

**MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AS A CULTURAL RELATIVIST:  
MAHATHIRISM ON HUMAN RIGHTS\***

**BY**

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**INTRODUCTION: “THE MAHATHIR MODEL”**

According to R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy (1999: 168), “Mahathirism is not a guide to Mahathir’s thoughts or actions. Rather, Mahathir’s thoughts and actions are a guide to constructing Mahathirism. Mahathirism is an exercise in allocating thoughts into logical categories with the aim of achieving intellectual satisfaction and understanding”. As an advocate of “Asian values”, Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister who ruled Malaysia from 1981 till 2003, explained that the Malaysian perspective of “Asian values” is based on Malay-Islamic culture and should be protected against absorption by Western values. He urged the three most basic elements of “Malayness” – feudalism, Islam, and *adat* (traditional customs) as he saw it in 1970 in his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, should all be classed as features to be

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merely accepted as realities and perhaps adapted to modern needs (Barr, 2002: 42). Mahathir (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995: 71-86) rejected universalism or the Western liberal notion of human rights which, he believed, can corrupt Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. Concerned about the influence of Western individualism, and the future of Asian values and traditions, Mahathir accepted the idea of cultural relativism and launched the “Look East” policy in 1982 as a broader campaign against “Western values”. Mahathir told the 1982 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) General Assembly to “Look East” to emulate the diligence found there and “to rid ourselves of the Western values that we have absorbed” (Khoo, 1995: 69).

Universalism, influenced by the ideas of natural law and liberal-individualism and embodied in international human rights law such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), rests on the proposition that the human condition is unique, and that all human beings possess certain inalienable rights (Kim, 1993). The international community claims the right to judge states by international standards (Mayer, 1994). The international community thus attempts to hold governments to the human rights standards enumerated in the International Bill of Rights. Theorists explain the concept of universal human rights by referring to the meanings of the term “universal” and by examining the history behind universalist theory. In general, Jack Donnelly (1989) interprets “universal” to mean that no institution or person anywhere may take away another person’s human rights. Enforcing those rights, however, is another matter. Therefore, in summarising these three meanings, Donnelly argues that the idea of universalism is “Human rights, because they rest on nothing more than being human, are universal, equal, and inalienable. They are held by all human beings, universally...Human rights, being held by every person against the state and society, provide a framework for political organisation and a standard of political legitimacy.” (Donnelly, 2001: 1).

In contrast, cultural relativism in definition “is the assertion that human values, far from being universal, vary a great deal according to different cultural perspectives. Some would apply this relativism to the promotion, protection, interpretation and application of human rights which could be interpreted differently within different cultural, ethnic and religious traditions. In other words, according to this view, human rights are culturally relative rather than universal” (Ayton-Shenker,

1995: 1). Proponents of cultural relativism, such as Richard Rorty (1993), Donald Dworkin (1977), Ernesto Laclau (1990), and Steven Lukes (1991), typically point to “the historically contingent and culturally bounded nature of human rights discourses and practices”, and therefore to their “socially constructed nature” (Freeman, 1994). According to them, human rights are inseparable from the mentality of the Enlightenment, and as presently construed are the products of a particular society at a particular time, for instance, Europe in the aftermath of World War II (and the Cold War). Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab (1980) criticise what they see as a cultural and ideological ethnocentrism in the area of human rights and human dignity. In their view, the UDHR is “universal” only in pretension, not in practice, since it is the charter of an idealist European political philosophy with underlying democratic and libertarian values, based on the notion of atomised individuals possessed of certain inalienable rights in nature. Because of the pervasiveness of the notion of “group” or “community” rather than that of the “individual” in many cultures, they conclude that the Western conception of human rights is not only inapplicable and of limited validity, but even meaningless to Third World countries (Chokr, 1999). From a different perspective, various Third World scholars have questioned the Western supremacy in the area of human rights, and argued on behalf of their respective cultural traditions, whether they be traditional African, Islamic, or Asian cultures (Yamane, 1982, Wiseberg, 1976, Bielefeldt, 1995, Hountondji, 1988, Panikkar, 1982, Legesse, 1980).

