

## Mahathir's leadership communication: Exploring the Indians' political and non-governmental organisations experience

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### ABSTRACT

In general, there were many studies have been conducted analysing leadership communication from the majority's group but fewer studies were conducted from the minority's perspective. Mahathir was perceived as a leader who merely focused on the development of the majority group (Malay) and marginalised the minority communal, including the Indians. Interestingly, despite his Ultra Malay rhetoric, the Indians in Malaysia showed advancement in various sectors including politics, economics and social. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to fill in the gap by investigating the influence of Mahathir's leadership communication from Indians political leaders and NGOs perspective in Malaysia. The transformational leadership theory was used to investigate the phenomena. In-depth interview was utilised to get an insight of the experiences of this Indians communities on Mahathir's leadership communication. Data were collected through a series of intensive interviews with 12 informants consists of Malaysian based Indian political leaders and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and create themes from the data collected. Based on the analysis, three themes were identified; characteristics of Mahathir's leadership communication, Mahathir as the Indian community transformer, and the expected leadership communication qualities of the Indians. This study has contributed to enhance understanding about the impacts of leadership communication from the minority community perspective. Further, it was found that the Indians are significantly affected by Mahathir's leadership communication.

**Keywords:** *Social Change, Malaysia, Mahathir, minority group, transformational communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of a nation depends on the leadership of a leader. This is because a leader is able to successfully implement his ideas, policies, vision and mission if his ideas are accepted by the people in the nation (Weihrich, Cannice, & Koontz, 2008). A study conducted by Ali (2011) stated that a leader in a country depends on his followers' acceptance towards his ideas, policies and visions in order to implement them (in Daft, 2005). Thus, effective leadership communication of a leader is important to ensure the followers accept the leader's ideas to bring development or social change to the nation (Willburn, 2008).

Besides that, according to Lester and Brower (2003), leadership communication is a process that involves influencing people's attitude including their perceptions and preferences (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Czech & Forward, 2010). Scholars also have stressed that through an effective communication, a leader would be able to influence followers towards effective changes (Carroll & Flood, 2010). Furthermore, the leadership theory, specifically transformational leadership theory discusses the effect of transformational leadership on followers' attitude and behaviour (Bass, 1999; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993) and it was evident that there is a sufficient conceptual gap in understanding the functionality of leadership theories, such as transformational leadership theory (Yukl, 2006). However, it was found that research investigating the transformational leadership from a contextual perspective was still underdeveloped, specifically the type of leaders' behaviour in a cultural context and how does it affect followers was still not fully explored (Avolio & Yammarino, 2002). Studies conducted mainly focused on western based context and treated the society as homogenous, such as GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness Research Program) study (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). However, scholars argued that the leadership outcome varies across cultural context or heterogeneous society. For instance, Graen (2006) criticizes the multicultural perspective that was overlooked in GLOBE study, specifically the leadership communication process between leader and follower from a minority perspective. Andreouli (2013) also pointed out that many researchers failed to discuss the diversity of society.

In Malaysia, Mahathir as a leader who represents the majority community has introduced various policies, visions, and missions for the nation. As the premier of the nation for 22 years (1981-2003), Mahathir brought many developments in Malaysia. It was evident that Tun Mahathir Mohamad, who once again appointed as the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2018, was the backbone behind the tremendous development of the country. Gomez (in Ahmad, 2010) argued that during his leadership (1981-2003), Mahathir well packaged most of government ideologies, policies and concepts in a form of public campaigns to gain support from the general as well as the segmented publics. He had communicated his plans effectively with the public to ensure successful implementation of his plans. Further, Mahathir was one of the renowned Third World leaders in several ways, not least in terms of his effort and motivation to change Malaysia into a fully developed nation (Khoo, 1995).

### *Problem Statement*

According to Mahathir, Hinduism and animism were controlling and shaping the Malay community (Khoo, 1995). Thus, the government under Mahathir tried to eliminate the Hinduism elements that exist among Malays which was perceived by elite Indians to be the fuel behind the negation of "Indians" and "Hindus" (Cangi, 2014). Mahathir's leadership caused worries among Indians and created fear that the government's Islamic policies which were introduced by Mahathir were ultimately aimed at assimilating non-Malays (Willford, 2007).

Due to his leadership communication approach, Mahathir was viewed as a leader who was concerned about the majority community (Malay community) that he represented. Wain (2013) labeled Mahathir as "ultra-Malay" or "Malay chauvinist" because of his support towards policies that aimed to promote Malays' communal uplift which eventually sidelined other communities. Furthermore, Mahathir used Islam as a tool for his political domination and to stop the interference of external parties in Malay politics (Willford, 2007).

