Economic success and authoritarian government have been the hallmarks of Mahathir Mohamad’s administration. Since Mahathir became prime minister in 1981, the Malaysian economy has grown dramatically and Mahathir has remained firmly in control of the political scene throughout.

Malaysian politics have been decisively shaped by Mahathir and this book provides a balanced and detailed account of his character, ideas, and temperament. The social and political scene in Malaysia is examined, as are the Prime Minister’s successes such as the careful management of ethnic tensions between Malays and Chinese, the program of modernization and industrialization, and his emergence as a champion of Third World causes. Mahathir’s faults are also honestly examined, including his preference for grandiose projects and his failure to check corruption. The abrupt dismissal from office, arrest and trial of Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir’s deputy, in late 1998, and their implications, are assessed.

The recent economic crisis in Asia has had a major impact on certain Southeast Asian states including Malaysia. *Malaysian Politics under Mahathir* considers these recent developments and their implications for Malaysia’s, and Mahathir’s, future.

**R.S. Milne** is Emeritus Professor and has held professorships at the University of British Columbia, Singapore University, London University and Victoria University, New Zealand. **Diane K. Mauzy** is Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. Both have published widely on Malaysia and Southeast Asia.
Malaysian Politics
under Mahathir

R.S.Milne and Diane K.Mauzy
To Portia and Alexa, whose quantum leaps have helped us to extend the bounds of knowledge
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Foreword

Ever since he became Prime Minister of Malaysia in July 1981 at the age of 56, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has exercised an extraordinary dominating influence over his country’s public life. An economic modernizer without fear of registering a scepticism of democracy and human rights, he has bent the politics of Malaysia to his will and in the process has successfully subordinated the constitutional monarchy, the judiciary and the predominant political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) which he has led continuously despite a major challenge in 1987 which was only narrowly defeated. His sustained political dominance was demonstrated in the way in which he removed his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, from national and party office in 1998. Indeed, in so doing, he effectively rewrote the rules of Malaysian politics.

Dr. Mahathir is exceptional as a Malay leader in contrast to his three predecessors as Prime Minister. He is not only authoritarian but also highly combative and confrontational and adept at open invective. Such behaviour is out of keeping with Malay cultural style and indeed with the notion of “Asian values” which Dr. Mahathir has espoused. It may be that his medical training as well as his personality has been a factor in shaping a political style that brooks no opposition to his diagnoses and prescriptions. His sense of rectitude in telling Malaysians that they should swallow the equivalent of so many pills a day in their own interest conjures up the image of medical infallibility translated to politics.

In locating Dr. Mahathir at the centre of their impressive study of Malaysia’s politics, Professors Stephen Milne and Diane Mauzy have acknowledged a fact of life which will not go away. They bring to this study considerable first-hand experience of Malaysia’s politics and its personalities and the text is informed by a deep understanding of its complexities. The role and political conduct of Dr. Mahathir is treated in a sober and balanced manner with credit given where it is due, while his early chequered political career is taken into full account. His accomplishments in economic modernization and his tolerant management of ethnic and religious matters as well as achievements in foreign policy are accorded full acknowledgement. Matching sober treatment is provided of his idiosyncracies and love of power. Indeed, it is pointed out that for him “power is a necessary food”. In this context, the authors discuss political succession and his chequered
relationship with his one-time political heir presumptive, Anwar Ibrahim. In addition, the shortcomings of governance in Malaysia under his rule are also addressed, including the rise in the incidence of corruption. Correspondingly, the reader is provided with an insight into his fixations, including a so-called edifice complex and characteristic angry xenophobic response to the onset of economic crisis from the second half of 1997. One depiction of Dr. Mahathir in this volume is as “innovative, eccentric and iconoclastic”. The fact of the matter is that Malaysia’s politics have never been the same since he assumed office and power nearly two decades ago. Professors Milne and Mauzy have captured the essence of the man and of the political context which he has shaped and conditioned in a scholarly and highly readable way. As such, they provide a unique insight into a distinctive political era in Malaysia.

Michael Leifer
September 1998
Acknowledgments

We have too many intellectual debts, to politicians, academics, diplomats, journalists, and other friends, incurred over more than thirty-five years of research in Malaya/Malaysia, to attempt to acknowledge them here. Many will be apparent from the references. However, some academics with whom we have had discussions since this book was underway merit our special thanks: Harold Crouch; Jomo, K.S.; Johan Saravanamuttu; Zakaria Haji Ahmad; and also, in Canada, Richard Stubbs and Frank Langdon. Also, we would like to thank M.G.G.Pillai for organizing, and listing us on, the <sangkancil@malaysia.net> Internet list, which has been very helpful and informative.

