the treatment resembles medical procedures (Mohamad, 2011, p. 127).

According to Mahathir’s background we can see that his family education was the most affective on his character and development. Significantly, even in his resignation he acknowledged his debt to his mother. Mahathir updated and developed his leadership according to a mindset that believes that the greater the prerogatives, the more effective the leader (Shome, 2002, p. 128).

A Banned Book Writer and Charisma

Mahathir’s political career commenced with anti-Japanese protests in Malaya, against confirming the residency of non-Malays as citizens of the Malayan Union (Wain, 2009, p. 9). Subsequently, he advocated affirmative action to support Malay admissions to medical institutions in Singapore. During his student life he used to write for *The Sunday*

Times (currently *The Straits Times*) under the nom de plume “C.H.E. Det”, strongly supporting Malay rights and voicing their problems. After graduation, he started his career as a medical officer at Alor Setar General Hospital. He was among the earliest members who joined UMNO just after its formation in 1946. He played a dynamic and significant role in UMNO and won the parliamentary seat for Kota Setar Selatan in 1964 (Wain, 2009, p. 19).

Despite his significance in the party, Mahathir did not want to be a nominee for the 1959 general election, because of his contrary political views with Prime Minister (PM) Tunku Abdul Rahman. After Malayan independence, relationships between the two had been frosty since Mahathir began to criticize Tunku’s pact of keeping the British and Commonwealth Forces in Malaya during the Emergency. Despite his young age, Mahathir raised a serious challenge to Tunku’s leadership by divulging his charismatic personality and revealing his fearless side, being entirely opposite to Tunku Abdul Rahman.

At another occasion, Tunku rejected Mahathir’s draft plan for regulating UMNO’s members by requiring minimum qualifications. Since Mahathir’s dynamic, thoughtful, and amazing ideas upset the status quo, they served to delay his access to Malay politics, thus he realised that it was not an opportune time for him to enter politics. This adverse delay did not continue long (Wain, 2009, pp. 18-19). In the subsequent general election in 1964 he advertised his candidacy as a nationalist doctor, and as a result was elected as a Member of the Federal Parliament for the Alor Setar-based seat of Kota Setar Selatan (Lee, 1996).

Tunku Abdul Rahman’s concerns of facing an overall Chinese majority if Malaya joined with Singapore could be allayed if the non-Chinese peoples of the Borneo territories were brought into the equation, but it was not enough to solve the nationality equation (Jones, 2002, p. 63). Thus, Singapore was separated from the Federation of Malaysia in Mahathir’s first year as parliamentarian. Mahathir lost his parliamentary seat in the 1969 general election despite his significance as an educated physician. Concurrently, his personal character and leadership attitude were disliked by the Tunku, because his charismatic sides were manifested in strong opposition to the incumbent regime (White, 2004, p. 183).

The 1969 general election was dominated by the issue of ethnic relations and state structure. Thus, the May 1969 general election crusade was overflowing with deliberate phrases concerning a communal outlook, and accusations by the political parties. Vulnerable topics like culture, education, language, and Malay special rights were heatedly debated and argued with much animosity. As a result, racial tensions increased and communal relations deteriorated, undermining the country's political solidarity. Finally, Malaysia fell into an importunate political catastrophe (Musalib, 1990, pp. 52-3). The 1969 election was fought in an atmosphere of suspicion between the two principal groups, the Malays and the Chinese. The surprising losses of the ruling Coalition enabled opposition parties to carve their way into Parliament in substantive numbers. This shocking result and opposition victory stoked communal ferocity in the May 13th riots of 1969 (Musalib, 1990, pp. 53-4; Stuart, 1970, p. 320).

The upshot of the communal violence was the up surging demands for the indigenous Malays (bumiputra); however, Mahathir's conjecture was that communal relations might be affected in terms of ethnic enmity and social anarchy. Thus, he started openly criticizing the government, writing an open letter to Tunku accusing him of lacking assistance to the Malays. Obviously, this letter had a wide impact to the government policies. Hence, Mahathir called for Abdul Rahman's resignation (Wain, 2009, p. 26). This unwanted retort was punished by the Tunku, who orchestrated the dismissal of Mahathir from the UMNO Supreme Council and his expulsion from the organisation (Hooker, 2003, p. 232). Abdul Rahman was feeling extremely annoyed with him, and had to be persuaded not to have him arrested (Wain, 2009, p. 28).

