

**MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AND LEE KUAN YEW - EXCELLENT
THOUGHT PRACTITIONERS**

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Abstract: Leaders have a significant role and immense influence on the history of a country, a people, or even an era in the development of human society. Throughout history, there have been many notable figures, including two outstanding leaders in Southeast Asia, namely Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew. They mastered the rotation of history, attached to the country's destiny, and changed the political situation of Malaysia and the Island Nation- of Singapore. They are not only the leaders but also excellent thought practitioners,

which is reflected in the policies and ideology in many fields related to Islam and Confucianism. To solve the scientific problems stated in this paper, the author has used an interdisciplinary approach with cultural methods, anthropological research methods, and historical methods to indicate that Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew are excellent thought practitioners.

Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister, Islam, Confucianism

1. Mahathir Mohamad – A typical Muslim

On July 16, 1981, Mahathir became the 4th Prime Minister of Malaysia and served as Prime Minister for 22 years (1981-2003). With 22 years in power, he became Asia's longest-serving Prime Minister.

During his tenure, he modernized Malaysia rapidly and brought it to miraculous growth to become one of the strongest economies in Southeast Asia and Asia. At this time, the famine was almost completely eradicated. Indicators of social welfare such as literacy rate and child mortality rate were on par with those in developed countries.

In addition, Mahathir also succeeded in building the image of modern Muslims. He orientated the right path when Muslims were still wrong in their perception and assessment of the world around them. Islam is the most moderate religion, which contains many progressive values. If Muslims understand and practice the religion correctly, it will become a positive factor promoting the development of society. This is the most transparent view of Mahathir, a moderate Muslim with strong religious beliefs and far-reaching influence.

1.1. Believing in Islam and putting it into practice correctly

Mahathir was raised as a Muslim child by his family. Therefore, Mahathir's religious beliefs were strong and his faith was undisputed. In the book named "*Political Memoirs*," he wrote: "*I am never keen on being a follower of another religion because Islam is my religion. I also don't believe*

any Muslim would abandon his faith. You may not participate in the ritual, but your commitment to Islam is unwavering” [1, p. 564].

With all his knowledge and profound insights about Islam, Mahathir has proved that Islam is the most moderate religion. The teachings of Islam do not have the same commandments as Christianity, but the Quran lists similar things. The Quran requires Muslims to keep their promises, to be honest, not to accept bribes, to be diligent in cultivating knowledge, to be ready to protect the global Muslim community, to take care of orphans, to accept petitions for peace, to judge by law, not to allow hatred to influence decisions, and not to force others to convert by force and many commandments. They not only instruct Muslims how to live but also to be upright and honorable believers. It is undeniable that Islam has brought many core values. According to Mahathir, Islam can be a good influence if people understand and follow it correctly. Islam is not only a faith but also simple guidance for followers to define their way of life. Islam's good values are also similar to Western values and common human values. He has proved that Islam can become one of the factors promoting the progress and development of society.

Of course, Mahathir doubted the teachings of Islam, which were the basis for him to strengthen his religious faith further. Mahathir understands that science helps people understand everything about the functions of the body. Humans have to eat, breathe and excrete toxins. However, what is the purpose of human life when they still have to die even though they have eaten, drunk, and breathed? Mahathir concludes that there is a force that governs everything so that it happens under its way, which is called “Supernatural” by scientists. What is “Supernatural”? It must be God, Allah, God, or the power that governs everything, controls the behavior of all things and phenomena on earth and beyond. Humans are taught to believe that this power is many times greater than human strength. Thus, Mahathir studies the scientific process further and strengthens his faith.

This issue was also addressed in an important political speech in the first decade of the twenty-first century by Dr. Mahathir on October 16, 2003, at the 10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference in Putrajaya, Malaysia. He said: *“Whether you are Muslim or not, the thought of every Malaysian will help the world to understand Islam and Muslims better, breaking the perception that Islam is a religion of backwardness and terrorism... I am sure that 1.3 billion Muslims, who account for one-sixth of the world’s population, are pinning their hopes on us...”* [2].

As a fervent Muslim with strong faith, Mahathir was very successful in creating the image of modern Muslims and showing them the right path.

