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**The Genesis Of A New Culture: Prime Minister Mahathir's Legacy In Translating
And Transforming The New Malays**

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Abstract

Malaysia under the administration of the fourth Prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has been transformed from an agric based country into a modern industrial nation. For 22 years, from 1981 to 2003, Mahathir has attempted to make Malaysia a well known country to the world, and a model country to the Islamic world. In developing the country Mahathir has introduced a number of policies and programs such as “Look East Policy”, “Leadership by Example”, “Towards 70 Million Population”, “Inculcation of Islamic Values” and “Vision 2020”. These policies were implemented concurrently with the affirmative actions taken under the New Economic Policy (1970 to 1990) and the New Development Policy (1990 onwards), aiming at restructuring the people of different ethnic background and eradicating poverty amongst the people. Mahathir has succeeded to a certain extent in bridging the economic gap between the sons of the soil (the Malays) and other ‘immigrants’. In doing so he has managed to transform the Malays from poor rural dwellers to middle class urban inhabitants. This paper explores what has been said by Mahathir in his speeches about his grand design in transforming and reforming his people to give birth to a new ethnic called the New Malays.

Introduction

In 1970, long before he became the prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad published his views on the backwardness of the Malays. His book entitled “The Malay Dilemma” was later banned by the then administration. Even though it was not considered a scholarly writing and not based on an empirical study, the book contained an intellectual guess of what went wrong with the people of Malaysia, particularly the Malays. The Malays make the majority of 27 million Malaysian populations (65%), the Chinese (26%), the Indian (8%) and other races (1%). Today the total population of Malaysia is around 25 million. The Malays are considered the ‘sons of the soil’ of Malaysia, whereas the Chinese and Indians were immigrants that came from China and India, apparently brought in by the British during British Malaya era in early 20th century. The Peninsular of Malaya gained independence from the British in 1957 and later in 1963 together with Sabah, Sarawak (in Borneo) and Singapore formed Malaysia. The Malays even though they formed the majority, remained the most backward and under developed of the groups (Hilley, 2001, Hng, 1998)). The transformation of the Malays was Mahathir’s main agenda in his 22 year reign of power.

Who are the Malays

The Malays make the majority of the 27 million population of Malaysia. They are considered as the ‘sons of the soil’ of the country. Constitutionally, according to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, a Malay is “a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks Malay, conforms to Malay custom”. Article 160 of the Constitutions penned in 1957 defines a Malay as a “Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore”. Even though the Malays are the majority, economically they are the poorest. This economic inequity amongst races has contributed to the dissatisfaction that later escalated into racial conflicts between the Malays and the immigrants, especially the Chinese (Syed Husin, 2008).

A bloody racial riot erupted on May 13, 1969. The event has prompted the government of Malaysia to take affirmative actions in order to balance the economic situation in the country and to eradicate poverty amongst the population. Since the economic imbalance between the Malays as the sons of the soil and the immigrants (Chinese and Indians brought into the country by the British) has been identified as the main factor that caused the bloody riot, actions were taken by the government to grant the Malays more economic opportunities. This move were considered as in line with the privileges of the Malays as provided in the constitution. However to some, this attempt has added advantage to the Malay supremacy, stipulated in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

The article grants the King of Malaysia responsibility for safeguarding the special position of the Malays and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia, collectively referred to as *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil) and also the legitimate interests of the other communities. The article specifies how the federal government may protect the interest of these groups by establishing quotas for entry into the civil service, public scholarships and public education (See Constitution of Malaysia, http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Constitution_of_Malaysia).

As a matter of fact the article is actually a continuation of previous laws made by the British to protect the indigenous peoples from being overwhelmed by the immigration of Chinese and Indian workers into Malaya. In the years after independence in 1957, the Chinese and Indians were generally rich urban dwellers, whilst the Malays were mostly poor farmers who live traditional lives in the villages in rural areas. This was the result of British's "Divide and Rule" policy implemented in the then Malaya.