Mahathir's leadership was mainly focused to uplift the Malays which could be understood through the gradual removal of affirmative action policies and the implementation of different government policies; for instance, the New Development Plan (1991-2000) and New Vision Policy (2000-2010) which had sidelined the Indians (Sikri, 2013). The privileges and special attention given to the Malay communal led to the marginalisation of non-Malays in various sectors including business opportunities, reduction in the number of intakes into higher educational institutions, denial of scholarships, and reduction of space for the promotion of ethnic and cultural rights of non-Malays (Sikri, 2013). Furthermore, the needs and necessities, fundamental rights and equal opportunities of progress were denied to Indians under Mahathir's premiership (Lahiri, 2008). Racial discrimination of Indians was evident in many fields, including: allotment of business licenses, eligibility in receiving government scholarships, closure of Tamil primary schools, complications in citizenship applications and permits for taxis, allotment of land, limited admissions to universities and the appointment of lecturers or teachers, etc. It was clearly shown that throughout his premiership, Mahathir had advocated Islamic approaches and due to his approach, he was labeled as "ultra-Malay" and contributed to enormous issues in Indian community (Mahathir & Ishihara, 1995 in Sani, 2008).

However, it was reported that the cultural sensitivity of non-Muslims towards Muslims dropped extensively under the premiership of Mahathir (Saad, 2012). Furthermore, interestingly, despite various issues and though he is labeled as an "ultra-Malay" leader, the Indians in Malaysia showed advancement in various sectors including politics, economics and social (see Table 1 Incidence of Poverty by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014, for complete data). Based on the issue discussed, this paper raises the following research question; what are the lived experiences of Indians in Malaysia towards the leadership communication of Mahathir from the viewpoints of Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations.

Table 1: Incidence of Poverty by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014<sup>f</sup>

	1970 <sup>a</sup>	1976	1979	1984	1987	1989 <sup>b</sup>	1992	1995	1997	1999 <sup>c</sup>	2002	2004	2007	2009	2012	2014
<b>Malaysia</b>	49.3	37.7	37.4	20.7	19.4	16.5	12.4	8.7	6.1	8.5	6.0	5.7	3.6	3.8	1.7	0.6
<b>Kumpulan Etnik/Ethnic Group<sup>d</sup></b>																
Bumiputera	64.8	46.4 <sup>a</sup>	49.2	28.7	26.6	23.0	17.5	12.2	9.0	12.3	9.0	8.3	5.1	5.3	2.2	0.8
Cina/Chinese	26.0	17.4 <sup>a</sup>	16.5	7.8	7.0	5.4	3.2	2.1	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.3	0.1
India/Indians	39.2	27.3 <sup>a</sup>	19.8	10.1	9.6	7.6	4.4	2.6	1.3	3.4	2.7	2.9	2.5	2.5	1.8	0.6
Lain-lain/Others	44.8	33.8 <sup>a</sup>	28.9	18.8	20.3	22.1	21.3	22.1	13.0	25.5	8.5	6.9	9.8	6.7	1.5	0.9
<b>Strata</b>																
Bandar/Urban	21.3	15.4	17.5	8.5	8.5	7.1	4.7	3.6	2.1	3.3	2.3	2.5	2.0	1.7	1.0	0.3
Luar Bandar/Rural	58.7	45.7	45.8	27.3	24.8	21.1	21.2	14.9	10.9	14.8	13.5	11.9	7.1	8.4	3.4	1.6
<b>Negeri/State</b>																
Johor	45.7	29.0	18.2	12.2	11.1	9.8	5.6	3.1	1.6	3.1	2.5	2.0	1.5	1.3	0.9	0.0
Kedah	63.2	61.0	53.8	36.6	31.3	29.9	21.2	12.2	11.5	14.2	9.7	7.0	3.1	5.3	1.7	0.3
Kelantan	76.1	67.1	55.0	39.2	31.6	29.6	29.5	22.9	19.2	25.2	17.8	10.6	7.2	4.8	2.7	0.9
Melaka	44.9	32.4	20.4	15.8	11.7	12.4	8.5	5.3	3.5	2.9	1.8	1.8	1.8	0.5	0.1	0.1
Negeri Sembilan	44.8	33.0	26.3	13.0	21.5	9.1	8.1	4.9	4.7	4.1	2.6	1.4	1.3	0.7	0.5	0.4
Pahang	43.2	38.9	26.9	15.7	12.3	10.0	6.9	6.8	4.4	9.8	9.4	4.0	1.7	2.1	1.3	0.7
Pulau Pinang	43.7	32.4	19.7	13.4	12.9	8.7	4.0	4.0	1.7	0.7	1.2	0.3	1.4	1.2	0.6	0.3
Perak	48.6	43.0	30.5	20.3	19.9	19.2	10.2	9.1	4.5	6.8	6.2	4.9	3.4	3.5	1.5	0.7
Perlis	73.9	59.8	63.1	33.7	29.1	17.4	19.8	11.8	10.7	13.6	8.9	6.3	7.0	6.0	1.9	0.2
Selangor	29.2	22.9	14.5	8.6	8.9	7.6	4.3	2.2	1.3	1.9	1.1	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.4	0.2
Terengganu	68.9	60.3	53.1	28.9	36.1	31.3	25.6	23.4	17.3	22.7	14.9	15.4	6.5	4.0	1.7	0.6
Sabah & W.P. Labuan		58.3 <sup>f</sup>	40.7 <sup>f</sup>	33.1	35.3	29.7	27.8	22.6	16.5	23.4	16.0	23.0	16.0	19.2	7.8	3.9
Sarawak		56.5	47.8	31.9	24.7	21.0	19.2	10.0	7.3	10.9	11.3	7.5	4.2	5.3	2.4	0.9
W.P. Kuala Lumpur	n.a	e	e	4.9	5.2	3.7	1.7	0.5	0.1	0.4	0.5	1.5	1.5	0.7	0.8	0.1
W.P. Putrajaya		g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