While Mahathir was consigned to a hostile political wilderness, he expressed his thoughts on the predicament in 'The Malay Dilemma', in which he resonated his opinions and vision for the Malays (Wain, 2009, pp. 29-30). Due to Mahathir's daring stand and frank criticism of the government, the book was officially banned (and was only permitted when he became PM in 1981). Despite being the author of an outlawed book, he worked his way up to obtain the positions of minister and then deputy PM, representing a unique case in Malaysian politics (Morais, 1982, p. 26). According to Milne and Mauzy, Mahathir's fierce and combative hostilities were one of the main reasons of Tunku's

deteriorating fame and his ensuing resignation as PM in 1970 (1999, p. 25). During that period Mahathir criticised Tunku's feeble leadership:

“As the 1969 general election approaches, Tunku's easy-going policies became of great concern, not just to me but to other young Malays. They subjected him to unprecedented questioning, which was something that he was ill-suited to handle. The Tunku seemed content to hand Malays civil service jobs instead of getting them actively involved in the economy. Moreover, considering how the British had tried to impose the Malayan Union on us, I thought the Tunku's subsequent pro-British stand was unacceptable. In short, in the Malay interest, I thought it was time for a change in Malay leadership” (Mohamad, 2011, p. 237).

Conspicuousness of His Leadership

UMNO was essentially constituted to represent the Malay national interest, and was led by Malay aristocrats, given the absence of a substantive Malay middle class or religious leaders with extraordinary charismatic powers. The founder of UMNO, Dato Onn Jaafar (1895-1962), and his successor, the Tunku, were both products of the traditional elite (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 14). While Mahathir never had friendly relations with Tunku, he realised upon his return to the party that Tun Razak Hussein (1922-76) had an energetic and pleasant personality, and he declared that Razak was a person he could work with. In the changing political scenario of Malaysia Tunku had to step down in 1970 and was succeeded by Tun Razak. He welcomed Mahathir's return in the UMNO and subsequently appointed him as a senator, and he was soon elected as a member of the UMNO Supreme Council in 1973 (Morais, 1982, p. 27). He took a keen interest in state affairs and displayed impressive competence, which ensured his rapid ascent through the political hierarchy under the leadership of Tun Razak, and he became a member of the University Malaya Council and Chairman of the University Kebangsaan Malaysia. In 1974, he won the uncontested election of MP for Kubang Pasu and was subsequently appointed Minister of Education (Belle, 2015, pp. 331-335). After strengthening his position in the party, he became one of the nominees for three vice-presidencies in 1975. This party election was crucial for the future leadership of UMNO, for both Tun Razak and his deputy Hussein Onn (1922-90). The successful

candidates were Ghafar Baba (1925-2006), Mahathir Mohamed, and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (b.1937) (Hamzah, 1990).

Soon the leadership of UMNO and the premiership of Malaysia passed into the hands of Tun Hussein Onn, because of the sudden death of Tun Razak in 1976. After much deliberation, Tun Hussein Onn appointed Mahathir as Deputy PM, which indicated that the latter was the likely successor as PM (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, pp. 27-28). However, Tun Hussein was a watchful leader who did not accept all of Mahathir's frank and persuasive political proposals. The bond between Hussein and Mahathir was relatively distant, and Mahathir's rivals Ghazali Shafei and Razaleigh Hamzah became Hussein's close allies within the party, enabling them to contain Mahathir's influence in the party and over Tun Hussein. These reactive efforts acknowledge the charisma and leadership quality of Mahathir, who was clearly identified as the main obstacle to those who coveted power for themselves. Nevertheless, when Tun Hussein's ill health prevented him from continuing as PM in 1981, he supported Mahathir as his successor, in the national interest (Wain, 2009, pp. 38-40).

Mahathir noted that his ascent to leadership of the country was not foreseeable in his earlier years, and he noted the role of good fortune. More prosaically, above the political tumult of everyday politics, Mahathir had sympathisers behind the scenes and in the upper echelons of the traditional Malay elite, who recognised his vision for the national interest. Additionally, when Mahathir faced numerous bureaucratic obstructions and political hurdles, his qualities of perseverance and a keen intellect enabled him to overcome them. Because of these abilities, it can be concluded that no one strong enough and tough enough had emerged to challenge Mahathir during his premiership because of his own baptism of fire in Malay politics (Thomas & Faruqi, 1987, p. 69).

A large number of people felt that his political rehabilitation was proceeding too quickly and that his rise through the party ranks was exceptional. As a member of cabinet, he was at the very centre of decision-making in the Malaysian system of government (Mohamad, 2011, p. 284). After this, Mahathir had to find a place to introduce his ideas for national development. He always employed what he later discovered was called "lateral thinking", if he could not achieve something in one way, he would try another, moving sideways instead

of seeking to bulldoze his way via a frontal assault. Consequently, he almost always succeeded in finding some way of doing the things that he wanted (Mohamad, 2011, p. 253).

Cue Signal to Transformation

At the age of 56 years, Mahathir was sworn in as PM on 16th July 1981. His initial task was to set free 21 prisoners held in custody under the Internal Security Act (Wain, 2009, p. 28). Contrary to his rapid ascent, Mahathir did not set about an abrupt campaign of political reform. He cautiously moved in his early years in office, strengthening his control over the party and working hard for the success of UMNO in the 1982 general election (Sankaran & Adnan, 1988, pp. 18-20). After taking the reins of government he encountered several challenges, including the ordeal of the constitutional status of monarchy. Mahathir started to work on identifying the legitimate role of sovereigns, which was a very difficult and risky task. The objective was clearly to modernise Malay governance, which entailed *ipso facto* removing elements of effective political power and authority from the traditional elites, who were and are respected by the Malay masses and who play an important role in national unity and stability.