1.2. Respecting differences and behaving in harmony with other people

Mahathir Mohamad's thought and Islamic teachings are also reflected in another perspective: respecting differences and treating people around. It is expressed even in religious beliefs if it is necessary to deny or completely contradict the views of other practitioners of thought.

In the perception of human rights, Mahathir argued that: *“Islam also accepts that any society has the rich and poor, king and masses, leaders and followers”, “there is no material equality because this matter goes against nature”, and “this fact cannot be denied because the attempt to be fair in the property will fail. However, there are many things that we have not foreseen the consequences of.”* [10, p.2].

Mahathir's views on the issues of social class, wealth, and poverty are clear. Everything is meaningless, and people are equal. The actions, thoughts, and words of each individual can determine whether he or she is noble or not. He never discriminates and always appreciates people if they don't stop working and trying. He believes that if people respect each other's differences in thoughts and actions, they will live peacefully and happily together.

Family values also contributed significantly to the formation of Mahathir's personality. He was taught about values that he always followed throughout his

life. His father, Mr. Mahamad bin Iskandar and his mother, Mrs. Wan Tempawan instilled in him the values of tolerance and respect. Being a fervent follower under his strict family upbringing, Mahathir became a pleasant and well-mannered Malaysian. Since becoming Deputy Prime Minister until being Prime Minister, he never transferred any of his staff even when he/ she did not perform and the others. Instead, he attempted to persuade them to do what he desired by earning their loyalty. As a result, his employees had opportunities to develop and improve their work performance. Some people continued to work with him throughout his final years as Prime Minister. Mahathir recognizes that the responsibility of a “boss” is to get along with his staff and help them reach their maximum potential.

Everyone can make mistakes, and maybe the new employee is not better than the old one. Mahathir supposes that no one is perfect. If he gets angry with the staff, they will get angry with him. In terms of work, although he disagreed with some policies and views of Prime Minister Tun Hussein, he always respected this Prime Minister, who was his “*boss*.”

The origin, the family’s outlook on life, and the unique personality of the parents had a profound influence on the thoughts, actions, attitudes, and choices of Mahathir in life. It can be said that Mahathir is fortunate to be born in such a family which is not wealthy but rich in integrity and tradition.

1.3. Freedom of belief and religion

According to Mahathir, Islam is a religion that is tolerant of other religions and their followers. Through a bilingual translation of the Quran in English and Malaysian, he found verses proving Islam's tolerance for other religions, showing that his feelings were entirely accurate. Here is an excerpt which is written about the pagan:

“Say: O unbelievers!

I do not serve that which you serve,

Nor do you serve Him Whom I serve:

*Nor am I going to serve that which you serve,
Nor are you going to serve Him Whom I serve:
You shall have your religion, and I shall have my religion.”*

There is no coercion in Islam. The Quran quoted is about religions whose followers do not accept “*faith*,” i.e. Islam.

When he was a teenager, he lived in a house next to apartments and shops occupied by other believers. There was a Chinese shop in front of his house, which had an altar opposite the door. Before the Buddha's portrait, there was an incense bowl. During the occupation period of Japan, the Tamil people (people originally from Southern India) lived with his family. They did not have altars or carved images of lords, but he knew they still worshiped gods in their temples. While studying at school, his classmate was Eurasian and Christian. Later, at university, his classmates followed different religions.

Mahathir knew that they followed different religions and teachings, but he still made friends with them. To not affecting his beliefs, he avoided discussing religion with his friends because he understood that it would be easy to lead to disagreements and a break in relationships.

After being mature, his view has unchanged and even become a strong wish. Building a nation that contains one people and is multi-religious has been the first and foremost dream of Mahathir Mohamad. According to him, the right to freedom of belief and religion is a basic human right. The disregard and violation of rights to freedom of thought, belief, and religion directly or indirectly lead to wars, riots, and significant consequences for humanity.

Many various interpretations of Islam have emerged throughout its more than 1,400-year existence. Each interpretation is influenced by the needs of the times. Some people claim that their acts of terror and violence are motivated by religious convictions, but this is not the case. Islam never tells its followers to do these things because the Quran writes: “*You have your religion, I have mine. You pray your way. I pray my way. Religion is not coercive.*” Therefore,

Mahathir has lived according to that concept and become an orthodox Muslim. That orthodox Islamic ideology makes him moderate. Mahathir believes that Islam, a religion and a culture, has been misinterpreted by extremist scholars, dividing the community. It is a favorable condition for others to invade and rule.