Nonetheless Article 153 is considered one of the most controversial articles in the Malaysian constitution. Critics especially from the oppositions consider it to create an unnecessary distinction between Malaysians of different races, because it has led to the implementation of affirmative action policies such as the post-1969 New Economic Policy (NEP) which only benefit the Malays. Eventually the NEP has been defended by the government as having successfully created a Malay middle class, changing their culture and averting major social conflicts in this multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious country (Mahathir, 1998).

Mahathir administration: what he said about the Malays

Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad took over the helm as the fourth prime minister of Malaysia in 1981. He was considered as an ultra-Malay. Under his reign of power for 22 years until 2003, he has managed to transform the country from an agric base to a modern industrial nation. This rapid development of the country, with the affirmative action especially the National Economic Policy (and later the National Development Policy from 1990 onwards) as the core, has also transformed the Malays. In 1970 when the NEP was started, the Malays made the most of the hardcore poor. More than 85% of them lived with a monthly income below US\$60.00 and only 12% earned about US\$1000.00 as compared to 52% Chinese and 17% Indians. The Malays made about 74% of the total poor households when the policy was launched. However in 1999 the percentage of poverty amongst the Malays has dropped significantly to only 3% and in 2003 to about 2%. Their average monthly income has increased to about US\$600.00 in 1999 and US\$900.00 in 2003 (Syed Husin, 2008). This achievement was credited to Mahathir's administration even though to some he practiced an autocratic leadership throughout his tenure (Milne and Mauzy 1999, Stewart, 2003). In 1970 he published his thoughts about his people entitled 'The Malay Dilemma'. Some critics considered the book as a pro-Malay tract where he regarded the Malays as the under-privileged people, being denied their opportunities to compete in economic activities and education. He also regarded them as a people who cling to values and codes of ethics which are impediments to their progress. In order to transform the Malays, they need to remove these obstacles, hence, to change their culture. And this notion has driven Mahathir's rule for twenty-two years. (Mahathir, 1970, M. Bakri, 1999, Ho and Chin, 2001)

The study

This study focuses on annual addresses delivered by Mahathir in his United Malay National Organization (UMNO) general assembly held once a year. Twenty two texts presented in 1982-2003 were selected for this study. The texts were chosen because these were the only texts prepared and presented by the speaker himself (Zakaria, 2003, Asiaweek, 1997, The Star, 2001). The texts were analyzed focusing on Mahathir's idea about the Malays. Appendix 1 shows the list of issues about the Malays detected in the selected speech texts. The issues were later analyzed using a traditional criticism method (Foss, 2004) in order to understand what was actually being said by the speaker.

The findings

From the analysis it was found that Mahathir focused on two elements that he believed served as the essentials of developing a new culture, namely productivity and religion. As economic stability is vital in any culture, productivity as an income generator is of utmost important for the Malays. The Malays are also generally religious, clinging faithfully to their religion, Islam. Therefore, in order to transform them these two factors need to be given serious attention. These two factors have been detected in almost all speech texts studied. Thus, productivity and Islamic issues have served as a significant essence in Mahathir's annual speeches.

Productivity

The first element in transforming the Malays is through their economy. They need to increase their productivity. Mahathir relates productivity to hard work. In his speech before his party delegates in the general assembly of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in 1982, the year he took over the premiership, he said:

“...The most important thing is our productivity – that is to work hard. As long as there is ability to work hard, and not to be too choosy, the country will progress and develop...”

He further related productivity with another factor, that is purchasing power. In the same speech he said purchasing power,

“... depends on their volume and productivity. We can accommodate up to 70 million population if Malaysians are willing to work hard and be more productive. With the big domestic market and high purchasing power we don't have to rely too much on the world market. Definitely we'll face some problem if our people lack of discipline. But this can be overcome if we instill discipline and diligence...”

