

Leadership And Political Culture: A Brief Look At The Malaysian Political Landscape

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Since 1930s, political discourses and literature were concentrated on the nature of leadership. Back then – and remained to be so though with more variables are considered – individual personal traits, styles, and behaviours were the main elements that has attracted and characterise all types of leader.

Perhaps Bolman & Deal's (1991) view would best describe who political leaders are when they say that,

“Political leaders clarify what they want and what they can get; they assess the distribution of power and interests; they build linkages to stakeholders; use persuasion first, then use negotiation and coercion only if necessary.”

Looking at it more closely, it seems that political leadership is more or less leader-oriented, as suggested by both writers (Bolman & Deal). Such description of political leadership, is indeed common as far as classical views on political science are concerned. Tom Bottomore for example, once stated that politics “... is about who get what, when and how”. In consonance with that, it was also said that the process of politics is “enacted by those who rule, and how it impacts those who follow” (Cole, 2005).

As many studies have shown, researchers, in general, believe that leadership is a relation between leader and followers in a specific setting or environment. Under normal circumstances, the relation involves legitimate power and authority. More often than not, the leader is pictured as a person who is equipped with some degree of formal power and authority granted to him by various sources. The relation is often conceived and expressed in causal terms, picturing the leader as a person of power or influence, and thus able to persuade others to change their preferences or actions. As Lasswell (1963:13) would have it: "This term is intended to designate the public leader, the one who plays an influential, conspicuous part in public affairs. Leadership

goes beyond advice to commitment; it goes beyond management to goal-setting and high-level integration. The full-time public figure or active politician comes in this category.”

So what exactly political leadership means?

Fradette & Michaud (1998) suggest that, like any other leadership such as managerial or administrative, political leadership involves the use of specific skills in communicating and dealing with people of all sorts. In contrast, under certain environment or setting, leaders are, by definition, separate and removed from their followers or workers.^[1] It is apparent that the definition is somewhat vagued in the sense that ‘politics’ is confined to communicating skills under a certain situation or setting. It may be so because political leadership – as exemplified by the definition above – is interpreted within business management spectrum.^[2]

Consider another point of view, such as this one which is provided by Paige (1977). In a rather different perspective, generally, Paige seems to treat "role" as an independent variable. He reiterates that some studies on leader role that seem promising for the advancement of political leadership inquiry include the description and mapping of formal political leadership roles and role-set relations in any concrete institutional setting or in any abstract model of a political system. Roles in general are positions that are defined by a set of expectations about one’s behaviour. Each role has a set of tasks and responsibilities that may or may not be spelled out. Relationships on the other hand, are determined by a role's tasks. Some tasks are performed alone, some are carried out in relationship with others. Thus, many tasks and behaviors that are associated with a role are brought about by these relationships. Therefore, new task and behaviors are expected of the present role holder because a strong relationship was developed in the past, either by that role holder or a prior role holder.

[1] In traditional, task-based organizations, leaders are separated from their workers. Leaders are responsible for predicting market trends from year to year, developing strategies, and making sure the strategies are implemented. Fradette & Michaud (1998). *The power of corporate kinetics. Create the self-adapting, self-renewing, instant-action enterprise*. NY: Simon & Schuster. page 115.

[2] Definitions and conceptions of leadership from the perspective of business and organisations management are many, some are discussed in this section via theories such as universal trait and behavioral theories. This include for example, Katz & Kahn (1978) and Mintzberg (1978).

To date, however, political leadership – and other types of leadership as well – remains to be a subject critically discussed by many researchers and writers.^{3]} Subsequently, suggestions were made. One of the suggestions is perhaps relevant and commendable. Paige (1977:111) in particular, advocates five steps or operations in order to advance what he calls "the scientific study of political leadership", which include:

- a) Articulate more fully a set of assumptions concerning the nature of leadership
- b) Establish rules for the identification of leaders.
- c) Describe patterns of leadership behavior to be explained
- d) Explore explanatory variables by which these patterns may be predicted; and
- e) Specify linkages between leadership behavior and general political paradigms, concrete political institutions, and specific political processes.