The traditional elites had protected the Malays from some aspects of British colonialism, and subsequently rallied the nation against Communist insurgency, thus revolutionary political reform was most unwelcome in the fledgling state. This sensitive task was particularly difficult for Mahathir as a technocratic professional from the emerging middle class, with no direct stake in the traditional feudal model. Conversely, Tunku was a prince and Tun Razak came from a distinguished family of administrators. Tun Hussein belonged to the privileged family of Johor, and heading government administration was a family tradition for him. Mahathir had none of this heritage, so any attempts at political reform had to be particularly sensitive. At the same time, he energetically and diligently took on the difficult task, displaying his leadership capability. He administered a number of changes to the Constitution, notably 'The Constitution Amendment Act A566 of 1983', which restricted the role of Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the State Rulers. Initially, Mahathir attempted to curtail the authority wielded by the new Agong over the government by tabling constitutional amendments compelling the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to give royal assent to any bill

passed by Parliament within 15 days. This entailed the assumption of supreme executive power by the PM, such as accruing to that office (from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong) the authority to declare a state of emergency (Hickling & Wishart, 1988-1989).

The constitutional model of Malaya upon independence was a continuation of the ancient tradition of local sultans reformulated as a British-style constitutional monarchy. In the British system, numerous aspects of executive power nominally held by the Crown (i.e. the monarch), such as supreme authority in matters of policing and defence, are in effect wielded by the Prime Minister, thus subject to some measure of democratic oversight due to the nature of the Parliamentary system. These subtle nuances were not clear in Malaysia prior to the 1980s. In principle, the present Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Sultan Ahmad Shah (1930-2019) of Pahang, initially consented to Mahathir's modernisations but vacillated after reading the documents, and he and the other sultans sought to avoid becoming redundant relics, holding their authority to be a sacred trust. Consequently, with the support of the sultans, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong refused to give royal assent to the said amendments, which had by then been passed by both Houses of Parliament (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 32). This represented a constitutional crisis that was only mediated with the good will of both the Agong and Mahathir (Lee, 1996, p. 31).

While Mahathir's political reforms were thus in essence an attempt to Westernise Malaysian constitutional arrangements by bringing governance in-line with British democratic standards, he was keen to avoid the hegemony of Western powers, especially Britain. His patriotism remained rooted in the anti-colonial fervour of his formative years, and he could be stirred up to anti-British actions if they pressed his buttons. When he became PM in 1981, in order to fulfil a target of the New Economic Policy (NEP), British plantations were compulsorily purchased to repatriate a stock of land and capital for the Bumiputra. As a result, Guthries, one of the prominent plantation holdings, was acquired by the government agency Permodalan Nasional Berhad and was nationalised. The takeover on the London Stock Exchange was legal, but as expected, Guthries attempted to obfuscate the nationalisation, and they connived with the British government to claim that the usual standard notice had not been given, and the London Stock Exchange rules were changed to support their cause. This takeover process

also coincided with Britain raising tuition fees for overseas students attending tertiary institutions, affecting close to 13,000 Malaysians, which would clearly result in hampering Malaysia's development. As can be understood, Mahathir reacted intensely and launched a boycott campaign called "Buy British Last". This problem was solved in April 1983, partly as a result of diplomacy with Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), who got on well with Mahathir, and who did not want Britain's historic ties (and interests) in Malaya to be severed. Clearly at this juncture they realised that Mahathir could not be bullied, and they were perplexed by the presence of a strong leader (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, pp. 139-140). During the whole process, he exhibited a role as a "visionary leader" of a developed Malaysia (Chio, 2005), and was consequently labelled an "Ultra Malay" due to his patriotic policies and political positions (Khoo, 1995).

By the mid-1990's Mahathir's government had embarked on an extensive programme of economic reform, including the privatization of airlines, utilities, and telecommunication companies, representing around 50 entities (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 57). The astute reader will note that this is generally an entailment of IMF financial assistance by which multinational corporations gain a windfall of cheaply priced public assets, of the very type Mahathir sought to avoid, but these autonomous reforms were premised on *Malaysian* private ownership of such assets, and the PM's resistance to foreign expropriation of such resources in the face of the 1997-1998 crisis formed the crux of Western hostility to his economic policy (as discussed later). His exceptional problem-solving capability showed itself in responsiveness to public needs and he incrementally found solutions. During Mahathir's strong governance, individuals were given more space to express their minds without distress, but nationalist views in concurrence of preserving the supremacy of Malay rights were also permitted to prevail, and peaceful coherent dialogue of matters considered subtle, like race and belief (Khoo, 2011, p. 200).