In this effort, Mahathir had introduced a policy known as Look East Policy. Generally the policy is related to the economy, particularly to increase productivity. He said in 1982,

“...In the East there are a few countries that had shown capabilities in tackling economic development and as a result they managed to compete successfully with the developed Western countries. Based on this we have to correct our attitude and stance. The West cannot always be an example. The fail people cannot be emulated. If we want to be successful we need to follow the thriving nations and today those successful nations are in the East. For example Japan and South Korea...”

According to Mahathir what attracted him most in the East is diligence. To him the Japanese and Koreans are not only hardworking but are also meticulous in hygiene. He said actually that Muslims should be diligent but “...our current practices are not as demanded by our religion...”

On the decline of the performance of the west, Mahathir said that

“...Since we adopted these Western values, we tend to look down even on diligence, especially by the young generation. Some of them said if we work hard we’ll become robots and some alleged we’ll become slaves. To them people need more and more rest. If we used to work seven days a week, now we should reduce to six. And if we work six days a week, we should reduce to five and a half, to five and so on...”

Mahathir linked laziness to the influence of the western culture. He said in his speech in 1982,

“...but since the influence of the West, we became lazy. Therefore we need to look East where there are diligent people in order to eradicate the bad influence of the West. We were once dubbed as lazy people by the West. But now when the Westerners are lazy, we treasure laziness...”

To him “Looking East” means inculcating existing noble values and eradicating bad values. He further stressed that not only diligence and manners should be emulated from the East but also he wanted to emulate hardwork, management efficiency, working relationships and so on from the East.

Additionally on the justification of looking east policy, Mahathir reiterated the failure of the west to set good examples for the rest of the world. In his speech in 1983 he said,

“...Unfortunately the Westerners now are not like what they use to be when they conquered the world a long time ago. They have changed their philosophy so much that one can do almost anything without considering its effect on the society. They have too much freedom. Even the insane are guaranteed their rights to be at large, even though they are dangerous and capable of committing murder. Their workers can go to work if they want to work, but if they refuse to work; their employers must pay their allowance. Consequently, many resorted to not work...”

He further stressed,

“...Drug abuse is so rampant in the West since it is also their right. They love to be high on drugs. And there are a lot more immoral things being done in the West in the name of basic human rights. They never think of its consequences on the society and their future generations...”

Mahathir maintained that due to this unscrupulous behavior his government had decided to lessen the influence of the West and enhance the influence of the East through his policy.

The essence of his concern in developing Malaysia is productivity. And in order to increase productivity the workers must adopt good discipline. As he said in 1983,

“...Discipline is another important factor. Only those who have discipline, those who exercise self-control and follow instructions and regulations, are able to contribute to the nation’s productivity. Additionally, inclination towards employing new innovations, to upgrade skills and to use technologies and techniques effectively will help to increase our productivity...”

To him that was the reason for his government to suggest every one to subscribe to good work ethics. Work ethics is work motivation and methods that are based on high moral values. Nonetheless Mahathir admitted that wage is important but “...working merely for pay will make us slaves...”

A year later, in his speech during the UMNO general assembly in 1986 Mahathir stressed that the Look East Policy will stay. This is because morality and the culture of the people of the East are more suitable to the Malays in Malaysia. Besides that, the way the Eastern people develop their country is more successful, and Malaysia does not want to emulate those who failed. Furthermore, according to Mahathir, currently a lot of workers and executives from the West go to Japan to learn production techniques and work ethics. Apparently, he said even the West is now looking East and thus following his foot steps. Thus, there is no reason for any Malaysian to reject this Look East Policy.

Later in the same speech he warned his audience of the possibilities of re-colonialization by the West. He said,

“...Through economy, through culture, this direct colonialization is taking place. We practice free enterprise since it is better than the feudal system. We realize that the economy of the countries in this world is interdependent. But we are not totally free since our market price is controlled by someone else. And today we are undergoing this colonialization since the price of our product had been suppressed that leads to our economic downturn...”

In addition, Mahathir stressed that

“...Cultural imperialism can be seen when we keep long hair, we wear jeans even though to attend weddings, we dance like under trance at rock concerts, men wearing earrings or purposely wearing dirty and torn clothes. Norms, traditions and mannerisms of our people are dilapidated and we almost lost our identity...”

