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ECONOMICS DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL VISION: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA

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I. ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, Malaysia, along with other East Asian countries, such as South Korea and Singapore, has been widely mentioned in the *East Asian Miracle* narrative among scholars, policymakers and relevant stakeholders. Today, Malaysia is one of the high performing Southeast Asian economies – only third to Singapore and Brunei respectively. Thanks to its political stability, foreign investment incentives, sound macroeconomic management, planning and a favourable resource endowment. By utilising document analysis of both primary and secondary sources, this study seeks to examine the extent to which Malaysia’s economic condition influence the outlook of Malaysia’s international vision. It asks two main research questions. Firstly, to what extent Malaysia’s economic development has been able to influence its stand at the international level. Secondly, what is the other conditions (or lack thereof) could determine Malaysia’s vision at the international level. The findings of this chapter suggest that economic stability, though necessary, is not sufficient conditions in determining Malaysia’s global vision. Equally important is political will and capacity from the part of the political leader, as well as the implementation of well-thought-out policies and plans.

II. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a small multiracial country located at the Southeast Asian region has demonstrated its resilience, capability and political will to establish itself as a prosperous, stable,

and dynamic nation in the region, if not among developing countries. Represented by three major ethnic groups – the industriousness of the Chinese, the ‘give-and-take’ of the Indians, and the harmonious nature of the Malays; Malaysia is a country that developed based on its own desired pattern (Awang, 2017, p. 11). It made to the tenth-fastest growing economy in 1970-90. As an ethnically heterogenous, this was expectational – considering a group ethnically heterogeneous countries were far poorer in 1990 than ethnically homogeneous countries and achieved a much lower growth rate of real per capita income in 1965-90 (Snodgrass, 1995: p. i).

From the time of independence, Malaysia has continued to enhance its international presence by expanding economic ties with the world, focusing on trade and investment. Malaysia was ahead of the curve to set aside ideological differences in conducting foreign relations. Indeed, diplomatic ties with USSR (Russia) and China were forged during the Cold War and not long after it gained independence from one of the major countries that champion democratic norms and ideology – the British – a country which held much influence over her during the formative years. Further, Malaysia also nurtures good relations with developing countries alongside the least developed ones such as Samoa and Papua New Genie (to name a few). As such, not only it became closer to developing countries or third world, but was also critical of the developed nations, especially from the West such as the Great Britain (its ex-colonizer) and the United States.

Malaysia was at the forefront to oppose the emergence of Western-led world order following the end of Cold War which discriminate against the interests of the developing countries across the board, much less in the economic domain. A case in point is her active role in the promotion of South-South Cooperation and East Asian regionalism. Both were designed strengthen the voice of the developing world and to facilitate greater political and economic cooperation with the developing countries. For instance, through the framework of South-South Co-operation, a partnership based on the win-win formula was forged between Malaysia, African and Latin American countries (Bernama 1996). The most notable example was the International Smart Partnership Dialogue which was held between Langkawi and Africa (consecutively) over the period of ten years since 1995. Such enterprise has generated both tangible and intangible benefits for all member countries (Bernama, 1996).

Malaysia’s bold and unorthodox approach in confronting the ASEAN Financial Crisis (1997) also did not go unnoticed (Hasan, 2002). Her decision to decline IMF assistance and chart its own course out of the crisis was difficult but proved to be rewarding. Not only did Malaysia recover quicker than other countries but the move also demonstrated her capacity for both

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independence and leadership in the region (Elangkovan & Said, 2013, p.629). Indeed, her relentless efforts to promote regional cooperation was responsible for the creation of ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea) grouping which aimed to enhance East Asian co-operation particularly in the economic field. This platform has since become the linchpin for ASEAN's dialogue with Northeast Asia.

Despite the daunting challenge, Malaysia is still known as one of the prosperous and peaceful countries amongst the developing, much less Muslim world. For instance, it has reached the top end of the upper middle -income range: ranked 27th in the Global Competitiveness Index and 15th in financial market. Its Gini-coefficient – a measure of the distribution of income across a population – score (0.41), about the same as the United States' (0.415) (Sheng, 2020). This shows that although Malaysia is yet to be a developed nation as envisioned in her Wawasan 2020, but it has achieved notable milestone in the economic field transforming from an economic backwater to one of Asia's leading economies.

Set against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to examine the factors (internal and external) that shaped Malaysia's economic growth and the extent to which it has determined her global vision. More specifically, it asks how Malaysia economic development informed her stand or posture at the international and regional levels. Secondly, this chapter seeks to explore other factors (or lack thereof) that could determine Malaysia's vision at the global level. For that purpose, the analysis is based on the decision and achievement of each Prime Minister which include: Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Hussein Onn, Mahathir Mohamad, Najib and Najib Razak. This chapter applies qualitative method, and the data were retrieved mostly from internet sources, which include the official public document and online media on the information pertaining to Malaysian economic and foreign policy. The speech, official statements and press release made by the Malaysia's highest policymakers, namely prime ministers, and relevant and related foreign ministers were used to facilitate this study.

III. MALAYSIA'S ECONOMIC AND INTERNATIONAL VISION

This section discusses Malaysia's economic development and the nation's international vision during the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn Mahathir Mohamad, and Najib Razak.

