



Mahathir Mohamad as a World-Class Leader: A View from The Great Man Theory of Leadership

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Abstract: Mahathir Mohamad's leadership as the Prime Minister of Malaysia is an example of excellent leadership. His stint is peculiar as he is the longest-serving leader in the world and the oldest Prime Minister to ever lead a country. The impact of his leadership establishes his reputation as an outstanding leader as supported by the Great Man Theory of Leadership. As an effort to comprehend his leadership excellence, this study examined Mahathir's leadership through the lens of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, which elevates leadership based on extraordinary achievements and considers the leader to be born a leader. The research was conducted by using a narrative review approach. Data were gathered qualitatively using thematic analysis, from secondary sources including academic journals, dissertations, books, and published articles pertaining to the topic of Mahathir's leadership. The results found that his leadership approach is indeed aligned with the underlying elements of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely charismatic, intelligent, politically skilled, and wise. Past studies reported that Mahathir possesses the quality of being visionary, trustworthy, authentic, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, good communication skills, highly ethical, and core value-based, thus strengthening his premise as an outstanding leader. His excellence in leading the country has been proven beneficial to both Malaysia and its people while the attention that he received from the international community further reinforced his relevance and influence at both the local and international levels. It is indeed a pride for Malaysia as a Southeast Asia country to have a world-class leader.

Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister, outstanding leader, Great Man Theory of Leadership, narrative review

1. Introduction

Leadership is a necessary component of human life. Because of the need for survival and adaptation to change, every matter and stage of human life necessitates the process of leading and being led (Bryson & Crosby, 2005). Similarly, national leadership is critical for a state institution as it is the backbone of a country's administration and development in its social, economic, and political aspects (Bulpitt, 1986) with national leaders serving as the main actor who leads the people to achieve the country's interests at the national and international levels (Breadsworth, 2017). According to Krass (1998), leadership is the ability to motivate others to work together [as a team] to achieve a common goal. In the context of a nation, a leader's ability is demonstrated when he successfully inspires and unites the people to achieve the nation's goal of progress (Burns, 1978).

Mahathir Mohamad's leadership as the Prime Minister of Malaysia is an example of excellent leadership (Chin, 2018). On 10 May 2019, he returned to the local political scene as the country's seventh prime minister after the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), defeated the incumbent winner, Barisan Nasional (BN), and won a majority of seats in the parliament, thus forming the federal government (Abdullah, 2019; Nadzri, 2018). For the first time in the country's political history, the opposition coalition won the general election (Wong & Ooi, 2018) and it was under his leadership. Mahathir's stint as Malaysia's Prime Minister is peculiar as compared to the other Prime Ministers because he had served the country for 22 years during his first tenure, which is the longest-serving period among all. Then, he came to power again after 15 years of retirement at the age of 93. Although his second tenure was less than two years, it does not obscure the fact that he is the longest-serving leader in the world and the oldest Prime Minister to ever lead a country (Suhaimy, Razali, Jaes, Sabtu, Othman, Abdullah, & Hanapi, 2021). In addition, Mahathir is the country's only Prime Minister for more than two decades (Beng, 2006).

These facts thus put Mahathir on par with other world-class leaders. Following his strong leadership approach, Mahathir was given a long and intact trust to lead Malaysia as it strives to become a more modern nation and he was even re-elected when the country was facing a leadership crisis due to an allegedly embroiled world's biggest corruption scandal. The impact of his leadership on the country not only elevates Mahathir as a world-class leader but also establishes his reputation as an outstanding leader as supported by the Great Man Theory of Leadership. This positions him at par with other excellent world leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Indira Gandhi, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Napoleon Bonaparte who were once known as great men. As an effort to comprehend his leadership excellence, this study examined Mahathir's leadership through the lens of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, which elevates leadership based on extraordinary achievements and considers the leader to be born a leader.

2. Literature Review: Mahathir Mohamad is Malaysia's Fourth and Seventh Prime Minister

During his first term as Prime Minister, Mahathir was known as Malaysia's national architect, community engineer, and father of modernisation for his success in driving the country's development and modernisation (Mohamad & Ibrahim, 1994; Omar & Pandian, 2006; Rohman & Sabri, 2017; Ukin, Efendi, & Ahmad, 2012). One of his master plans was Vision 2020, which aimed to transform Malaysia into a developed nation (Khalid, 2011; Khattab, 2004). It is regarded as a long-term visionary goal that could boost the people's motivation (Omar & Pandian, 2006). Mahathir is particularly admired by the majority of Malaysians for his service to the country and its people (Rohman & Sabri, 2017) as well as by many third-world countries for successfully bringing their voices to the international stage (Furuoka, 2007; Vatikiotis, 1992). At the global level, he is highly regarded by many world leaders for being extremely vocal, particularly on issues related to the series of wars brought by the United States and Israel towards Muslim countries (Akbarzadeh & Connor, 2005; Renwick, 2007).

After retiring from Malaysian politics for 15 years, Mahathir re-emerged as Prime Minister in the 14th Malaysian general election (Chin, 2018). Since his return, Mahathir has received numerous prestigious degrees from various countries and institutions for his outstanding contributions and achievements as a statesman. He was also named one of the world's most influential people in 2019 by Time Magazine alongside other world leaders. Although his tenure as Malaysia's 7th Prime Minister only lasted for 22 months, his leadership during that time had a significant impact and helped shape the Malaysian political landscape. His presence as a deserving national leader at a time when the country needed a figure who could spark a development revolution and save the situation while also being associated with polemical issues and situations had elevated him to the status of an outstanding leader.