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Acronyms

2MP  Second Malaysia Plan
ABIM  Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia—Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement
ACA  Anti-Corruption Agency
AFTA  ASEAN Free Trade Area
AMM  ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
APEC  Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF  ASEAN Regional Forum
ASA  Association of Southeast Asia
ASEAN  Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM  Asia-Europe Meeting
BMF  Bumiputra Malaysia Finance
CHOGM  Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
DAC  Declaration of ASEAN Concord
DAP  Democratic Action Party
EAEC  East Asia Economic Caucus
EAEG  East Asia Economic Group
EPF  Employees Provident Fund
EPU  Economic Planning Unit
EU  European Union
FELDA  Federal Land Development Authority
FLDA  see FELDA
FIMA  Food Industries of Malaysia
FUNCINPEC  Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif
GATT  General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
HAKAM  National Human Rights Society
HICOM  Heavy Industry Corporation of Malaysia
ICA  Industrial Coordination Act 1975
IKIM  Institute of Islamic Understanding
ILO  International Labor Organization
IMF  International Monetary Fund
IMP  Independence of Malaya Party
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>INA</td>
<td>Indian National Army</td>
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<td>IRG</td>
<td>Islamic Republic Group</td>
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<td>ISA</td>
<td>Internal Security Act</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Institute of Strategic and International Studies</td>
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<td>JUST</td>
<td>Just World Trust</td>
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<td>MAF</td>
<td>Malaysian Armed Forces</td>
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<td>MARA</td>
<td>Majlis Amanah Rakyat</td>
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<td>MCA</td>
<td>Malayan/Malaysian Chinese Association</td>
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<td>MCP</td>
<td>Malayan Communist Party</td>
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<td>MIC</td>
<td>Malayan/Malaysian Indian Congress</td>
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<td>MPAJA</td>
<td>Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army</td>
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<td>MPHB</td>
<td>Multi-Purpose Holdings Berhad</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Multimedia Super Corridor</td>
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<td>MTUC</td>
<td>Malaysian Trade Union Congress</td>
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<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>New Zealand and Australia Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<td>NAM</td>
<td>Non-Aligned Movement</td>
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<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Consultative Council</td>
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<td>National Development Policy</td>
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<td>NEAC</td>
<td>National Economic Action Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>NECC</td>
<td>National Economic Consultative Council</td>
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<td>New Economic Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>NIE</td>
<td>Newly industrializing economy</td>
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<td>NOG</td>
<td>National Operations Council</td>
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<td>OIC</td>
<td>Organization of Islamic Conference</td>
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<td>OPP2</td>
<td>Second Outline Perspective Plan</td>
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<td>PAC</td>
<td>Political action committee</td>
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<td>PAP</td>
<td>People’s Action Party</td>
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<td>PAS</td>
<td>Partai Islam Se-Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBDS</td>
<td>Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak—Party of the Dayak Peoples of Sarawak</td>
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<td>PBS</td>
<td>Parti Bersatu Sabah (United Sabah Party)</td>
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<td>Perkim</td>
<td>Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam</td>
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<td>PMC</td>
<td>Post-Ministerial Conference</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
<td>People’s Progressive Party</td>
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<td>RIDA</td>
<td>Rural and Industrial Development Authority</td>
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<td>SNAP</td>
<td>Sarawak National Party</td>
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<td>SUPP</td>
<td>Sarawak United People’s Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>Treaty of Amity and Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UDA</td>
<td>Urban Development Authority</td>
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<td>UEM</td>
<td>United Engineers (Malaysia)</td>
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<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malays National Organization</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization</td>
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Acronyms

UNTAC United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
WTO World Trade Organization
ZOPFAN Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality
Malaysian proper names and titles

Malays are not referred to principally by their patronymics. Rather, they are referred to by their given name(s), and their fathers’ names are attached at the end after “bin” (for males) or “binte” (for females). Some Malays drop the use of “bin/binte, e.g., the third Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn, son of Dato Onn bin Jaafar. When there are two given names and the first is “Abdul,” either the person is referred to by both given names (e.g., Abdul Rahman), or the “Abdul” is dropped (e.g., the second Prime Minister, Tun Razak—otherwise known as Tun Abdul Razak bin Dato Hussein). Similarly, if the first of two given names is “Mohamed” (or one of its variations), it is sometimes dropped.

Malaysia’s Chinese generally have three names, and the usage is simple and consistent. The family name comes first and is followed by two given names. For example, in the name “Lim Kit Siang,” “Lim” is the family name; friends would call him “Kit Siang”. The only exception for Chinese names occurs when a person uses a Christian first name, then the family name appears last, as for the Chinese politician, Michael Chen, who would otherwise be known as Chen Wing Sum.

