A BRIEF LOOK AT THE MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTERS' LEADERSHIP STYLES

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Introduction

Leaders' style in leading are varied. Basically, as far as the classical view of leadership style is concerned, a leader's style can either be (1) democratic; (2) autocratic; or perhaps (3) laissez-faire. However, it is almost impossible to come up with a collectively agreeable conclusion of what a prime minister leadership style really is. There are a number of reasons for such pessimistic statement. First, leadership in general is often associated with conflict. One person's ideas and plans are put into collective action by a group or groups of people of which that one person had, in some way or another, managed to convince. Leadership, in this instance, is looked at how abstracts are put into concrete actions. It displays the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute (House, 2004:15). Therefore, in one sense, ideally, leadership is best defined by those who are directly involved in the whole process of achieving specific tasks that has been set out by individual or individuals on behalf of the institution or organisations. The leadership style of a leader, then, is rests upon the followers to determine. However, this should not prevent people outside the setting from making their own interpretations and conclusions.

Secondly, leadership is basically all about relationship, i.e. leader-follower relations in a specific setting, and under various situations. It is an abstract term. In other words, leadership is a process, not a personality (Ismail, 1999:5). Basically, the connection between the leader and his followers is governed by a set of norms and rules, depending on the source of power that generates authority. Position and title – whether formal or informal, official or inofficial – for instance, emphasise authority. Thus, it all boils down to the followers acceptance of the individual or individuals ability that makes leadership seems to be meaningful enough for one to appreciate.

Thirdly, cliche may it sounds, but nevertheless the traits or personality of a leader is in fact a contributing factor in fostering leadership. Leaders are people who are able to express themselves fully, know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others in order to gain their co-operation and support (Bennis, 1989). It may not be conclusive, but studies on leadership that emphasised on personality characteristics have nevertheless pointed out rightly that some persons or leaders are able to take the lead in very different situations. Thus, lists of personality traits were identified and refined which include attributes such as physical vitality, intelligence, understanding of followers and their needs, courage and resolution, assertiveness, capacity to motivate people, so on an so forth.

A prime minister is the leader of the whole nation. In general, there are many roles expected of him. At all time, he is expected to guide the people by setting himself as the role model. Is he a man of his words especially when it comes to realising the party's election menifesto? Is he able to initiate the necessary drive for the people to help him achieve what he wants for the good of the country? Does he has the ability to balance that delicate matters concerning issues which are deemed to be seen as highly sensitive in a multi-ethnic society like in Malaysia?[1]

Thus, not only he must have the ability to gain acceptance and support from his cabinet ministers and party members, but he must also be able to show his willingness to serve his followers and the entire people. He could display his leadership style either by saying it out clearly to the people – for example that he is a servant leader – or simply by displaying some sort of leadership process by showing his cabinet ministers ways of doing things.[2]

To do so, besides having certain skills – such as the ability to communicate and convince the people especially the cabinet ministers – he must also have goals or missions that are clearly visible and easily understood through his words and actions. As an example, making the objectives and missions clear and known to the people can be done effectively by consistent 'selling', 'telling' and 'persuading' the people about philosophies and principles that are close to their hearts, such as 'clean, efficient & trustworthy' and 'transparency & integrity'.

Since independent, Malaysia has had five prime ministers and experienced eleven general elections. All of the general elections were held according to shedule, that is once in every four

or five years. That Malaysia has never missed a scheduled general election testifies to how much this fundamental aspect of our democracy is cherished.[3]

