

Leadership

Without Laurels

Management caught a glimpse of Tan Sri Musa Hitam's unpretentious but resolute leadership stance as he proffered some candid views on leadership and a few contemporary management issues.

He was Deputy Prime Minister from 1981 to 1986, former heir apparent to the nation's top leadership post. An erudite speaker and customarily silent protagonist, the subtly assertive Tan Sri Musa Hitam has been recognised as an "internationally regarded elder statesman" and "social savant", among other tributes. Indeed, he has comported himself well in the face of crises, and although he continues to serve unassumingly from the sidelines, Tan Sri Musa is one leader whom few can afford to conscientiously sideline.

Today, at 71, Tan Sri Musa still cuts a regal figure with his quick retorts and agile grace. Ever the self-confessed consummate journal reader, Tan Sri Musa presents his unapologetic, apolitical review of our nation's leadership, interspersing his observations with anecdotes and themes that have some bearing on the nation's direction.

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Leader as a servant

Tan Sri Musa finds the concept of servant-leadership very applicable to our society, especially if one appreciates the spirit of the parliament system in which a leader is appointed and elected by the people. Such a leader is appointed and elected simply because the people expect their leader to serve them; thus in that sense, the leader is a servant of the people.

Observing that our current Prime Minister has espoused servant-leadership and has reflected the spirit of “we are here to serve the people”, Tan Sri Musa philosophically reflects on the contrast between leadership in developed and developing societies:

“Firstly, I do believe that in developed societies, leaders are led whereas in developing societies, leaders really lead. In developed societies, public opinion is expressed in the broadest terms that cover every aspect of society. And a leader sieves through these and understand these, and it is their peer pressure that guides them to the direction of their leadership. In other words, it’s bottom up.”

On the other hand, Tan Sri Musa argues that in a developing society, there is generally a lower level of education with a greater distribution of people living in remote areas, engendering society at large to experience different levels of development, which results in the existence of an elite class that is flanked by a very small middle class but a huge lower class. As such, he perceives these masses of people to be in a situation that requires a leader to lead them, inferring that, “...leaders in a developing society are expected to be educated enough, to be experienced enough; and that feeling of trust and belief in the capability of a leader in a developing society is much higher than that of a developed society.”

Relating the above to Malaysia, Tan Sri Musa notes that when Malaysia first became independent, the majority of Malaysians, particularly the Malay or Bumiputera community, had been conservative, feudal and traditional, predisposing them to be wholly dependent on the leadership that was created in that environment of newly found independence.

Premiership – from past to present

In Tan Sri Musa’s analysis, the prevailing mentality after Merdeka was that whatever Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Father of Independence, said was right. But after the incident on 13 May 1969, the people started questioning Tunku’s leadership.

This paved the way for the next leader, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, also an aristocrat. Again, the leader-is-always-right mentality abounded. Tan Sri Musa offers the reason behind this phenomenon:

“Because it was presumed to be that leaders knew best. And among the people, the level of education and exposure to democratic principles and the concepts of development in general had been very simplistic and simple. The people depended on the leaders to invent, to create, to innovate and

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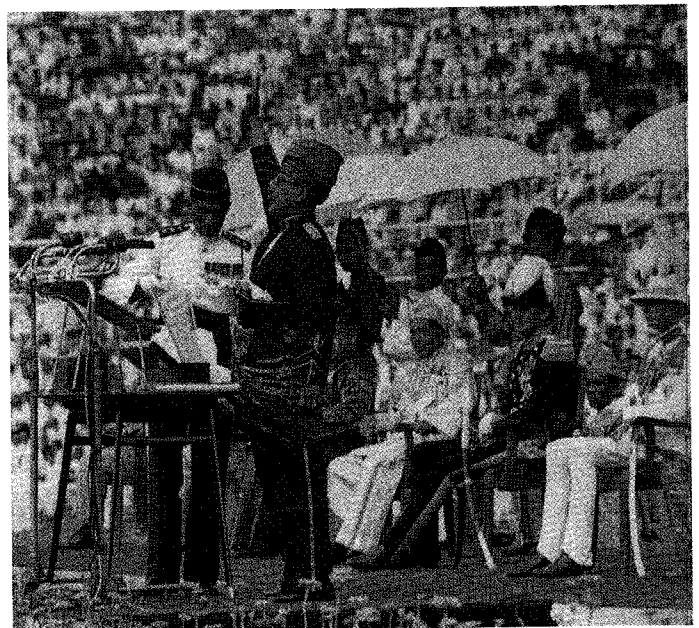
Razak provided that with his emphasis on rural development - the benefit to the rural people in terms of giving them education, giving them health services and simple infrastructure development. So, they looked up to the leader, almost unquestioningly.”