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

Malaysia got independent from the British on the 31st August 1957, and ever since then, economic development became key national agenda. The first prime minister of Malaysia was Tunku Abdul Rahman Al-Haj, who led

the country for thirteen years – from 1957 to 1970. As a newly independent country, it was not surprising that the focus of the government at that time was to ensure economic independency, through the reduction on the degree of external trade (Ariff 1973, p. 373). Economic development policies were focused to empower manufacturing sector so as to replace imports. This was done by establishment of mild protection policies and generous incentives. These efforts were deemed successful, whereby, the manufacturing sector in Peninsular Malaysia recorded a promising annual growth rate of 9.9 per cent between 1965 and 1970 while its contribution to GDP increased from 10.4 per cent to 12.8 per cent in the same period (Ariff 1973, p. 373).

At the same time, efforts for economic development were also focused on ‘the rural poverty, susceptibility to international economic fluctuations, excessive concentration of production in a narrow range of commodities, and dearth of manufacturing activities’ (Ariff 1973, p. 373). Rural poverty, among Malays and other indigenous people, or commonly known as the Bumiputera became the main agenda of the Tunku’s government. This was reflected by the establishment of new infrastructures at the rural areas; improvements in agricultural techniques, whereby, majority of the Malays and Bumiputera involved (Ariff 1973, p. 374). The government also decided to implement the large-scale diversification program, in which, excessive specialisation in a few commodities and concentration of export markets in few countries were frowned upon (Ariff 1973, p. 374).

It therefore can be argued that Malaysia’s economic development policies in the post-independence were very specific, which set up based on an identified set of priorities, and most importantly, to achieve the targets within its capacity as a newly independent nation. Likewise, Malaysia did not set up an ambitious international vision during the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman. As a newly independent state, the Federation practiced humble and modest foreign policy approaches (Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations 2008, p. 17), making sure that friends and foes did not intimidated with its external policies. The notion of “independent” and “non-aligned” were often used in the Federation’s foreign policy discourses. Nevertheless, it is an open secret that under Tunku, the Federation’s foreign policy was widely known as ‘pro-British’, and as such Tunku emphasised that “one of our great tasks is to complete the defeat of Communist terrorism” (Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations 2008, p. 10). Also, Tunku decided for the Federation of Malaya to become an active member of the Commonwealth due to the deemed benefits that the country would enjoy should the country join the organisation. This was not surprising occurrence since Tunku – an ariscrotic Malay, with Western education – who had lived half (if not more) of his life in Britain, and therefore, his norms and perceptions

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were widely influenced by his experiences living abroad in Britain and working with the British elites and technocrats. In addition, with the Cold War heightening in the region at the time when the Federation just gained its independence informed Tunku's decision to maintain close relationship with the West rather than establishing new relations with the Communist ideology countries, such as China and Soviet Union (Hagiwara 1974, p. 384). Tunku also saw the importance of regional peace and stability, and therefore, he also focused on establishing and improving the Federation's relationship with its neighbouring countries, namely, the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia through an array of economic and political treaties signed at the Southeast Asian region. Indeed, Malayan pro-West, anti-communist foreign policy and good neighbouring policies through regionalism and regionalisation, propagated by Tunku Abdul Rahman contributed to the positive economic and political development of independence Malaya (Ott 1972, p. 227).

TUN ABDUL RAZAK HUSSEIN: NEUTRALITY AND PEACEFUL RELATIONSHIPS (1970 - 1976)

Tun Abdul Razak, the second Prime Minister of Malaysia has been able to lead and transform Malaysia, a newly independent country into one that is respected worldwide for its rapid economic development (Mansor & Syed Salleh 2015, p. 145). Malaysia's economic performance under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak – the second Prime Minister of Malaysia – in 1970s witnessing the decade of highest growth since independence (Jomo 2018, p. 12). The doubling of national income between 1970 and 1975 from RM 895 to RM 1,511 respectively, and continuously to rise to more than 150 per cent in 1981 (See Table 1) were the evidence of the exceptional economic growth for a newly independent country (Jomo 2018, p. 13).

Malaysia's economic in terms of manufacturing and services also saw a positive and rapid growth transformation; encouraging the rural Malay communities to work in urban areas which offer manufacturing and services activities (Jomo 2018, pp.14-15). Unemployment number, therefore, was in declined, too. Interestingly, the decade was the years where women started to become important sources of labours working at various manufacturing and services lines. Malaysia had also achieved poverty eradication between 1970s – 1980s, whereby the poverty rate reduced to 10 percent by 1984 and 17 per cent by 1987 from 40 per cent in 1970, especially in Peninsular Malaysia (Jomo 2005, p. 186).

Much of the success of economic development during Tun Razak premiership owe to the formulation and implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Launched in 1970 by Tun Razak, the NEP is a long term political, economic and social transformation agenda, which aims to firstly, to

eradicate poverty irrespective of race, and secondly, to restructure the society. It was Mei 1969 racial riots that informed the government to adopt measures that could avoid similar outbreaks of violence among races in the future. One of the main reasons that led to the Mei 1969 racial riots was income gaps within each major ethnic group in Malaysia, namely, the Malays and the Chinese. The implementation of the NEP, therefore, aimed for national unity and cohesion. In so doing, the NEP emphasised on the efforts toward ‘poverty eradication regardless of race’ and ‘restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function’ (Jomo 2005, p. 206).