Errol P. Mendes (1994: 3) labels the Malaysian version of Asian values as “The Mahathir Model” to differentiate it from other types of Asian values such as Singaporean School that stresses on Confucianism and China Model that emphasises the combination of Chinese-Nationalist-Communist values. “The Mahathir Model” is basically influenced by Malay-Islamic values. As Alan Dupont points out, Mahathir had the clarion call for Asian values:

...despite the fact that the Islamic ethos of his country differs markedly from the neo-Confucianism of Singapore and other Sino-centred states in East Asia. However, he (Mahathir) reconciles this apparent contradiction by subsuming Malaysia’s distinctive national character in broader obeisance to Asian Values. (Dupont, 1996: 14)

This model of Asian values has also helped to support the government agenda. Stability and enforced social cohesion in a heterogenous society has become internalised as a fundamental core Asian values (Mendes, 1994). Asian leaders, such as Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, also introduced the concept of Asian values in response to the global democratisation, booming economy and political stability of the 1990s, before the currency crisis of July 1997 had shocked Asian countries (Naisbitt, 1997: 51-85, Inoguchi and Newman, 1997: 1-2). The main elements of “The Mahathir Model” are strong authority, prioritising the community over the individual, and a strong family based society. The distinctive feature of “the Mahathir Model” is that it draws upon the experience of the Western world in order to evaluate state and society in the light of modernity. Its main critique both of a universalist-liberal democratic model of politics and individual rights as reflecting Western hegemony is based upon empirical and cultural grounds. Mahathirism or “the Mahathir Model” is clearly a reaction to the debate between two main theories of human rights, universalism and cultural relativism, and it could also be expanded into these three arguments: anti-western imperialism, strong government and protecting community.

### **ANTI-WESTERN IMPERIALISM**

According to R.J. Vincent (1986: 38), the argument provided by cultural relativism against imperialism appeals not merely because it is an argument against imperialism, but because it seems true. In Asia, there is a widespread suspicion that the West has a hidden agenda to maintain its hegemony by slowing down Asian prosperity and crippling its competitiveness by “changing the rules” to invoke a new kind of protectionism, with human rights and democracy as the standard-bearers, succeeding the old banners of colonialism and Christianity (Far Eastern Economic Review, 1994: 20-21). In fact, such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed by the United Nations in 1948, are futile proclamations, derived from the moral principles valid in one culture and thrown out into the moral void between cultures. They might have some validity if the proclaiming culture was successfully imperialist, and had imposed its values on others by *force majeure*, but the doctrine of cultural relativism at its strongest regards this always as a superficial phenomenon, incapable

of eroding the irreducible core of cultural singularity in the various social components of the world (Vincent, 1986: 38).

In an agreement with cultural relativists' view, Mahathir claimed that Western pressure on developing countries, including Malaysia, over human rights and democratisation is intended to cause "instability, economic decline and poverty. With such a situation, they can threaten and control us" (Christie, 1995: 206). Westerners, argued Mahathir, generally cannot rid themselves of this sense of superiority. He explained that:

They still consider their values and political and economic systems better than any others. It would not be so bad if it stopped at that; it seems, however, that they will not be satisfied until they have forced other countries to adopt their ways as well. Everyone must be democratic, but only according to the Western concept of democracy; no one can violate human rights, again according to their self-righteous interpretation of human rights. Westerners cannot seem to understand diversity, or that even in their own civilization values differed over time. (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995:75)

Mahathir further argued that the West has a long history of human rights violations and has hardly been a paragon of democracy and justice. The groundless sense of superiority prevents the West from seeing the rationality in Eastern values.

Likewise, the Western media are sometimes portrayed as accomplices in serving dominant Western power interests and values (Laiq, 1996). Mahathir explained that:

Make no mistake. The people who control the media control our minds, and probably control the world...Not the national Governments of tiny developing nations...or the Government of powerful nations. A very few people in the West control all the international media. (Mahathir, 1999: 71)

Mahathir's government exploited these reasons to legitimise its control over the local media. The government also exercised its power to strengthen the media laws, particularly the Printing Presses and Publications Act, and to control the local media companies as well as foreign publications. The government, however, is unable to control the flow of information from the Internet.