2.1 The Great Man Theory of Leadership

Great Man Theory of Leadership is one of the earliest leadership theories that emerged in the 19th century. It was proposed by a historian named Thomas Carlyle who attributed world history to the biography of great men. According to the theory, people are born with innate qualities that make them successful leaders (Northouse, 2019). Therefore, creating great leaders is seen as a futile effort as leadership qualities are innate and can never be nurtured. The theory further posits that among the natural characteristics of a successful leader include charisma, intelligence, political acumen, and wisdom while effective leaders are often intellectually superior, brave, and well-liked. In this regard, individuals who possess these qualities are commonly referred to as social role models. Among the examples of people who rose to prominence through exceptional leadership abilities and accomplishments throughout the world history include Abraham Lincoln, Indira Gandhi, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Napoleon Bonaparte (Northouse, 2019).

According to Carlyle, the Great Man Theory of Leadership is underpinned by two major assumptions. First, every great leader is born with innate characteristics that prepare them to rise and lead (Spector, 2016). Those with natural leadership skills are believed to have influence over other individuals and that nobody can aspire and succeed as a leader. In this regard, Mahathir was able to successfully lead the people in nonviolent resistance due to his influence and tact. Second, great leaders often emerge when there is a need (Organ, 1996). It is because leaders are those who respond to critical situations. Among the examples of world leaders who demonstrated characteristics of the Great Man

Theory of Leadership include Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Mohammed Suharto in Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia who championed the cause of their respective nations while also being suspected of nepotism.

The Great Man Theory of Leadership has received major criticisms from a number of researchers and theorists. Among all, Tolstoy (2011) has rejected the concept of a great man by arguing that the leadership theory is based on the imagination of the respective individuals. Although the theory posits that great men and leaders believe they have complete control over how events unfold, the reality remains that leaders often create an illusion of power that influences others. Moreover, Spencer (1986) proposed that leaders are products of the society in which they live. As a result, it is often the society that determines the greatness of a leader rather than innate abilities, particularly when the environment in which a person grows has a large influence on their characteristics.

Furthermore, the Great Man Theory of Leadership has been propounded to possess several flaws. First, it fails to account for external environments or situations, which frequently influence human behaviours and attitudes (Organ, 1996). The theory also disregards the contributions of other individuals and personnel who aid a leader's success (Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn, & Lyons, 2011). Plus, the motivations that drive a leader's actions are also made unknown in this theory, which is prominent as different individuals may become a leader for various (positive or negative) reasons (Spector, 2016). Moreover, there is no guarantee that someone who possesses the leadership characteristics will become great and successful leaders, although it is impossible to deny that some people possess basic leadership qualities that can be honed even further with the right training and guidance (Spector, 2016)..

3. Methodology

This qualitative article was conducted using a narrative review approach. The data were obtained from various secondary sources including academic journals, dissertations, books, and published articles pertaining to the topic of Mahathir's leadership. Thematic analysis was then used to derive the themes and subthemes about Mahathir's leadership from the sources. The thematic analysis method was deemed fit as the data analysis tool in this study as it is one of the common methods used for encoding qualitative data in order to find recurring themes like topics, ideas, and patterns of significance (Boyatzis, 1998).

The extraction of data from each document began by reading the abstract followed by an in-depth reading of the entire document to identify fitting themes and subthemes. The subthemes were then assigned to the typology-established themes. In addition, descriptive analysis was used to provide an in-depth discussion of Mahathir's leadership elements. The Great Man Theory of Leadership was later used to guide the data analysis process and discussion in order to achieve the research objectives.

4. Results

The data analysis procedure had yielded four main themes (i.e., charisma, intelligence, political skilled, and wisdom), the elements of Mahathir's leadership that are in line with the Great Man Theory of Leadership. Under these themes, there are nine supported subthemes (i.e., visionary, trustworthy, authentic, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, good communication skills, highly ethical, and core value-based) concerning Mahathir's leadership. The results found that his leadership approach is indeed aligned with the underlying elements of the Great Man Theory of Leadership.

A total of eleven past studies were analysed in this research. In this regard, two studies were conducted by international researchers, another two studies were done by regional researchers, while the remaining seven studies were conducted by local researchers. Furthermore, these studies also vary across different research scopes where seven studies focused on Mahathir's political leadership in Malaysia, two studies focused on his leadership communication, and only one study focused on his foreign relations orientation. All of the studies used qualitative methods ranging from archive research, in-depth interviews, and visual research with content analysis. In terms of publication years, one article was published in 1999, 2002, 2006, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019 respectively while two articles were published in 2013 and 2017.

4.1 Mahathir's Leadership Elements

This section discusses the elements of Mahathir's leadership that are in line with the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely charismatic, intelligent, politically skilled, and wise.

4.1.1 Charismatic

Mahathir's leadership has three sub-elements as per the charismatic element of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely visionary, trustworthy, and authentic.

4.1.1.1 Visionary

Three studies indicate that one of Mahathir's leadership elements in maintaining the country's trust is visionary. This subtheme contains two elements namely goal-oriented and transforming. In this regard, two studies (Embong, Hassan, & Ibrahim, 2016; Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a) found that Mahathir is goal-oriented which was demonstrated in his leadership while one study (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018) discovered that Mahathir's leadership approach in driving national modernisation was transformational.