TABLE 1. MALAYSIA NATIONAL INCOME, 1970, 1975, 1981

INDICATOR	1970	1975	1981
GNP (RM million)	11,644	21,606	55,602
National Income (RM million)	9,732	17,936	45,505
Population ('000)	10,877	11,868	14,128
Real GDP (RM million)	–	29,550	47,602
National Income per Capita (RM)	895	1,511	3,221

SOURCE: Jomo 2018, p. 13

Tun Razak’s transformation agenda in terms of economic development, at the national level, did determine Malaysia’s stand and vision at the international level. One of the NEP strategies to eradicate the poverty was through the empowerment of Malays ethnic group with a number of policies that give advantages in terms of economic, political and social development to the Malays and the Bumiputera, since majority of them were (and still are) live in poverty. Tun Razak and the government firmed believe was that the Malay and Bumiputera ethnic group should be helped so as to allowing them to get the benefits of the country’s wealth distribution, and therefore the racial riots could be avoided in the near future. Tun Razak’s ‘Malay and Bumiputra-first’ strategy, to some extent, created uneasiness among Chinese, asking the rationale behind it (Jomo 2005).

One of the methods to remedy the uneasiness among Malaysian Chinese, Tun Abdul Razak opted for an official and a closer relationship with China as part of his neutrality and non-alignment approaches (Hagiwara 1974, p. 387). This was reflected by the result of the general election in 1974, whereby, the incumbent government, the *Barisan Nasional* won the election with sweeping victory (Hagiwara 1974, p. 387). The confidence and trust of the Malaysian Chinese on the Razak’s government was paramount to the Malaysia’s image as a dynamic and viable multi-ethnic state at the international level (UKEssays, 2018). In other words, Tun Abdul Razak saw that develop-

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ment not only involves material gains that only focus on one race, but also, includes matter concerning to societal and political realms of all Malaysians. This was reflected in his statement in 1963 (cited in *The Edge Malaysia* 2019), “on the human, cultural and religious aspects of our lives so that we can build up a Malaysia which is not only economically stable, but which is also a nation of people who are happy within themselves, self-reliant and secure within their own sincerity of purpose”.

Under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia brought about new changes in its foreign policy paradigm and international vision. Malaysia adopted a non-aligned stance, whereby it was not aligned to the West, nor was Malaysia aligned to the Eastern bloc. Tun Abdul Razak wanted Malaysia to become a neutral, non-aligned country, and distance itself from the Western bloc as Tun Abdul Razak felt that the pro-western democracies did not longer sustain Malaysia’s needs. Symbolic to this new approach at the international level was state visit by Tun Abdul Razak to Russia and China in the 1970s. Tun Razak was also insisted Malaysia to join Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation (APSO) – an almost communist bloc that Malaysia had been rejected to join (Mahathir Mohamad, 2000: 10). By 1974, Malaysia had officially established diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, China, and Soviet Union. Since then, the diplomatic relations between Malaysia and socialist countries, especially, China has broadened into trade and economic relations, considering the big markets that China has to offer to Malaysia’s rubber, and the opportunity to export cheaper machinery, chemicals and foods (Hagiwara 1974, p. 383).

Malaysia’s international vision during Tun Razak did reflect the needs and priorities set up at national level – national unity of a newly independent multi-racial country. Under Tun Abdul Razak, neutralization had become the key elements of Malaysia’s foreign policy. Tun Abdul Razak himself proposed Malaysia’s international vision for neutralization to the United Nations General Assembly in New York in October 1971, whereby he received a lot of encouragement and acceptance from other nation states. At the regional level, Tun Abdul Razak managed to convince Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders to issue a joint communique that declared their commitment to cooperate and work together towards achieving Southeast Asia as Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN).

Economic, politics and societal conditions at the national level in the early 1970s, therefore, informed Tun Abdul Razak’s decision on adopting the neutrality approach on the matter concerning to diplomatic and foreign affairs. Also, Tun Abdul Razak’s firm believe on the importance for the Southeast Asia as the ZOPFAN became Malaysia’s cardinal norms and vision in projecting the image of the country at international level.

TUN HUSSEIN ONN (1976 – 1981)

Tun Hussein Onn (1976 – 1981), the third Prime Minister of Malaysia took over the leadership role from Tun Abdul Razak untimely death in early 1976. As Tun Hussein Onn was Tun Abdul Razak former deputy, and finance minister, it was not surprising occurrence when the former largely pursued the policies decided upon during the later premiership. Malaysia's development blueprint and strategy, therefore, were geared towards bridging the racial divide and putting an end to the economic disparities and classification among major ethnic groups.

Likewise, Tun Hussein Onn maintained his predecessor's stance on foreign affairs and his international vision, in which Tun Hussein Onn emphasised on the stabilisation of security situation in the Indo-China region due to the intensifying of the Cold War in the region. It was during Tun Hussein Onn's premiership that two significant multilateral agreements were signed, namely, the ASEAN Treaty of Amity ad Cooperation (TAC) 1976, and Cooperation and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord. Both agreements generally aim to maintain the peace and stability in the region through friendly negotiations or good offices, mediation, inquiry of coalition.

