

Musa on Management & Leadership

by Nazatul Izma

Tan Sri Musa Hitam critiques the country... and himself.

He may no longer be in the top tier of government, but Tan Sri Musa Hitam - Malaysia's fifth Deputy Prime Minister - is still widely sought after for his critical comments on just about any sub-

ject under the sun.

Politics and leadership are of course perennial hot topics for this United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) legend. But he is also quizzed on subjects outside his purview, "like the ringgit peg," he laughs wryly.

Tan Sri Musa Hitam has vivid memories of his ex-bosses, who include most of Malaysia's former Prime Ministers. Musa describes Tunku Abdul Rahman as "very easygoing", Tun Razak as "very focused and very serious", Tun Hussein Onn as "doubly serious and very intense" and Tun Mahathir as "a no-nonsense manager who is stubborn and full of conviction." The current Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is a personal friend, is "genuine, good-hearted and sincere."

Of all his bosses, Musa's style is probably closest to Tunku Abdul Rahman's. Musa describes his leadership and management style as "being relaxed, because I believe in making people calm. It is not apathy, but promoting a serene state of mind so others too feel



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relaxed.” Musa also subscribes to the therapy of laughter. “There was plenty of laughter on the job. But that’s because I believe that messages can be conveyed clearly through laughter.” In fact, he got quite a lot of work done as a civil servant, in the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), and in different ministerial portfolios, such as education, home affairs and primary industries, thanks to his imperturbable approach.

This relaxed stance has come in especially handy during emergencies. Musa is proudest, he says, of his handling of the crisis in Baling in 1974, where mass demonstrations against low rubber prices could have erupted into bloody riots. Heart thudding but outwardly calm, the then-Primary Industries Minister waded through the throng to a makeshift pulpit to address the disenfranchised farmers and students. In a gesture of confidence, he waved aside his bodyguards and the red-helmeted policemen, which did not make them happy. “They thought I was going to get killed! But it was the right move. The crowds dispersed peacefully after I outlined to them a line of action to be taken.”

He kept his word. Musa was credited with implementing key support measures, such as purchasing smallholders’ output at higher-than-market prices and building up the domestic rubber stockpile. At the international level, Malaysia played a key role in promoting stockpile arrangements for primary commodities.

But he has not always found an amicable solution. The November 1985 Memali incident - which resulted in the deaths of 18 Muslim extremists from government bullets - is a black episode in Malaysian history, blotting Musa’s record since he was in charge after the Prime Minister decided to go ahead with his official visit to China. Memali

is frequently cited as the *raison d’être* for Musa’s resignation from Mahathir’s cabinet in 1986. Then in 1987, he teamed up with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in an attempt to unseat the UMNO incumbents in the party elections. Despite the failed “coup,” he and Mahathir are still “good friends, even though we don’t see eye-to-eye on many issues.”

These contentious issues include human rights, which are anathema to Mahathir and a key concern for the liberal Musa, who was instrumental in the formation of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission or SUHAKAM and was also the former head of the Malaysian delegation to the United

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Nations Commission on Human Rights. “I wanted to raise the level of local awareness about human rights, sensitise Malaysians to human rights, and I think that we have achieved that goal,” he says.

Musa also argues that promoting human rights – not only political rights but also people’s economic rights and welfare – could be a potent tool in combating modern terrorism. In fact, he says that Western governments today could learn valuable lessons from Malaysia’s earlier battle against communists, which paralleled this era’s war on terrorism. “We were the earliest country in the world to deal with terrorists and produce the right effect,” says Musa,

citing a three-pronged approach of providing economic, military and psychological support that helped win the hearts and minds of the people.

Poverty is the root cause of terrorism and economics is the key; “By improving the lot of the rural people, which included the rural Chinese, we minimised the infiltration of the communists.”

In fact, Musa’s very first job as a civil servant was to dig wells to provide precious water and to help build up other village infrastructure. “I had to calculate how many lorry loads of laterite it took to build miles of roads into the villages. We built clinics, health centres, cleared drains, and did rural development.”

But Malaysia’s tactics against communist “subversives” also involved muzzling the press and incarceration without trial, which ran contrary to the conventional ideals of human rights and provoked international outrage. “Since a communist takeover was a threat to national security and interest, we invoked acts such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and, The Printing Presses & Publication Act 1984, which are justified within the context of a parliamentary democracy. These are acts of Parliament, not done by decree, and Parliament was elected by the people at the ballot box,” explains Musa. After decades of condemning Malaysia’s undemocratic ISA, the West now employs “worse measures like the Patriot Act and pre-emptive strikes, unashamedly and unapologetically. What we did was a picnic compared to what they are doing now,” insists Musa.

But human rights are not the only subject that Musa feels strongly about. His opinions are frequently solicited on fundamental issues such as unity and education, which is understandable given his background as an education minister in the seventies.

The two are intertwined; rewiring the

education system could help tackle the problem of race relations at the roots. Schools and universities now are highly polarised, with Bumiputeras dominating the mediocre public institutions while non-Bumis prefer private schools or the challenging Chinese-medium schools. Addressing the quality issue at national

Reports. Isn't it time for fresh research?" asks Musa. In 1960, then Education Minister Abdul Rahman Talib chaired an education review committee that produced a comprehensive report of the education system, which in turn is the basis for the Education Act 1961.

Further up the education food chain,



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schools could lure all the races together once again, like in the nostalgic sixties.

Quality cannot be achieved through new ad-hoc policies, such as a national homework policy or the reinstatement of English for math and science or the "smartening" of schools through technology. Instead, Musa says the national education system needs to go back to basics. "The National Education Policy was formulated nearly fifty years ago based on the Razak & Rahman Talib

public and state universities and colleges also need a renaissance in quality. Paraphrasing Musa, most are degree mills catering to the Malay desire for that piece of paper. The problem of unskilled graduates could be a powderkeg for future unity as underqualified Bumiputeras cannot contribute to the goals of affirmative action or the New Economic Policy (NEP), which wants each race to have an equitable share of the economic pie.

Now that he is out of government, his words are purely advisory and cautionary. Does he regret that he could have shaped this country differently and perhaps in a more liberal mould if he hadn't walked away? "I am happier that I never made Prime Minister. I have personal satisfaction, and meaning

if I commit sins?" Such a value system entrenches corruption and lack of accountability, but Musa credits Abdullah Badawi with trying to restore integrity and honour.

As a member of the old guard, which prizes merit, Musa disdains sinecures. "Whenever there is an offer of a job, I



in my life. Besides, I think that you should opt out if you cannot play your role effectively, not just be *sabar* (patient) and warm your seat."

Not many people uphold the principle of merit anymore, especially those in government and politics. Instead, loyalty takes precedence. When those in power surround themselves with yes-men and sycophants, integrity and accountability take a back seat. "In the old days, the leaders used to assign us to recruit new talents, and the foremost criteria would be "Can he work and serve (the rakyat and the nation)?" recounts Musa. "Then money politics seeped in and the criterion was, "*Dia ini boleh percaya ke?* Can he be trusted to support me till death do us part even

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will take it only if I can do the job, I enjoy the job, and I am compensated." His immense talents are now channeled into (some would say wasted on) corporate work – as the hands-on chairman of Guthrie Berhad and Lion Industries Corporation Berhad - and numerous speaking engagements. At 70, Musa also says he is thinking of "winding down." Now, in the autumn of his life, the world will never know whether the man journalists dubbed the "best Prime Minister that Malaysia never had" could really have delivered the goods. ■