

## **Vaseehar Hassan: Feudalism And The Stifling Of The Malay Mind**

**AWANI REVIEW**

**07 March 2019**

In the financial and banking circle, Datuk Dr Vaseehar Hassan Abdul Razack is towering figure in the development of Islamic Finance in Malaysia.

He was the founding chairman of RHB Islamic Bank. Vaseehar also headed Saudi conglomerate Dallah Albaraka Holding's array of subsidiaries in Malaysia - among the many senior leadership positions and directorships he's held throughout his 30-year-banking career.

His vast experience in the corporate sector also led Vaseehar to develop a keen understanding and practices of leadership through psychodynamic approach - with a particular interest in understanding Malay political and business leadership qualities.

So, at age 60, Vaseehar took on a new challenge - he wrote a PHD thesis titled "The Malay Leadership Mystique" which was turned into a book.

At the age of sixty, I did a PHD on the topic and came up with a paper titled The Malay Leadership Mystique

"This was triggered primarily by Tun Dr Mahathir's speech at the Harvard Club of Malaysia in 2003 where he presented a paper on the New Malay Dilemma - criticising the Malays for failing to use the advantages extended to them by the National Economic Policy."

“I thought that I should do something and help contribute in this area. So, at the age of sixty, I did a PHD on the topic and came up with a paper titled The Malay Leadership Mystique.”

Vaseehar is now an executive coach at INSEAD Global Leadership Center and a Senior Associate at the Ket de Vries Institute where he aims to help develop effective leaders, be it at the business or government spheres.

“I actually planned my transition from being a banker to become a trainer, with the aim to help the society,” says Vaseehar.

The Malay leadership, he views, is truly paradoxical. While its political leadership had been successful in leading a young nation to economic success, the same kind of leadership falls short in business pursuits - so much so that Malays had for many years been seen as incapable of becoming good businessmen or professionals.

However, he stresses that we can't be too quick to criticise without understanding the historical and cultural contexts of Malay leadership where the lacking in business or entrepreneurship skills is attributed to insufficient experience and appropriate training.

AWANI Review sat down with Vaseehar to get an analysis on the various aspects on Malay leadership.

### On Malay Political Leadership and UMNO

“Since independence, Malays have depended on UMNO for their political survival and guidance. Therefore, UMNO and Malay leadership is almost synonymous,” says Vaseehar.

He views that UMNO has done well is charting the growth of Malaysia until the 14th General Elections, but the party has been faced with a 'dearth of leadership'.

"We have been proud on how the leadership brought Malaysia to greater success. But for the first time in Malaysian history, a major embarrassment happened to the Malay political leadership."

"The fact that we had to resort to Tun Mahathir coming back to lead the nation at 93 is glaring proof there a leadership vacuum in the country. Even the Council of Eminent Persons are all above the age of sixty."

"That shows that we have not cultivated enough leaders in the political arena to take over because the young government also suffers from lack of good leadership as most of them lack experience. So, we have a real challenge for the future of Malay leadership."

### **On Feudalism and Malay Leadership**

While often whispered in hush tones, even in academic circles, Vaseehar lays bare the uncomfortable trait of feudalism deeply rooted in Malay history the led to the mentality of subservience, patronage and dependency.

The tendency to be overly respectful to a beneficent master grants those at the top – which in modern day Malaysia translates into an political leadership , omnipotent leaders always armed with a basket of goodies to divvy up and shower upon the masses.

During the interview, Vaseehar cites Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede's Power Distance Index that measures how much a culture values hierarchical relationships and respect for authority.

A higher power distance indicates the people are more likely to conform to hierarchy, accept, even expect, that power is distributed unequally. Malaysia tops the index.

We ask Vaseehar on the significance of a strong Malay political leadership in a multi-ethnic Malaysian society. UMNO, by far, is still the strongest party to fill the 'Malay leadership' void.

There's no other party strong enough to be a competitor to UMNO. For the last several generations, UMNO and Malay leadership is ingrained as one and it is not easy to undo that.

"There's no other party strong enough to be a competitor to UMNO. For the last several generations, UMNO and Malay leadership is ingrained as one and it is not easy to undo that. That is why you have a large segment (of Malays) who still believe that UMNO should be the party leading Malaysia."

"Maybe with the exception of the more urban and well-educated Malays - even so, who are quite divided. This is all attributed to the Malay culture," says Vaseehar.

He says any attempt to put in place policies espousing 'true equality' is only achievable when the Malays perceive there is an economic parity among all races.

The majority of Malays cling on to the notion that 'Nusantara' - and that includes Malaysia - is their land and they, the sons of the soil or bumiputera. That status means nothing if other races - seen as mere 'guests' or pendatang - usurp their status by dominating; if not professionally; then certainly economically.

Vaseehar adds, while the New Economic Policy (NEP) created many prosperous Malays, the huge majority feel a sense of angst and neglect as they are no more than mere bystanders.

“The NEP succeeded - as far as bringing professional Malays to the forefront is concerned. We have more doctors, engineers and bankers in good numbers.”

“The failure came in creating Bumiputera entrepreneurs and business people,” says Vaseehar.

“That happened when the elites ‘hijacked’ NEP to enrich themselves while the larger Malay population was not given the real help, to build up entrepreneurship.”

“A lot of the Malays, whom the government gave assistance too, were not successful too,” and this, says Vaseehar is the failure of the government to recognise that creating capable business leaders is an adaptive challenge, not a technical one that can merely be solved by providing the Malays with licenses and finance.

On Malay Leadership in Business and the Corporate Sector

Through his research, Vaseehar hopes, not only to help the Malays to address past failures, but also become adaptive to new challenges.

“This is one way I can give back to society is to train Malays to be better leaders.”

“For the last 60 years , if you look at the economic and political growth and stability of Malaysia, many people would agree that we have done well compared to many other countries that got their independence around the same time.”

The failure came in creating Bumiputera entrepreneurs and business people

“But the important thing now is for the future generation. I am very worried about the future of Malaysia. We have come a successful nation but we are now lagging behind. Other countries are catching up.”

He says it is time Malay leaders to ditch the inscriptive culture in Malaysia and take on a merit and achievement-based attitude. The Malays, he says, need exposure to world-class education that can help improve their business acumen. They must also not fear the English language.

“The notion that ‘if we bring back English (in schools), the Malay will suffer’ is a myth,” says Vaseehar.

“Young children in Europe speak three to four languages. So, what is the problem? If we start them early, they’ll be able to manage. It is just our fear that if we teach them English, they will forget Malay. That is not correct.”

**Copyright © 2018 Astro Awani Network Sdn. Bhd. All rights reserved.**

Source: <https://www.awanireview.com/articles/2019/03/07/news/vaseehar-hassan-feudalism-and-the-stifling-of-the-malay-mind-610/>