Further, Paige suggests what he terms a "Multivariate, Multidimensional Linkage Approach", in which the most important task becomes the identification of explanatory variables that may predict different leadership styles. Thus, in addition to role, Paige suggests personality, organization, task, values and situations. These variables are then analysed, and are expected to be able to produce or describe:

- 1) the patterns of leadership behavior capable of typological description;
- 2) measurable effects upon the functioning of total polities, component institutions, processes, and other subjects of specialized political science concern, and
- 3) variance in the functioning of political systems conceived at the highest levels of abstraction.

^{3]} Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, for example, has been organising series of discussions through a programme – in cooperation with the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute – called *Leadership for a Changing World*. The discussions involved prominent politicians and scholars from all over the globe. Available at: (<http://leadershipforchange.org/insights/conversation/files/mapping.php3>)

Thus, in view of Paige's suggestion, the conceptual problem of political leadership studies is to identify and link primary causal variables with patterns of concrete leadership behavior that are viewed as linked to all important elements of political science concern such as power, authority, position and role. The influence and the legitimacy of a political leader rests not only upon the amount of formal power associated with a position, but also on the way the incumbent manages this authority. The term "manage", however, should not be understood in a narrow, "managerial" sense, but rather as an expression of the idea that the "amount" of authority associated with a position is not static, but sensitive to variation associated with incumbent behaviour and environmental response.^[4]

Political Culture

Which type or style of leadership best described the first Prime Minister of Malaysia? How does a style, as exemplified by a Prime Minister, encourages the people to participate actively in a planned programme for social and economic development? Are the prime minister's personality, beliefs and values considered as strong role models for the entire people to emulate with?

In general, these questions are inter-related and very much relevant in a way or another with the political culture and nature of leadership of the polity since the functioning of a political system cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of the influence of political culture. A fairly significant example of this is the ethnic issue in Malaysian politics.^[5] It is an undoubted fact that dominant values in Malaysia for instance have been largely determined by the Malay-Muslim polity and culture. Thus, as can be observed at present day, the political system in this country is heterogenous in terms of having many subcultures. This was partly due to the colonial's strategic policy of exploiting the natural resources of Malaya by bringing in foreign

^[4] Larsen (1999:10).

^[5] As already been discussed in the leadership theories section, each leader styles such as democratic, autocratic, laissez-faire, bureaucratic, charismatic etc., has its own different impacts on leadership especially in dealing with certain issues such as ethnic and religions. Malaysia is a unique example. Researchers such as Milne & Mauzy (1999:1) state that politics in Malaysia are still dominated by ethnic considerations. They state further that the differences in the degree to which the Malay-Muslim attribute importance to various aspects of Islam complicate the pattern of politics.

workers to work in the mines and plantation estates.^[6] The fact, however, is indeed recognised and over the years, since independent, has become an uncommon feature in Malaysian polity. Today, it is considered as one of the most encouraging aspects of the Malaysian scene. It is said to be truly Malaysian in its outlook, having its roots in the country of Malaysia and formed as a result of a synthesis of influences which are Malay, Chinese and Indian in their origin. As one observes, the result of this growth of a Malaysian culture can be seen in many aspects, most obviously including arts, literature etc., that is the outward expressions of a people's feelings. Ryan (1962:xi) stated it exceedingly well by saying that,

“Such a culture will be the result of compromise, fusion and synthesis; not an easy process as the main communities in the country, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians and the Borneo peoples differ greatly from each other.”

Culture is basically looked as made up of three major elements, i.e. (i) behaviour patterns (loyalty; individualistic; etc.); (ii) artifacts (man-made objects such as buildings, banners, pamphlets etc.); and (iii) belief systems (including religion, norms and taboos).

Political culture, then, is defined as ‘the cluster of distinctive shared political values, attitudes, beliefs, and orientations’. Further, the cluster can be summed up as the mores and modes of thought as well as behaviour by which people live and institutions are sustained. The mores are those elements of a culture which are considered vital for the survival of the society.^[7]

It has been asserted that to understand political culture, an assessment must be made of the parameters and social thought within which politics has meaning, purpose and value. In view of this, Leeds (1981: 194) suggests a two-way process, i.e. (i) the underlying political culture provides many of the key assumptions that govern political behaviour and the development of institutions; and (ii) in the reverse direction, the existing political system acts as a conditioning

[6] Mills (2003: 237) reported that, “The extension of British power over the Malay States after 1874 was at once followed by a great increase in the number of Chinese there, until they were to be found in every part of the Peninsula.”