Goals, particularly ideological goals, denote a course of action to achieve the ultimate long-term goal (James & Lahti, 2011). As reported by Embong *et al.* (2016) and Cheah and Ahmad (2017a), Mahathir is indeed a goal-oriented leader. This is evidenced by the Lat's visual analysis in Embong *et al.* (2016) which found that Mahathir demonstrated patience in securing Japan's consent to make the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) successful despite being forced to work beyond his working hours. Such example indicates that Mahathir is indeed a patient and strong leader who refrains from budging until his objectives and final decisions are achieved. Meanwhile, Cheah & Ahmad (2017a) believe that Mahathir's ideological goal-oriented element is reflected in the national policies formulated during his state administration, particularly in the national development policy, industrial policy, state heavy industrial policy, and Vision 2020. These policies were designed to bring people together, foster harmony, and achieve success (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a).

The next characteristic of Mahathir's leadership is transforming (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018), which is closely related to the element of visionary leadership. Suppiah *et al.* (2018) described Mahathir as a transformational leader because he has successfully increased the motivation of many Malaysians, including minorities such as Indians, to work together in achieving a vision that directly transforms Malaysia into a successful industrial nation. Mahathir's success in taking Malaysia to the next level demonstrates that he has successfully implemented social changes across the nation (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). Thus, elements such as goal-oriented and transformative leadership have bolstered Mahathir's visionary leadership.

4.1.1.2 Trustworthy

A total of three studies had identified Mahathir as a trustworthy leader who was in charge of the country. This subtheme comprises three elements namely responsible, credible, and respectful. In this regard, two studies (Ong, 2005; Embong & Hassan, 2013) suggest that Mahathir's leadership style is responsible, one study (Cheah *et al.*, 2017b) stated that he is credible, while another study (Embong & Hassan, 2013) reported that he is respectful.

Trustworthiness is an important characteristic for a leader. Furthermore, responsible leaders often resemble the traits of trusted leaders. Hence, Mahathir can be propounded as a trusted leader following his leadership characteristic of responsibility (Ong, 2005; Embong & Hassan, 2013). According to Ong (2005), Mahathir's sense of responsibility stems from his experience as a medical doctor where he understands the illness (adversity) experienced by his patients (people) and feels responsible for treating or resolving it (Ong, 2005). Moreover, Embong & Hassan (2013) believe that Mahathir is a responsible leader following his constant worry and concern about the state of the country and everything that happens throughout the nation despite not being physically present. This has been proven on many occasions where Mahathir would still be consulted by ministers on a variety of issues even when he was abroad (Embong & Hassan, 2013).

Next, the believable aspect of Mahathir's leadership is the people's trust in his ability to govern the country (Cheah *et al.*, 2017b). The majority of Malaysians across races are said to believe in Mahathir's ability to make social changes (Cheah *et al.*, 2017b; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). According to Cheah *et al.* (2017b), the local Chinese community trusted Mahathir's leadership because he successfully transformed Malaysia from an agricultural-based nation to a modern country while allowing them to share its wealth and power with the Malays as Malaysia's majority race. Another component of Mahathir's trustworthy leadership is respect. It is believed that Mahathir is a respectful person because he values other people's cultures, customs, and traditions (Embong & Hassan, 2013). This is particularly important for him to strengthen the relationships with his working partners and subordinates, including the bilateral relations between Malaysia and other countries.

4.1.1.3 Authentic

Several studies have identified authenticity as a key component of Mahathir's leadership. There were two elements under authenticity namely autocratic and strong personality. One study (Omar & Pandian, 2006) had found evidence of autocratic leadership in Mahathir's style of governing while two other studies (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018; Abdullah, 2019) had identified strong personality as his key leadership characteristic.

Generally, an authoritarian administration is led by a dictatorial or autocratic leader. Although Mahathir has been described as autocratic (Omar & Pandian, 2006), his autocratic side is not absolute and has been misinterpreted by several parties. Mahathir argued that as the leader of a democratic country who was elected by the people and given the

authority to lead the nation, his delegated authority must be respected and that he was only exercising his duties as the Prime Minister (Omar & Pandian, 2006).

Another aspect of Mahathir's authentic leadership is his powerful personality. Mahathir is believed to have a strong personality, both as an individual and a political figure (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018; Abdullah, 2019). Suppiah *et al.* (2018) argue that Mahathir's strong personality is reflected in his bold actions of implementing out-of-the-box ideas as part of the efforts to develop the country. Despite being viewed as a dictator, the social changes brought by his ideas had eventually portrayed him as a transformational leader rather than a dictator. This was especially true when he first wanted to protest mainstream ideas (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). According to Abdullah (2019), Mahathir is indeed a powerful figure that his mere presence was enough to force the transition of the Malaysian government, which had been dominated by a single party since independence. His strong personality is attributed to his influence and experience as Malaysia's former and longest-serving Prime Minister when he was the fourth premier as well as his contributions to the vast development of the nation.

4.1.2 Intelligent

Two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership have been identified under the second element of intelligence in the Great Man Theory of Leadership namely resourceful and pragmatic.

4.1.2.1 Resourceful

Three studies have identified resourcefulness as one of Mahathir's leadership characteristics. Two elements appeared under this subtheme, which are wise thinker (Ong, 2005; Cheah *et al.*, 2017b) and source of reference (Embong & Hassan, 2013).

According to Ong (2005) and Cheah *et al.* (2017b), Mahathir is indeed a wise thinker. It is believed that his medical education and career as a doctor have prepared him to be a brilliant thinker (Ong, 2005). This is exemplary by his capability of evaluating a situation, accurately and thoroughly diagnosing problems, and devising a set of appropriate actions. Furthermore, Cheah *et al.* (2017b) described Mahathir as a wise thinker due to his reading habit. Mahathir is well-known for his passion for books and it is believed that his extensive reading has made him knowledgeable while his actions have highlighted his intelligence. The knowledge gained has also enabled Mahathir to effectively manage the country and master the complexities of development, thus allowing him to achieve great success.