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD (1981-2003)

Mahathir Mohamad, who is internationally known as a vocal, visionary, and decisive leader, not only has transformed but also modernised, industrialised, and strengthened the national economy within his 22 years premiership as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir's contribution to modernising Malaysia could not be denied, as he is known as the Father of Modernization for Malaysia. This includes his contribution to advancing Malaysia's rapid economic growth, primarily through privatizing policies that cover various sectors such as airlines, utilities, and telecommunications. Mahathir has transformed Malaysia from a developing agricultural country to a modern and progressive Muslim country through the inculcation of Islamic Values policies, embodying the universal Islamic values into the government's working culture. The establishment of Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad (*Islamic Bank*) and the International Islamic University of Malaysia, the introduction of Islamic Civilization and Malaysian Studies as a compulsory course for all undergraduates' programs at local university, the increasing of airtime on television and radio for Islamic programs did occur during Mahathir's premiership (Hassan 2007, p. 298).

Mahathir's efforts to nation-building also geared toward industrialisation through state intervention to promote heavy industrialisation by emulating the Japanese's and South Korean's impressive economic development (Jomo, 2003). He introduced the "*Look East*" policy, welcoming the money, experi-

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ences and technology of Japan and South Korea in the 1980s – 1990s (Noor Shams, 2016). Mahathir understood that Japanese companies such as Toyota and Hitachi, to name a few, needed cheaper production bases outside Japan to remain competitive due to the rising cost, severe labour shortage and the strengthening of Yen that would threaten their business profits (Noor Shams, 2016). Therefore, Mahathir's focus back then was to convince those Japanese companies to invest in Malaysia in a big way. Mahathir succeeds! Malaysia became industrialized, shifting its emphasis to export manufactured goods such as air-conditioners, refrigerators, televisions and computers rather than selling raw material like tin and rubber just like decades ago.

As mentioned earlier, Malaysia experienced its fastest economic development in the 1970s, with average 7.9 % of economic growth. However, it was during 1980s that growth really could be felt by all walk of life of the Malaysian (Noor Shams, 2016). Indeed, the only comparable period of high growth in Malaysia to that of what had been achieved in 1970s was during the premierships of Mahathir, particularly from the late 1980s until the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which saw growth averaging 8.0% (Jomo, 2005).

Mahathir's economic blueprint focused on three main components, namely, a heavy industrialisation drive, a 'privatization' programme and a 'Malaysia Incorporated' orientation. The heavy industrialisation drive drew its inspiration inspired by the South Korea state-led late industrialisation programme and was made possible by equity participation and technology transfer from both Japanese and South Korean corporations (Teik 1997, p. 13). The 'national car' project (Proton), and a steel complex (Perwaja) are the case in point in discussing Malaysia's experience in heavy industrialisation project. The 'privatization' policy aims to reduce state expenditures and involvement in other areas of commerce and business (Teik 1997, p. 14), especially on the matter concerning to the national infrastructures and services such as Malaysia's system of expressways, ports, power plants and telecommunication facilities. Through the privatisation policy, Mahathir's government had successfully boosted economic growth, ensured efficient distribution of resources, reduced its financial burden, increased efficiency and work productivity, among others (Chow, 2019). The 'Malaysia Incorporated' policy attempted to remould the relations between the public and the private sectors (Teik 1997, pp. 14-15). The underpinning idea to the Malaysia Incorporated was that for the government to manage the nation as a "corporate" or "business entity" jointly owned by both the public and private sectors (Guie 2018).

With the outstanding achievement in transforming the national economic development, Mahathir then focused on elevating Malaysia's profile as a progressive developing Muslim country at the international level. Mahathir began to orchestra a dynamic balance between domestic capacity and external

performance (Nathan, 1995, p. 225). Mahathir declared the Malaysia Vision 2020 in 1991, with the ultimate objective to be a “Malaysia that is a fully developed country by 2020 ... in our own mould” (Mahathir Mohamad 1991). The Vision 2020 outlined nine challenges that Malaysia needed to tackle to achieve developed status; fostering a united country; a society with a liberated spirit; a democratic society; a moral and ethical society; a liberal society; a scientific and progressive society; a caring society; an economically just society; and a prosperous society. Fast forward 30 years later, Malaysia is yet to achieve the status of a developed nation “because it fell short in certain fields” (Mahathir Mohamad, cited in *Bernama* 2020). Nonetheless, according to Mahathir, the architect of the Vision 2020, Malaysia has made a progressive transformation following the launch of the vision in 1991, when he said (cited in *Bernama* 2020), “The people are more prosperous, the country is more prosperous and development is evident throughout the country, with better infrastructure. The fact is many aspects of Vision 2020 have been achieved.” Moreover, not only the Vision 2020 guided and set the parameters of Mahathir’s leadership for Malaysia, but also for ASEAN during his premiership. As such, Mahathir’s ‘Vision 2020’ also transcended at ASEAN level with the ‘ASEAN 2020’ document, charting the direction of ASEAN towards the year 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat 1997a).

With the progressive economic development, Mahathir emphasised economic foreign policy so as to strengthen Malaysia’s position at international level. Mahathir rapidly expanding Malaysia’s international trade capacity as reflected by numerous trade agreements signed in conjunction with the Malaysian premier’s visits to Africa, South America, the South Pacific, the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and the Caribbean (Nathan 1995). The building of new economic links with the South countries is a double-sword strategy; firstly, to reducing over-reliance on Western markets, and secondly, to garner international support for Malaysian views on the emerging post-Cold War international order (Nathan 1995, p. 233-234). This was in lined with the Vision 2020 agenda to utilise Malaysia’s export potential and the penetration of new markets for Malaysian merchandise, capital, and investments (Nathan 1995, p. 233-234).

