

MAHATHIR'S PARADIGM SHIFT

The Man
Behind
the Vision



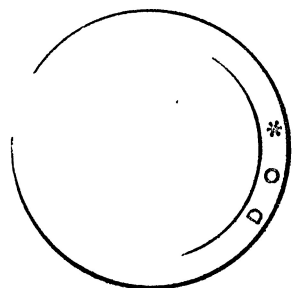
AZIZ ZARIZA AHMAD



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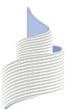


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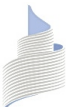
THROUGH successive trials and tribulations of his well-charted course in life, of which he has managed to weather all storms, Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has emerged as an utterly indispensable leader in steering the country's course through the threshold of the 21st century. To his flock comprising Malaysians from all walks of life, he has always stressed on the need for willingness to accept changes for a better life. However, the changes advocated by him in his dynamic stewardship of the country are not the hasty and ill-planned ones as adopted, for example, in Mikhail Gorbachev's doomed *Perestroika* or *Glasnost*, but rather akin to the effective modernisation programme introduced by China's Deng Xiaoping to his most populous country in the world. Both Mahathir and Deng are notable leaders from the Far East in their own times and, whether wittingly or unwittingly, have subscribed to the Eastern concept of gradual improvement as manifested in the Japanese *kaizen* principle. In its essence, such philosophy calls for "improvement to come not in one great leap but by a succession of continuous little steps".

Whether we realise it or not, most of us East Asians have long held principles of such sort. Taken in isolation, each of the moves taken by Mahathir throughout his political career might seem just like certain re-

MAHATHIR'S PARADIGM SHIFT

sponses to particular developments. However, the unswerving consistency of his conviction and steadfastness in the face of various challenges cannot but help convince most observers that he really is serious about bringing about a paradigm shift, as opposed to a quantum leap.

Aziz Zariza Ahmad



C H A P T E R 1

MAHATHIR'S POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY

DR Mahathir Mohamad's leadership is a topic of continuing discussion and study. He has adopted a different leadership pattern from his predecessors, one not easily understood by the people.

Tunku Abdul Rahman's leadership geared the Malays towards independence to free themselves from the hold of the colonialists. Thus, all forces were combined to achieve that particular objective. Tunku Abdul Rahman's struggle was not questioned. With the objective of the struggle clear, the people stood united, giving their undivided support to his leadership until Malaya, now Malaysia, achieved independence.

Similarly, when Tun Abdul Razak succeeded the Tunku, his emphasis on development was accepted by the people, particularly his concern for rural development. The Tun Abdul Razak era is popularly known as the era of development.

The tenure of Tun Hussein Onn involved no marked innovations or policy changes. It was a continuity of efforts initiated by his predecessor, Tun Abdul Razak.

When Mahathir took over the national leadership, however, he emerged not only a well-prepared leader but also an ambitious one. Innovative and often radical policies were implemented with such urgency

and rapidity that many could not fully grasp his style of functioning. This caused confusion regarding the aspirations and policies of the Mahathir administration.

Mahathir's leadership philosophy is that each individual should have his own ideas and the ability to realise them. He has emerged a progressive leader with his own vision. He is more concerned with the success of the government he leads than with personal politicking. For him, his colleagues and followers have an important role as participants in policy implementation and planning at their respective levels.

Mahathir's political career began in 1964 when as a Member of Parliament he demonstrated great political acumen. His youthful enthusiasm was evident in his speeches which dwelt on the nation and national leadership. There was a time when his opinions were in conflict with those of the party leadership, resulting in his temporary expulsion from UMNO. Among his bitter experiences was defeat at the hands of an opposition candidate in the contest for a parliamentary seat. His mixed political fortunes in the initial stages of his career have moulded him into what he is today.

Although he sometimes appears arrogant and cynical, Mahathir's leadership actually combines a tremendous amount of self-confidence and firmness. He displays characteristics quite different from the traditional Malay or even Malaysian leader in several respects. One is his bluntness. Even as a young government backbencher he spoke his mind frankly on issues. This forthrightness is evident even today.

There are times when his speeches and actions seem to lack diplomacy, suggesting that the man does not give importance to interpersonal relationships. He never demands respect and at the same time does not show appreciation easily. As a consequence, many close to him harbour feelings of frustration and fear, worrying whether he approves of their performances. The truth is, those close to him will vouch that Mahathir is appreciative. In fact, he has an extraordinary sensitivity, awareness and ability which do not reveal themselves easily. Part of the reason lies in the fact that Mahathir is an intensely patriotic and nationalistic Malay and

Malaysian leader. He is impatient for his people to attain prosperity and success in every facet of their lives.