Following this, Tun Hussein Onn, the “perfect Malay gentleman”, came into office. He was also looked upon as THE man - Hussein Onn, the son of Onn Ja’afar - characterising clever, elite leadership. Tan Sri Musa sums up Malaysia’s first three leaders as elitists whom their followers were wholly dependent on.

Next, there was a discernable change when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over. Mahathir was, as Tan Sri Musa describes, a commoner just like Tan Sri Musa himself. With sheer strength of character and determination, Mahathir asserted himself so much so that one could hardly regard Mahathir’s brand of leadership as servant-leadership. Without elaborating further on Mahathir’s leadership style, Tan Sri Musa reiterates that it was through such sheer strength of character that Mahathir had brought the country to where it is now, with Dato’ Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeding him at the helm today.

Tan Sri Musa recapitulates, “I feel that we’ve been lucky in this country in the sense that every time there’s a change in

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leadership, it seems in a way to be even timely, I dare say. Look at Tunku Abdul Rahman; he was in power for 10-12 years and to me that were very long. And I along with Dr Mahathir was trying to get him out. We in the end did with a price that, in the meantime, we were

ousted. But then that was part of the political process... Then Razak came. Razak did the "right" thing [but was] short-lived and then Hussein Onn came. Hussein Onn, I thought, was a man who sort of toned down the whole psyche of the nation – you know, take-it-easy sort of thing. And then Mahathir came with this very rapid-fire, idea oriented, strong leadership."

In stark contrast after 22 years, Dato' Seri Abdullah brings with him, as Tan Sri Musa puts it, a sense of "soothingness" to the community. Dato' Seri Abdullah has emerged as a man of

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the people, entrusted by the people and the party to lead - a man who with his usual modesty and humility, declares that he is here to serve. Recapping his previous description of the difference between leadership in developed and developing societies, Tan Sri Musa points out that Malaysia, as far as representative government is concerned, now seems to be entering the developed country status, where after over two decades of Tun Dr Mahathir's type of government, we now have Dato' Seri Abdullah saying, "Yes, say the things you like; express yourself."

Tan Sri Musa hastens to add that it is up to society to decide upon the limits of how to handle this newfound openness through trials and tests. He observes, "So you now have a proliferation of activities where the Press seems to be more open, there seems to be less fear or intimidation. This sort of spirit comes from the top, yet the top says ‘I am serving you but in order for me to serve you, I must listen to you.’ This whole spirit of openness and transparency seems to get down very fast to the lower levels."



Past Malaysian Prime Ministers: Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He anticipates that over the next few months, people will begin to feel more confident and more relaxed, but yet they have to be very careful because freedom comes with responsibility. The acid test, Tan Sri Musa believes, is in how people ultimately react to the servant-leadership of Dato' Seri Abdullah – if people get "bored" or lack discipline or abuse it, then trouble looms ahead.

The role of Islam Hadhari

Qualifying that he is not an ideologist in Islam, Tan Sri Musa states what he perceives to be the simple rationale behind the present leadership's promotion of *Islam Hadhari*: that after September 11, Islam was inadvertently linked to extremism, intolerance, terrorism and all their associated vices. Consequently, profiling of Muslims and anything Islam by certain quarters ensued, whereas in reality, those involved in extremism and terrorism represent a very minute minority of the Muslim community throughout the world.

To Tan Sri Musa's mind, the spirit of *Islam Hadhari* is one of a modern relevant religion that is tolerant, moderate and adaptable to a multiracial society like Malaysia as well as a globalised world of different religions - one that believes and strives for modernisation. Thus in relation to business, one



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Tan Sri Musa Hitam listens as Dato' Ng Tieh Chuan poses a question.

should conduct business by adapting to modern ways, which is the main reason why the World Islamic Economic Forum was instituted recently, dispelling past notions of Islam that had been narrowly equated with merely the spiritual rather than with an economic or business orientation.

Tan Sri Musa further explains that the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) as a collection of states had given the impression, whether rightly or wrongly, that it was mainly interested in the promotion of the spiritual aspect of Islam as such, paying less attention to economic matters. However, the OIC under the leadership of Malaysia has slowly but surely tried to steer out of that stereotyped thinking, a move which concurs with the concept of *Islam Hadhari*. Therefore, since it is Malaysia and the Prime Minister who have championed *Islam Hadhari*, Tan Sri Musa finds it appropriate to hold the inauguration of the World Islamic Economic Forum (WIEF) as an indirect demonstration of what is meant by *Islam Hadhari*.

Management and leadership credo

When it comes to business corporations, Tan Sri Musa believes that established businessmen and managers are not interested in being bogged down by committees and passing resolutions. Tangible results are more important. As in the WIEF, Tan Sri Musa fails to see the rationale behind drafting a resolution which is typical of other resolutions that have been passed before.