Malaysia also continuously working with developing and third world countries at the international level as an avenue for experience sharing and capacity building efforts. Unlike other majority of the newly appointed heads of state or government of third world county, who would make his or her official state visit to the United States of America, Mahathir decided to first visit Malaysia’s closest neighbour, Indonesia. Indonesia and other regional countries, as well as the Associational of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), became the main priority of Mahathir’s foreign policy. At the same time,

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Malaysia became friendly with poor country such as Samoa, Fiji, Papua New Genie, Sudan and many more. Through the G15 – a group of 15 non-aligned countries, Mahathir Mohamad has made shifts towards Africa and Latin America as well. The decision to be friends with small countries was mainly influenced by the economic factor. By befriending with other non-aligned and poor countries, it provided opportunities for Malaysia to boost its tourism industry, and most importantly to add numbers on Malaysia's trading partner (Siraj 2020; p. 10).

Mahathir also prepared the nation for a more visible and assertive role at the international level through active participation at the United Nations, and by holding positions of leadership in several international organizations such as ASEAN and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), and various international events (Nathan 1995; p. 234). During his tenure for example, Malaysia became leader of G-77; president of the twenty-fifth UNESCO General Conference; alternating UN Security Council Member from 1988-90; host for 1998 Commonwealth Games, and many more. Though its active participation at the international level, Malaysia has been able to improve its economic cooperation, boosted its international trade and develop its foreign policy (Siraj, 2020; p. 10).

ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI

On 31 October 2003, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is fondly called as Pak Lah took over as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia. His appointment played a significant role in Malaysia political history following the stepping down of his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the modern Malaysia's founding father who helmed the government for 22 years. It was not an easy journey for Pak Lah to lead a country which had been under the leadership of a visionary, bold, brave and charismatic leader for 22 years. Indeed, none has achieved greater than what Mahathir has during his reign. Thus, when Abdullah took over the batten, the expectation for the PM to provide better leadership was undoubtedly high.

Hopes and expectations for Pak Lah to provide a better leadership for Malaysia emerged when he won a landslide victory in 2004 general election. With confidence, Pak Lah offered a more moderate image, cracked down several figures known for their corruption under Mahathir, and came out with his own mantra to reflect his participative leadership style, "work with me, not for me" (Pandian, Omar & Mohd Sani, 2010). As such, no sooner after being sworn in, Abdullah forged his own signature for the nation but kept some fundamental dynamic in consonance with his predecessor. On the domestic front, Abdullah advanced two notable policies: Mission 2057 and Islam Hadhari (IH). Mission-2057 was for Abdullah what Vision-2020 for

Mahathir in that both desired to leave their mark on the progress of Malaysia in socio-cultural and economic terms. That aside, the major concern of Abdullah was to ensure that Malaysia is on track to achieve the target set out in the vision 2020 before his Mission of 2057 can be realized. Meanwhile IH sought to promote a moderate or progressive view of Islamic civilization as Abdullah (2005, cited in *Agence France Presse*): 'we are responsible for ensuring that the culture of extremism and violent acts in the name of Islam does not happen in Malaysia'.

Under his administration, Malaysia attached great importance to economic reforms but with a focus on was on agriculture as he believed that industry could generate wealth and reduce poverty particularly among those from rural areas. The increment of more than 70% of the Ninth Malaysia Plan budget for agriculture, compared to the previous year's budget show the importance of agricultural industry during Pak Lah's tenure (Reen, Mokhtar & Jamir Singh 2012, p. 181). Among the projects undertaken included the set-up of the Malaysian Agro-Exposition Park Serdang (MAEPS) to support and promote Malaysian agricultural excellence through events and activities, including the biennial Malaysian Agricultural, Horticulture and Agrotourism Show (MAHA). This is Malaysia's largest agriculture-related event, drawing 500,000 national and foreign visitors. The high-impact event is an opportunity for agro-entrepreneurs, buyers, investors and service providers to meet and showcase their products and services. In addition, Pak Lah's economic policy called for more foreign investment, the privatisation of government assets and signed a free trade agreement with Japan – one of Malaysia's major trading partners (Hays 2008). In addition, several mega projects were planned during Abdullah' tenure, such as, restructuring LRT railway track in Klang Valley, Ipoh-Padang Besar, a West Coast Highway and a Penang Monorail (Reen, Mokhtar & Jamir Singh 2012, p. 182). Yet, the focus of Pak Lah in terms of economic development was on agriculture as he believed that industry could generate wealth and reduce poverty particularly among those from rural areas.

The aforementioned priorities set up at the national level by Pak Lah also shaped Malaysia's Foreign Policy posture. Akin to Mahathir, Abdullah considered foreign policy as the best avenue for Malaysia to pursue its national interests. Abdullah's style and Malaysia's foreign policy under his tenure, however, a slightly different from that of Mahathir's. Abdullah Badawi administration were engagement, quiet diplomacy, constructive solutions (as in bilateral relations with Singapore) – a shift from Mahathir's blunt, critical, sometimes adversarial champion of the Third World (Martinez 2004, p. 203).