Coincident with Mahathir's premiership, Malaysia witnessed the signs of Islamic resurgence among the Malays. At that time, Muslim population in Malaysia were becoming more sensitive about religion and seemed to be drifting in a more socially conservative direction. Characteristically, Mahathir could not be indifferent to this situation. During the 1970s, PAS and UMNO formed a coalition government by

making a progressively Islamist community under the leadership of Yusof bin Abdullah, also known as Yusof Rawa (1923-2000). Mahathir took a positive stance to boost up the Islamic teaching by setting up Islamic institutions like the famous International Islamic University of Malaysia, to uphold Islamic and scientific education under government control, modernizing while resisting colonial and neo-colonial ideologies and control. One of Mahathir's most able lieutenants in this political programme was Anwar Ibrahim (b. 1947), the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement's leader (ABIM). Mahathir identified Anwar's own charismatic leadership qualities that could in future benefit UMNO and Malaysia in general (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, pp. 80-89). Mahathir had handpicked and personally groomed Anwar and declared him to be his successor on several occasions (Shome, 2002, p. 151).

Mahathir established a series of large infrastructure projects during his tenure. Under his leadership, the Multimedia Super Corridor was created south of Kuala Lumpur, a local version of Silicon Valley, planned to advance national IT and communications industries, but this plan did not meet with success for industrial reasons. His other projects, Putrajaya, was more successful as one of the most prestigious and finely decorated administrative centres in Southeast Asia. He managed to set up a Formula One Grand Prix in Sepang, as well as the massive investment project of the Bakun Dam in Sarawak, a hydro-electric project to address energy problems in West Malaysia via the South China Sea, but this project was terminated due to the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998 (Wain, 2009, pp. 185-189). Mahathir amazingly dashed into his projects like a force of nature, all the while fulfilling his conventional responsibilities as PM and head of UMNO, and significantly advancing the deprived and disadvantaged condition of the Malays beyond recognition while fostering harmony among Malaysia's communities (Wain, 2009, p. 53).

After assuming office Mahathir decided to review and modify the tradition of the country's foreign policy. For him, Malaysian people should disregard ideological differences and should be sincere to everybody. He started this task within ASEAN, establishing and strengthening relationships with other member states, promoting cooperation and collaboration with neighbouring states. Before starting his heavy economic process, Mahathir wanted to avoid any potential for conflicts with other ASEAN states, which is the fundamental reason

ASEAN was established in the first place. Mahathir remembered how Western powers had dominated the region with a divide and rule policy, stoking Indonesia against Malaysia during the confrontation era, and there were latent issues with the Philippines, such as their claims in Sabah. He was determined that solution of conflicts between Malaysia and its neighbours must be avoided through good relations with ASEAN members (Mohamad, 2011, p. 417). For him, globalization can bring about a better world if people are not fanatical about particular interests (Mohamad, 2000a, p. 42). Mahathir came into office with a favourable disposition towards Japan and a less favourable disposition towards Britain, and he was much more pro-Japanese than any other Southeast Asian leader, which represented bold leadership given the sensitivity of Japanese relations in many Asian states due to the experiences of WWII (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 123).

Mahathir's "Look East" policy of preferring Asian neighbours over Western economic and political interests increasingly revealed itself during his tenure, aiming to prove that world powers such as the USA and European countries came last as far as Malaysia was concerned. Mahathir thus fostered mutually beneficial relations with Japan and South Korea, as models of regional developed countries. Later, when China left its Communist insurgent support in Malaysia, Mahathir accelerated the establishment of firm relations with China, exhibiting a remarkable spirit of rapprochement and reconciliation that would have been acknowledged as great peacekeeping had he been a stooge of the West (Mohamad, 2011, p. 417). However, Mahathir's "Look East Policy" was a general vision, and under no circumstances was it transformed from an idea into a detailed political programme; rather Mahathir was always first and foremost a pragmatist, seeking in every individual situation and relationship the best interests of Malaysia (Salleh & Meyanathan, 1993, p. 21). Naturally seeking the best interests of Malaysia as opposed to the West was anathema to the latter, who subsequently began a massive campaign of critique against the upstart Malaysia. Malaysia's manifest prosperity and socioeconomic development under Mahathir's rule was ignored, and he was personally eviscerated in global media, habitually described as a dictator by the petulant former colonial masters in the West.

Mahathir nominally respected traditions but used them only to drive the passion of his rhetoric for unity. He was not interested in the

conventions that characterized the leadership style of his predecessors when this hampered national progress. Nevertheless, he wanted Islam to be an integral part of a moral and socially conservative society, he wanted for his country, alongside rapid economic development and improved education and opportunities for all Malaysians, particularly Malays. Mahathir was the epitome of the modern leadership paradigm required by Muslim-majority countries. He was modern but not Westernized in the way previous PMs were. Nevertheless, his political career by the 1990s had come up against increasing international censure and pressure, and he realized that it was necessary to redefine his leadership to suit the changing political landscape (Shome, 2002, p. 128).