Another aspect of Mahathir's resourceful leadership is the source of reference (Embong & Hassan, 2013). A person who possesses vast expertise in a particular field or the wisdom to solve a problem will often be a source of reference. As a leader, Mahathir is a valuable resource because he is well-versed in various aspects of the country's administration, including economic, political, and social issues. Following his in-depth understanding of various matters pertaining to the country, Mahathir has been made as a point of reference by other leaders particularly regarding the administration of the country. This is evidenced by several titles that were given to him including the national engineer and national architect.

4.1.2.2 Pragmatic

Another subtheme associated with Mahathir's leadership element is pragmatic. One element appeared under this subtheme, namely good managerial qualities. As reported in two studies (Mauzy & Milne, 1983; Ong, 2005), Mahathir possesses good managerial qualities as a leader. His managerial characteristics include a focus on information distribution and a sense of urgency (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). For example, Mahathir was directly involved in administrative affairs on a daily basis where he constantly supervised, monitored, and encouraged civil servants to work hard (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). Aside from that, he practised a culture in which each minister was required to explain the most recent actions that specific and related civil servants should take immediately following the conclusion of his cabinet meeting (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). According to Ong (2005), Mahathir's good managerial qualities stem from his ability to balance his main career as a medical practitioner with his side career as a politician when he was appointed as the Head of UMNO in Kedah.

4.1.3 Political Skills

People-oriented and good communication skills have been identified as two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership under the politically-skilled element of the Great Man Theory of Leadership.

4.1.3.1 People-Oriented

Three studies have identified people-oriented as one of Mahathir's characteristics in leadership. In this regard, two studies (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Embong, *et al.*, 2016) believe that Mahathir is a democratic leader while one study (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013) discovered that Mahathir practised togetherness to lead fellow Malaysians. This suggests that democracy is one of the elements in Mahathir's leadership particularly in terms of being people-oriented. As Prime Minister, Mahathir is a democratic yet distinctive leader in his own right (Omar & Pandian, 2006). This is based on his approach and changes to democratic practice during his administration of the country. Mahathir argued that Malaysians' democratic approach is based on their participation in the national general election. In contrast to the western approach to democracy, the uniqueness of Mahathir's democratic practice is closely related to the control of several democratic processes such as freedom of speech, social justice, media freedom, and the rule of law (Omar & Pandian, 2006). According to Embong *et al.* (2016), the democratic angle in Mahathir's leadership is evidenced through how he responded to questions raised by the people. Such situation demonstrates that he is indeed a leader who values the people's opinions and is concerned about their problems. Furthermore, he also appreciates the perspectives of other subordinates and civil servants who serve as the catalysts for government-led operations.

Apart from that, Mahathir's people-oriented leadership can be seen through the element of togetherness (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). He often resorts to consensus in making decisions as both working together and reaching consensus are critical in creating a harmonious and equitable state for a multiracial country like Malaysia (Omar & Pandian, 2006). It is believed that Mahathir will make the final decision on matters concerning the country and the people only after having open discussions with other government leaders (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). As a result, the elements of democracy and togetherness further strengthen Mahathir's people-oriented leadership.

4.1.3.2 Good Communication Skills

Several studies have identified good communication skills as part of the traits in Mahathir's leadership. The subtheme is represented by three elements namely excellent spokesman, clarity, and inspiring. According to Suppiah *et al.* (2018), Mahathir is an excellent speaker due to his strong communication skills. This includes qualities like good body language, spontaneous speech delivery, factual content, and powerful messages, which have led him to become an excellent spokesman (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018).

According to Cheah & Ahmad (2017a), one of the strong points in Mahathir's communication skills as a leader is clarity. It describes his ability to deliver clear and concise speeches that allow all segments of the society to understand his message with ease and maximum clarity (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a). According to Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), leaders who use clear language in communication can provide their people with a distinct understanding about the message. Another important component of good communication skills that a leader should possess is inspiring. In this regard, Mahathir is regarded as an excellent communicator due to his ability of projecting an inspiring image of himself to the audience, whether it is the people, working subordinates, or foreign leaders and delegacies (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a). This is particularly important as a leader's inspirational imagery is linked to the elements of loyalty, confidence, and dignity (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

4.1.4 Wise

Two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership have been identified under the wise element of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, which are highly ethical and core value-based.

4.1.4.1 Highly Ethical

A total of four studies have described Mahathir's style of leadership as highly ethical. This subtheme is supported by four elements namely efficient, dedicated, integrity, and discipline. In this regard, one study (Mauzy & Milne, 1983) described Mahathir's leadership as efficient while another study (Embong & Hassan, 2013) portrayed him as a dedicated individual. Furthermore, other studies have mentioned integrity (Ong, 2005) and discipline (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Embong *et al.*, 2016) as part of Mahathir's leadership qualities.

Efficient refers to the capability of performing an assigned task efficiently and reflects one's ethical values. Mauzy & Milne (1983) believe that efficiency is one of Mahathir's leadership elements in delivering his duties as Prime Minister. He also repeatedly emphasised on the importance of hard work, discipline, productivity, motivation, values, and cultures in the administration of state affairs by civil servants (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). Meanwhile, dedication is one's commitment in holding and conducting responsibilities, which illustrates their ethics. As the head of state, Mahathir had demonstrated significant commitment to conduct his responsibilities (Embong & Hassan, 2013), as evidenced by situations in which he will continue to serve.