Some descendants of royalty have the title of “Tunku” or “Tengku” (Prince) which is spelled differently in different states. The word “Haji” or the feminine “Hajiah” in a name indicates that the person has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Non-hereditary titles may be conferred by a ruler or governor at the state level, or by the Agung at the federal level. In most cases the nomination would come from the appropriate minister. The most usual state title is “Dato” or “Datuk,” the latter is now becoming the more frequent spelling. Longer forms are “Datuk Seri” or “Datuk Amar.” The feminine form is “Datin,” although a woman who acquires the title in her own right, and not by marriage, is a “Datuk.” At federal level the corresponding title is “Tan Sri.” A higher federal rank, rarely conferred, is “Tun.” Men without a title are referred to as “Encik” (Mr.). The feminine equivalent is “Che.”
Key dates

Background
The first British territory acquired on the Malayan peninsula was the island of Penang, leased to the British East India Company by the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. Early in the Twentieth Century, the British government controlled all Malaya. It exercised the greatest control in the three “Straits Settlements,” Penang, Malacca and Singapore. In four “federated states” its rule was less direct, and in five “unfederated states” it was even less direct.

Some important dates concerning Malaysia, and Mahathir, in the last half-century or so, are given below:

1925 Mahathir Mohamad born in Alor Setar, Kedah. His father, half-Indian, half-Malay, was a school principal. His mother was Malay
1942–5 Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya
1946 United Malays National Organization (UMNO) formed
1946 Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) formed
1946–8 Malayan Union formed then abrogated
1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement on Malaya’s constitutional future
1948–60 Communist rebellion (the “Emergency”)
1948 Partai Islam, later Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), founded
1949 Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) formed
1951 Independence of Malaya Party formed
1953 The Alliance Party formed
1953 Mahathir awarded a medical degree by the University of Malaya, Singapore
1955 General election decisively won by the Alliance
1957 Malaya becomes independent, with a new Constitution. Tunku Abdul Rahman becomes the first Prime Minister
1957 Mahathir starts a new medical practice in Alor Setar
1963 Malaysia formed
1963 “Confrontation” by Indonesia against Malaysia
1964 Mahathir elected to Parliament
1965 Singapore separated from Malaysia
1966 Democratic Action Party registered
1967 Malaysia becomes a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
1969 Ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur
1969 Mahathir denounces Tunku’s leadership
1969–71 State of Emergency exists
1970 Mahathir publishes *The Malay Dilemma*, in Singapore
1971 Tun Razak succeeds Tunku as Prime Minister
1971 The New Economic Policy (NEP) announced
1974 The Barisan Nasional (National Front) replaces the Alliance
1974 Official relations established between Malaysia and the People’s Republic of China
1975 Mahathir elected a vice-president of UMNO
1976 Tun Razak dies and is succeeded as Prime Minister and as president of UMNO by Tun Hussein Onn. Mahathir becomes Deputy Prime Minister and deputy president of UMNO
1981 Upon Hussein’s resignation, Mahathir becomes Prime Minister and president of UMNO. Mahathir announces his “Look East” policy
1982 Anwar Ibrahim, standing as an UMNO candidate, wins a seat at the general election
1983–4 Mahathir leads UMNO in a campaign to limit the power of the Agung and the rulers
1983 Privatization policy announced
1985 Economic growth for the year negative
1986 Musa Hitam resigns as Deputy Prime Minister; replaced by Ghafar Baba
1987 Razaleigh and Musa challenge Mahathir’s leadership of UMNO, unsuccessfully
1987 Razaleigh founds a breakaway party, but Mahathir’s UMNO defeats it at the general elections of 1990 and 1995
1988 The Lord President of the Supreme Court and other high-ranking judges removed from office
1989 Mahathir has a successful coronary bypass operation
1991 The National Development Policy announced
1991 Mahathir launches his “Vision 2020” policy
1993 Anwar replaces Ghafar Baba as deputy president of UMNO and Deputy Prime Minister
1996 Razaleigh dissolves his party and rejoins UMNO
1997 An economic crisis severely affects Southeast Asia, including Malaysia
1998 Mahathir dismisses Anwar as Minister of Finance and as Deputy Prime Minister; Anwar expelled from UMNO, arrested and his trial begins
Map 1 Southeast Asia
Map 2 Malaysia
Introduction
Leadership in Malaysia

The theme of this book should be stated at the outset. Indeed, it has already been affirmed, or suggested, in the title; “under” not only refers to a period of time, the years in which Mahathir has been in power—from 1981 to the present (1998)—it also conveys the high degree of control, almost of domination, that he has exercised. The structure and functioning of government, outlined below, is conducive to a high degree of control. However, Mahathir’s assertiveness and strong political will not only made the most of the structures he inherited, but they also laid an imprint on them of increased prime ministerial authority, and strengthened the control that can be wielded by his successors, provided that they also have the necessary political will.