Respecting freedom of religion or belief will build and complete Mahathir Mohamad's personality and culture, create the image of a peaceful Malaysia in the eyes of the international community, and create social justice and friendship among nations.

2. Lee Kuan Yew – A person practices Confucian thought by upholding moral values and education in leading his country.

Singapore is a country in Southeast Asia but heavily influenced by Chinese culture and traditions. Therefore, Singapore's development has been determined by Asian characteristics, particularly Confucian thought. That idea was established and instilled by Lee Kuan Yew, a great leader.

Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore (Lee Kuan Yew, September 16, 1923 - March 23, 2015), is a fourth-generation Chinese Singaporean. He is influenced by Eastern and Western cultures and always values and directs Singapore to a traditional society. He always emphasizes the importance of Confucianism in Singaporean society. Confucian ideals are constantly honored and prioritized in his thoughts and deeds to build a good community, whose foundation is education and morality.

2.1. Respecting moral values

Singapore is a young country in Southeast Asia with a small population and limited resources. As a leader, Lee Kuan Yew has determined that people are the nation's resources. Although Lee Kuan Yew's view of governing was the rule of law, the model of government that Lee Kuan Yew built in Singapore was a family-based society. In which, the first is a moral authority. He is patriarchal but exemplary and always strives for the happiness of all members of the Singapore family. That society encourages people to study and value

outstanding people who have contributed to the island nation. Although it is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country, most citizens live in peace and harmony. Singapore is a country that begins later but finishes before many other countries in Southeast Asia and worldwide, thanks to a society with effective administrative apparatus and low corruption, and advanced social organization and infrastructure.

Facing the difficult situation after independence, Lee Kuan Yew, as Singapore's supreme leader, always put the interests of the country and people first. He always thought about how to make people happy. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew worked hard to do these goals, introduced many appropriate policies to build and develop society, and implemented them with great determination. As a result, Singapore's society has changed and developed rapidly, surprising the rest of the world. Singapore became a free, prosperous, and peaceful country. People's lives were concerned and improved. Lee Kuan Yew's policies made people believe in the government, support the People's Action Party (PAP), be attached to their nation, and even voluntarily preserve, protect, and build their country.

A great leader shall have high ethical standards followed by people. Lee Kuan Yew is such a person. His core value is to prioritize the interests of society above personal interests. After separating from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, Singaporeans faced many difficulties in life. In addition to economic development, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew paid great attention to policies to ensure people's living standards. He said:

“As an Asian with a background in Chinese culture, I value an honest and efficient government that protects people and allows them to have access to opportunities to develop in a stable and orderly society, where they live happily and raise their children to be more successful than themselves” [3].

Lee Kuan Yew was determined to build houses for low-income people and support them to own houses to enhance people's living standards. He said:

“My primary concern is to secure the rights of all citizens and their future. I would like to create a society where everyone owns their home” [4, p. 110].

People supported his act, which strengthened the connection between them and the government. Moreover, Lee Kuan Yew also took measures to create equity, reduce social differentiation, and narrow the gap between the rich and the poor such as promulgating a reasonable wage policy and taxing income. Singapore implemented a policy to adjust wages across industries and economic zones. Wages were also adjusted between the public and private sectors. The poor Malaysian and Indian families got help. As a result, the income gap between ethnic groups had narrowed. Moreover, Lee Kuan Yew also built a strict social discipline.

Besides taking power, Lee Kuan Yew was deeply aware of his mission to establish a clean and efficient government before the widespread corruption. Accordingly, he always persisted with the principle of building a clean public apparatus during his time in office. It is the decisive factor helping Singapore get rid of corruption and stagnation after gaining national independence. It is also the secret for the People's Action Party (PAP) to master the leadership and deploy development strategies to achieve the best results. The strong will and great determination of Lee Kuan Yew, who is knowledgeable about the times and fundamentally honest, has helped Singapore fight corruption. He built a legal system with strict penalties and established the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), operating with functional independence. This agency has deterred, prevented officials from corrupt, and ensured transparency for the investigation and trial process. Lee Kuan Yew also highly appreciates people's power in the fight against corruption. He believes that the greatest strength is public opinion which can keep the apparatus clean *“from the top.”* According to Transparency International, Singapore ranks at the top of the cleanest countries in the world.