**Note for Table 7/Nota untuk Jadual 7 :**

**a\* Refers to Peninsular Malaysia only/ Merujuk kepada Semenanjung Malaysia sahaja.**

**b\* Starting 1989, data is based on Malaysian citizens/ Mulai tahun 1989, data adalah berdasarkan kepada warganegara Malaysia.**

**c\* From 1999 onwards, calculation of poverty is based on 2005 Methodology/ Mulai tahun 1999 dan seterusnya, pengiraan kemiskinan adalah berdasarkan metodologi 2005.**

**d\* The HIS sampling frame does not take into account the data precision based on ethnicity. Therefore, data on ethnicity are only suitable to depict a general view/ Rangka pensampelan Penyiasatan Pendapatan Isi Rumah (HIS) tidak mengambil kira kepersisan data berdasarkan etnik. Oleh itu, data berkaitan etnik hanya sesuai sebagai gambaran umum.**

**e\* Kuala Lumpur is gazetted as a Federal Territory on 1 February 1974. Data for W.P. Kuala Lumpur is part of Selangor/ Kuala Lumpur diwartakan sebagai Wilayah Persekutuan pada 1 Februari 1974. Data bagi W.P. Kuala Lumpur adalah sebahagian daripada Selangor.**

**f\* Labuan is gazetted as a Federal Territory on 16 April 1984. Data for W.P. Labuan is part of Sabah/ Labuan diwartakan sebagai Wilayah Persekutuan pada 16 April 1984. Data bagi W.P. Labuan adalah sebahagian daripada Sabah.**

**g\* Putrajaya is gazetted as a Federal Territory on 1 February 2001. Data for W.P. Putrajaya is part of Selangor/ Putrajaya diwartakan sebagai Wilayah Persekutuan pada 1 Februari 2001. Data bagi W.P Putrajaya adalah sebahagian daripada Selangor.**

**r\* Figures have been revised/ Angka telah disemak semula.**

**n.a\* Not applicable/ Not available/ Tidak berkenaan/ Tidak diperoleh**

**0.0\* Less than half the smallest unit shown (for example, less than 0.05 per cent)/ Kurang daripada setengah unit terkecil yang ditunjukkan (contohnya, kurang daripada 0.05 peratus).**

**Source for Table 7/ Sumber untuk Jadual 7 :**

**1) Post Enumeration Survey, 1970/ Penyiasatan Selepas Banci, 1970.**

**2) Agriculture Census 1977, Malaysia (reference 1976)/ Banci Pertanian 1977, Malaysia (rujukan 1976).**

**3) Household Income Surveys/ Penyiasatan-penyiasatan Pendapatan Isi Rumah.**

**4) Statistical compilations (Malaysia Plan, Mid-Term Review and others)/ Kompilasi statistik (Rancangan Malaysia, Kajian Separuh Penggal dan lain-lain.**

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Leadership Communication*

Leadership and communication are interdependent (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and scholars have discussed that leadership communication affects the attitude and behavior of followers. Generally, leadership communication consists of two components; the content of the leader's messages and the delivery style of the messages. Scholars proved that the messages sent by leaders affect followers' attitude and thinking (Liu, 2010). This is because effective communication of leaders could earn followers' support and confidence, which contribute to communication satisfaction and strong relationship between the leader and followers (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

Further, a study conducted by Fairhurst (2007) discusses that effective communication of a leader has a significant effect on followers' perception especially in motivating them towards social change or development. Likewise, Northouse (2013) defined leadership communication as a process of influencing people to reach goals. Particularly, there are three key ideas that emerged from the leadership communication literature which defined leadership as a form of influence, an achievement of a common goal or visions and as a symbolic, communicative behaviour (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). In-line with the three ideas above, Hackman (2013) defines leadership as a human symbolic communication that is used to influence attitudes and behaviors of people to reach shared goals. Moreover, the research found that leadership effectiveness is dependent on the communication of the

leader (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013). Therefore, it is proven that communication is the core principle of leadership (Vries, 2010) and if a leader possesses effective leadership communication qualities, he or she could create changes in society by influencing people towards his or her ideas and visions (Martinez, 2012). In short, this study perceives that Mahathir as a leader, who contributes significant developments to the society, possesses effective leadership communication which played a pivotal role in influencing the Indians towards social change.