This chapter is intended to make the role of leadership more easily understood. In particular, it will demonstrate the weakness of any checks and balances on the leader, as compared with the national leaders of many other countries, especially those in the West.

There is a federal system of government, although the power of the states is limited, and the system was adopted initially only because the royal rulers of the Malay states were retained to make the acceptance of British colonial rule easier. Two of the states, Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo, were combined only in 1963 (Singapore was also a component, 1963–5) with Malaya to constitute “Malaysia”.

Politics in Malaysia are still dominated by ethnic considerations. The Malays constitute just about half the population. Together with other indigenous peoples they are classified as Bumiputera—sons of the soil—who enjoy certain privileges, primarily in employment and education. The remainder of the population consists mainly of Chinese (30 percent) and Indians (10 percent). Neither of these groups is homogeneous, being made up of persons with varying languages and religions. The Malays are all Muslims, but differences in the degree to which they attribute importance to various aspects of Islam complicate the pattern of politics. Ethnicity is the main factor, but social class also has an effect. However, while the majority of Malays belong to an umbrella-like interethnic Barisan Nasional (National Front), a main opposition party, PAS (Partai Islam Se-Malaysia), which controls the state of Kelantan, receives considerable Malay voter support in the four northern states. Among other salient features is the dominating role of the Barisan in the political
system, and the preeminence of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) at its core.

The power of UMNO and its leader: the armed forces
The leading role of UMNO and its president, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who is also prime minister, can best be appreciated, not by listing formal constitutional powers, but by considering the relative weakness of other institutions. The situation resembles its British counterpart very little, in spite of the fact that the Constitution was modeled on the British. The counterpart should not be mistaken for an equivalent. The Barisan has never been defeated in a general election. Its percentage of winning votes is exaggerated when converted into seats, mainly because the Malay vote, where the Barisan tends to have an advantage, is strongest in constituencies that contain relatively fewer electors. The Barisan has much more money to spend than the other parties, and has more patronage to dispense. Because of the Barisan’s usual large majority of seats and firm party discipline, Parliament is weak. Government-introduced bills usually pass as a matter of course, while other bills are seldom successful. The opposition parties have little power. It used to be asserted that civil servants in some developing countries exerted so much authority that these states could be described as “bureaucratic polities.” But, although some bureaucratic inertia still persists, in Malaysia Mahathir does not give the bureaucrats much chance to resist his will. The power of the rulers in the states and of the Agung (King), elected in rotation for a five-year term by and from among the rulers, was substantially reduced soon after Mahathir’s succession. So were the powers of the judiciary in 1988, after a “battle” with the Prime Minister. Two other institutions are markedly weaker in Malaysia than they are in some other countries, especially Western ones: the press and interest groups. Additionally the rights of the citizen are weak in Malaysia. The government has, and has sometimes used, powers of detention without trial.

Unlike some countries close to Malaysia, such as Thailand or Indonesia, the armed forces are not prominent in politics. Malaysia has enjoyed forty-one years of unbroken civilian rule. There has never been a coup attempt in Malaysia, nor any hint that the military might seek a political role for itself. There are a number of reasons that the military has stayed out of politics. First, the Malaysian military was trained in the British tradition of a professional corps whose role and duties did not include intervening in the political process. It helped that independence was gained peacefully, and that the role and limits of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) were spelled out clearly in the Constitution. The governing elite in Malaysia differs from that in several neighboring countries, because in Indonesia, etc., the governing elite prevails over military elites, and in Japan it prevails over the bureaucratic elite. Second, it probably helped that the expansion of the MAF was very gradual and that until the 1980s, the para-military federal police was a larger force than the army. Third, there has tended to be strong familial connections between the ruling elite and senior MAF officers.
All of Malaysia’s prime ministers have placed relatives or in-laws in important senior positions in the MAF. In a country where feudal traditions persist, strong family loyalties provide additional insurance of good civilian-military relations. However, it is ethnic factors that provide the single most important reason that the MAF has stayed in the barracks. The combat services are overwhelmingly Malay. The premier corps, the Royal Malay Regiment, is entirely Malay. There has been a close coincidence of interests between the Malay civilian political elite and the Malay senior military officers on the political rules of the game in Malaysia; namely, ensuring that the ethnic status quo is not disrupted to the disadvantage of the Malays and that there are no threats to Malay political hegemony. Given the convergence of these factors, the military has stayed out of politics despite the demonstration effect of military rule in the region.