2020 Project Perception

Regardless of his massive capacity for work, Mahathir was a compassionate person who did not pursue his activities for the incentives or any monetary gains. His enduring mission was to stimulate and revolutionise the social and economic conditions that turned Malaysia into a developed nation. Due to his firm devotion and strong leadership, political permanency was vital for the development of the nation. This prescription shows that he has purely charismatic leadership features and that he applied them frequently (Wain, 2009, p. 54).

Charisma must show the way and must enter from the door. Mahathir felt that he set ambitious but realistic targets for the nation, and he even laid the groundwork for this work to be continued by his successors. Charismatic political leaders are always showing a target to their nation as Mahathir did. The NEP was terminated during the early 1990's, and it was very good opportunity for Mahathir to draft his economic ideas for Federation of Malaysia. In 1991, Mahathir expected that under Vision 2020 Malaysia would be reaching to a height of an industrialised state within 30 years (Wain, 2009, pp. 1-3).

Vision 2020 was introduced by Mahathir while tabling the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. This Vision calls for Malaysia to attain the autonomous status of an industrialised nation by the year 2020, including in terms of daily life, economic welfare, social security, a world-class education system, psychological balance, and political stability. To attain Vision 2020, Mahathir benchmarked a national growth requirement of 7% annually over the period of thirty-years (1990–2020), at the end of which the economy would be eight times larger than its 1990 GDP of

RM115 billion. Subsequently, with this strategy, Malaysia's GDP would be RM920 billion to the year 2020 (Mohamad, 1991).

The Vision 2020 (1991-2020) was subdivided into a successive 10-year advancement plans, known as OPP2 (The National Development Policy 1991-2000); The Third Outline Perspective Plan OPP3 (The National Vision Policy 2001-2010); and the New Economic Model (NEM) 2011-2020 with National Transformation Programme NTP. As Mahathir elaborated:

“Malaysia, as a developed country, must not have a society in which economic backwardness is designated with race. Surely, it does not imply individual income equality, a situation in which all Malaysian population will have the same income. This is an impossibility because by sheer dint of our own individual effort, our own individual upbringing and our individual preferences, we will all have different economic worth, and will be financially rewarded differently. An equality of individual income as propounded by socialists and communists is not only not possible, it is not desirable and is a formula for disaster. But I do believe that the narrowing of the ethnic income gap, through the legitimate provision of opportunities, through a closer parity of social services and infrastructure, through the development of the appropriate economic cultures and through full human resource development, is both necessary and desirable. We must aspire by the year 2020 to reach a stage where no-one can say that a particular ethnic group is inherently economically backward, and another is economically inherently advanced. Such a situation is what we must work for efficiently, effectively, with fairness and with dedication” (Wawasan2020).

Telecommunications is a vital sector for the development of a nation, and the Malaysian government gave many incentives and encouragements to its telecommunications industries to prioritise local entrepreneurs. To boost Vision 2020, the dawn of the new millennium saw a rejuvenation of the process, and local telecommunications industries were expected to play a dynamic role in producing a well-informed society (Mohamad, 2000e, p. 13). Vision 2020 was Mahathir Mohamad's call for “industrial discipline” and “mental revolution” (Chio, 2005, p. 80).

Mahathir had many reasons to be proud of the growth he presided over during the 1990s and for displayed a target for Malaysia to become an entirely developed nation by 2020 (Stewart, 2003, p. 9). For this reason, he pioneered two flagship projects: the formation of Proton Saga as a national car, and its subsequent variations; and the steel industry, which channelled funds and energy into subsidised products that were more symbolic of nationalist aspirations than meaningful contributions to the nation's wealth (Stewart, 2003, p. 10).

Economic Defence of the Country

In 1994, Mahathir described the West's switch of tactics in order to impair East Asian economies' ability to compete. According to him, they liked to see the Asian egalitarian societies as feeble, unbalanced, and inferior. He castigated intrigues by the West to dent East Asian financial prudence. Their primary efforts were camouflaged in talk of fairness and basic rights, which were fundamentally superfluous given their long and recent history of warmongering in ASEAN and throughout the world. Subsequently, they were pleasantly offering to eradicate the resources of Asian thrift in order to stop Asian countries from effectively challenging the West. The suggestion for a universal minimum wage was one clear case. They knew that this was a perfect solution to remove at a stroke the only substantive competitive advantage of emerging nations in attracting industrial investment (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 89). He believed that the Western powers did not want developing nations like Malaysia to outdo them in terms of progress (Mohamad, 2000d, p. 17).