#### *Mahathir as a Transformational Leader*

The concept of transforming leadership was established by Burns (1978) in his study of political leaders. According to Burns (1978), transforming leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation. Burns (1978) also indicated that a leader with transformational qualities could provide followers with an inspiring mission, vision and give them an identity. The leader transforms and motivates followers through his or her idealised influence (earlier referred to as charisma), intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. In addition, transformational leader encourages followers to come up with new and unique ways to challenge the status quo and progress to a better level. Furthermore, literatures stated that, leaders with qualities foster inspirational motivation (Judge, 2002), set visions for the future (Sosik, 2005) and stimulate followers' confidence in achieving collective goals (Wilderom, Berg, & Wiersma, 2012). Thus, due to these powerful symbolic behaviors, followers tend to have a great inspiration and respect towards the leader (Hughes, 2014). Thus, transformational leader could be viewed as a leader who could contribute towards positive changes or development in a society.

Based on the literature, this study analyses the transformational leadership communication qualities which are significant in Mahathir's leadership. A study, argued that, during his leadership, Tun Mahathir has successfully implemented his ideas with people's acceptance because he well packaged most of government ideologies, policies and concepts in a form of public campaigns (Ahmad, 2010). He managed to get support from all the ethnic groups in Malaysia, including the Indians. Furthermore, Tun Mahathir was one the renowned Third World leaders in several ways, which could be seen in his efforts and motivation to change Malaysia into a fully developed nation (Khuo, 1995). Moreover, in his speech, Mahathir stressed that, Malaysia should develop in all aspects economically, politically, socially, psychologically, culturally and spiritually (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991). This is evidence that Mahathir has motivated Malaysians to strive to reach the vision which could transform Malaysia to a better level and in other words, Mahathir was perceived to have contributed to social change in society.

Based on leadership communication literatures, transformational leaders are able to communicate effectively and influence their followers. They are also a role model for their followers. Thus, in order to stimulate social change, leaders need to show their commitments (Achakul & Yolles, 2013). Past researches stated that the leaders enhance group cohesiveness by using persuasive and image-based rhetoric (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001). These leadership qualities can be seen significantly in Mahathir's leadership. Mahathir has developed and introduced the concept of 'Bangsa Malaysia' to create an identity for Malaysians and to foster unity among Malaysians.

*Indians' Achievements under Mahathir's Leadership*

The Indian community showed the achievements in various sectors. For instance, from the economic perspective, the Indian community's achievements in Malaysia were significant. During Mahathir's leadership, from 1981 to 2003, the household income of Indian community increased significantly. Before his premiership in 1979, the gross household income of Indian community was RM756 and in the early year of his premiership in 1984, the gross household income of the Indians was RM1, 107. It can be seen that there was a significant increase in the gross household income of Indians compared to in 1971. The household income of Indians further increased in the middle years of Mahathir's leadership from RM1, 604 in 1992 to RM2, 140 in 1995. In 1999 to 2002, at the end of Mahathir's premiership, the household income of Indians continued to show increased from RM2, 702 to RM3, 044. This gradual increase of household incomes shows Malaysian Indians' achievement in the economic sector (see Table 2, Mean Monthly Gross Household Income by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014, for complete data).

Table 2: Mean monthly gross household income by ethnic group, strata and state, Malaysia, 1970-2014.

	1970	1974	1976	1979	1984	1987	1989	1992	1995	1997	1999	2002	2004	2007	2009	2012	2014
Malaysia	264	362	305	678	1,098	1,083	1,169	1,366	2,020	2,606	2,472	3,011	3,249	3,686	4,025	5,000	6,141
Ethnic Group																	
Bumiputera	172	242	345	492	844	868	940	1,268	1,604	2,038	1,984	2,376	2,711	3,156	3,624	4,457	5,548
Chinese	394	534	787	1,002	1,552	1,488	1,631	2,192	2,890	3,738	3,456	4,279	4,437	4,853	5,011	6,366	7,666
Indians	304	408	538	756	1,107	1,105	1,209	1,604	2,140	2,896	2,702	3,044	3,456	3,799	3,999	5,233	6,246
Others	813	1,299	1,268	1,475	2,957	2,992	955	1,163	1,284	1,680	1,371	2,165	2,312	3,561	3,640	3,843	6,011

Source: Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia (EPU).

The achievement of Indian community in economic sector can also be seen through the significant decrease in poverty rates during Mahathir's premiership. In 1979, a year before he came to power as the premiership, the poverty rate was 19.8 but this number dropped significantly to 10.1 in 1984 during the early years of his leadership. The poverty rate dropped further to 3.4 in 1999, on the edge of his leadership. It was clear that there was economic growth in Indian community during Mahathir's leadership (see Table 1 Incidence of Poverty by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014, for complete data).

From the social perspective, during Mahathir's leadership, the number of Indian students' enrollment in primary schools increased significantly from 73,513 students and 583 schools in 1981 to 89,175 students and 524 schools in 2000. This shows primary school education opportunity was available during Mahathir's leadership for Indian students (<http://www.indianmalaysian.com/education.htm>). In terms of professional and technical growth, the Indians witnessed an increase in proportion in the category, from 9.9 per cent in 1995 to 11.0 per cent in 2000. The registered Indian professionals by ethnic group also shown an increase from 7.9 per cent in 1990 to 9.0 in 1995 and 10.6 in 2000 (see Table 3 Employment by Occupation and Ethnic Group, 1990, 1995, and 2000, 7th Malaysia Plan, 1996-2000, for complete data).

