

Is servant-leadership rooted in Islamic values? What more remains to be written that may be considered unique in itself? Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas offers some insight on the genesis of servant-leadership and contemplates the extent to which our Government has exemplified such leadership.

Servant Leadership: Reflections on Genesis and Significance to Our Leadership

When I was invited to write a brief essay concerning the Prime Minister, I was informed that the theme of this current publication would revolve around the idea of servant-leadership. Perhaps this theme was the result of an amalgamation of catchy slogans akin to those of the order of “come work with me”, “a sense of accountability”, et cetera. On the one hand, I have always found slogans of this nature to be just that - slogans. The nature of the slogan is generally intended to instill a kind of amorous fervour, temporal in itself, fleeting, accompanied by a flood of words with hardly a drop of reason. It is also the nature of the slogan where one finds its proponents to be skilled in the art of polishing the apple, never pausing to consider the value of the fruit itself.

What was it that was required of me? I was never one considered skilled in the art of flattery, nor perhaps am I one capable of elegantly portrayed narratives complete with a complement of literary wit. Perhaps one may preface by saying that much of the flattery and unabashed or shameless praise is not a new phenomenon. I have previously explained elsewhere that throughout history, descriptions of the times were frequently exaggerated to suit the powers that held sway.

In explaining this salient feature, I have often made reference to the period of the Thousand and One Nights. It is my contention that one may indeed refer to this period as the exotic paradigm, in large part due to the descriptions contained in those narratives, complete with unabashed flattery and entertaining wit. However, the reality, which I have previously referred to as the paradigm of patronage, was an uneasy symbiosis between artist and court patron. The artist was essentially at the mercy, whims and good graces of his patron. Depending on the latter's humours, the former was either held in high esteem or was banished to the point of destitution, or worse.

Conversely, the skill of the artist or literary man was such that he saw opportunity in shameless flattery. This is

frequently the case with modern Malaysian writers, who claim to resort to fits of “poetic genius” in order that his patron's purse strings be relaxed or that a favour be granted simply by clever manipulation, flattery and an acute sense of his patron's shortcomings, or more precisely his vanities, which the writer would then use to his favour. Then there is the ideal paradigm, a phase where there was mutual respect between the learned and patron, not simply due to monetary incentive but rather an actual concerted effort to advance the cause of learning.

Is the current modern Muslim world comparable to the period of the Thousand and One Nights? If we are referring to the intellectual dynamism which punctuated that period, then the answer must be “no”. Indeed, it was this intellectual dynamism which behaved as a sort of catalyst wielded to enrich the culture and advance the civilisation. On the other hand, if our question refers to the paradigmatic stages alluded to earlier, one may indeed affirm the fact that these stages are cyclical in nature, dependant upon the intellectual and spiritual conditions of man.

Has there been an exotic paradigm in recent Malayan history? Perhaps the period which defined the Malacca Sultanate may be referred to as the exotic paradigm. What about the paradigm of patronage? Certainly one may draw similarity between the periods prior to and immediately following the establishment of the United Malays

favour appears to have been granted dependent upon the stature of the apple and the skill of the polisher. Conversely, those who have tasted the fruit itself and have resolved to preserve its contents have largely been ignored. Is this indicative of a culture referred to as that of servant-leadership?

Inspiration for servant-leadership

When one refers to the idea of servant-leadership, who does one typically emulate? In the West, this idea has been forever enshrined within the preamble of “democracy” and cloaked with an apparent sanctity of ethical and moral responsibility. Today, the West pride themselves as being the defenders of freedom and fulfillment. Whence have they drawn inspiration? Surely not the Western worldview because it is one where its fundamental elements are not derived from religion but rather from the passage of scientific discovery throughout history. Was it not their disillusionment with religion which led to the theory of twofold truth and subsequently the separation of church and state?

Unfortunately, the most conspicuous problem as a result of this dichotomy was the problem of knowledge because a conviction resulting from one could form a necessary preliminary attack on the other. So how did the idea of servant-leadership manage to permeate the very system which guarantees preservation of

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National Organisation. The uneasy and often tumultuous relationship between the colonialist government and the local population, and between the ill advised and often times selfish monarchy and the proponents of freedom and independence, Dato' Onn Ja'afar in particular, testified to this fact. In recent history, the paradigm of patronage has become more pronounced. Political

the aforementioned dichotomy? Whence are those ethical and moral principles which form the cornerstone of responsibility derived, if not from religion? If the principal foundations of the idea of servant-leadership in the West are built upon the conviction that all mankind is created equal, and that one man's interests are no more important than those of society, then one may

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conclude that a religious element lingers. Nevertheless, a conviction in the unity of mankind, the notion of justice and responsibility are all elements fundamental to Islam, derived from the holy Qur'an and the prophetic Traditions, which then form the basis of the worldview itself.