On the regional level, Malaysia continued to promote regionalism in East Asia through ASEAN-affiliated agencies. A case in point is Malaysia's backing

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of ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed in 2001 designed to increase economic exchange and cooperation between the two nations and promote greater integration in East Asia through the ASEAN+3 platforms. For instance, it was also under Abdullah that, the first 'East Asian Summit' (EAS) was convened in 2004 akin to the EAEG proposed by Mahathir in the early 1990s. The main goal of this summit is to be an 'open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum... to strengthen global norms and universally recognised values' (ASEAN Secretariat 2005). The EAS seeks to promote 'dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern, with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia' (ASEAN Secretariat 2005).

Under his watch, Malaysia's international standing was enhanced. For instance, Malaysia served as a Chair of the Organization Islamic Conference (OIC), the largest grouping of Muslims nations. This made Malaysia a leader of the Muslim world and increase its strategic values to big powers and other non-Muslim countries seeking to gain greater access to their markets. During Abdullah chairmanship, Malaysia was also able to articulate OIC's views on Israel-Palestinian problems and promote a peaceful resolution to the on-going conflicts in Iraq. Malaysia's elevated profile was not limited to Muslim world. From 2003 to 2006, Abdullah also chaired the non-aligned movement, an organization that represents two thirds of the world population. As such, Abdullah maintained the stance that had been firmly established during Mahathir's premiership and therefore, focusing on the Malaysia's role as the defender of the Third World and South-South rights/interests, and the architect of Malaysia's entry into multilateral trade arrangements and new markets.

NAJIB RAZAK

Najib Razak, the son of Tun Razak (the second PM of Malaysia) took over the leadership in April 2009 following the dismal performance of Abdullah in the 12th General Election when the BN-led government lost its sacrosanct 2/3 seat in the parliament. As such, Najib was confronted with greater challenge than his predecessor. Overlapping to that was the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 which posed a daunting challenge for Najib's government. Indeed, a drop in demand from the US its major trading partner and the decline of FDI from the West in the post-2008 affected Malaysia's export-oriented economy. As such, it was clear that the main concern of Najib's government was to bring Malaysia's economy back on the track since the failure to do so can generate domestic backlash against his leadership.

Set against this, Najib advanced two economic policies: the National Economic Model (NEM) and Economic Transformation Plan (ETP). The NEM focused to tackle overcome the middle-income trap and renew the momentum

for economic growth 2010 (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 440). The ETP aimed to address the drastic decline to the Domestic Direct Investment (DDI) due to the number of issues such as capital flight and voluntary delisting from domestic stock markets in favour of those overseas (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 440). When Najib took over prime minister office in April 2009, Malaysia was right in the middle of the 2008-2009 great global recession, and as a country which depends on international trade, Malaysia was severely affected. Nonetheless, under the leadership of Najib, Malaysia has been able to increase its gross national income had increased by nearly 50 percent, with 2.26 million jobs created (*NST Business* 2017). Malaysia also has been able to narrow the gap towards the high-income target from 33 percent to 19 percent (*NST Business* 2017). In addition, 2.26 million jobs have been created in between 2009-2016, and almost half of it were high income jobs (*NST Business* 2017).

According to Md. Khalid (2011), Najib's economic trajectory did not in stark contrast with that of Mahathir's. Both leaders succumbed to the 'Keynesian multiplier effect of government spending to boost aggregate demand in the economy' (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 441). What's more with the implementation of the ETP, it was a necessity for Najib to continue adhering to the Mahathir's view of the economy as infrastructure driven. Najib introduced the '*infra-rakyat*' (infrastructure for the people) to boost the economic growth which has been severely affected by the Global Financial Crisis 2008-2009. The main focus of the '*infra-rakyat*' policy was in improving public transportation system in the whole nation. This was reflected by Najib speech in 2018 (cited in *The Sun Daily*): "We were clear that we not only had to catch up, (but also) had to get ahead of the competition and have a public transport system that is truly world class." An array of mega projects which aim to improve the standard of public transportation at par to that of developed countries was launched during Najib's premiership. That includes East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), Pan Borneo Highway, Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), High-Speed Rail (HSR) projects, to name a few.

Najib held very dearly the formula that indeed, economic policy is a primary determinant of a country's foreign policy. This explains that under Najib's tenure, 'Malaysia's foreign policy has been strongly influenced by domestic consideration', particularly economic factors that are closely tied to political stability and regime legitimacy (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 439). Najib's foreign policy and international stance, therefore, largely drew on the necessity to reassuring the existing trading partners and yet at the same time renewing economic links to achieve the objectives that have been set in the NEM document. Malaysia's relationship with the People's Republic of China has been elevated to a higher degree, with the perception that

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indeed China is seen as Malaysia's new trading partner during Najib era, a role that Japan has been fulfilling during Mahathir's premiership (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 448). This was clearly demonstrated by the Najib's visit to China in June 2009, not long after he was appointed as the prime minister to renew the 35 years of Malaysia-China Relation. In 2017 alone, Malaysia had sealed 14 business MoUs between Malaysia and China worth RM144 billion. The strong relationship between the two countries was also proven by an impressive bilateral trade, which total RM 376.63 billion in 2017 (Ariff & Karim 2018). China's President Xi Jinping described Malaysia-China relations during Najib's tenure as being "at an all-time high" (Ariff & Karim 2018).