He states further that (p.251), “...as soon as British power was extended over the Western Malay States, thousands of Chinese poured into them until in a generation, from being a small minority they formed about two-thirds of the total population.”

[7] Leeds, (1981:194).

factor, influencing the boundaries in which the political culture exists. A person's individual political beliefs, then are a response partly to his own personality and partly to the total socialising influence of the environment and over-all political culture. Leeds reiterates further that such attitudes affect the kinds of demands made, the way they are expressed, and the responses of elites and the government. An example of this is provided by an observation made by Bowring (2004). In one of his articles, Bowring remarked how 2004 was the year that witnessed more Malays in Malaysia participated in a 'reasonably free and fair national elections than will vote in the U.S. presidential election in November.'

He goes on to say that 'of the four predominantly Malay nations, with a combined population of some 300 million, only the tiny rich oil sultanate of Brunei cannot pass as a democracy'.

It is apparent, as Bowring had observed, that the three nations, i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Phillipines, are usually thought of in terms of either their religious differences – Muslim, Christian or a mix – or the different governance systems that have grown out of foreign rule – British, American, Dutch. However, as he observes more closely, Bowring notices that there is a shared common cultural heritage which predates the arrival of the West, of Christianity and of Islam.

He states further that, "It is found in many social attitudes and behavioral norms and often transcends religious and national differences. There is also the basis of a shared language – before English, Malay was the lingua franca of Southeast Asia."

Although deemed to be inconclusive, it seems more or less clear, as Bowring had recently observed, that political culture does has a considerable part in stabilising a state's political system and leadership. Accordingly, it is quite interesting to observe the differences in attitudes as Leeds and Finer (1970) have rightly pointed out so in their references to some political cultures in different countries (Figure 13 & 14). Both the writers indicate, in general, that attitudes and political culture are inseparable. The interlocking connection between attitude and political culture thus impact the political processes in one way or another.

Figure 13 Leeds's (1981) examples of differences in attitudes

Country	Example of attitudes
Mexico	Citizens are often alienated from the policies of government but they are loyal to the system because of its identification with the emotive symbol of the Revolution.
Britain	Unlike West Germany, more emphasis is placed on informal personal bargaining and negotiation between government representatives and others via committees than on adherence to decisions made by an impersonal, institutionalised bureaucracy.
United States	The culture is more egalitarian compared to Britain. People are more inclined to an attitude of 'deference' or passive acceptance to government policies.

Figure 14 Classification of political culture[§]

Type	Feature
Mature, or participatory	People are orientated positively towards most aspects of the political system, like in Britain, the United States, Norway and Sweden. The level of political culture, at this stage, is high when the political formulae by which rulers claim right to govern are generally accepted. The basic criteria then, are:

[§] The classification is suggested by Finer (1958; 1970) and cited by Leeds (1981).

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. degree of public approval for the procedures for transferring power from one government to the next; 2. degree of public recognition as to who or what comprises the sovereign authority; and 3. degree of public involvement in politics and in organisations such as churches, businesses, trade unions and political parties.
Subject	This type of political culture exists in countries where the citizen is expected to have a passive or obedient relationship to the system, as in dictatorships and under systems of authoritarian rule.
Minimal, or parochial	Here the average individual hardly relates himself to politics and is unaware of its existence, as in traditional societies and parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia, especially in geographically remote areas. In some states, as Finer suggests, two or all of the above may be found. The Soviet Union, for instance, has been described as a participatory-subject political culture.

So far, this section has explained, though briefly, the concept of political culture. A broad classification of the types of political culture is also made with special reference to a few differing countries as suggested by some researchers. Next relevant question, perhaps, is what are the factors that determine the nature of political culture in a particular state or country?

Broadly, there are many factors that can be considered (Figure 15). The factors which will be discussed here include: (i) history; (ii) geography; (iii) socio-economic structure; (iv) political tradition and customs; (v) political socialisation. As suggested by Leeds (1981) and Abdullah Sanusi et al. (2003), history is perhaps one of the factors that has been impacting the

development of a country in terms of the degree of stability and loyalty to a political system in the present. In his observation on the political system in Britain, Leeds conclude that the comparatively peaceful transition from feudalism through an autocratic monarchy to democracy was not marked by a violent revolution apart from the Civil War. In contrast, the successive French revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 resulted in political divisions which have continued to be an unsettling influence in French politics to the present day.