The year 1997 should have been victorious for Mahathir. The Malaysian economy was displaying good acceleration after a decade of growth at an annual rate of more than 8 per cent, and the National Front coalition was in firm political control, so he could step back as head of the state and enjoy retirement, and let his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, take over (Stewart, 2003, p. 3). However, the financial crisis in Southeast Asia started in mid-1997 (initially in Thailand), and subsequently spread throughout the region. The Malaysian ringgit collapsed because of exchange rates, resulting in a flight of external capital and the subsequent fall of the main stock exchange index by around 75 per cent. The IMF pounced with its demand for reduced social spending, and the government thus began to think to reduce executive expenditure and increase interest rates, which exacerbated

the hardships of normal people. Policy differences between Mahathir Mohammad and Anwar Ibrahim affected governmental harmony, but this was not the main reason for the conflict between Mahathir and Anwar. At any rate, Anwar subsequently resigned in the context of the failure of his soft policy, in contrast to Mahathir's orthodox challenge to the IMF and big money speculators. Mahathir contumaciously increased governmental spending and fixed the Malaysian Ringgit to the Dollar. The outcomes surprised all of the world, and especially the IMF. As a result of Mahathir's emergency solution policy to exit from crisis, Malaysia emerged smoother and quicker than its regional neighbours. In internal affairs this represented a triumph for Mahathir, and during the economic repercussions in 1998 Mahathir discharged his Finance Minister and Deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim, and assumed direct control of the economy (Wain, 2009, pp. 105-109).

Unlike Tun Razak or Tun Hussein Onn, who were quite detached in their outlook, Mahathir tended to look at problems in a more personal way; perhaps this had to do with his 'doctor-patient' approach. It can be said that his medical background coloured his political ability, and he was definitely dissimilar from previous leaders in one major style, preferring his own diagnosis of issues, savouring dominance, and avoiding delegation (Shome, 2002, p. 132):

"My training as a doctor also helped me to approach problems in a rigorously methodical and logical manner, another skill that would help me in politics. When faced with political or administrative problems I always apply the same approach. The solution may not always be right, but mid-course corrections can be made as problems arise. The results from this methodical way are seldom entirely negative. During the currency crises of 1997-1998, when the value of the Malaysian ringgit was plummeting, we were told that our problem was our mismanagement of the economy. I refused to believe this, as only months earlier, the IMF Managing Director Michael Camdessus had praised Malaysia's administration. I had to find out exactly why the crisis was happening to identify the causes, or aetiology as we say in medicine. In politics as well, if you can remove the causes you may be able to overcome the problem. And as in medicine, standard formulae may not always work. Sometimes, outwardly similar occurrences of the same

problem in different places may be due to different causes. The IMF apparently believes that all financial problems can be overcome simply by reducing expenditure, achieving a surplus, increasing interest rates, and bankrupting inefficient business. The IMF merely looks at the numbers, caring little that bankrupting such companies can have far-reaching social repercussions. Although I have no clear evidence of it, there seemed to be something of a hidden agenda to prevent upstart nations from becoming established economies” (Mohamad, 2011, p. 294).

Mahathir referred to “sinister powers” who were using their economic might to weaken developing countries. These neo-colonialists wanted nations like Malaysia to “bow down and end up being debtors to them”, so they could dictate what Malaysians should or should not do. He accused the West of a conspiracy to bring down governments in South-East Asia (Stewart, 2003, p. 4). Mahathir did not surrender his country to the IMF and he led Malaysia successfully through an unprecedented economic crisis, holding his nerve against Western hostility and domestic cowardice in the face of the diktats of the international financial system. This courageous stance made him popular all over the world among anti-colonialists. Ostensibly, we can say that he saved his country. In choosing to follow an autonomous, rational, and orthodox policy to save the country from deeper crisis, Mahathir saved Malaysia and its people from the tyranny of the IMF, who cared nothing for the socioeconomic and political ravages of their crude management solutions. When Mahathir saw the crisis of confidence due to the fall of ringgit, and businesses problems, he sensed that Malaysia was under attack, and he knew the objective was to seize the country’s private sector, which was why he refused the poisoned chalice offered by the IMF.

Before the economic crises, Mahathir had actually been planning to step down, having served 18 gruelling years by 1998, and he only reluctantly remained in position at this juncture due to the crises and problems in Malaysia and UMNO. He saw the crises in very black and white terms as a coherent attack on Malaysia’s economy, and there were opportunist traitors inside his own party trying to capitalise on the confusion and instability in order to grab power, thus he acted decisively to prevent the plundering of Malaysia and its people’s assets. Naturally, this angered the enemies of Malaysia, including George Soros (b. 1930), who did not think Mahathir’s idea about a ban on currency

trading deserved any serious consideration. For Soros, Mahathir's policy was a danger, and Mahathir was outrageous (Stewart, 2003, p. 3). In the following process, spin-doctors appeared, and Mahathir was criticized and humiliated. A London-based analyst said that Malaysia was suffering from an "IQ crisis" (i.e. the former colonial subjects were too stupid to govern themselves and manage their economy properly without the IMF and international financial system to hold their hands), and for them what Mahathir knew about economics could be "written on the back of a postage stamp" (Mohamad, 2000c, p. 31).