To him these are all the product of imperialism.

Nevertheless, Mahathir admitted that not all imitation of foreign cultures denotes foreign imperialism. There are good practices that should be emulated willingly by Malaysians. In point of fact he added that "...cultural imperialism occurs when we are too obsessed with the foreign culture without even considering its negative effects..." To prove his allegation, Mahathir took drug abuse as an example. He said,

"...We are also colonialized through drug abuse. We do not produce drugs in this country. This practice surely is not a part of our culture. But today a majority of these drug addicts are the Malays..."

To him the drug addicts are useless and are unable to protect the dignity of the nation.

In order to develop the Malays, as stated earlier, they need to be reformed. The Malays need to change their attitude and consequently their culture. According to Mahathir in a speech delivered in 1988 the Malays must put quality as a priority in their product. He said,

"...Whatever we can produce can also be manufactured by other people. In fact there's no product that we cannot produce. But the success of our product is determined by its costs and quality..."

He further stressed on the importance of quality by saying that:

"...If we are known for poor services and substandard products, our industrial growth and consequently our economic growth will be stunted. On the other hand, if our services are excellent and our products are of high quality, not only the investors will invest in our country, but visitors and tourists will throng to our country and spend their money here. This will not only create more employment but also increase workers earnings. Obviously high quality products and services will fetch higher prices and be easily marketable. Low price for low quality products does not guarantee sales in this modern market..."

Another important factor according to Mahathir is to be proud about the product. The Malays must have this sentiment. He said in the same speech,

"...What we need here is to be proud of our products. High quality products and services will not only raise high income but also yield satisfaction to us. The society must appreciate and recognize those who produce high quality products and services. Quality must be one of the values that Malaysians seek and those who achieve this high standard should be recognized, appreciated and given a high status in our society..."

Going further on explaining the need to produce and maintain quality products, Mahathir emphasized that knowledge is vital since with knowledge one will have the ability to create, design, produce high quality and sophisticated products from various types of metal, natural raw materials and synthetics such as plastics, carbon fibre, composites and others. Accordingly, Mahathir urged Malaysians to use electronic components and laser in their products and creations. Nevertheless, in the same speech Mahathir concluded that these high quality products can only be manufactured if the people have good values and work ethics. His dream is to make Malaysians "...known not only for their efficiency but also because of their honesty and keeping promises, because they do not betray and they are diligent and loyal to their country..."

In order to boost the achievement of the Malays they need to be transformed. In other word the Malays need to have a new culture as stated by Mahathir in 1991. He said,

"... the Malays need a culture and a set of values suitable with management of worldly wealth. Since there are indications that certain Malay culture is not suitable in promoting competition in modern economy, the government is committed to establish a new culture needed by the Malays to thrive in economic programmes..."

Among other thing, Mahathir reiterated that the Malays need to have sincerity, thrift, meticulousness and hard work as components for their success. These qualities should be practiced as a vital part of their routine. Only when these conducts are observed by the Malays besides efficient management, their success in business and industry can be guaranteed.

Thus, Mahathir proposed the Malays to establish a new culture in order to be able to compete in the current business world. He said in an address before his fellow party members in 1992 UMNO general assembly in Kuala Lumpur,

"...the fact is the Malays must establish a new culture suitable with the current business climate which is more complicated and risky. Our old approach whereby a person was supported to run a small business and entrepreneurship that yields a small profit margin is no longer applicable. The new move is to help potential Malay investors and enterprises to operate in a larger scale..."

He further urged the Malays to think big. And to him think big must be accompanied by sizeable capital, honesty and sincerity, efficient management and experience that are able to convince clients and financial institutions. Mahathir also suggested that the time has come for the Malays to accept all the changes. According to him as long as the Malays think and work small, they will forever be poor and backward.