Nowhere in the Constitution is it stated that the Prime Minister must be a Malay or a Bumiputera, yet to violate this understanding would be unthinkable. One consequence is that the Malay Prime Minister, in order to be fair, must act in the interests of all ethnic groups; he must behave as a “Supra-communal Arbiter”. He is responsible for seeing that the national “pie” is shared out equitably, not just for material allocations, but also symbolically, in terms of ethnic esteem.

Other institutions, for example those at state level, which have less power than the Prime Minister, are not to be regarded as negligible or ineffective. They are important agencies through which power is exercised but only in accordance with the plans, or visions, of the leader. They are a means of ensuring that the leader can get the people in the society to do what he wants them to do.

**The nature of leadership**

Generalizations about leadership, taken from books on psychology, business administration and so on, are sometimes platitudinous. Some useful generalizations, especially in the field of international relations, are cited by Richard Stubbs. Some recent examples rightly affirm that the most important leadership traits are not discernible by looking at the leader alone but by looking at interactive leader-follower relations. However, although it may be true that a leader retains his status to the extent that he meets the expectations of other group members, is this enough? To be sure, it makes for acceptability that one should be able to “get along” with followers. But is this the crux of leadership? A more appropriate, though sterner, test is whether a follower trusts a leader enough to follow him if he embarks on an unusual course of action. This is a necessary qualification for a leader. As Mahathir remarked, “You have to lead. You should be sensitive to what your followers think. But if you do exactly what they want, you’re not a leader.” In the long run, it must be supplemented by the leader evoking sufficient feelings of loyalty, and providing enough material benefits, to establish legitimacy. To try to explore in more depth the “Malay” characteristics or special traits of leadership is not easy. It is enough, perhaps, to suggest a few ideas. Some key terms occur in Mahathir’s early political testament, *The Malay Dilemma*: for example, “feudal,” “adat” (custom), “authority,” “ritual.” A description of “the Malay way,”
which, among other elements, indicates the desire to avoid conflict, would include: emphasis on traditional courtesy and good manners, wide consultation, avoidance of direct confrontation where possible, but leaving a role for innuendo. Consensus is sought in preference to imposing the will of a majority. Critics are wooed, rather than repressed, and defeated opponents are not victimized but a way is left open for future reconciliation.  

Some “coffee-house” conversation was reported during the UMNO split in 1987, during which four qualifications were suggested as being desirable in a Malay leader. The leader must fight for the Malay cause, should not be sombong (stuck-up), should have tokoh (style), and, preferably, should be of aristocratic birth. Other desirable traits or features were mentioned, such as tradition, harmony, and peaceful succession, while disapproval of impatience and ambition was expressed. One difficulty in discussing Malay styles and values is that they may be becoming somewhat old-fashioned for younger urban voters.

Mahathir’s style is not typically “Malay.” While approving of Asian values such as consensus and deference, his own style is confrontational and, indeed, “Western.”

Malaysia’s prime ministers

The first three leaders had features in common, which were not shared by the fourth, Mahathir. Some are very well known. They were all of noble birth, and Abdul Rahman, known to all affectionately as “the Tunku,” was a prince of the Kedah royal family. All three studied law in England. All of them played golf, and all were administrators in the government service. Mahathir was also briefly in government service, but engaged in his profession of medicine.

All four prime ministers had one feature in common: none of them was entirely Malay. Tunku had some Shan-Thai blood; Razak, some Bugis (Indonesian); Hussein, some Turkish; Mahathir, some Indian.

Clearly, Tunku had a good deal of the playboy in him. When he was in England, he was reputedly interested only in fast cars, fast women and not-so-fast horses. Tunku did not take his studies very seriously, but when he resumed them after the war he found time to revive the Malay Society of Great Britain, and became its president. This was one of his opportunities for making contacts. Tunku was naturally gregarious, which was a useful qualification for becoming president of UMNO (in addition to his being a prince).

The choice of Tunku as UMNO leader was quite fortuitous. He was proposed by his friend, Razak, who had been asked to allow his name to go forward, but who considered himself too young. The presidency was vacant because of the acrimonious departure from office of Dato Onn (p. 5). He worked well with the British during the transition to independence. In office as Prime Minister, he looked and played the part. Tunku found it easy to delegate; he did not believe in working too hard. Consequently, when Razak succeeded him as Prime Minister, he was thoroughly equipped to carry out the job. It was said that, while Razak preached delegation, he did not practise it himself. He assumed too many portfolios