Time for Changing Leadership - Being a Legend Instead of Becoming Retired

There was no doubt though that Mahathir's stirring leadership was an enigma that cannot be ignored, and to belittle him would be to give scant regard to one of the most important personalities of Asian political history. To measure Mahathir by any yardstick can be difficult, since his length in office provided an assumption of his success. As a prerequisite to continuing leadership, he naturally needed to be re-elected to Parliament, but that had always been an easy hurdle to get over even when his political works were outlawed. Political manoeuvres within the inner circle of UMNO were more difficult to manage, but he had consistently triumphed over petty political squabbles by skilfully capitalizing on the loyalty of those who mattered most in the survival of his leadership (Shome, 2002, p. 129). His rise under UMNO was unparalleled, as well as his resignation. At this point, he began to sense that his intense efforts to promote the socio-economic conditions of Malays and Malaysia were not as welcome as they had been:

"For 21 years I had done my job as best as I could, but I was becoming increasingly mindful of what my mother had always said when I was a young boy: never overstay your welcome... When I was finally sure that the time was right, I kept it to myself... I had made up my mind to announce my resignation at the end of 56th UMNO Annual General Assembly in 2002, when I was to give my closing speech. I chose that time and place because then the announcement would be a public statement that I would not be able to retract. I thought that if I told a few people, they would try to dissuade me. If I then reserved my position, my critics would say I had reneged. The foreign press would also have

a good laugh if they heard me say I would resign and then did not.... Throughout my tenure, I tried hard to establish certain standards. Firstly, I did not encourage the adulation and excessive glorification that is often given to leaders. I was determined that there would be no personality cult. Even when I held the education portfolio, I stopped the practice of naming schools after the prime minister. When I became prime minister, I also refused to allow the naming of buildings and facilities after myself or any living person other than the Malay Rulers. I gave instructions that my official picture should not be displayed in government buildings, although this was widely ignored. To date, nothing has been named after me, except an orchid. I even rejected the idea of memorial library" (Mohamad, 2011).

During his time in office, Mahathir had adopted a slogan "leadership by example" and tried to live by that slogan in every way. His stepping down voluntarily was part of that creed, as he declared in his memoirs. For him, leaders should not cling to their position but should learn to recognise the signs of what their followers feel; if they felt it was time that their leaders should go, they should go. Although he knew that those who benefited from his decision would not always be grateful or even appreciative, he never regretted resigning voluntarily. "*I still think that leaders, no matter how popular they may be, should listen to their conscience and not wait until they are pushed out*" (Mohamad, 2011, pp. 762-763).

Conclusion

The task of governance is intrinsically difficult, and multi-ethnic nations often struggle to produce effective leaders capable of uniting disparate communities in pursuit of common national interests, governing the country with equality fairness. In such contexts, strong leadership is essential to perform effective governance. In response to the Asian Monetary Crisis of 1997-1998, Malaysia's economy bounced in an upward trajectory. As one of many fledgling post-colonial nations of the late 20th century, Malaysia had never countenanced a charismatic, powerful, and modest leader like Mahathir, who seemed to be an aberration in the malaise of stunted development that faced comparable countries, in Southeast Asia and throughout the world (Wain, 2009, p. 55). He was obviously and absolutely a man of principle and action (Rashid, 1993, pp. 171-172). Mahathir was constantly in a rush in his

intense drive to push Malaysia forward, utilising all available national and personal resources to that end, and his only regret was that he did not do more (Kulkarni, Jayasankaran, & Hiebert, 1996, p. 18). Mahathir tried to inject an element of sagacity in public and national symbols, concluding strategies such as the national car Proton, the Sepang Formula One circuit, and the iconic PETRONAS Twin Towers.

Mahathir faced intense opposition, both internationally and in Malaysia itself, and he was criticized mercilessly by rich elites who resented his modernising reforms. In comparable context, authoritarian leaders in nearby states crushed press freedoms and freedom of expression, but Mahathir let his actions be the best riposte, and the stunning Malaysian response to the 1998 Crisis was attributable to his charismatic leadership, steering the country clear of the IMF ambush promulgated by Soros and the international financial pyramid of domination.

Politically, his policy differences damaged his friendship with his protégé Anwar Ibrahim, his implicit successor as the next Prime Minister of Malaysia. One of Mahathir's superb talents was his aptitude to encounter a calamity tranquilly, and not capitulate to dread and panicked responses. At critical junctures where the country and political class were engulfed in mayhem, he steered an even course above the squall. With Stoic resolve he noted that "*the world will not come to an end*" (in relation to monetary fluctuations), and there was ultimately nothing to worry about (Wain, 2009, p. 57). There was a widespread antipathy among foreign (particularly Western) leaders and officials to his failure to capitulate into cowardice and servitude on the familiar pattern of 'developing' nations, arising from his rightful position underpinned by his formidable personality and non-conformity (Stewart, 2003, p. 12).