In the Muslim world, if one were to examine the genesis of this notion of servant-leadership, one cannot casually overlook the example of the prophet Muhammad. One may indeed claim that he was the first political leader of a Muslim State. It was he who established the general guidelines and laws pertaining to the administration of that State. It was

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he who brought a diplomatic solution to the festering tensions and harboured animosities between the people of Makkah (*Muhajirun*) and Madinah (*Ansar*). He cared for his flock and astutely defended their interests. Whenever there was a job to be completed or a mosque to be built, he did not consider it beneath him to carry the bricks himself. These are but a few examples of his exemplary leadership. But when it comes to the notion of “servant”, one example comes to mind more than any other. It was well known that apart from fulfilling his personal obligations with regard to prayer, the prophet would always perform additional prayers. Some of his companions were mystified. Why would the prophet perform extra prayers? After all was he not a prophet assured of paradise? The prophet, upon being asked these questions replied that it was precisely because he was a prophet that he should be the servant (*abd*) to continually thank God. Such was the character of the prophet Muhammad.

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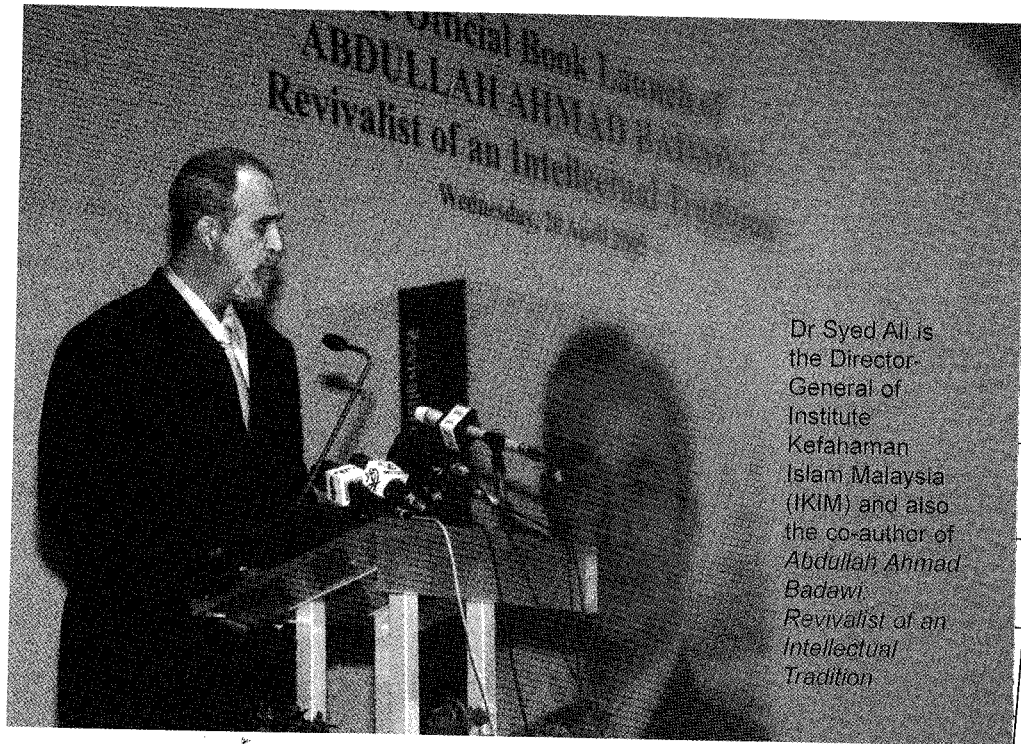
Servant-leadership in the Government

If one were to question the legitimacy of the present government's claim of practising a servant-leadership approach, then does the Prime Minister exemplify the aforementioned Islamic approach? Has he put the concerns of the population before his own? Certainly with regard to both the queries, one may say that indeed he has. With the introduction

of his political approach referred to as the “hadhari approach”, he has attempted to once again reinvigorate and unite the Muslims punctuated by a revival of dynamic intellectualism. Far from being a “new religion”, his approach is neither a new teaching nor is it a new denomination (*madhhab*). It is an effort directed towards understanding the present age within the framework of religion. Therefore, emphasis is placed upon the correct understanding of

religion and not upon religion itself. This understanding requires correct definition guided by the tenets of religion and aided by reason.

Consequently, the task of correctly defining and elucidating the finer points of this approach falls upon the learned (*ulama*), whereas the task of implementing a culture of servant-leadership, punctuated by a thorough comprehension and subsequent manifestation of its character, falls upon the elected representatives of government. It is they who must ultimately exemplify the character and philosophy of the Prime Minister. It is they who should lead by example. Whether or not this is being instilled remains to be seen. □



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