Having discussed a few aspects of leadership, including the leadership of prime ministers in general, to compare each of the prime ministers in terms of their leadership style is probably the hardest decision to make. No matter how comprehensive the analysis is, to attach a particular style to a prime minister leadership is never conclusive for it is subjected to many interpretations relating to various factors such as the variables that can be considered most accurate, representable and as objective as possible. This limitation however, should not deter someone from analysing and eventually lable a style to a particular prime minister. Analyses of each of Malaysia's prime minister are plenty and varied. From time to time biographical series of the prime ministers are continuosly written and published, each time with new different insights and perspectives. Their styles of leading are continuously analysed and interpreted by various historians and writers. Thus, it is quite interesting to think critically about some analyses and generalisations that researchers and writers have made concerning leaders style and preference. Milne & Mauzy (1999:4) for instance stated that the first three leaders – Rahman, Razak and Hussein – had features in common, which were not shared by the fourth, Mahathir. As both the writers have observed,

"They (Rahman, Razak and Hussein) were all of noble birth, and Abdul Rahman, known to all affectionately as "the Tunku" was a prince of the Kedah royal family. All three studied law in England. All of them played golf, and all were administrators in the government service. Mahathir was also briefly in government service, but engaged in his profession of medicine."

Milne & Mauzy (1999:5) also remarked that leadership wise, Tunku Abdul Rahman 'found it easy to delegate; he did not believe in working too hard", while Tun Abdul Razak was said to have "*preached* delegation, he did not practise it himself."

Discussing further on the leadership of the prime ministers, Milne & Mauzy (1999:4) conclude that the leading role of Mahathir, as opposed to the others, can be best appreciated not by listing formal constitutional powers, but rather by considering the relative weakness of other institutions.

Consider the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak's analysis on leadership aspects of all prime Ministers of Malaysia. Referring Malaysia as a lucky country, Najib believes

that all the prime ministers have emerged at the right time of the country's history to steer Malaysia on the right path. Further he says that,

"All the five Prime Ministers have ascended to the helm of the political apex at times when it suited their presence."[4]

Figure 18 and 19 illustrate brief observation and analyses of Malaysia's prime Ministers leadership. The analyses may not be comprehensive and conclusive but nevertheless they are indeed useful and provide an alternative way of interpreting the leadership of Malaysia's prime ministers.

Figure 18 Najib's view on the leadership of Malaysia's Prime Ministers

Prime Minister	Najib's brief observation
Tunku Abdul Rahman	When the Tunku led the independence movement and subsequently became the first premier, his diplomatic skills being an Anglophile helped reassure the British that granting independence to Malaya was the right thing to do. "To be given freedom without bloodshed is far greater an achievement than with the spilling of blood over the flag of independence."
Tun Abdul Razak Hussein	He toiled the fields and put into place a major economic and societal reform – a reform that was to transform a community and a nation. "The father of Development was not only a visionary leader but a leader who had great empathy towards the people. He gave us hope and raised the stakes for all to be successful."
Tun Hussein Onn	He was needed to carry out the agenda that his predecessor had put into place. "He was the rightman for the job. Just imagine, if Malaysia had a leader who was ambitious for he could have merely dismantled this social and economic reform and replaced it with something else, thereby disrupting its implementation."
Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad	With the passing of a decade of the New Economic Policy, the country needed a leader who could elevate Malaysia's sense of achievement. Dr Mahathir was that man. "He was unique, for he was both a visionary and a man of action. He was an iconoclastic leader, someone who challenged prevailing ideas and beliefs."
Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi	Abdullah has become the country's fifth Prime Minister at a most significant period of the nation. With the increasing pressures of globalisation, stronger demands for a more open and transparent economy and business environment, Abdullah's rise to the top was timely."