Mahathir further emphasized on his call for the Malays to change their culture. To him culture is an important factor that discriminates the successful nation from the failed one. The differences between nations is not their ethnic or origin but their culture, that is the values that they uphold and practice. And culture is the determinant of a nation's achievement. To be able to compete in this modern world the Malays need to master

knowledge and modern technology. Thus according to Mahathir it is important for the Malays to develop an appropriate culture that goes in line with this intention. Culture here means assigning high values to acquirement of knowledge and complicated and relevant technology and appreciating efforts to learn and work hard.

A year later in 1993, in the same forum Mahathir inspired the Malays to form a new culture. With this culture, a new race will be born, the new Malay. He said,

“...if all this while the Malays are quite backward as compared to the other races in Malaysia, this is not because of nature or their character. Once they change their cultural values, their productivity increased. Definitely the new Malay culture that we are establishing is suitable with the development...”

Mahathir claimed that the cultural changes of the Malays were due to the struggle of his party UMNO. To him his party has spearheaded the reformation of the Malays especially through the affirmative actions such as the New Economic Policy. Through this policy the government led by UMNO and its coalitions in the National Front has transformed a nation that used to be paddy planters and rubber tappers, to a new nation that are able to produce complicated products from modern factories. He stressed that “...from the nation of farmers now emerged an industrial nation, with a different set of values and more suitable to develop the country and to compete with others...”

He further emphasized in his speech delivered in 1996 that

“...UMNO has played a role in the formation of the Malay culture through organizing various courses, seminar, researches and thousands of speeches. A book entitled “Mental Revolution” has been published by UMNO in order to guide the Malays so that they are able to adapt to the changes when they move from rural to urban areas, from farmers to factory workers, from the time they live from hand to mouth to the time they have a steady income and organized expenditures...”

Nevertheless, Mahathir admitted in the same speech that the reformation process of the Malays is still incomplete. To him there’s a lot more to be done to change the culture of the Malays and the changes that the Malays have now are still far from establishing a civilization of the New Malays. Thus he said the people must retain UMNO’s power in the government in order to form a culture and to create a new civilization.

A year later in 1997 in the same forum Mahathir once again reminded his audience the pivotal role played by UMNO in leading the Malays to success. He claimed that some of the culture of the New Malays was formed consciously and unconsciously by UMNO and the changes of social climate, politics and economy brought in by the leaders of UMNO.

He regarded the cultural changes of the New Malays spearheaded by UMNO have helped to cause them to thrive. Consequently the Malays today are no more marginalized and isolated from the country’s economic, political and social stream. In business and

industry, the Malays have shown their capabilities that were never thought before. Thus, Mahathir said that the Malays have succeeded in developing their own self-esteem.

At any rate, the Malays have had to pay for their achievement with a very high price. Apparently not all of the new Malay culture is good. There are some ill elements in the culture. In the past the Malays were not involved with immoral activities such as drug abuse, but today a majority of the drug addicts are Malays. The same goes for AIDS, and social crimes like rape, child abuse, domestic violence, defamation and so on.

In order to shield the Malays from this negative effects of development, in his speech in UMNO general assembly in 2000 Mahathir suggested them to cling to Islam. He said,

“...the New Malays are the Malays that uphold steadfastly to Islam and its values, discipline and realize that God will only help those who struggle and learn and master knowledge that can develop them...”

Adherence to Islamic principles

The second factor in transforming the Malays is their religion, Islam. Mahathir as a Muslim leader believed strongly in Islamic principles as a method of inculcating good culture. In his speech in 1982 he said “...Hitherto the Malays only preached Islam but never practiced it. They talked about brotherhood but created issues to generate a split between Muslims. They talked about knowledge acquisition but never learned...”

He further pledged his party’s role to intensify Islamic practices and to ensure the Malays adhere to Islamic teachings. This means the Malays must be diligent, knowledgeable and efficient in every aspect. The Malays must work towards self-reliance in every domain.

In his effort to develop the Muslims, especially the Malays, Mahathir’s administration had introduced three major projects. The first one was the establishment of the International Islamic University. The university was to provide places for Muslim students currently enrolling in universities outside Islamic countries where they are exposed to damaging elements not suitable to Muslim’s personalities. Imitating the practices of higher learning institutions in Andalusia and Baghdad, this university was planned to accept a number of non-Muslim students so that the non-Muslim world will be able to understand Islamic philosophy and personality.