Besides the media, Mahathir was also critical toward the role played by the civil society movements especially human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and accused them as agents of Western powers. The Mahathir government was of the view that human rights activists, often encouraged by foreign countries and organisations, are a hindrance to the country's economic development and jeopardise its stability (Milne and Mauzy, 1999: 105). Mahathir (1982: 127) argued that the activities of movements in civil society that tend to meddle in politics should be curbed as they clearly aim to weaken government authority and do not contribute to the public good. The government was of the opinion that human rights NGOs should be closely monitored as they have the ability to influence public opinion, endanger public order and even obstruct well-planned, national development.<sup>1</sup>

It should also be borne in mind that Mahathir's Asian values provided a very effective response to critics (Oehlers, 2000: 216). At domestic level, by arguing his strategies were sanctioned by Asian values, Mahathir was able to establish some respectability and legitimacy to counter the accusations of detractors. These critics, indeed, could no be portrayed as "un Asian", contaminated by alien Western ideas, and agents of Western imperialism. Further, by posing his actions as a product of a unique Asian culture, Mahathir successfully established a case in the international arena to justify his pursuit of state-led development. Mounting Western criticism of practices in Malaysia could now be safely deflected, and indeed, dismissed as the "rude", "insensitive" and "misinformed" interjections of another race lacking any understanding of Asian values, practices, or aspirations. For instance, the "diplomatic incident" caused by the remarks made by Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, in November 1993 when he described Mahathir as "recalcitrant" for the latter's refusal to attend Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in the US. It was made clear on the Malaysian side that Keating's remarks were evidence of the lack of manners and respect in Australian culture – an obvious contrast to the Asian culture.

With Mahathir remaining aloof to the remarks, the general impression created by the Malaysian government was that the “Malaysian people” had been offended by the remarks rather than Mahathir personally. Negative and exaggerated external criticism can easily be depicted as an insult to the cultural values of the people. In this case, Keating provided some very convenient material that enabled the Malaysian government to exercise its political chauvinism effectively, targeting both the domestic and external audiences (Lawson, 1996: 122).

## **STRONG GOVERNMENT**

In Western culture, the concept of limit government is a common practice where the government interventions in personal liberties and the economy are limited by law, usually in a constitution. This concept is closely linked with libertarianism and classical liberalism in the West. It has roots in Hebraic Law and Magna Carta and the US Constitution are examples of limiting of government powers in Western Civilisation. Mahathir, however, argued that people in Asian countries believe in the idea of strong government, not limited government or state minimalism. Mahathir (1999: 77-78) mentioned that Malaysians (Asians) should respect authority because authority guarantees social stability: without authority and stability there can be no civility, even a Western society lauding individual rights, will fragment and become more disordered. However, Mahathir argued that strong authority does not of course mean despotic rulers. In fact, Mahathir admitted that he still believes in democracy, because democracy enables the removal of a leader without bloodshed. Nonetheless, he argued that even within the most democratic system, citizens must pay due respect to government and understand the need for healthy balance between individual rights and obligations towards society.

However, Mahathir has taken a step further by encouraging feudalistic loyalty among people to his leadership. For instance, after warding off a challenge to his leadership of the UMNO at its general assembly in 1996, Mahathir reminded his audience that “according to Malay tradition...it is impolite for someone who sits in the same committee or cabinet to challenge another who also happens to be his boss” (Case, 2002: 19). The UMNO’s permanent chair had earlier made the same point, advising that while leadership challenges were formally permitted in the party’s

constitution, actually to mount one flouted cultural understandings; “According to Malay tradition, it is treachery” (Case, 2002: 19). This, however, clearly shows how the political elite have exploited Malay culture and Asian values in order to justify their autocratic leadership.

## **PROTECTING COMMUNITY**

Malaysians typically believe that the community should take priority over individuals. The importance of the community in Asian culture and society is incompatible with the primacy of the individual in Western society, which is the basis of Western notions of human rights. Modern Asian orientalism was based around the proposition that “Asian” culture, with its priority on the group rather than the individual, was ideally suited to modern, industrial society. Universalism or Western liberalism, with their emphasis on the rights and freedoms of the individual is, in contrast, portrayed by Asian thinkers as producing crime-ridden societies in moral decay and with little social discipline or concern for the broader interests of community (Robison, 1996: 310). In Mahathir’s (1995a: 16) words, “Democracies are only beginning to learn that too much freedom is dangerous”. Mahathir urged the need to limit personal freedom for the sake of political stability and economic prosperity:

For Asians, the community, the majority comes first. The individual and minority must have their rights but not at the unreasonable expense of the majority. The individuals and the majority must conform to the mores of society. A little deviation may be allowed but unrestrained exhibition of personal freedom which disturbs the peace or threatens to undermine society is not what Asians expect from democracy. (World Youth Foundation, 1999: 105)

Furthermore, communitarianism – the idea that responsibilities to the family and the community have priority over the rights of the individual – is widely embraced not just in Confucian East Asia and Singapore, but also in Islamic Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia and Buddhist Thailand (Chandra, 1995, Fukuyama, 1995: 20-33). Joseph Chan (1995: 30 & 35) has suggested that, while Asian cultures

do not deny the value of personal autonomy, they do not value it as highly as do universalists or Western liberals. The value of individual autonomy, however, does not justify the right of individuals to disregard the interests of society (Fareed, 1994: 111). The Asian concept of the individual differs from that of the West. The extension of the relationships learned in the extended family setting gives East Asians a much more sophisticated ability to relate to others. Mahathir (1995b: 1-2) held that there should be no freedom without responsibility. Hence, it should come as no surprise to learn that close to the heart of Mahathir's hostility to "Western values" is his concern for family, which he believes provides stability and security for the individual.

### **CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS ON MAHATHIRISM**

Many writers criticise Mahathirism particularly from the argument of "Asian values". For instance, Wan A. Manan (1999: 359-381) thinks that the discourse on "Asian values" by Mahathir is basically a cultural construction aimed at maintaining certain practices that came under threat from globalisation and democratisation. Underlying current global transformations are forces that tend to generate fundamental changes within society. These include issues relating to human rights, civil society, gender consciousness and democratic reforms. However, the cultural position that advocates the division between the "West" and "East" is misleading because these are not two big permanent static blocks. The dynamic relationships between cultures in the age of global interactions keep them in a constant state of flux. In any case, proponents of "Asian values" are not alone in their cultural claim because Western scholars such as Huntington consider their version of democracy and human rights as the only valid and objective one (Huntington, 1993: 22).

The most disturbing use, or rather abuse, of the cultural argument is that it is often a central plank in the narrative of those governments who actively oppose the application of international human rights standards in their countries in order to buttress their own power. The presumed "tolerance" and "pluralism" of culture seems to underwrite a conservative political agenda: the tolerance and perhaps even maintenance of highly not egalitarian and repressive political systems, while ironically energies are devoted to the "sentimental education" of ruthless and cruel dictators (e.g., Suharto of Indonesia and Marcos of the Philippine) and the

predominantly illiterate and subjugated masses of this world. In fact, Mahathir had been accused by political opposition and civil society activists who involve particularly in the *Reformasi* (reform movement) in 1998 and 1999 as a dictator called *Mahafiraun* (the great pharaoh) and *Mahazalim* (the ruthless dictator) because of the way he controlled the three branches of government (the executive, legislative and judiciary) and treated Anwar Ibrahim, his former deputy prime minister, who got sacked from the government, detained under the repressive law of Internal Security Act (which allows detention without trial), and imprisonment under charges of corruption and sexual misconduct. Cultural relativism or particularism is often “one of the most useful ideologies” in mounting a defence and bringing about international acquiescence in state repression (Wilson, 1997: 9). Many critics also argue that strong authority is merely a justification by Asian leaders such as Mahathir of autocratic rule in their own countries. Advocates of human rights contend that “Asian values” are little more than an excuse for authoritarian government, and for authoritarians to retain power (Mauzy, 1996: 211). The government has dominant powers over many aspects of life that Westerners would view as inappropriate. Human rights are all significantly curtailed, much more extensively than in the West.

The concept of human rights, therefore, relates to the dignity of the human individual. Some critics think that this philosophy is misunderstood by some Asian political leaders, especially Mahathir, who conflate the anti-social behaviour of some individuals in the West with the individualism of the theory of human rights (Fareed, 1994: 111). A common source of this misunderstanding is the relationship between rights and duties. It is said that “Asian” morality is based on duties, while “Western” morality is based on rights (Ghai, 1995: 60). Michael Freeman (1996: 361) argues that this misstates the logic of rights. He explains that John Locke (1689/1993), for example, held that everyone has the duty to respect the life and dignity of others. Rational individuals consent to live under government on condition that it also implements the same duties. Governments that violate the rights of their citizens deserve condemnation as tyrannies. So, similarly, societies that impose imperial rule over other peoples without their consent are guilty of violating the rights of those people. The concept of human rights justifies democracy and condemns tyranny and imperialism.

