

Reflections on Leadership and Renewal in the Malay/Muslim Community

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Introduction

The roots to Singapore's economic success and stability have been attributed by many observers to the steady stream of capable leaders at the top echelon of governance and leadership. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was quoted to have said that his cabinet "worry obsessively"¹ on the issue of leadership renewal. The tradition of leadership renewal in Singapore's political system is not one that adopts the "plug and play" approach. Capable leaders for the various levels of leadership, from grassroots, to members of parliament and cabinet ministers are identified, attracted, groomed and empowered in a dynamic yet seamless succession planning system.

In a recent interview on the subject of Singapore's political leadership², PM Lee asserted that a leader "must have his own views and ideas." He explained that a leader shoulders the responsibilities of listening to people, analysing, understanding and explaining issues, convincing the people of the decisions taken and striving for consensus. Reiterating firmly, he cautioned that "if you have no ideas, you should not be a leader."

With the best practices in leadership succession planning can be seen to be most exemplified in the tradition set by Singapore's ruling party, it has to be asked, why then has this planning model not immersed deep in the ranks of Malay/Muslim community leadership? Is it the case where leadership is separated from positions of authority, divested across and through the ranks such that every individual member is empowered to lead within

¹ "In Search of 4th Generation Leaders," *The Straits Times*, 06/10/2007

² "Beyond Kissing Babies," *The Straits Times*, 15/04/2008

an individual social sphere? Could it be the case that the talent pool is small to begin with? Could it be the case of an inherited system mimicking the leadership practices of the Malay ruling class of the past? Perhaps, there is not one single question to be asked or a single answer to explain the lack of active attention to attract, groom, and retain the right talent for the right leadership role much desired for the progression of the Malay/Muslim community.

Leadership, Capacity and Renewal – A Long Standing Concern

The concern towards planning for leadership within the community is not a recent phenomenon. For instance, in 1977, the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas put forth the necessity to nurture a pool of capable people in society who will provide leadership in the realm of thinking needed for growth and development. This intellectual leadership³ is one that is guided by strong moral integrity and philosophic spirit grounded on a scientific orientation. Citing Jamaluddin Afghani, he reiterated that “without the spirit of science imbued in society’s leadership, modernisation cannot be a successful agent of change in transforming the character of the people.”

The spirit of science is not to be confused with the regurgitation of statistical data, simplistic application of surveys, and frivolous application of ‘scientifically developed’ scales to measure attitude and aptitude of abstract matters. The basis of philosophical and scientific spirit is inquiry. Fuelled by the spirit of inquiry, leaders would be driven to understand the past, appreciate the present and plan for the future in the context that is relevant to the progress of the community that is being led. Perhaps, the absence of this scientific spirit may be observable if one was to consider the frequency of decisions made by leaders that are based on 1) conjectures and gut-feel rather than sound information, 2) the authority of position rather than expert opinion and 3) age and seniority of leaders rather than cognitive maturity and moral integrity.

In discussions on leadership, more often than not, leadership is tagged to functions such as political leadership, administrative leadership and religious leadership. However,

³ Alatas, S.H., (1977), *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*; London: Frank Cass

much neglected are abstract aspects of leadership that bring about meaning to the leadership mission. For example, the concept of ‘Moral Leadership’⁴ as put forth by leadership educationist Thomas Sergiovanni is a dimension of leadership that centres around purpose, values and beliefs. Along with moral leadership is the concept of ‘Inclusive Leadership’⁵ rooting from humanistic philosophy, calls for leaders to not only advocate for willing followers but to face the challenge of inviting the unconvinced into the folds of participation. The dimension of ‘Intellectual Leadership’ as discussed by Alatas calls for conscious development of intellectual capacity within any leadership class. These are some dimensions of leadership that have developed and have gained contributed to process of defining and evaluating the effectiveness of leaders. It is perhaps prudent that the leadership echelon of the Malay/Muslim community takes heed, attempt to understand and exercise relevant aspects necessary for purposeful and effective leadership practices.