Aside from dedication, integrity is another important component of being highly ethical. It describes the degree of one's honesty in performing assigned duties and responsibilities. According to Ong (2005), Mahathir's quality as an honest leader is exemplary by his willingness to admit his failure to fulfil his roles and duties as Prime Minister, particularly in developing the Malays. Moreover, Mahathir's style of leadership undoubtedly reflects discipline (Omar

& Pandian, 2006; Embong *et al.*, 2016). Such quality was not only reflected in his role as Prime Minister but also his expectation for all civil servants and Malaysians to be disciplined at work and in their daily lives. Furthermore, Malaysia's rapid development and modernization is a result of Mahathir's determination to govern the country in its own image (Omar & Pandian, 2006). This demonstrates his quality as a highly ethical leader who demonstrated efficiency, dedication, integrity, and discipline in conducting his duties as the head of state.

4.1.4.2 Core Value-Based

Another vital element in Mahathir's leadership is core value-based. This subtheme comprises three elements namely prioritising religion, prioritising nation, and practising Asian values. It was found that two studies (Mauzy & Milne, 1983; Abdullah, 2019) indicated that Mahathir prioritised on religion, two studies (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Abdullah, 2019) stated that he prioritised on the nation, and one study (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013) reported practising Asian values as a component of Mahathir's leadership.

According to Mauzy & Milne (1983) and Abdullah (2019), Mahathir had placed significant priority on the aspect of religion in his leadership. During his reign, Mahathir constantly emphasised on the importance of Islam without denying the right to practise other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. This was not only aligned with the position of Islam as Malaysia's official religion but it was also evidenced by the country's progressive Islamization during his presidency. It includes the launching of three major Islamic-based projects during his second year as Prime Minister, namely the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), the establishment of Bank Islam as an Islamic banking institution, and the inclusion of *Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia* (TITAS) as a compulsory subject in the tertiary education curriculum (Mauzy & Milne, 1983).

Despite the claim that UMNO, led by Mahathir in the 1990s, was threatened by the wave of Islam brought by *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) and *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM), Mahathir had repeatedly reiterated his stance to fight for Islam, the nation, and the race through UMNO (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). According to Abdullah (2019), Mahathir's emphasis on the importance of Islam in his leadership was visible when he openly voiced strong opposition to the western countries' discrimination against Islamic countries on international platforms. For example, he had openly condemned the violence and destruction brought by the United States' mission of "War on Terror" towards several Islamic and middle eastern countries. As a result, many Islamic countries consider Mahathir as the spokesman for Islamic matters due to his courage and bravery to voice out Islamic interests and matters at the international level.

In addition to prioritising religion, Mahathir is known as a fair leader of a multiracial nation by emphasising the Malay rights as *bumiputera* (indigenous) while also upholding the rights of other races including the Chinese and Indians (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Abdullah, 2019). His fight over *hak bumiputera* (indigenous rights) did not disregard the social, economic, and political rights of minorities such as Chinese and Indians. Such strategy was vital to ensure the harmony and well-being of all Malaysians while also reflecting his side as a Malaysian nationalist. According to Omar & Pandian (2006), Mahathir is a leader with a strong sense of nationalism. The spirit thus inspired him to believe in governing Malaysia independently of other countries. He also repeatedly reminded all Malaysians, regardless of race, to unite in order to combat any external elements that may divide the people.

It is believed that Mahathir's strategy of maintaining peace and harmony within the multiracial country was to constantly emphasise on the importance of history to all Malaysians. According to Abdullah (2019), Mahathir is fortunate to have been appointed as a crusader of the people and the nation fighter by all Malaysians, and not just the Malays. Furthermore, the Malays' trust over Mahathir was prompted by the fact that he had never ignored nor denied their rights as *bumiputera*. Meanwhile, the majority of Chinese and Indian citizens respected him as a statesman who brought success and prosperity to the country and people (Abdullah, 2019). In the context of leadership based on core values, Mahathir had placed significant priority and practise over Asian values in governing Malaysia (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). This is because Asian values impose significant importance in the Malaysian context, including to challenge the western imperialism culture, uphold the local cultural values, champion the Malay agenda, and defend Islamic values (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). Therefore, Mahathir is regarded as a leader who prioritised on Asian values because he upholds local cultural values shared by many Malaysians.

5. Discussion

This study reported a thorough review of 11 articles that discussed on the leadership of Mahathir Mohammad during his governing period as the 4th and 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia. The findings revealed that his leadership comprises several elements, in lined with four main themes of the Great Man Theory of Leadership (i.e., charisma, intelligence, political skilled, and wisdom) and nine supported subthemes (i.e., visionary, trustworthy, authentic, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, good communication skills, highly ethical, and core value-based). Such result thus demonstrates a broad yet comprehensive analysis of Mahathir's leadership elements that aligned with the underlying elements of the Great Man Theory of Leadership.

The charismatic element of Mahathir's leadership is believed to have close resemblance with the three sub-elements of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely visionary, trustworthy, and authentic. It is propounded that among the characteristics of visionary leaders include their goal-orientedness (Kearney, Shemla, van Knippenberg, &

Scholz, 2019) and that step-by-step goals are essential for achieving the desired big vision aside from providing a clear picture of what needs to be done (Jensen, Andersen, & Jacobsen, 2019). Mahathir is also a visionary leader who governed the country with a goal-oriented approach (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a; Embong *et al.*, 2016). Throughout his governing period, Mahathir had set several objectives and goals and he was dedicated to achieve it, including Vision 2020. He is also an ideological leader who believes that it is critical for followers to understand his visions and crusade in order for it to be achieved and realised (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a). For this purpose, Mahathir constantly informed the people about his goals, ambitions, and visions for Malaysia so that they could understand his thoughts and ideas, thus willing to participate and invest significant efforts to achieve such goals and visions.