Table 3: Registered professionals<sup>1</sup> by ethnic group, 1999 and 1995.

Profession	1990					1995					Average Annual Growth Rate (%), 1991-95				
	Bani-putea	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total	Bani-putea	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total	Bani-putea	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total
Accountants %	627 13.2	4,524 81.2	346 6.2	77 1.4	5,574 100.0	1,422 16.1	6,655 75.7	692 7.9	75 0.8	8,844 100.0	17.8	8.0	14.9	-0.3	8.7
Architects %	231 23.6	728 74.4	12 1.2	8 0.8	979 100.0	368 27.6	943 70.7	20 1.5	3 0.2	1,334 100.0	-9.8	5.3	10.8	-17.8	6.4
Doctors %	496 24.3	847 30.7	396 22.7	21 1.3	1,670 100.0	577 10.9	854 45.7	409 23.9	29 1.5	1,869 100.0	7.1	0.2	0.6	6.7	2.1
Doctors %	1,931 27.8	2,430 34.7	2,410 34.4	216 3.1	7,007 100.0	3,312 33.4	3,086 31.1	3,169 32.0	241 2.5	9,608 100.0	10.3	4.9	3.0	2.2	6.3
Engineers %	7,018 34.8	11,741 38.2	1,065 5.3	342 1.7	20,166 100.0	10,415 34.1	15,091 35.2	1,416 3.2	427 1.5	27,349 100.0	8.2	5.7	5.9	4.3	6.1
Lawyers %	305 22.3	1,175 30.0	836 26.3	37 1.2	3,153 100.0	1,731 29.0	2,389 43.7	1,591 26.6	65 1.1	5,976 100.0	19.7	10.3	13.7	11.9	13.6
Surveyors %	573 44.7	636 49.6	48 3.7	26 2.0	1,283 100.0	1,309 48.3	1,233 45.6	86 3.2	29 2.9	2,700 100.0	18.0	14.2	12.4	24.9	16.1
Veterinary Surgeons %	342 33.9	160 23.7	230 37.0	23 3.4	675 100.0	310 40.2	183 23.7	239 31.3	20 2.6	772 100.0	3.1	2.7	0.7	-2.8	2.7
Total %	11,753 28.0	22,641 33.9	5,363 13.2	750 1.9	40,507 100.0	19,344 33.1	30,636 52.4	7,542 12.9	939 1.6	58,461 100.0	10.5	6.2	7.1	4.6	7.6

Source: Professional associations and institutions covering both public and private sectors.

Note: <sup>1</sup> Figures in the table cover eight selected professional occupations.

This situation reflects the Indian community's gradual improvements and achievements during Mahathir's leadership. The statistics show that under the premiership of Mahathir, the Indians in Malaysia have progressed in various sectors (see Table 1 Incidence of Poverty by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014, for complete data).

## METHODS

In this study, a qualitative method was employed to capture the complexity of leadership and follower dynamics, including the cultural context of a community. It also allows the researcher to examine the way the Indians perceive Mahathir's leadership communication specifically from the perspective of Indian political leaders and non-governmental organisations. In general, the researcher aimed to address the research questions raised in this study through in-depth interviews. In order to get a holistic perspective on Mahathir's leadership communication from the Indians cultural perspective, twelve research informants or interviewees consist of six Indian political leaders representing the Government and Opposition, and six non-governmental organisations representatives were selected using purposive sampling based on recommendation by Patton (2002). Ultimately, six Indian political leaders and six presidents of non-governmental organisations who have experienced the Mahathir's leadership were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that the interviews yielded the depth of information required for the study. Interview questions were open-ended which provides an opportunity for participants to share their lived experiences and perceptions towards Mahathir's leadership communication. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and create a theme from the data collected. Three stages of thematic analysis of the data coding stage, themes developing stage and also analytical theme creating stage were applied (Thomas & Harden, 2003).