His nationalism grew out of his firmness in upholding Malay rights. At one time, when racial chauvinism was predominant, he openly stated that the non-Malays should not take the Malays for granted and that the latter would not submit to their provocations. There was, he said, a limit to Malay tolerance. He went on to stress, "We do not intend to seize the rights of others but no one should attempt to seize our rights." On another occasion he said, "We will not trade our security for our great-grandchildren's right to live in peace and prosperity." The message he wishes to impart through his speeches, especially to non-Malays, is this: do not question the indigenous rights of the Malays.

Throughout his political career, Mahathir has always been a champion of the Malays. Although the Malays are at present economically weak, Mahathir is intent on seeing the Malay race on par with the other races of the world. This same nationalistic fervour has been translated in later years into an unswerving passion to build a successful Malaysian nation free from racial strife and respected internationally. Respect, for the Malays or for Malaysians, is a dominant thrust of his leadership. "As a small nation, we do not want to favour any bloc. We need friends of equal standing, not big countries who look upon us merely as their customers," he says.

Despite the furore created by his changes in Foreign Policy, the fact remains that Mahathir has managed to instil an awareness among Western countries that although Malaysia is a small nation, it has the same role and responsibility as other members of the United Nations. His vigorous and independent Foreign Policy has encouraged some to view it as anti-Western. However, Mahathir feels it is a fight devoid of anti-Western sentiments. Malaysia wants to be friends with all countries of the world except Israel. This friendship is based on mutual respect and understanding. This new non-aligned Foreign Policy is meant to show that Malaysia is a free country. It cannot be dictated to by anyone. His firmness in pronouncing Malaysia's stand on an issue is consistent with his nationalistic aspirations and dreams.

While the Mahathir era has witnessed many tumultuous changes and raised criticisms that he is autocratic, a careful study of his reign would prove that respect for democratic principles has been another major feature of his leadership. He has repeatedly reminded the Malays that the Malay Conference, which met to oppose the Malayan Union before independence, automatically decided to adopt the democratic path, and when UMNO was formed it supported the framework of a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch. Other ideologies, whether socialism or communism, liberalism or whatever, did not influence UMNO's struggle.

Though the British parliamentary tradition had a certain amount of influence on UMNO, it was not totally accepted. The historical Malay polity was primarily based on a feudal monarchy system. Therefore, when UMNO began its struggle, it combined the elements of its own indigenous political heritage and that of the British.

Mahathir has reiterated this time and again in many of his speeches, for he saw in it a need for Malays, especially members of UMNO, to understand the choice that had been made. He has asserted, "We do not regret the choice to adopt a democratic system under which a person who ceases to be qualified for leadership loses his position. It is important for a leader or government to be free of influence or threat of the possibility of defeat in the course of policy formulation or implementation. A government without any threat can sometimes act more fairly."

Throughout Mahathir's political struggle, continuous challenges to the unique democratic ideals adopted by the party has threatened the smooth functioning of his administration. While he was earnestly stressing that the Malays should really understand the political system they had chosen, distorted thinking emerged which equated democracy with attaining power at any cost. Mahathir has emphatically repeated that among the adverse consequences of this corrupted form of democracy are money politics and struggle for position. Mahathir feels that if both these practices are not contained, they would destroy UMNO, the country and with it the fate of the Malays. It will also adversely affect the position of Islam in this country.

The Mahathir era has witnessed a near total disregard for the cherished traditional and democratic ideals laid out by the founders of UMNO. The most vicious struggle for the control of the party leadership, for example, was waged during his tenure. It is a tribute to Mahathir's incredible staying power and extraordinary resilience that his administration survived one crisis after another. In retrospect, even his adversaries have to admit that politically Mahathir has outlived his rivals and has given the lie to those prophecies which announced his political demise at periodic intervals.

It would not be an overstatement to say that probably no other Prime Minister in the world had been put in the unenviable position Mahathir was where every idea, policy pronouncement or project was subject to vehement and prolonged criticism. A case in point was the Proton Saga national car project. When it was launched it was criticised acrimoniously. A lesser leader would have retracted in the face of so much condemnation and ridicule from the experts to the layman. But the government stood firm and the Proton Saga took off even before the end of Mahathir's first term. The achievement of the project and hopes for future exports have put to shame its critics.