Sociologist of management and leadership, Michel Macoby explains that the task of leadership is not simply to introduce changes. Adopting the framework of his teacher, Erich Fromm, he explains that leaders obsessed with introducing changes are trapped in the mode of ‘having’ (the authority and power) rather than the immersion of ‘being’ a leader⁶ that is conscious of the needs of the led. He noted that there are leaders who are overly confident of their own ideas and often fall back to their personal(ised) ideals and preferences as a benchmark. This creates a style of leadership he terms as ‘Narcissistic Leadership’⁷. While acknowledging that some narcissistic leaders have been successful, it is not difficult to imagine the effects of narcissistic leadership exercised in the absence of a scientific spirit.

Such effects have been recorded and analysed by Shaharuddin Maaruf in his work on the concept of hero in Malay society⁸ where he cited the examples of decisions made by the feudal ruling elites that have contributed to prolonged underdevelopment of the society. Apart from narcissism, Dr Shaharuddin’s analysis revealed that leaders who begin with contempt of the very people who are being led will only entrench further the problems faced

⁴ Sergiovanni, T. (1992), *Moral Leadership*; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

⁵ Ryan, J., (2006), *Inclusive Leadership*; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

⁶ Fromm, E., (1977/2005), *To Have or To Be*. Continuum International Publishing Group

⁷ Macoby, M., (2003), *Narcissistic Leaders*; Boston; Harvard Business School Press

⁸ Shaharuddin Maaruf, (1993), *Konsep Wira dalam Masyarakat Melayu*; Singapura: Pustaka Nasional

by society. This may be exemplified by the longstanding myth of laziness, genetic inferiority and a skewed prejudice that Malays are mere 'social animals' without the will and ability to think and act on their own.

Without a doubt, the material developments throughout the world have given rise to rapid changes in lifestyles, values and attitude. The challenges of underdevelopment in education and economic upward immobility as well as the struggles to mitigate the many by-products and side effects of low educational attainment and low disposable income in the Malay/Muslim community, have crossed a couple of generations. With rapid globalisation of technologies, values and cultures, the challenges have intensified.

Social Health – The Need for a Refined Diagnosis

Taking a leaf from the medical profession, when a patient's health continues to deteriorate and the prescribed medications are no longer effective; the patient may be referred to a new set of prescription, a supplementary form of treatment or reviewed totally for a more precise diagnosis. Perhaps, the same could be applied to social intervention efforts. It has to be asked whether the social health of the community has improved or are there aspects that are deteriorating? Are the various treatments and intervention programmes still effective? Have changes been introduced to the treatment plans and are the changes truly reflective of a substitute treatment or simply a variation of the 'same medication from the same family'? Are the initial diagnoses still relevant? Have we reviewed and investigated the issues in greater depth for a more accurate diagnosis? Have we included the most competent people to perform the treatment? Have we attracted, trained and groomed the relevant individuals to continue with the treatment plan?

While these and many other questions may be asked by any concerned member of the community, the answers may be best appraised by community leaders. How can the community leadership renew itself such that the focus is directed intently at facilitating the social recovery of the community rather than reducing organisational infrastructures and human capital as mechanisms for mass scale trial runs of new (read: infantile) ideas and a parade ground for celebration and publicity?

With all that said, along with the various issues raised in this publication, hope for the future lies in the high youth representation in the community. The younger generation today are getting access to more opportunities, live exposures and a plethora of options to shine in the field of their choice. The spate of success stories in recent years holds testimony that there are a good number of our youths capable of beating the odds in their quest for excellence. Many others have proven their mettle by attaining credible educational qualifications and excelling in their professional endeavours. The blend of experience gained from the daily struggles to 'make it' in school, attainment of knowledge in specialised areas and youthful vigour qualifies these youths to obtain candidature for a leadership role in future.

More significantly, however, is to ask the question; how distant is this future that is before them?

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