The second effort introduced by Mahathir’s government was to form an Islamic Bank. Banks are significant financial institutions in a modern economy, but the current banking practices bring in an unsuitable system contrary to Islam. Mahathir believed that the Islamic Bank would be able to create a stronger economy and a more resilient Muslim society. This Islamic financial system will serve as an alternative to the conventional system.

The third move championed by Mahathir’s government was to introduce Islamic Civilization as a subject in Malaysian universities. He believed that Islam as an official religion of the country should be understood by every Malaysian. Dr Mahathir reiterated that this subject was not intended to teach the tenets of Islam in order to attract people to embrace the religion, but to focus on the civilization. According to Mahathir the method was the same as the teaching of “History of the British Empire” during the British era. With this move he hoped to erase the fright and doubt of certain quarters of the non-

Muslims towards Islam and Muslims. Additionally, this effort will strengthen inter-ethnic relationship in Malaysia.

Commenting on the same issue in 1983 Mahathir explained that

“...Efforts in inculcating Islamic values in administration, which means to instil good moral values, are based on rationales that a country will never be successful without practicing such values. We understand that the differences between humans and animals are our ability to think and our human values. Islam gave priority to both. Therefore, we make an effort to inculcate Islamic values as a foundation for our success and future. Apparently all Islamic values are not different from the good values accepted universally. Only those who are corrupted morally will be threatened by the intention of the government to inculcate these values...”

This policy has drawn criticism from certain people. In rebutting the critics, Mahathir insisted that “...This move will not intimidate certain people and never intended to make non-Muslims to embrace the religion...” He further assured that no one will be forced to accept Islam. He said,

“...There’s no force in Islam and Islam will not gain any good if people convert just because of the coercion. What we want is that Muslims really practice Islamic values, the non-Muslims practice good values which definitely go in-line with the Islamic values, and we can live harmoniously and happily...”

A year later, in his speech before his party delegates in 1984 UMNO general assembly in Kuala Lumpur, Mahathir once again touched on the Islamization policy. He said the move was to create successful Malays. He was certain that Islamic values are capable of bringing success to the Malays in this life and the hereafter. Administration based on these values will be a strong, just and successful administration. Later in the same speech he defined Islamic values. He said,

“...Here Islamic values are not outward appearance and culture of the Arabs as understood by some Malays in Malaysia. It is true that forms can easily be imitated and become symbols of Islam. But the forms will never bring success to us. Success will only be achieved through the practice of Islamic values such as honesty, discipline, loyalty, diligent, meticulous, brotherhood amongst the believers, courage, tolerance, considerate, just, thankful and other values that are noble but difficult to be practiced or displayed...”

Clearly the move was to inculcate good and universal values that could create a new culture amongs the Malays.

In his speech in 1987, delivered before party comrades during the UMNO general assembly, Mahathir once again emphasized on the inculcation of Islamic values policy. He alleged that hitherto the Malays have been successful in politics. But on the other hand, in terms of religion, social and economy their achievement is still below expectations. In supporting his claims he said,

“... We are far from successful in religion since we fail to practice a lot more principles from Islamic teachings. Some of us decline brotherhood, are not so trustworthy, and not so tolerant, do not advocate justice and so on. That is why we proposed the inculcation of Islamic values...”

On the backwardness of Muslims especially the Malays, Mahathir put the blame on the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings. To him Islam is supposed to bring success to its followers. He argued that the Arabs before the Islamic period were ignorant, but after embracing Islam they managed to be a successful nation. This was said in his 1991 address to UMNO members on this matter,

“...Islam is Ad-deen or a way of life. Proudly we announce to the world that Islam is not merely a religion but Ad-deen, a way of life. But the teachings that reach the public normally concentrate on success in the after-life. If someone talks about worldly success, then there'll be some self-claimed scholars accusing the person as un-Islamic. To them Ad-deen means ways to prepare oneself to face death...”