The history of Malaya, on the other hand, provides meaningful informations and knowledges pertaining to the emergence of a modern and progressive Malaysia such as at present. A good example is shown by the Malay Sultanate institution. Traditionally, even before the presence of the European colonials, each state in Malaya had its own political hierarchy. Reports by various researchers show that each state was headed by a ruler called either *Yang di-Pertuan* (He who is Lord) or *Raja* (Hindu ruler) or *Sultan* (Arabic Ruler) depending on their inheritance from their forefathers (Gullick, 1965; Abdullah Sanusi et.al., 2003). Such hierarchy, which is well preserved and practised for decades in the Malay-Muslim polity, serves as the foundation of the Sultanate institution that gives significant meaning to the Parliamentary monarchy form of government in the present Malaysia. Thus, the rulers remain as the symbol for unity and sovereignty of the Malay-Muslim polity.

Apart from history, another factor that is considered critical in determining a political culture is geography. According to Leeds (1981) the nature of the climate, terrain, availability or resources for industry or agriculture, size and access to the sea can all influence a country's culture.

Malaysia, with respect to its geographical feature, is a blessed country. One of the glaring features of Malaysian history is shaped by the role of rivers and basins as the main lines of trade, administrative centres, settlements and communication (Gullick, 1958). Apart from its main function as a means of communication, a river provides opportunity for district chieftains to generate income by taxing merchants for using the river for transporting merchandise. It is a fact that during the early Malay-Muslim polity, conflicts between district chieftains were not uncommon due to their rivalries over the rights to control rivers. Thus, as one can observe, in some states, the administrative centres are all located somewhere either near the main rivers or areas which were once rich in tin or other mineral: Kuala Lumpur – at the adjacent of Sungai

Kelang and Sungai Gombak; Perak – Sungai Perak and Taiping (Kelian Pauh); Negeri Sembilan – Sungai Ujong; Selangor – Sungai Langat.

While history and geography contribute considerably in determining a country's political culture, another variable that is recognised by researchers to have direct and indirect influence on a political culture is socio-economic structure. The New Economic Policy, an affirmative policy which was introduced by the Malaysian Government in 1970 is an excellent example of this. It is not a secret that many Malays – who are, in the eyes of the Federal Constitution must be Muslims, or otherwise their 'Malay status' is nullified – appreciate and take pride in the ethnic and religious diversity of this country. But it is also a fact that, being the *sons of soil* (or the Bumiputera), they also want a unity in the diversity, part of which involves equality of access and ownership especially to income and education. The May 13, 1969 ethnic-clash in Malaysia was nevertheless seen as a tragedy. After careful considerations, the Government convinced that one of the causal factors was socio-economic imbalance between the Bumiputera and other ethnics. The Malays were in inferior economic position. The implementation of the New Economic Policy was seen as an affirmative action that should have corrected the imbalances in the entire society.

In a slightly different angle, socio-economic structure also determines the degree to which people are in the position to participate actively, preferably voluntarily, in the political process. This include, for example, their readiness to support the Government's development policies and programmes. In view of this, Leeds (1981:198) puts it exceedingly well by stating that,

“A mainly urban, industrialised society tends to have higher educational standards than a rural one and there tends to be wider participation in the political process.”

The fact that political traditions and customs play an important role in determining a political culture is clearly translated and reflected in the present system of polity in any countries. In Malaysia for example, the dominant role of chieftains (in some districts they are called *Penghulu, Penggawa, Ketua Kampung, Tok Sidang*, each with different degree of authority in its very own hierarchy, while in the longhouses in Sarawak they are known as *Tuai*) form a fairly strong foundation in the present political system of local and federal government. The concept of 'patron-client', which goes back as early as during the Malacca era, had provided not only a

basis for common practices during those times such as the *gotong royong* (or collective efforts of the people in preparing for special events like marriage ceremonies) but also remained to be a meaningful philosophy of community service that is based on loyalty, empathy and strengthened further by the concept of altruism.^[9]

Apart from the above example, other elements that are often associated with political traditions and customs include:

- i. Symbols (such as the use of national flags with different motifs e.g. the crescent on the flag is the symbol of Islam while the star illustrates the unity of the states in Malaysia);
- ii. Music (an excellent example would be the national anthem, “*Negaraku*” – “My country, my native land / The people living united and progressive / May God bestow blessing and happiness / May our Ruler have a succesful reign / May God bestow blessing and happiness / May our Ruler have a successful reign”);
- iii. National holidays and festival (such as Malaysia’s Independence Day; the Yang Di Pertuan Agong’s birthday; Warriors’ Day;);
- iv. Ceremonies (as exemplified by the Emergency Parade, held in 1960 in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the official ending of the Emergency on July 31st, 1961).

Political socialisation is defined as a continuous process by which people, through learning and experience, come to understand their duties, rights and role as loyal citizens.^[10] It also involves with the imparting of norms, values, attitudes, beliefs and customs from one generation to another. In the process of passing and imparting those elements, some sort of alteration and modification are made. At this stage, it is believed, as Leeds (1981) asserts that ideas about a political culture are gained unconsciously by younger generation as they developed. Undeniably, this poses some dangers especially in dealing with issues that are considered as sensitives by the

[9] Altruism (Latin: *alter* or pl. *alteri*, others) connotes the principle of living, having regard for, and acting for the good of others, always showing compassion and concern for the welfare of the others, especially that of the *ummah* (community). Ismail (1999:8).

[10] Leeds (1981:196).

Government. An example of this is the ethnic relations issue between Malaysians where some basic ideas about political socialisation is clearly portrayed. Khoo Kay Kim, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Malaya believed that the nation's 'communal ties are at their most delicate in nearly four decades'.^[11] Khoo was referring to the lacklustre achievements in racial unity which was rightly so. Further, Khoo points to three reasons which he believes :

- i. a national school system that has become more communal despite its supposed non-ethnic and non-religious status;
- ii. the participation of political parties in national unity committees; and
- iii. Malaysians ignoring the fifth tenet of Rukun Negara: good behaviour and morality.

Leeds (1981:196) however, cautions that 'too strict a socialisation process can lead to a narrow patriotism and restrict freedom of thought' while at the same time 'immigrants or minority groups will feel insecure as to their identity and allegiance if they are forced to integrate unwillingly or too rapidly into the mainstream of society'. Therefore, it is equally important for the Government in particular, and all other institutions in general – e.g. political parties, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and families – to provide a fairly conducive environment for the young generation to learn and acquire positive ideas and values that can help develop and nurture an ideal socialisation. Failing to do so will probably expose the people – especially the young ones – to dangers in the forms of: (i) unthinking conformism or acceptance of the status quo which eventually leads to extremism; (ii) alienation, a situation when people feel that they are powerless to exert any real influence in politics; and (iii) counterculture, with potential risks of jeopardising the effectiveness of Government's public policies.

Figure 15 Factors determining political culture^[12]

^[11] *New Straits Times*, "The lonely bridge builder", February 19, 2006, p.10.

^[12] A fairly broad description of the factors is provided by some sections, "*Malaysian Polity*" in particular, in the first chapter.

Factor	Examples
History	Historical events at all stages that led the country's progress and development, e.g.: The transition from Hinduism to Islam; the role of Islam in the Malay-Muslim polity; forms of early government e.g. chieftains and sultanate; emergence of settlements and states; establishment of governments at various levels; road to independence; etc
Geography	E.g the country's position; area; terrain; climate; topography; geology; etc. Malaysia history for instance is often referred to as a history of its coastline.
Socio-economic structure	Use of affirmative policies (e.g NEP) in protecting the Bumiputera rights and privileges; Rate of urbanisation; level of education attained by the people; wealth distribution; economic development.
Political traditions & customs	Malay-Muslim as the dominant culture, and translated into the state's highest leadership; Yang Di-Pertuan Agong is the Head of State; Malay is the national language; Islam is the Federal's religion; multi-ethnic traditions and customs are preserved and practised freely.
Political socialisation	The role of political leaders – with Malay-Muslim dominating the political landscape and polity – in promoting and inculcating ideas about political culture; with ethnic considerations in mind as far as the 'social contract' is concerned, a rather 'moderate approach' is employed by the government;

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