Freeman (1996: 355) thinks that the individualism of the West is often overstated. Western societies constrain individualism by such collectivities as the family, economic enterprise and nation. Yash Ghai (1995: 61) points out that there are strong communitarian traditions in the West, including conservatism, democratic socialism and some forms of liberalism. The doctrine of human rights attributes rights to individuals, but requires that they are protected by appropriate communities. He claims Asian development strategies, based on strong states and participation in global markets, have been very destructive of traditional communities. Such human rights as freedom of association and expression may be necessary to defend threatened communities. Invoking the value of community, therefore, does not clarify the difference between “Asian” and “Western” values. Human rights should be used to protect and serve the communities and individuals as well. However, the deference between Malaysians and Westerners is, Malaysians are strongly rooted in their culture and religion even though they are ruled under the secular political system.<sup>2</sup> This is unlike Western communities which believe strongly in secularism and individualism especially in the US and UK, and religion is relatively secondary in their life. However, Xiaorong Li (2001: 42-43) also claims that the “Asian values” perspective creates confusions by collapsing “community” into the state and the state into the (current) regime. When equations are drawn between community, the state and the regime, any criticisms of the regime become crimes against the nation-state, the community, and the people. The “Asian values” idea relies on such a conceptual manoeuvre to dismiss individual rights that conflict with the regime’s interest, allowing the condemnation of individual rights as anti-communal, destructive of social harmony, and seditious against the sovereign state.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is clear that Mahathirism or Mahathir’s view about human rights is totally aligned with the theory and philosophy of cultural relativism. Malaysia definitely believed that Malaysian cultural tradition and political realities should be distant from the influence of universalism or Western liberalism. The Malaysian restrictions are defended in terms of “Asian values” with the strong influences of Malay-Islamic values (plus also Confucianism), which set them far apart from “Western liberal-universalist values”, in terms of the role they play in society and how the state has

responded to them. In cultural terms, the Mahathir's argument of Asian values is not a single proposition, rather a collection of reactions and related arguments against universalism or the Western individualism. People's behaviour is encouraged to be motivated not by concerns of individual rights but by duties and responsibilities. The Asian values thesis is an approach which suggests that it is only through an orderly society which curtails the excesses of individualism that all members of the community can live safe and fulfilled lives. The government must secure such an environment by curtailing individual freedoms and striking a balance between civil liberties and social stability. Critics obviously dispute the Mahathir's purported intention in restricting human rights, arguing that his real intention was to exploit these issues as a justification for curtailing opposition and reinforcing his position in power.

From a theoretical point of view, it must be conceded that Mahathirism had not provided much of a challenge to dominant Western political outlooks. There are a number criticisms, for instance, that Mahathirism is a cover for an ideological contest of universalism and cultural relativism. Mahathir is typical of Asian critics of Western values. Hence, Mahathirism is unquestionably a type of cultural relativism. Mahathir once said that "...the norms and precepts for the observance of human rights vary from society to society and from one period to another within the same society" (World Youth Foundation 1999: 35).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The state has labelled advocacy-oriented NGOs together with the organised Left, dissident student movements, labour groups, and opposition political parties an 'internal Other' against whom society must struggle to remain peaceful, unified, and secure. Before, NGOs and other dissident groups were labelled 'communist', now they are lambasted as 'Western' or 'non-national'. For instance, former Federal Territory Minister Abu Hassan Omar declared in December 1986 that seven groups – two opposition parties and five NGOs – were out to destroy 'the country's political and social fabric' (Tan and Singh, 1994: 24). Thus, the role of this group in politics is so essential to make sure the smoothness of democratic system in Malaysia, credibility of the judiciary, effectiveness of the police institution and media. The

political organisation is likely to see as the group that will maintain the effectiveness and efficiency of all those political institutions for the public good, although they probably will face a risk of government's sanctions.

<sup>2</sup> Anwar (1996: 2), for instance, who has continued to speak of a Western/Asian dichotomy, noting in particular that, unlike the Westerner, "the Asian man is a *persona religiosus*. Faith and religious practice...permeates the life of the community".

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