Mahathir's management of Malaysia during the late 20th century changed the perception of Malaysia from another third-world failure to a vibrant and dynamic global economy and society. As a commoner his ability to transcend traditional class structures in Malaysia's conservative society while respecting the unassailable values of religion, family, and culture was remarkable, and was based purely on his inherent talents and hard work. After becoming PM he was able to implement his patriotic vision for the country. In the eyes of people and in their imagination, Malaysia was not a poor country on the "African" model anymore, but

a well-developed and globally respected Tiger Economy. Mahathir was the one of the most important political figures during this development process. Throughout Mahathir's tenure of office, Malaysia enlarged from a developing country position to become the world's 13th largest economy. When he began as PM in 1981, Malaysia's gross national income per capita was at \$1930 (US), while by the time he left office in 2003 this had more than doubled to \$4,160. His risk-taking personality undoubtedly enabled this economic success. For him:

“some say to be a big frog in a small pond is no great achievement, but we have proven that even a little frog in a big pool can thumb its nose at the largest, most powerful toad. That it can has not only been gratifying to us, but has also vindicated our foreign and national policies and has brought us self-respect and pride, and given us a sense of accomplishment. Malaysia has shown that a well-intentioned policy of engagement, cooperation and practical involvement with small countries can prove far more beneficial and successful on the international stage than a policy of antagonism, aggression and domination as practised by world powers. There is no need to toady to the powerful” (Mohamad, 2011, p. 440).

Mahathir in many ways was an outsider. A nationalist and modernizer, he was essentially realistic, and had little regard for obfuscating rules, morals, and values that might hamper his highly motivated campaigns. Even though Mahathir accumulated numerous honorific titles reflecting his unique importance in Malaysian history (Datuk, Datuk Seri, and Tun), we generally prefer to call him “Dr.” Mahathir, a title he warranted with his valediction from medical school in 1953. As he said himself, “I earned that one” (Wain, 2009, p. 1).

It is a great irony that some critics refer to Mahathir as a dictator, ignoring the fact that he was a democratically elected PM. When this charge is levelled by Malaysians, it reflects the internalisation of the Western paradigm of dominion, where those who enable the international financial system to expropriate national resources – the land, resources, labour, and even bodies and souls of the people – are good guys and democrats, while those who safeguard national interests and the integrity of current and future generations are decried as dictators and despots. Mahathir has amply received his share of such

smears. When Western leaders display uncompromising politics and leadership they are lauded as strongmen and inspirational visionaries, such as the 'Iron Lady', Margaret Thatcher. Much of the vitriol directed against Mahathir was due to his statements about the Jewish lobby, and international indoctrination inspired some local academics to join this caravan of criticism. Had Mahathir capitulated to the Zionist lobby and surrendered his country to the IMF he would have been labelled a great peacemaker and would have been feted worldwide and by the intellectual stooges of Western neoliberalism within Malaysia, but due to his principles he was labelled a dictator, and his essential role in saving Malaysia is unacknowledged by such prejudicial views. Bary Wain (1944-2013) attached great importance to the concept that few had the courage to appear as opposing leadership candidates to Mahathir, which reflects his outstanding qualities; some opposing party members described him as an "extraordinary leader" and acknowledged that it would be difficult to discover another seminal leader of his type in centuries (BBC, 2002).

Mahathir has implemented an extraordinary dominating impact over his country's public life. As an economic modernizer without fear of registering a scepticism of democracy and human rights, he directed the politics of Malaysia to his wish and in the process he successfully subordinated the constitutional monarchy (with its track record of fatal weakness in the face of Western agendas), the judiciary, and the predominant political party, the UMNO, which he led continuously despite a major challenge in 1987 that almost unseated him (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). He was careful of his status with Islamic world leaders, with whom he enjoyed enormous popularity. While he revelled in international compliments and support, he was also cautious of Islamic conservatives back home who feared that economic and technological modernisation might be harbingers of Westernisation. Mahathir is an enigma of 21st century leadership style *per se*, and his case is particularly interesting in presenting an Islamic vision of modernity (Shome, 2002, p. 196).

Malaysia is one of the most respected states in the world today. Its socioeconomic development is a shining example of the possibilities of multinational states. Unquestionably Mahathir is at the heart of this development process as a leader and visionary. Perhaps his most significant and enduring legacy is not the economic transformation he

oversaw, but his fostering of ethnic harmony among the minorities of Malaysia, especially his peaceful management of the inequalities between the Malay majority and Chinese economic and professional elite. When he became PM, most Malays were extremely poor and very few had tertiary education or professional qualifications. Mahathir prioritised the elevation of the Malays through education and employment, alongside public planning and development. Charismatic political leadership features are evident in Mahathir's personality, conditioned by his family education and his formative years, and he was a shining example of good leadership qualities from his very first years in politics. The dominant political party's sovereignty permitted such radical leadership. Tunku Abdul Rahman, as the first PM who governed Malaysia during its initial independence era was considered the "father of the nation", and is generally commended for his efforts for national harmony and economic effectiveness. The second PM, Tun Abdul Razak, had an agenda of rural progress and transformation. The third, Tun Hussein Onn, prioritised stability and clean government (Salleh & Meyanathan, 1993, p. 36). Mahathir Mohammed built on these efforts with his illumined vision and public sector restructuring to drive national progress toward developed status. As a result, we can claim that among the Malaysian PMs, Mahathir's status is exceptional and demonstrates distinctive charismatic leadership.

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