Table 19 A brief comparison of the leadership of Malaysia's Prime Ministers

Unit of Analysis	Leader *	Brief analysis
Educational Background	PM1:	Bachelor of Arts (Law & History), Cambridge
	PM2:	University.
	PM3	Degree (Utter Barrister), Lincoln's Inn.
	PM4	English College, Johor Baru; Military Academy, India.
	PM5	King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore.
		B.A. (Hons.) Islamic Studies, University of Malaya.
Political Background	PM1:	Chairman, and later, President of UMNO.
	PM2:	Youth Chief of UMNO; Pahang's Chief Minister.
	PM3	First Youth Chief of UMNO; UMNO Secretary General; left UMNO in 1951 to join IMP; rejoin UMNO 1968; Education Minister; Deputy Prime Minister.
	PM4	Member of UMNO since inception (1946); elected MP in 1964; appointed Senator 1973; appointed Minister of Education 1974.
	PM5	Appointed Parliament Secretary to the Federal Territory; promoted to Deputy Minister of Education; Minister in Prime Minister's Department; Minister of Defence; Minister of Foreign Affairs; Deputy Prime Minister.
Political Ideology	PM1:	Secularism
	PM2:	Malay nationalism
	PM3	Some degree of nationalism
	PM4	Malay nationalism; some degree of administrative Islamisation; declared Malaysia as an Islamic State.
	PM5	Declared Islam *Hadhari* (Islam that is based on civilisation);
Leadership Style	PM1:	'Telling'; 'Delegating'; 'Laissez-faire;
	PM2:	'Visionary'; 'Selling'; 'Participative'
	PM3	'Delegating'; Laissez-faire
	PM4	'Charismatic'; 'Visionary'; 'Selling'; 'Autoritative';
	PM5	'Directive'
		'Participative'; 'Delegating'
Source of Leadership	PM1:	Became leader due to his aristocratic background.
	PM2:	Became leader when PM1 stepped down.

PM3   Became leader due to PM2 death.
PM4   Became leader when PM3 stepped down.
PM5   Became leader when PM4 stepped down.

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* PM1 = Tunku Abdul Rahman;
* PM2 = Tun Abdul Razak;
* PM3 = Tun Hussein Onn;
* PM4 = Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad;
* PM5 = Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi.

The success story of prime ministership in Malaysia testifies that the Malaysian political system i.e. in a Malay-Muslim polity needs a continuously strong alliance political organisation and culture that are sound and stable. It is true that all the prime ministers in Malaysia have been so successful. The late Tunku has been successful in achieving independent despite stern actions and challenges from every corner. As already have been indicated by a few scenarios, apart from being an Anglophile, Tunku's diplomatic skills helped reassure the British that granting independence to Malaya was the right thing to do. Tun Razak – a visionary and and had great empathy towards the people – has succeeded in transforming the nation by putting into place a major economic and societal reform. Tun Hussein Onn, the third premier, made no mistake in continuing the agenda that his predecessor had put into place. The twenty-two years of Tun Mahathir's administration saw the passing of a decade of the Tun Razak's New Economic Policy. He was seen as an iconoclastic leader who challenged prevailling ideas and beliefs. He is also remembered for his uniqueness, for he was both a visionary and a man of action. Malaysia at the moment is under the leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. Known for his humility and concern for people, Abdullah certainly has a lot of opportunities to rise to the occasions. And as the Deputy Prime Minister has said, "with the increasing pressures of globalisation, stronger

demands for a more open and transparetnt economy and business environment, Abdullah's rise

to the top was timely".[5]

END NOTES

[1] An excellent example is shown by the Prime Minister's decision – after a thorough discussion with his cabinet ministers – to withdraw the *Ethnic Relations* guidebook which at that time was used in one university. The book was said to be containing some 'overly-intepreted' issues relating to certain political parties' involvement in ethnic clashes in this country. Even though the book contains facts of history that, in the Prime Minister's own words, "...can never be changed, there is no need for us to hurl accusations at other races", decision was made, however, by the Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers to withdraw the book. *New Straits Times*, "Ethnic relations guidebook withdrawn", July 20, 2006, p.1.

[1] Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Hj Ahmad Badawi indicated that he is a servant-leader when he professed "Work with me, not for me. I am the No.1 servant of realm". *Sunday Star*, "Servant leaders are super leader", August 21, 2005.

[1] Rehman Rashid, "An election of hope and promise", *New Straits Times*, March 19, 2004, p.4.

[1] *New Straits Times*, "At the right time and the right place", September 21, 2005, p.6.

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