Mahathir never believe in religious extremism. To him Islam brought a lot of benefits to its followers. The reputation of Islam and its contribution to mankind are known and recognized all over the world. Malaysia is trying to bring back this glory. Therefore in his speech in 1993 he revealed that Muslims in Malaysia especially the Malays need to convince the world that Islam is a progressive religion and not antagonistic to anyone. Mahathir's administration has aggressively established a number of establishments in supporting this intention. For instance he has founded the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia and the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), the Bank Islam and Islamic Insurance Company to show the world that an Islamic system is reasonable and capable to fulfill the people's needs, and the International Islamic University Malaysia to prove that the Islamic higher education system can function in line with the modern and complicated education systems of other countries. He concluded his statement on 'modern Muslims' by calling Muslims, particularly the Malays, not to regard Islam as merely a religion for the hereafter. To him Islam has taught its followers to balance the world and the hereafter.

This equilibrium is vital for success. Prioritizing merely the after-life and sidelining worldly affairs is considered un-Islamic. Conversely, focusing too much on worldly affairs without preparing for the hereafter is also un-Islamic. In 1995 Mahathir stressed on the shortcoming of concentrating too much on worldly affairs. He said,

“...the culture that we have established now is a culture of irresponsible materialism. This is what we have now in our society. Believe me, even the most developed nation in this world could collapse when they lose their culture of excellence. What more to us, who are not even fully developed yet. We will be ruined even faster...”

Those who sidelined the after-life will do anything to accumulate wealth. Consequently, they resorted to accept bribery. And thus bribery has been part of the culture. And this bad habit will definitely bring down the civilization to its lowest.

The Arabs were very successful after they embraced Islam. But why today are the Arabs still living in an underdeveloped situation? According to Mahathir in his 1997 party address,

“...even though the Arabs embraced Islam, but most of the Islamic teachings have been left out. For instance, whilst Islam teaches the Muslims to be united as brothers and sisters, the Muslim Arabs not only declined brotherhood, but fought amongst themselves. They went backward to the pre-Islamic culture, to engage in a consistent confrontation with each other. Wealth and weapons are used in war and to kill fellow Muslims. The non-Muslims are taken as an alliance to fight other Muslims...”

To him once the Arabs ceased to practice true Islamic teachings, their civilization started to decline. On the same note, in reminding the Malays not to repeat the mistakes of the Arabs, Mahathir said in the same speech,

“...we are Muslim Malays. More than the Arabs and other Muslims, Malay nationalism is directly linked to Islam. A person is not Malay unless he is a Muslim. That is how devoted we are to Islam. If the Arabs after embracing Islam could be so developed and strong until they managed to establish an empire, is it impossible for the Malays who are so devoted to Islam to achieve such success? Shouldn't the culture of the Malays be changed so that it is suitable with a success that was once enjoyed by the Muslims?”

On the same note, in his speech in 2001, Mahathir provided a proposal to the Malays. He urged the Malays to go back to basics and subscribe to the fundamentals in Islamic teachings. He said,

“...we need to revisit our culture and good values of our race, and our religious teachings. Today so many non-Islamic nations considered the Malays and Malaysia to subscribe to a moderate Islam. This is totally incorrect. We are not moderate Muslims. We are fundamentalist Muslims, that means we advocate the basics or

the fundamental teachings of Islam, those carried in the Quran and the sayings of the prophet..."

To Mahathir the fundamental teachings of Islam will definitely make the Malays a noble and successful people.

In his farewell speech to his party comrade in 2003 UMNO general assembly Mahathir once again reminded his followers to hold fast to Islamic teachings. He stressed that

"...the important thing is that we cling to the true teachings of Islam, the teachings which are all positive and constructive, the teachings which had given success to our Prophet Muhammad s.a.w., the teachings which had given great success to the early Muslims so much so that they were able to enlarge the Muslim territories to include almost the whole world and to maintain it for 1300 years. If we study closely we will find that the teachings of Islam stress good and honourable values. We are asked to read, "Iqra'" i.e. to seek knowledge. We are exhorted to be brothers in Islam, including in the party, outside the party, outside the country. We are told to keep our promises and undertakings. We are asked to work hard, to acquire all kinds of skills which can help upgrade our defense and many more which are positive and constructive. We are also enjoined to reject what is bad and negative..."