Mahathir's transformational leadership also demonstrates his visionary side. This is vital as a leader must first establish a vision or a goal in order to transform a situation (Burns, 1978). According to McCleskey (2014), transformational leaders will provide their followers with a vision and mission that inspires their own identity. It is also the process of assisting one another in reaching higher levels of morality and motivation. In this regard, Mahathir has performed admirably as he succeeded in transforming Malaysia into a modern nation by inspiring its citizens to participate and work toward the set goals (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). This resulted in an improved standard of living among most people and Malaysia had progressed from an agricultural to a modern country. Thus, visionary leadership is indeed essential for a leader to improve and further developed a nation, as exemplary by the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad.

Furthermore, trust is another important quality for leaders as it shapes the followers' perceptions, behaviours, and values in light of the successes, failures, and risks that will be faced by them and their respective countries. Not only that, leaders must also foster a sense of self-efficacy and self-worth in both themselves and their followers (Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017). Such advancement will allow both leaders and followers to work together more effectively in order to meet and resolve the challenges of achieving their goals (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). In this regard, Mahathir is believed to be a reliable leader due to his responsible, credible, and respectful qualities (Cheah *et al.*, 2017b; Embong & Hassan, 2013; Ong, 2005; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). The practise of these qualities while conducting his duties thus established trust between him and his followers, and it was further amplified by his intentions, actions, and behaviours. In addition, Mahathir is known as a man of action rather than words. His visions and missions to develop the country were based on a sense of responsibility in providing the best solution to alleviate the people's hardships. This subsequently increased the people's faith over him because of his courteous demeanour toward others (Embong & Hassan, 2013). In addition, Mahathir valued his working colleagues and subordinates whether they were from other countries, investors, or ordinary citizens. Such behaviour has earned him trust.

Mahathir is also an authentic leader due to the unique elements that underpin his leadership. He is perceived as an autocratic leader despite the fact that his government practised democracy and that he was loved despite his strong personality (Abdullah, 2019; Omar & Pandian, 2006; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). According to Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May (2004) and Sendjaya, Pekerti, Härtel, Hirst, & Butarbutar (2016), authentic leaders often have the highest level of commitment. In this regard, Mahathir's strong desire to lead Malaysia was inextricably linked to his leadership element, which combined both autocratic and strong personality traits.

Moreover, Mahathir had applied democracy in his own unique way, thus limiting the scope of several basic principles of the original democracy concept to ensure the establishment of a strong state administration and preservation of the people's well-being. He viewed the election of a government as a democratic practice conducted by the people (Omar & Pandian, 2006). Once elected, the government must then be given full trust and authority to govern in order for all administrative matters to run smoothly. Moreover, leaders must be respected for such authority to be strong. Without such authority, the society is vulnerable to chaos, which will disrupt the development, prosperity, and well-being of the people and the country, particularly in developing countries.

Despite the fact that Mahathir is autocratic and has a strong personality, the people were receptive and at ease with his leadership. This is due to his unique and authentic approach combined with his strong personality, which had enabled Malaysia to achieve its goals, visions, and missions. His commanding personality has also had an impact on Malaysia's history. Furthermore, his return to politics has altered the political landscape of the country (Abdullah, 2019). Although factors such as dissatisfaction with the previous administration had led Malaysians to reject the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, the presence of Mahathir-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) had strengthened the people's decision to vote for the opposition coalition. This further upholds and strengthens the authenticity of Mahathir's leadership by demonstrating the importance of a strong personality or role of personalities.

Furthermore, two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership were identified under the leadership element of intelligence in the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely resourceful and pragmatic. Mahathir is resourceful in the sense that he is a wise thinker who serves as a point of reference (Embong & Hassan, 2013; Omar & Pandian, 2006; Ong, 2005). His reputation as a wise thinker is attributed to his experiences as a medical student and practitioner. This is because diagnosing the cause or symptom of a condition is a fundamental for doctors before they can proceed with further action (Ong, 2005). Such process enables doctors to prescribe the best solution for their patients (Omar & Pandian, 2006). Mahathir took the same approach in administering the country where he would examine and investigate the possible causes of a problem experienced by the country or people before determining the best course of action to improve the said problem.

Mahathir's experience as a medical practitioner prior to entering the national leadership field had greatly influenced his approach of conducting his duties as a state leader. Despite the fact that these two fields are somewhat distinct, the attention required in the medical field had shaped Mahathir into an attentive national leader in dealing with the people's problems. Apart from being a wise thinker, Mahathir also served as a point of reference for various parties on various matters pertaining to the country (Embong & Hassan, 2013). This is due to his extensive knowledge and insight on many aspects of national management and leadership. Furthermore, Mahathir also gained his wisdom from his childhood exposure to the culture of knowledge particularly by recognising the importance of reading as a gateway to knowledge. He began his reading habit at a young age because he was born into a family that valued education (Omar & Pandian, 2006). His self-presentation also demonstrates the benefits of reading as evidenced by his ability to constantly present thoughtful ideas and challenge local habits. Furthermore, he has been writing materials since a young age even before becoming involved in politics. This is exemplary by his ability to write about Malayan politics prior to independence, which cannot be done by many people. His mastery of knowledge can also be seen in his out-of-the-box ideas, such as the first national car project, the Multimedia Super Corridor project, as well as the Twin Towers and Putrajaya, all of which were considered mega projects for Malaysia as a developing country (Ismail & Saad, 2007).