According to Mahathir, sacrifice is essential for the eventual success of any project. "We have to sacrifice a little for the happiness of all and finally we too will enjoy the benefits of it," he often says. Based on his belief that success never comes easily, he encourages the people to be prepared to make sacrifices. He himself upholds this in daily life. Even though he is in his fourteenth year of tenure, he still maintains the habit of being at work before eight in the morning and returning after six. As he puts it, "we have to knock a wall several times to break it down, otherwise we will fail."

Personally, the Prime Minister sets very high standards of achievement for himself and others too. Without forgoing the cultural and moral values of his heritage, he displays a high degree of competitiveness in his attitude towards work and life in general. However, Malaysians may not find his pace and style much to their comfort and liking. A population which is generally used to a sedate and laid-back sort of value

system suddenly finds itself being vigorously and suddenly pushed forward in its endeavours. The net result is a feeling of discomfort, even tension and quite naturally resentment towards its leader.

As a nationalistic leader aspiring to introduce change and advancement, Mahathir is aware of the need to instil courage to withstand all challenges. That quality will ensure success in overcoming unavoidable problems faced not only by the poor but also the rich. Perseverance and courage are essential qualities of Mahathir's unending political struggle. According to him, "If we become frustrated and easily disappointed in the course of our problems or challenges in life, we will be left behind. We must boldly compete with other races to achieve progress, consistent with the evolution of time. Although it is not our intention to seize anyone's rights or oppress anybody, it is clear that competition is inevitable. Whatever the field, competition will definitely occur."

Elaborating on his understanding of democratic ideals, Mahathir says that when a leader is not accepted by the majority, he must be prepared to resign. He adds, "I myself would withdraw if my leadership becomes obsolete and yields no benefit. If we do not adopt this approach, we are being undemocratic."

Despite his election victories at party and national levels, his political foes continue to harass him as being undemocratic for not being prepared to tender his resignation because of his slim margin of majority in the 1987 party elections. Their actions are evidently geared towards blemishing Mahathir's democratic credibility. These people, whose political philosophy is not in agreement with Mahathir's, have proved themselves to be an undemocratic lot through their actions. They not only twist their own interpretations of democracy, but also demonstrate a negative attitude in the practice of democracy. This was clear when they failed to observe the majority decision, particularly in the 1987 UMNO leadership contest. They should understand that even when the majority does not agree with them, they should accept its judgment. This is part of the party system, which cannot be successful, if they do not comply with it.

According to Mahathir, although unity exists among the Malays and members of UMNO, it will not be fruitful if there is no will and ability to compete in all aspects. Political power derived from unity can assist in competition. But political power is not the absolute power to determine victory. Mahathir believes that absolute power results from the desire to face all impediments.

Mahathir has clearly-defined goals. Sometimes in pursuing them, he acts hastily as he feels that opportunity comes but only once and he himself does not know how long he would remain in power. Therefore, he deems it inappropriate to wait for everyone's approval prior to an initiative for this might thwart his action. Though he could wait and maintain the *status quo*, he says, "This is not what leadership means."

Based on his ability to lead, he invites the people to participate in his every hope and aspiration. In UMNO's political struggle, for instance, position and power are not his goals. Rather it is a call of responsibility. The UMNO party is not just a Malay political party to him but an institution encompassing Malaysians and the nation as a whole. He believes, "If UMNO was dissolved, the fate and survival of Malays would be threatened in their own country. Even the non-Malays would feel insecure and live in constant apprehension. On these grounds UMNO struggles to maintain its political stability with sincerity not only for Malays but also for the other races. UMNO is not for dishonest and irresponsible people. UMNO would not deviate from the principles of its struggle for the integrity of the nation, religion and country.

To achieve this end, the government will act harshly against UMNO leaders found guilty in a court of law, although such action may contribute to the unpopularity of the government. UMNO's resolution, maintained to this day, is also the result of support from non-members, including those from other races. Therefore, UMNO and its leadership need to uphold this confidence, to continue to play this vital role in the ruling of the country.

He is not only confident of UMNO's struggle but bold enough to take action. Nevertheless, he does not fail to act justly. UMNO's struggle is not an emotional struggle but based on reality. This is the challenge

that every leader will have to face. Mahathir will not submit to any unjust demand, even from UMNO members. The objective of his political cause is not for one individual or a certain group but for the interest and welfare of all.

As Prime Minister he does not hesitate to explain his inability to provide certain facilities, even to voters in his own constituency. Evidently he is not prepared to use his power simply to satisfy his every whim and fancy. He analyses a situation carefully before taking action. The rationality of this should be convincing to all parties, especially to Malaysians who still doubt his ability. He never acts on emotion. Rather, he acts in accordance to his principles of struggle, consistent with the dreams and aspirations of the people and nation. "We all know what good and bad values are, but it is in the application and practice of good values that the leadership and the party will survive or wither," he says. He believes that for the leader and party to remain, the leadership pattern must be congruous with the people's trust.