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

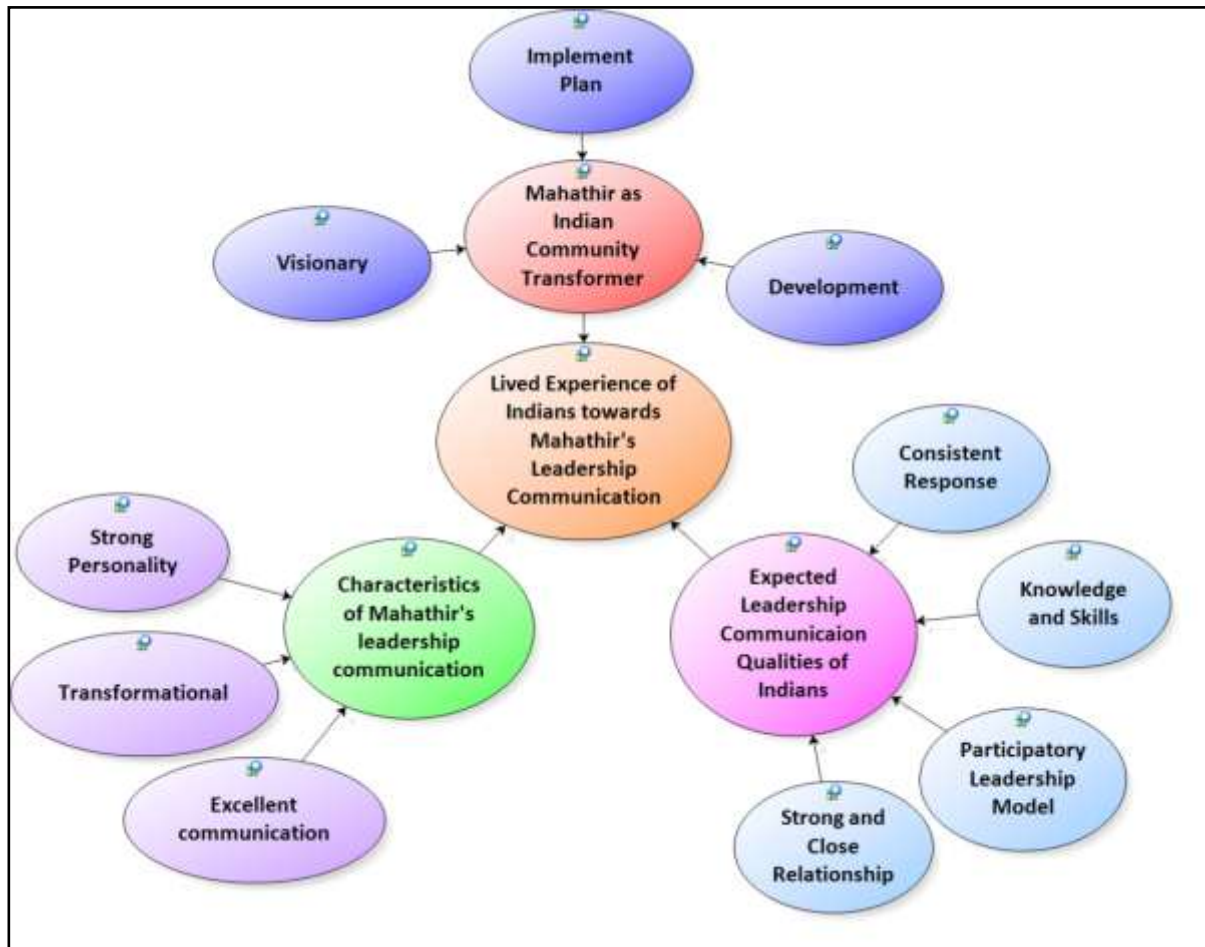


Figure 1: Indian community perspective on Mahathir's leadership communication.

This section provides the results of data analysis obtained from the data collected from twelve informants. The aim of the study is to investigate the lived experience of Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations under the leadership communication of Mahathir. The data has been analysed using the NVivo software and the figure above was constructed. Figure 1 shows that there are three themes that could explain the lived experience of the Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations towards the leadership communication of Mahathir.

*Characteristics of Tun Mahathir's Leadership Communication*

The findings show that the characteristics of Mahathir's leadership communication could be explained through a few sub-themes which were identified in the figure above. Based on the interviews, most of the informants stated that Mahathir possesses excellent communication skills. For instance, research Informant 2, 3, 7 and 11 stated that Mahathir is spontaneous, able to transmit powerful messages, speaks with facts and has an excellent body language.

Informant 2: "...Of course, during his tenure, he took his time to draft his speech with powerful message(s). He writes it well. They were very powerful messages and the delivery was very effective and powerful..."

Informant 3: "...He rarely makes a U-turn (he is very consistent). He was able to stand up against the first world countries because that was the (his) idea. He wanted to bring Malaysia in line with first world countries..."

Informant 7: "...He can always think and speak constantly. He is very thought provoking and if you analyse his communication, he is very calm and able to communicate effectively to the people from different level. He uses language which is simple, easy and understandable ..."

Informant 11: "...when he says something, he provides facts to support them. He knows how to construct the message that he wants to reach across. So, even a lay man can get attracted with his speech..."

Next, some research informants mentioned that Mahathir has a strong personality. For instance, research informant 4, 6 and 11 stated that Mahathir's leadership communication as dictatorial and autocratic.

Informant 4: "...I view his leadership as anarchy or autocratic, He is not democratic, he actually doesn't support democratic values..."

Informant 6: "...Actually we must understand Mahathir's brand of leadership is dictatorial. He did not accept any different voice. He was a dictator; he has people in MIC and MCA with similar mindset like Tun Samy Vellu. Tun Samy Vellu has the same brand of leadership qualities of Mahathir..."

Informant 11: "...To me the biggest attraction is his boldness in coming out with new idea. He is very clear with any new idea, he develops and tries to share it with others effectively. That's why he is successful. So many policies were introduced. He introduced the policy of producing our own national car, he boldly implemented it. There were some hiccups here and there, but he made it. Even the Look East Policy, he doesn't want us to look at the Westerners as a role model but the East which is more similar to us..."