Another leadership element associated with Mahathir is pragmatic. According to Lovelace, Neely, Allen, & Hunter (2019), pragmatic leaders refer to those who are directly involved in administrative management. Mahathir is well-known for his pragmatism (Mauzy & Milne, 1983; Ong, 2005) where he not only tells his subordinates and employees about what they need to do but also participates and monitors the work progress (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). This is done to make everything easier and to identify the results of any action immediately. Despite the enormous task of running the country, Mahathir was able to manage his subordinates as well as the ongoing national projects with his management skills. Mahathir's strong managerial abilities can be traced back to his early days in politics. Despite continuing to practise medicine, he was able to conduct his duties as UMNO's state chairman (Omar & Pandian, 2006). Both jobs demanded focus and Mahathir's ability to hold office and manage both careers at the same time thus demonstrates his managerial abilities.

Under the politically-skilled element of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, people-oriented and good communication skills have been identified as two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership. It is believed that concern for people is one of Mahathir's leadership characteristics (Embong *et al.*, 2016; Omar & Pandian, 2006; Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). This element suggests that Mahathir has been a democratic leader throughout his time as Prime Minister. Furthermore, it has been proven that Mahathir was elected by the people in a general election. Despite the fact that his democratic approach differs significantly from the original approach to democracy, the people's participation in state administration is at the forefront of democratic practice in Malaysia (Means, 1976). Due to the constraints imposed by him in administering Malaysia, Mahathir's democracy, which some have perceived as autocratic, is unique. Matters such as free speech, social justice, media freedom, and the rule of law that Mahathir governed during his presidency of Malaysia were solely to maintain the stability of a relatively new country that had achieved independence (Mauzy, 1996; Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Furthermore, this approach was taken to ensure the country's smooth administration, political stability, and prosperity.

Listening to the people is also an important quality for a leader to provide the necessary solutions or needs that address their problems (Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017; Gabriel, 2015). Such approach was taken by Mahathir during his administration of Malaysia, thus demonstrating his people-oriented side in governing the country. He also strives to communicate and connect with people of all ages in order to obtain direct feedback, as evidenced by his effort to communicate with people using cutting-edge technology such as the Internet (Embong *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, Mahathir values people's opinions, stays up to date on current events, and uses cutting-edge technology to govern the country. Indirectly, he has set an excellent example for fellow Malaysians to use existing technology for good. Apart from listening to the people's complaints and opinions, Mahathir had never ignored the voices of his subordinates and civil servants who worked directly under him (Omar & Pandian, 2006). This demonstrates that Mahathir did not govern Malaysia blindly in accordance with his will but rather he took action after considering the views of the people.

Throughout his tenure as Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir emphasised on the importance of unity in leadership. From 1981 to 2003, Mahathir led the BN government with caution by debating, consulting, and tolerating any issue before reaching a final decision that was equitable to all parties involved (Keling, 2006). The same procedure applied when dealing with sensitive issues such as racial or religious discrimination. For example, despite claims that Mahathir is a true champion of Malay rights, other ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Indians had backed his leadership and honoured him as the Prime Minister (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). Both Chinese and Indians supported Mahathir because his administration did not deny their rights as minority groups while maintaining the majority rights of the *bumiputera* to ensure that no one was left behind. This demonstrates his use of cooperation in administering Malaysia. In fact, when he became the interim leader of the opposition coalition in the 14th general election, Mahathir was credited with uniting Malaysians to elect the opposition (Abdullah, 2019). He rallied Malaysians to elect a new government representative in place of the BN, which had long been the sole government of Malaysia.

Mahathir is also known for his excellent communication skills, which are essential for leaders. According to Johansson, Miller, & Hamrin (2014), leaders should be able to communicate effectively as communication, whether

verbal, written, or behavioural, allows both leaders and followers to understand one another while helping the former to gain influence over the latter. In this regard, Mahathir had used the space to communicate with the people as effectively as possible. Despite not having the public speaking skills of Anwar Ibrahim, the president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Mahathir is an excellent speaker (Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). His distinct communication abilities, such as being spontaneous, factual, clear, and inspiring, enable listeners to easily engage and comprehend the essence of his messages (Cheah & Ahmad, 2017a; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). Mahathir also managed to capture the public's attention and persuade them to work together towards a common goal through effective communication. This is consistent with Lovelace, Neely, Allen, & Hunter (2019) who claim that successful leaders are those who can shape how people perceive reality and seek to change it.

The wise element of the Great Man Theory of Leadership has also identified two sub-elements of Mahathir's leadership, namely highly ethical and core value-based. It is believed that Mahathir had reflected the quality of a highly ethical leader. According to Burns (1978), leaders must have high ethics in order to improve the quality of leading their followers and to implement ethical practices among them (Ng & Feldman, 2015). It is also important for leaders to practise high ethics for the greater good of the people because proper and good practices are fundamental to the formation and change of a nation. The elements of efficiency, dedication, integrity, and discipline in Mahathir's leadership demonstrate his highly ethical perspective (Embong & Hassan, 2013; Embong *et al.*, 2016; Mauzy & Milne, 1983; Omar & Pandian, 2006). Mahathir values efficiency because it allows everything to be well supervised and all issues to be resolved as competently as possible (Mauzy & Milne, 1983). Efficiency will benefit all aspects of people's lives as well as the country's administration (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Moreover, dedication is important in a leader and Mahathir's dedication to his role as Prime Minister was visible throughout his tenure. For example, he arrived at work at 8 a.m. like any other civil servant but left at 6.30 p.m. (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Rohman & Sabri, 2017).