If he were a politician with the attitude of a five-foot way medicine seller, he would make a thousand promises to uphold his position, overlooking the fact that he could not fulfil all his promises. Yet, this is the practice of several hypocritical politicians, especially during elections. Mahathir, on the other hand, undertakes to convince voters in his constituency on the basis of the issues and problems and gives assurance on actions taken by UMNO, which at times arouses dissatisfaction among members. For example, in the selection of party candidates in the last general election, the request by a UMNO member to contest was openly rejected by Mahathir as not possible.

He reminded UMNO members that not all constituencies could be contested by UMNO candidates. In certain constituencies, the Malay voters act only as the determining factor of victory if there is a split of votes. As the pillar of unity, there is need for UMNO to be compromising. In fact the other parties in the Barisan Nasional too have to be compromising. "There are many constituencies where the victory for the UMNO candidates depends upon the support of other races," he says. Therefore, UMNO members too are obligated to ensure the victory of

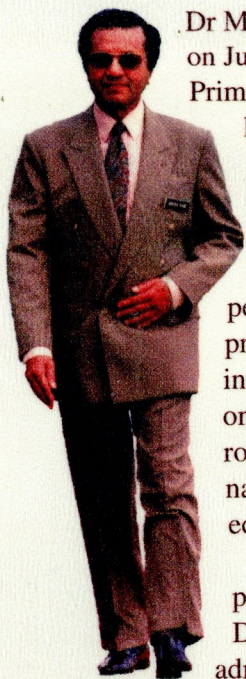
candidates from other parties in the Barisan Nasional. It is better for candidates from other races who want to work together with UMNO to win rather than the candidates from opposition parties. On the issue of non-Malay candidates appointed in Malay-majority constituencies, Mahathir said that UMNO placed importance not only on sincere cooperation but also on the need to prove UMNO has no greed for power. This willingness to co-operate with other communal-based parties shows that UMNO does not practise racialism as claimed by certain quarters.

As a leader he is always cautious. He constantly reminds UMNO members of enemies attempting to disunite UMNO. He says: "If we observe carefully, lately many non-UMNO members who consider themselves intellectuals are forever giving their views on the role of UMNO. They are ever striving to implant dissatisfaction among a group of UMNO members to provoke misunderstandings with other groups within UMNO. When UMNO members claw at each other, this will cause the party to be paralysed and thus the goal of these people to divide UMNO will be realised."

Mahathir calls on UMNO members to "Love UMNO and do not allow a couple of leaders to sow the seeds of disunity in the party." He says that UMNO members are obligated to strengthen and unify UMNO to continue its role as a political party, to uphold Islam, the rights of Malays and the nation. He reiterates, "We need to be strong, for the Malays are still weak and need our support."

Mahathir requests UMNO members to make strategic computations to achieve party aspirations. He believes there are many ways to achieve a goal. From time to time, he presents invigorating proposals to members of the party and the people as a whole. He presents new ideas and is agile at adapting to every change that occurs.

During the last elections, Mahathir reminded the Malay community that they might have to face adverse consequences if they did not exercise their rights carefully and should they fail to utilise that right which carried with it tremendous power, they had only themselves to blame. In a democratic country the right to vote was a responsibility of utmost im-



Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who took the oath of office on July 16, 1981, celebrated his 15th anniversary as Prime Minister of Malaysia in August 1996. He has propelled the nation to greater heights; redeemed the dignity of Malaysians and restored their self-confidence; enriched qualities which enable Malaysians to move towards excellence; impressed upon the people that economic development was a prerequisite to raising the nation's status internationally; reduced the nation's dependence on the developed nations; and taken an active role in the international scene, defending poor nations still trapped in the unfair world economic system.

Apart from the dynamic, charismatic, pragmatic and visionary leadership of Dr Mahathir motivating and energising the administration to accomplish success after success, how has the Mahathir administration been able to attain so many glorious successes in a relatively short period of time?

This book gives an enlightening answer to this perplexing question. Besides looking at the opposition and challenges that plagued Dr Mahathir, especially during his early years as Prime Minister, it also probes into the philosophies and policies that have shaped the *modus operandi* of the Mahathir administration. The successes won by his administration is neither the result of chance nor a quantum leap, but a paradigm shift—a fundamental and radical change in the organisational and operative culture of the administration.

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