Most of the respondents described Mahathir as a transformational leader. Research informants explained that Mahathir transformed Malaysia to a better level.

Informant 10: "...He was a transforming leader. He brought other developments, improvements such as Vision 2020. I love the transformations he has done to the country but at the same time there was weakness as he didn't be a genuine leader to the nation. He brought a lot of developments and transformations to the country for the world to recognise..."

Informant 8: "...Leadership communication can bring a lot of changes. If you see in last 22 years of Mahathir, (there is) significant changes and effects on our lives starting from younger generation to older generation. He transforms the country in many ways compared to other prime ministers..."

#### *Mahathir as a Transformer*

The findings also show that the theme Mahathir as a transformer could be explained through a few subthemes. Firstly, the research informants stated that Mahathir is a leader who contributes to social change. The leadership communication qualities of Mahathir have contributed to the development of the nation. This situation also could be explained through the concept of effective leadership communication and Transformational Leadership Theory, which discuss the great influence of bringing social change in a society.

Informant 1: "...Everyone in this country has benefited during Mahathir's time. They have a higher standard of living during his period and there is no doubt about that..."

Informant 8: "...If you see in the last 22 years of Mahathir, (there is) significant changes and effects on our lives starting from younger generation to older generation. He transforms the country in many ways compared to other prime ministers..."

Secondly, research informant 1 classified Mahathir as a transforming leader because he always implements his plans and fulfills promises to the people.

Informant 1: "...Whatever promises he made, he will fulfil and his time management is fantastic. He comes to work on time and expects others to do the same. That is a very good thing about him. That period of time, Malaysia was very strong in leadership and had a strong (political) party and etc..."

Lastly, the research informant 7, 5, 10 and 11 revealed that Mahathir is visionary, and inspires people towards development of the nation.

Informant 7: "...Yes, Mahathir's visions and ideas did inspire me. For instance, Vision 2020, Amanah Saham, Tabung Haji, Koperasi. A lot of his visions are used by the Chinese and Indians organisations/parties but they are doing them in different ways..."

Informant 5: "...The development of Malaysia was based on the framework that established by Tun Mahathir. Tun Mahathir has built confidence among Malaysians to develop. The policies introduced by Tun Mahathir aimed to development the nation. For instance, the development of KLIA and Putrajaya was a part of Mahathir's development plan..."

Informant 11: "...he is visionary and a great leader. He put full hard work and effort as a leader and that is very important to develop the nation...".

Informant 10: "...I would think he is a person who is focused on what he wants. When he wants something he will actually get it. For an example in 1980s, he wants reduce the power of monarch. He went around the country, drives up peoples' support and holding rallies. He was inspiring. I was fascinated with the crowd who were chanting "Hidup Melayu", "Hidup UMNO" and Mahathir. When he wants to implement something, he will do whatever it takes to implement it...".

#### *Indians' expected leadership communication qualities*

Expected leadership communication qualities of the Indians (the theme) could be explained through a few sub-themes identified in the figure above. The informants mentioned that the relationship between a leader and subordinate plays an important role in ensuring effective leadership communication. A leader should have a strong and close relationship with his followers.

Informant 1: "...is a personal touch of people. When you communicate with the people, listen and fight to overcome their problems, then only it is considered as a leadership communication...".

Informant 3: "...leader who continuously communicates with the grass roots is able to address issues related to the people, he must share a close relationship...".

Informant 4: "...leadership communication is referring to relationship between leaders and followers that he seeks to represent...".

Informant 8: "...I think connectivity and constant touch with people...".

Next, the Indians expected for a consistent communication between a leader and followers. Research informant 7 and 9 mentioned that a leader needs to consistently communicate with his followers and not only during the political election season. A leader also should be a good listener.

Informant 7: "...A leader must be knowledgeable and should be a good listener. He also must listen to his followers. As a leader, one must understand that different people have different issues. If you listen carefully you will be able to give a good solution....".

Informant 9: "...A leader must be able to listen and understand his people. He must be analytical to understand what the cause of each problem is. He must establish visions and ways to solve problems....".

Participatory leadership style is the next sub-theme identified to explain effective leadership communication. Based on the interview session, informant 3 emphasizes on inclusiveness of followers in leadership communication process. Research informant 3 and 13 said:

Informant 3: "...Currently, the democratic parliamentary model that is used in Malaysia or other countries encourages very minimal people's participation. How a leader should breakdown decision making and share power with people is very much lacking now. Be it in the ruling party Barisan Nasional or the opposition party, they are emphasising on top-down leadership. The parties claimed that they have very good policies and if people elect them, they will carry on with the policies. Over the years, people have experienced the ruling of both parties. This type of leadership is failing because people want to be empowered, they want to involve in decision making process. A good characteristic of leadership communication is how a leader can empower the people. For instance, in annual budget plan, normally leaders say that they want to listen to people's feedback, but at the end of the day, the decisions are made by the government or bureaucracy..."

Informant 13: "...It must be inclusive approach to encourage the people to progress, regards to that, leaders must listen to the feedback or suggestions of the people in achieving the goals or visions..."