Conclusions: the transformation of the Malays

The Malays' epistemology is influenced mainly by their religion Islam, their environment, and their daily routine. Their culture has been characterized greatly by their custom and religious belief which has been deeply rooted for generations in their life. In order to change their culture, one vital aspect that needs to be re-examined is their norms. Through his speeches Mahathir urged the Malays to revisit this facet in transforming their culture to form a 'new' ethnic which he called the New Malays.

Mahathir's hypothesis is if the culture of the Malays is to be transformed, then their norms and their religious interpretation need to be changed first (Hasan, 2003). In parallel to this reformation, the Malays economic status needed also be elevated since material gain and spiritual commitment must be developed hand in hand. Accordingly, in his speech he kept reminding the Malays of the need to change their culture in order to increase their productivity and consequently to free themselves from poverty and an inadequate state of living. He harped on this move since, for him, worldly achievement is as equally important as the success in the after-life. Furthermore, to him, Islam urges its followers to balance the success in this world and the hereafter. In doing so he recommended the Malays to stop looking to the West and started to adopt the work culture of the East, especially the Japanese and Koreans. Not only to him the West has failed to set a good example, but they are responsible for too many negative influences. For instance laziness and drug abuse.

He sounded very anti-West but actually he is a maverick (Adshead, 1989). Probably this was due to his background. The three prime ministers and most of the

leaders of the country before him obtained their education from the West, especially the United Kingdom. But not Mahathir. He never studied in the Western countries. He finished his education in Malaya and obtained his medical degree from King Edward Medical College in Singapore. Probably since he never stayed long in the West, he could not appreciate the thinking and the lifestyle of westerners. But he agrees with all the good values of the Western culture such as democracy, research, and the quest for knowledge. However, he hates imperialism and western domination. As a result, he launched a “Buy British Last” campaign against the UK in 1982 in order to shed the colonial mentality amongst Malaysians. In 1993 he refused to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and was dubbed a recalcitrant by Paul Keating, the premier of Australia then. This episode has led to a sour relationship between Kuala Lumpur and Canberra for quite some time.

Later towards the end of his tenure as the prime minister Mahathir forewarned Malaysians of the bad intention of the West to re-colonialize their former colonies. According to him this time is not through military invasion but through popular culture, technology, and ICT especially under the pretext of globalization, borderless world, and open sky policies (Mahathir, 2002).

As a Muslim himself, Mahathir offered different and unconventional views of Islam. To him Muslims all over the world are in an under developed condition due to misinterpretation of the religion. His argument is simple. If Islam could bring success to the Arabs in the early Islamic era and transformed them from nomadic lives to a very modern, developed and successful civilization, why not now and to the Malays. Thus he emphasized the need to reinterpret Islamic teachings, especially the Holy verses of the Quran. This call was a very unpopular move made by a Muslim leader especially in a conservative society like Malaysia. As a result some even equates Mahathir with Mustapha Kamal Ataturk of Turkey. But this did not stop Mahathir from calling the Islamic scholars to ‘modernize’ the interpretation of the book since to him the interpretation that most Muslims subscribe now was made in the last millennium and out of date. In order to rebuild the modern and successful civilization, the Muslims, according to Mahathir, have no alternative but to go back to the basic and true teachings of Islam, as brought by the prophet Muhammad. To him good values such as brotherhood, loyalty to leaders, diligence, honesty, sincerity, love, knowledge and so on were the basic doctrine of Islam. Thus he insisted on the Muslims, especially the Malays, to revert to practice the fundamentals of the teachings. With these he reiterated, the Malays will be transformed into the New Malays.

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