With regard to the U.S, Najib were more eager to please the Washington when compared with Mahathir (Md. Khalid 2011, p. 448). Over the years, the U.S has been the largest source of FDI to Malaysia, and therefore, strengthening the relationship with the U.S was deemed necessary, especially with the continuous assertive behaviours of China, exerting her influence in the Asia Pacific region.

While China has been influential to both Malaysia's economic and diplomatic domains, the relationship of the two countries endangered with the unresolved territorial issues especially on the matter concerning to the South China Sea. Malaysia, therefore, needs to keep a more balanced relationship with all the major powers – that includes the U.S (Kuik 2013, p. 144). Indeed, the U.S has been Malaysia's key trading partner with bilateral trade amounting to \$USD40 billion annually (U.S Mission to ASEAN 2014). As a result, "the Najib government has stepped up efforts to increase bilateral trade and investment flows and decided to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations" (Kuik 2013, p. 144). From the military and strategic realms, Najib premiership has intensifying Malaysia's long-standing military cooperation with the U.S (Kuik 2013, p. 144).

Malaysia's image at the international, however, slightly tarnished with the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. The 1MDB was a strategic development company driving new ideas and new sources of growth which was funded by Najib Razak in September 2009. It has been said that Najib allegedly received more than USD\$1 billion in 1MDB funds, some of which was used to buy jewellery for his wife (Reuters 2019). As expected by many observers, Najib lost his position at the 2018 general election mainly due to the 1MDB scandal. Unfortunately, the scandal has also revealed Malaysia's weak governance, poor internal controls within banks, the failure of watchdogs and enforcement bodies to take necessary actions partly due to the involvement political figures and networking and the corruption that involving officials, bankers and others (Jones 2020, p. 59).

TABLE 2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL VISION

LEADERS	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AND LEVEL	INTERNATIONAL VISION
TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering manufacturing sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humble and modest foreign policy approaches • “Independent” and “non-aligned”
TUN ABDUL RAZAK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decade of highest growth since independence • The New Economic Policy (NEP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutrality approach
TUN HUSSEIN ONN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridging the racial divide among major ethnic groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stabilisation of security situation in the Indo-China region
MAHATHIR MOHAMAD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy industrialisation • Privatization programme • ‘Malaysia Incorporated’ orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more visible and assertive role at the international level
ABDULLAH BADAWI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam Hadhari • Agricultural industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement • Quiet diplomacy • Constructive solutions
NAJIB RAZAK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Economic Model (NEM) • Economic Transformation Plan (ETP). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassuring the existing trading partners • Renewing economic links

SOURCE: Authors' Own Compilation.

IV. MALAYSIA'S OUTLOOK: 2018 AND BEYOND

It can be argued that Malaysia in 2018 and beyond is a country that trapped in between a myriad of political, economic, social and pandemic upheavals. Politically, it has witnessed three times of government changes in three years due to political and governance crisis. Economically, the country is grappling with the rising cost of living, particularly among the Malay population and among the youngsters; insufficient high skilled jobs opportunities especially for the youths (Head 2020); a slowdown in manufacturing growth (Ming 2019); the increasing of federal debt; and the declining of government revenue, among others (World Bank Group, 2019). Socially, a deep cleavage has opened up around urban and rural populations, and the division of politics of race and faith, of East and West Malaysia.

Nonetheless, there was optimism, hoping and expecting for a better Malaysia in May 2018. Indeed, 9 May 2018 marked the historic critical junctures on Malaysia's domestic politics due to two main reasons. Firstly, the winning of the *Pakatan Harapan* (Coalition of Hope, or PH) in Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE) by simple majority, which had ended the domination

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of *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, or BN) after nearly six decades in power. Secondly, the came back of former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed in Malaysia's political scene as the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia. With the first change of government since independence, the nation of "*Malaysia Baharu*" (New Malaysia) dominated the narrative of Malaysia's political development back then. It is hoped that the New Malaysia would bring about transformation of Malaysia's system of governance; and against kleptocracy, the abuse of power, greed and corruption (*The Malay Mail* 2020).

That optimism did not last long, however. The chances to change the trajectory of Malaysia's outlook toward the New Malaysia have been wasted when the PH could not maintain and sustain their power as the incumbent government. The internal bickering and mishandling of the transition power from Mahathir Mohamad to Anwar Ibrahim – the prominent leader of the most dominant party in the PH – which scheduled in 2020, and no later, became the main factor that led to the comes back of the old regime under the leadership of Muhyiddin Yassin – a progressive and pragmatic leader (Tan 2018).

Muhyiddin Yassin has sworn in as Malaysia's eight Prime Minister after the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad as the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia. It was Mahathir's decision to resign, which resulted the collapse of PH – coalition government that had defeated the BN in 2018 GE. Muhyiddin then decides to pull his party, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, or *Bersatu*, out from the Coalition and tied up with several parties, including the two most influential parties under BN – United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Islamist Party PAS – to form a new government on March 1, 2020. This new coalition is called *Perikatan Nasional* (PN). Since then, Muhyiddin is muddling through his premiership on a narrow 113-seat majority in the 222-seat Malaysian parliament. What's more, his party is not the largest block of the PN coalition. Instead, Muhyiddin's tenure is very much depending on the support of UMNO – the largest party in Malaysia's ruling political alliance.