Lastly, research informant 2 and 11 highlighted that a leader should have an in-depth knowledge in various fields and must possess a good personality. Research informant 2 and 11 said:

Informant 2: "...Another thing is of course, the body language. Good eye-contact and gestures when you communicate with others are important. These are fundamentals in communication and it shows that you are genuine. It takes everything including your dressing. Second is the language and what you think of a person. Of course the values that you have, regardless of religion and economic status, if they (people) are here to see you, you should respect them. Beyond all this, leader's communication skill is more important. You must be reciprocator, respond to them (followers)..."

Informant 11: "...I strongly believe in this. As a social worker, we need a good communication skill to explore the issues faced by people. Second is appearance. It also depends on knowledge and the way we deliver social message. If a leader simplifies a message or language, it could be understood clearly by his or her followers. Thus, the followers will believe in leaders..."

Based on the findings, this study revealed three main characteristics of Mahathir's leadership communication from the perspectives of Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations. First, the excellent communication skills of Mahathir. Research informants revealed that Mahathir possesses excellent communication skills which include the

informative content of his communication and his delivery. For instance, Mahathir uses a simple language that could be understood by all categories of people. At the same time, Mahathir also was able to send powerful messages that influenced people's mindset. Mahathir also possesses a good body language while delivering his speeches and it made his audience connect with him. Research informants stressed that Mahathir is spontaneous and possesses a good eye contact with his audience. Mahathir was also stated as a person with strong personality. This is due to his action in implementing his ideas boldly and this lead to some research informants labelling Mahathir's leadership as autocratic leadership. Furthermore, Mahathir also has been regarded as a transformational leader who brought developments or social changes in Malaysia. It was evident that Mahathir has brought tremendous development through his development plans and policies and thus he was known as the "The Father of Development". The responses given by the informants were consistent with the discussion of Barrett (2014) who discussed that a transformational leader possesses characteristics such as authority, credibility, inspires followers and articulate clear messages or visions.

Based on the intensive interview conducted, it was revealed that Mahathir has been classified as a leader who contributes to social change or betterment of the nation. People witnessed rapid development under his leadership. Mahathir strived to transform the nation to a better level through his ideas and develop plans. It was evident that he introduced many policies and visions for the people and the nation which emphasis on development and progress. Mahathir's leadership communication enables to influence and motivate people in the nation to progress towards social change. Further, it was highlighted that Mahathir was a great leader who was also an "agent of change" in Malaysia. Mahathir had given a very high commitment throughout his premiership as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. It was clear that Mahathir implements his ideas and plans with high determination. In a study conducted by Mohd. Shukri Shuib, Mohamad Nasir Saludin, Feigenblatt, Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis (2010), it was stated that Mahathir was an example agent of change not only in Malaysia but also for the entire world. Besides, Mahathir as a leader always kept his promises to his followers and the people. The informants seem to be fascinated towards Mahathir's leadership communication skills, knowledge and his strong personality in transforming the country to a better level.

This study revealed four major expectations of Indians on leadership communication qualities: relationship between leader and followers, consistent communication, participatory leadership model and, knowledge and skills. Based on the findings, it was clear that effective leadership communication depends on the relationship between the leader and his followers which is consistent with the views of scholars of leadership communication. It is evident that when a leader has a strong relationship with his or her followers, it smoothens the leadership communication process and creates stronger bonding. Secondly, a leader should have a consistent communication with his followers. This is because consistent communication provides a platform for a leader to explain all his ideas to the society and convince people to accept his ideas and at the same time, the people would be able to understand the actions of the leader. A leader should not only communicate when there is a need but it should happen consistently. Thirdly, the participatory leadership model. The findings show that followers are looking for an inclusive leadership approach where the people prefer to be involved in various decision making process. The policies implemented should be more inclusive taking consideration of people

from different communities. The followers or people want the leader to evaluate and include all the feedback given in the decision making process. Lastly, the Indian politicians and non-governmental organisations also stressed on knowledge and skills of a leader.

Based on the findings, a leader is described as knowledgeable in various fields mainly in economics, politics and social. Besides, a leader also should be skillful in handling different situation or challenges faces by the county. For instance, a leader should be able to handle an economic crisis. This discussion was in-line with the Transformational Leadership Theory which explains the characteristics of a transformational leader. The theory highlighted four main qualities of a transformational leader: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and personal or individual attention (Warrilow, 2012). As a leader, Mahathir's communication leadership attributes match the transformational leadership qualities from the viewpoint of the Indians in Malaysia. Mahathir was described as a charismatic leader, able to motivate people towards his visions, provide ways to achieve the visions or goals and able to address people's concerns.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided evidence of the lived experience of Indians in leadership communication of Mahathir. The results of the study revealed how Mahathir's leadership communication affected the Indians. The finding also provides an insight to the concept of leadership communication between two different groups namely majority-minority or Malay-Indian. Interestingly, although Indian leaders have some reservations on Mahathir, but his leadership communication practices have an impact on their social change. Thus Mahathir leadership communication may significantly become a reference or model in dealing with minority group such as Indian community. The model may also apply to any Indian minority group in other locality or another part of the globe.

### BIODATA

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