Apart from that, Mahathir is a man of integrity in conducting his responsibilities as Prime Minister by strongly condemning corruption, money politics, and abuse of power among state leaders, civil servants, and the general public. This is evidenced by the constant emphasis on the drawbacks of these practices in many of his speeches (Omar & Pandian, 2006). Furthermore, Mahathir was not afraid to admit his flaws as the leader of the country, which portrays him as a man of integrity (Ong, 2005). Admitting one's own shortcomings is never a sign of weakness as it informs leaders about the flaws in their leadership and potential solutions to resolve the problems. Similarly, the people will become aware of their flaws and can work to improve them.

Mahathir is also a highly disciplined individual. Winston (2002) defines discipline as a leadership component that involves behaviour control and serves as a necessary practice because it allows everything to be done in a systematic manner. Mahathir is a highly disciplined leader and often encouraged Malaysians to be discipline in order to succeed in developing the country (Omar & Pandian, 2006; Embong *et al.*, 2016). According to van Houwelingen, van Dijke, & De Cremer (2015), the practice of discipline by leaders will often imply the same quality among their followers. Mahathir, who was highly ethical in his conducting role as a national leader, not only urged the people to be disciplined but also followed the same practice, thus setting an indirect example to fellow citizens (Rohman & Sabri, 2017). Such practice is important for a national institution because it can promote the country's overall development while increasing national productivity.

Furthermore, beliefs and values are essential in everyone's life. A successful leader is someone who can communicate the visions and missions that must be accomplished while aligning it with the followers' beliefs and values (Sendjaya, Pekerti, Härtef, Hirst, & Butarbutar, 2016). In this regard, Mahathir values local beliefs and values as an individual and a leader (Mauzy & Milne, 1983; Abdullah, 2019). As a Muslim, Mahathir upholds the dignity of Islam in ruling the country while also celebrating other religions. He also frequently expressed the Muslim Malaysians' misunderstanding of Islam by emphasising that the true teachings of Islam are not merely related to obligatory worship but also pertaining to being progressive in their pursuit of knowledge and striving for the development of the nation (Mauzy & Milne, 1983).

As the majority of Malaysians are Muslims, Mahathir had placed significant emphasis on the importance of Islam. However, he never ignored the rights of other religions and constantly reminded the people that every religion wants its followers to be good and beneficial citizens to the country. Apart from focusing on religion in leading Malaysians, he also fought for the Malay and Malaysians' rights, making him a true Malaysian nationalist. His decision to fight for the Malay rights was prompted by the fact that they are the country's indigenous people and that issues concerning their rights are sensitive even among Malays. Nonetheless, Mahathir had never denied the rights of Chinese and Indians where they were provided with equal opportunities. In fact, they have been staunch supporters of Mahathir throughout his tenure as Prime Minister (Cheah *et al.*, 2017b; Suppiah *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, it is believed that one of Mahathir's main goals is to unite all races in making Malaysia a developed nation.

Mahathir is also an advocate for Asian values and he is regarded as a spokesman for Asian values in Malaysia along with Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Asian values refer to the local cultural values shared by Asian countries as opposed to the Western values assimilated within Asian countries (Chandra, 1995; Mauzy, 1996; Milner, 1999). Mahathir believes that Asian countries, particularly Malaysia, have a set of eastern values that must be well practised for the nations' dream of success to be realised (Sani & Azizuddin, 2013). These values are significant because it allows both nations and the respective people to succeed while respecting local customs, cultures, and traditions.

Analysis of Mahathir's leadership approach from the perspective of the Great Man Leadership of Theory further strengthens the premise of this study that Mahathir is indeed an excellent leader and comparable to other world leaders who are appointed as great men. His leadership approach is based on the qualities of charismatic, intelligence, politically skilled, and wise that highlight his excellence in successfully providing a solid platform for Malaysia to climb the ladder of progress in the future. Although Mahathir's leadership approach has been accused to contain various polemics and unresolved issues that cause several political parties and personnel to openly reject his leadership, it does not deny his prominent achievements and noble services to the country. The strong path of development and progress currently enjoyed by Malaysia and its people serve as proof to the significance of his leadership. Therefore, his efforts and determination to develop Malaysia must be continued by the next Prime Minister in order to for Malaysia to achieve the status of a developed country and sits at par with other developed countries.

6. Conclusion

This article has evaluated and discussed Mahathir's leadership approach as the 4th and 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia. The results found that his leadership approach is indeed aligned with the underlying elements of the Great Man Theory of Leadership, namely charismatic, intelligent, politically skilled, and wise. Past studies reported that Mahathir possesses the quality of being visionary, trustworthy, authentic, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, good communication skills, highly ethical, and core value-based, thus strengthening his premise as an outstanding leader. His excellence in leading the country has been proven beneficial to both Malaysia and its people while the attention that he received from the international community further reinforced his relevance and influence at both the local and international levels. This positions Mahathir as an excellent leader on par with other world leaders who possess the elements of the Great Man Theory the Leadership. It is indeed a pride for Malaysia as a Southeast Asia country to have a world-class leader. Significant appreciation should thus be given to Mahathir for his services and sacrifices to the nation. As a statesman, Mahathir has proven his ability to lead and shape the future of Malaysia despite facing several ups and downs. Future studies can examine Mahathir's leadership by looking at the suitability of his leadership approach to be compiled as a module that can be utilised by other leadership practitioners.

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