Practising what he preaches, Tan Sri Musa has ensured that the WIEF crafted just a two-page, two-sector resolution; and despite forming three task forces he is prepared to do away with projects being looked into by the task forces, should they prove impractical. Moreover, Tan Sri Musa subscribes to the credo of being realistic, getting things done step-by-step rather than starting off with a bang and fizzling out at the end.

Competitiveness

Tan Sri Musa believes that it is not only the government-linked corporations (GLCs) that need to be competitive - anybody and any organisation must strive to be competitive, be they Muslims or Malays, GLCs or private companies. Perhaps, as

“... you are not a welfare organisation; you are here to make profits. That is, if you don't make profits then I'll close [you] down. It's common sense.”...

Tan Sri Musa reasons, too many people now have high expectations of GLCs; yet GLCs should not get involved in any project simply because the “Prime Minister has said so”. It should be that the project is voluntarily undertaken based on economic viability.

As the Chairman of a GLC himself, Tan Sri Musa declines to elaborate at length but adds that there has always been a tendency towards a government bureaucratic spillover effect in GLCs. These GLCs tend to be bureaucratic in the sense that they become overcautious, non-risk taking, non-proactive and more reactive. Nevertheless, our Prime Minister who is looking into GLCs afresh has put across a number of demands that aim to make GLCs change and become competitive.

Understandably, Tan Sri Musa is somewhat skeptical of the piles of rules, regulations and papers as guidelines since such guidelines are only beneficial inasmuch as they are being followed and practised. To him, practice is what counts - management has to be intelligently executed with an understanding of the objective of efficiency towards productivity and profitability; otherwise, one should not get involved in business. During his term as Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Musa was legendarily famed for closing down some state agencies that were found to be unprofitable.

Principled leadership

Tan Sri Musa is not coy about his cynicism of the previous leadership while acknowledging some cynicism even for the present leadership. As a former politician who spoke up against the previous administration, he believes he had left due to his principles, without fear of losing his stature as a consequence. Nevertheless, he clarifies that his cynicism is not borne out of vindictiveness.

While Tan Sri Musa regards his ability to speak up as his strength, some critics might interpret it as a weakness - an inability to successfully engage in politics without being ousted. He points out other leaders who had also resigned, notably, Tun Ismail and Hussein Onn.

In upholding principled leadership, Tan Sri Musa is unimpressed by success that is based on how close one is to certain people; on the contrary, it should be service motivation

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Down memory lane with Dato' Seri Abdullah

In concluding the interview, *Management* probes the relationship between Tan Sri Musa and Dato' Seri Abdullah. Tan Sri Musa nostalgically traces how his relationship with Dato' Seri Abdullah began. The former had started politics as the political secretary to the then Minister of Transport, Dato' (Tun) Sardon. At that time, Dato' Sardon was the UMNO Youth Leader with Haji Ahmad Badawi as his Deputy. Because of this, Tan Sri Musa had the opportunity to visit the family home of Dato' Seri Abdullah's father in Penang often enough.

Eventually, Tan Sri Musa got to know Dato' Seri Abdullah

“...If you want to be global and respected, you have to be of world quality.” ...

even better when they were both involved in the Malay Students' Association or *Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung* (GPMS). However, it was their tenure in politics that drew them even closer; the apex of which was when both were involved in the sub-group of a dissident group. They had shared the same aspirations as Tun Razak – very pro-poor, very pro-*kampung*, very conscious of what people say and sensitive towards the demands and wishes of the ordinary folks. Despite their friendship and shared sentiments, Tan Sri Musa denies that he is an advisor to the Prime Minister since, “...he has many more capable people to advise him.”

And so where the fabled Hercule Poirot would say, “Elementary, my dear Watson”, our very present Tan Sri Musa would say, “It's common sense.” □

rather than loyalty motivation that determines success. In his own experience, Tan Sri Musa finds that if he as a corporate leader is not transparent and is dictatorial, then everybody would try to get promoted by always being nice to him. He has also come across officers in the civil service and employees in the corporate sector who would say “Yes” to him even before he had completed his sentence. There is also a tendency for people to tell him what they think he, as Chairman, wants to hear. Whereas, Tan Sri Musa upholds the principle of allowing his people to give frank feedback on his ideas – after all, no business can survive based on “yes-manship” as opposed to productivity and profitability.

Tan Sri Musa at MIM



1997: Tan Sri Musa Hitam with Datuk Dr Paddy Bowie at the “Leaders vs Managers - The Pathway to Development” colloquium at Sunway.



1998: Tan Sri Musa Hitam with Dr Tarcisius Chin at the Chief Executives' Lunch in Johor Bahru.