2.2. Valuing education

Since Lee Kuan Yew took over the country, he has recognized that education can solve the current situation of Singapore, such as poverty, backwardness and division among ethnic groups, and inconsistency in language. Therefore, he was determined to invest more in education than in any other field. He believed that schools would educate students, helping them healthy and strong. The more important thing was that they would be taught high standards of behavior, social norms, the good, and the bad. A literate generation without reaching these values could be riskier than a completely illiterate one.

The significant decisions he made were promoting and maintaining the bilingual policy, which was a cornerstone of the education system. According to him, language is the key to acquire knowledge. If students cannot understand a language, they cannot receive information or knowledge in that language. English becomes the first choice in Singapore's language policy because it can connect this small island nation to the large and developed world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and several European countries. With his experiences and knowledge, he has applied a policy that solves the language and ethnic issues and helps Singapore integrate with the world quickly. That is why he chooses English as one of the four main languages in Singapore. According to him, *“you need to master a language that makes you productive, helps you access the information, and expresses your thoughts. It is English.”* [12, p. 315]

While the mother tongue connects Singaporeans with the origin, culture, and spiritual heritage of each ethnic group, English becomes the language used at work, helping them connect with the world. Bilingualism has built national unity and strengthened Singapore's cultural identity. Therefore, using English as a second language is wise, producing results beyond Lee Kuan Yew's expectations. In Singapore, Japanese staff must communicate in English. The Chinese Singaporean have to speak English at work and in daily life. On the internet, information is also written in English. English is entirely dominant

rather than French or Russian as it used to be. The bilingual policy is developed to ensure cultural diversity and equality among ethnic groups. Bilingual education becomes a lifelong commitment in Singapore. Therefore, students learn both English and their mother tongue in the general education program.

Lee Kuan Yew also supported and encouraged people in learning. He established the Prime Minister's Book Prize to award the most outstanding bilingual students in primary and secondary schools every year, regardless of their class, status, and ethnicity. *We always try to help them more in tuition, care more about them, and inspire them. When I get paid for my speech, I donate it as a scholarship to encourage people in the lowest class to study hard from vocational school to college. ...* [12, p. 248]. He focused on equipment and laboratories in school and recruiting highly qualified teachers at colleges, universities, kindergartens, and primary schools because a person needs to be cared for and educated carefully from an early age.

He established the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism to create initiatives to help preschool children develop a good foundation for bilingual learning. He has also contributed to Singaporean education by providing scholarships to outstanding students in schools and institutes of Science and Technology and outstanding people in the academic and non-academic fields. There are many scholarships under his name in Singapore, such as *Lee Kuan Yew Award for All-Round Excellence, The Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship to Encourage Upgrading, The Lee Kuan Yew Award for Mathematics and Science, The Lee Kuan Yew Award for Outstanding Normal Course Students ...*

Lee Kuan Yew has been an example of lifelong learning. He thinks that if people cannot adapt and change, they will not grow and become obsolete. *"Therefore, if I don't learn something new, I feel out of place in the world and useless"* [5]. That great man has accumulated a lot of knowledge and contributed a lot to the development of Singapore. He continues to study and believes that learning is essential.

He always values the great importance of education and considers it a national policy. He believes that if education thrives, the economy will also thrive. Therefore, as soon as he came to power, he devoted much effort to the development of education. Studying is extremely important to him, and he has constantly been learning throughout his life. That spirit has become a modern culture and inspiration for people across the Island Nation.

3. Conclusion

In addition to leading the country, Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew are considered outstanding thought practitioners. Their decisions and ideas in various fields are related to the thought of Islam and Confucianism.

Mahathir Mohamad devoted his youth to his political career and persistent fight to pursue his dream of developing the country. The dedication and qualities of an outstanding politician have helped him reach success and the affection of Malaysians, who consider him a hero with the best qualities.

Lee Kuan Yew always upholds the spirit and concept of Confucianism and considers it a guideline to maintain social and family order during his life and career. His actions help Singapore develop and make residents satisfied with the quality of life and feel secure in the stability and wealth of the country. They have access to high-quality education, good service, and a clean government devoting to people thanks to his vision and strategy.

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