Muhyiddin leadership faced three formidable challenges to maintain his political legitimacy, and therefore, political stability of the country. First, to maintain support from other parties under the PN coalition, especially from UMNO's. UMNO knows the weaknesses of the existing coalition, which very much survives with its support. UMNO has threatened to pull out Muhyiddin's government, in a bid to extract concessions from his PPBM in the form a more senior positions in cabinet (Strangio 2020). Also, Najib Razak, who was defeated in 2018 election, but still one of the key influential leaders in UMNO, was (and still is) wooing support from members of BN coalition (to which UMNO belongs) to back Anwar's bid for the prime

ministership. Secondly, to maintain the cohesion within his own party, the PPBM (Strangio 2020). The PPBM suffers internal party bickering ‘from when Muhyiddin first took over and right till today’ (Kwan 2020). The third challenge is on the possibility of the changes of the government due to Muhyiddin’s ‘a razor-thin majority in parliament’ (Al Jazeera 2020). The announcement made by Anwar Ibrahim that he commanded a formidable majority in parliament in mid-October 2020 is evidence of this. Indeed, in August 2021, Muhyiddin resigned as the eighth Prime Minister of Malaysia after he failed to command the majority supports of the Members of the Dewan Rakyat (lower house of Malaysia’s Parliament).

As a result, Ismail Sabri Yaakob has been appointed as the ninth Prime Minister of Malaysia. Presiding the nation at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, deep political divisions, and a battered economy; expectations were low for Ismail (Zainuddin, 2021). This is especially so when there is a possibility that Ismail’s government will only last maximum for two years before the next general election. What’s more, Ismail’s personality is relatively low profile when compared by other heavyweights in Malaysian’s politics, namely Mahathir Mohamad, Anwar Ibrahim and Najib Razak (South China Morning Post, 2021).

Nevertheless, Ismail’s leadership has offered much-needed stability amid the political landscape shifts (Zainuddin, 2021). Ismail’s leadership witnessing the inking of a historic bipartisan deal with opposition bloc Pakatan Harapan (PH), led by Party Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) president, Anwar Ibrahim. It is anticipated that the deal would pave ‘the way for political stability and institutional reforms’ (Anand, 2021). Among others, the deal stated that PH ‘will either abstain or vote for key government Bills in Parliament – including the Budget – as long as its demand on a number of policy reforms are met by government’ (Hassan, 2021). Consequently, Ismail scored his first victory when he has successfully convinced the majority of the Lower House to pass Malaysia’s biggest spending bills worth of Malaysian Ringgit MYR332 billion. The spending plan for 2022 is crucial, as it is designed to chart a post-pandemic path for the nation and to spur its recovery progress into the endemic phase (Hassan, 2021).

In general, Malaysia’s economic growth grows at a slower pace in the 2021 amid the global pandemic and the relatively instability in politics and governance. Indeed, the COVID-19 has changed the “economic landscape in terms of production level, household spending, investment and labour market” (Department Statistics of Malaysia, 2020). Malaysia’s recorded the lowest economy growth of -17.1 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. In the third quarter, Malaysia’s GDP growth rebounded significantly by registering -2.7 per cent. In addition, the government also faces various challenges,

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including the weakening of Malaysian currency, the drop in oil prices (oil revenues account for 30 percent of state revenue) and the fall in commodity export prices. Moreover, political instability makes efforts toward intensifying economic growth a bit challenging. For instance, the benchmark FTSE Bursa Malaysia KLCI Index extended declines after Anwar's announcement to slide 0.6 percent to 1,496.48 (Shukry & Heijmans, 2020). The Malaysian Ringgit also weakened at 0.6 percent to 4.1578 a dollar (*The Bangkok Post* 2020). Nonetheless, challenging it may, Malaysia is still the 3rd largest economy in Southeast Asia, behind Indonesia and Thailand, and it continues to perform promisingly, albeit slowly due to the global pandemic. Central Bank of Malaysia (Bank Negara Malaysia, or BNM) "had predicted that the Malaysia's economy will rebound in 2021, with a projected GDP growth rate of 5.5 percent to 8.0 percent" (*The Malay Mail* 2020).

V. CONCLUSION

It therefore can be argued that different leaders reflect a pragmatic response to the geopolitical and economic changes from time to time. It shows that economic condition is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for Malaysia to exert its influence at the international level. Malaysia's experience shows that the norms, values, perception and principle of the political leaders are also cardinal in determining Malaysia's position and vision at the international level. Equally important (if not more) that could determine Malaysia's role at the international level is on the geostrategic and geopolitics settings both at regional and international level. The needs of the Malaysian, the pressures from civil societies and the demands of NGOs, to some extent, also informed the decision takes at the government level. Altogether, the interaction of these factors shapes and determines Malaysia's take at the international level.

Malaysia's story shows the central importance of leadership towards nation-building efforts. The political will, courage, vision and commitment from the part of political leaders could transform a country from a developing agrarian country to a modern and industrialised nation. It also demonstrates that bad governance, stalemate in leadership, corruption and bribery inhibit efforts toward national cohesion and nation building. These are the variables that Malaysia's leaders should tackle so as to bring back Malaysia's positive image as a progressive and dynamic developing country at the international level.

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