

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP OF MAHATHIR: MALAYSIAN LOCAL LEADERSHIP STYLE

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(Received 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025; revised 25<sup>th</sup> November 2025; accepted 02<sup>nd</sup> December 2025)

**Abstract.** This study explores Mahathir Mohamad's leadership through the lens of authentic leadership theory, analyzing its impact on Malaysia's political stability, economic development, and governance framework. As Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister, Mahathir played a crucial role in shaping the nation's trajectory, implementing transformative policies such as Vision 2020 and the Look East Policy to drive modernization, industrialization, and self-sufficiency. His leadership embodied key attributes of authentic leadership, including self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective, while also integrating elements of authoritarian pragmatism and strategic governance to maintain national stability. The study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, adhering to PRISMA guidelines, to critically examine 53 high-quality academic sources that discuss Mahathir's leadership style in relation to authentic leadership, nationalism, economic sovereignty, and political pragmatism. Findings reveal that Mahathir's visionary leadership and strong nationalist stance contributed to Malaysia's economic transformation and political consolidation, while his authoritarian tendencies in governance sparked debates on democratic freedoms and governance ethics. Despite criticisms of his firm control over political institutions and media, Mahathir remained goal-oriented and pragmatic, ensuring Malaysia's resilience in times of economic and political crises, including the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of authentic leadership within a non-Western political context, demonstrating how leadership authenticity can coexist with pragmatic and authoritarian decision-making. Practically, it offers insights for political leaders, policymakers, and governance scholars, emphasizing the importance of balancing vision, pragmatism, and ethical governance. The study also identifies avenues for future research, including comparative leadership analysis, the impact of Mahathir's leadership on institutional development, and the role of authentic leadership in crisis management. By contextualizing Mahathir's leadership within Malaysia's political culture, this study advances the discourse on leadership effectiveness in multicultural and developing nations.

**Keywords:** *authentic leadership, Malaysia, political leadership, nationalism, authoritarian pragmatism, governance*

### Introduction

Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister, is a pivotal figure in the nation's political and economic transformation. Born on July 10, 1925, in Alor Setar,

Kedah, Mahathir's early exposure to the struggles of Malayan society under British colonial rule shaped his nationalist sentiments. He pursued medicine before venturing into politics, joining the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in the 1940s. His political career gained momentum in the 1960s, and despite a brief expulsion from UMNO due to his outspoken criticism of the government, he re-emerged stronger, eventually rising to the position of Deputy Prime Minister in 1976. In 1981, he was sworn in as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, marking the beginning of a 22-year tenure that saw the nation undergo rapid industrialization, economic diversification, and infrastructural expansion (Razali et al., 2022; Reza and Yasmin, 2019). His Vision 2020 policy was instrumental in setting Malaysia on the path to becoming a developed nation, while his strong stance on Malay rights and economic empowerment shaped the country's socio-political landscape (Suhaimy et al., 2021). Mahathir's leadership communication was also deeply influenced by Confucian values, emphasizing discipline, respect for hierarchy, and collectivist ideals (Lynn-Sze and Ahmad, 2017).

After retiring in 2003, Mahathir remained an influential voice in Malaysian politics, often critiquing his successors (Teik, 2003). Dissatisfied with the country's political direction, he made a dramatic return in 2018, leading the Pakatan Harapan coalition to a historic victory against UMNO, the party he once led (Razali, 2022). At 93, he became the world's oldest elected leader, serving as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister until 2020. His second tenure was marked by anti-corruption reforms and efforts to restore democratic governance, but political infighting led to his resignation (Razali et al., 2022). Mahathir's leadership style, often described as pragmatic and authoritarian, left a lasting impact on Malaysia's governance, economic policies, and international standing (Wain, 2009; Hwang, 2003). His contributions to national identity formation, particularly in promoting Malay nationalism while navigating Malaysia's multicultural society, continue to shape the country's political discourse (Suhaimy et al., 2021). While supporters praise his visionary leadership and economic foresight, critics highlight his concentration of power and suppression of dissent. Regardless of perspective, Mahathir's role in shaping Malaysia's modern history is undeniable, making him one of the most influential and controversial leaders in Southeast Asia.

### ***Literature review***

Mahathir's leadership style embodies elements of authentic leadership, which is characterized by self-awareness, personal integrity, a strong vision, and an unwavering commitment to national development (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019). He positioned himself as a leader who spoke candidly about Malaysia's socio-economic challenges and actively sought solutions to enhance the nation's global standing. His leadership was driven by a deep nationalist sentiment, where he emphasized the importance of self-reliance and reducing economic dependence on Western countries. This was evident in his Look East Policy, which encouraged Malaysians to adopt Japanese and South Korean work ethics and technological advancements as models for national progress. One of Mahathir's most defining policies was Vision 2020, a long-term strategic plan aimed at transforming Malaysia into a fully developed nation by the year 2020 (Reza and Yasmin, 2019). His vision encompassed not only economic growth but also technological advancement, industrialization, and social cohesion. However,

despite his commitment to modernization and progress, Mahathir's leadership was also marked by authoritarian pragmatism. To maintain national stability, he exercised strong control over political opponents, the media, and government institutions. His administration implemented laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA), which were used to suppress dissent and consolidate power. While these measures ensured political continuity and economic stability, they also led to criticisms regarding democratic freedoms and governance transparency.

During his tenure, Mahathir implemented major economic reforms that significantly transformed Malaysia's industrial landscape. One of his key initiatives was the privatization of state-owned enterprises, aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing government expenditure. He also spearheaded the national car project, Proton, in 1983, as part of his vision to establish Malaysia as a technologically advanced and self-sufficient nation. In addition, Mahathir played a crucial role in the development of iconic infrastructure projects such as the Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), and Putrajaya, which symbolized Malaysia's rapid modernization and ambition to become a global economic player. These efforts reflected his nationalist approach to leadership, emphasizing economic sovereignty and industrial self-sufficiency as fundamental pillars of Malaysia's growth (Lynn-Sze and Ahmad, 2017). Mahathir was also a strong advocate for Bumiputera policies, ensuring that the Malay majority had greater access to economic opportunities through affirmative action programs. His government introduced policies that prioritized Bumiputera participation in business, education, and property ownership, aiming to reduce economic disparities among Malaysia's ethnic groups. However, these policies often sparked debates on racial equity and economic fairness, as non-Bumiputera communities, particularly the Chinese and Indian minorities, raised concerns about preferential treatment. Beyond domestic affairs, Mahathir's leadership was marked by his outspoken stance on global issues, where he frequently criticized Western powers for their dominance in international trade, financial systems, and foreign policies. His firm and sometimes controversial rhetoric on global politics reinforced his image as a leader who prioritized Malaysia's sovereignty and interests on the international stage (Suhaimy et al., 2021).

Mahathir's leadership can be analyzed through the four key components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. His self-awareness was evident in his ability to adapt policies to Malaysia's unique socio-economic and political landscape. He demonstrated a keen understanding of the nation's strengths and challenges, which allowed him to implement bold and strategic policies, such as the Look East Policy and Vision 2020. His leadership was driven by a clear national identity, emphasizing self-reliance and economic sovereignty. Meanwhile, his relational transparency was reflected in his direct and sometimes blunt communication style, as he openly addressed national issues and global affairs without hesitation (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019). Although Mahathir made decisions based on pragmatism and strategic calculations, he also upheld a strong moral stance on economic independence, political stability, and Islamic governance. He believed that a stable and prosperous Malaysia required firm leadership, which often led to authoritarian measures to suppress opposition and

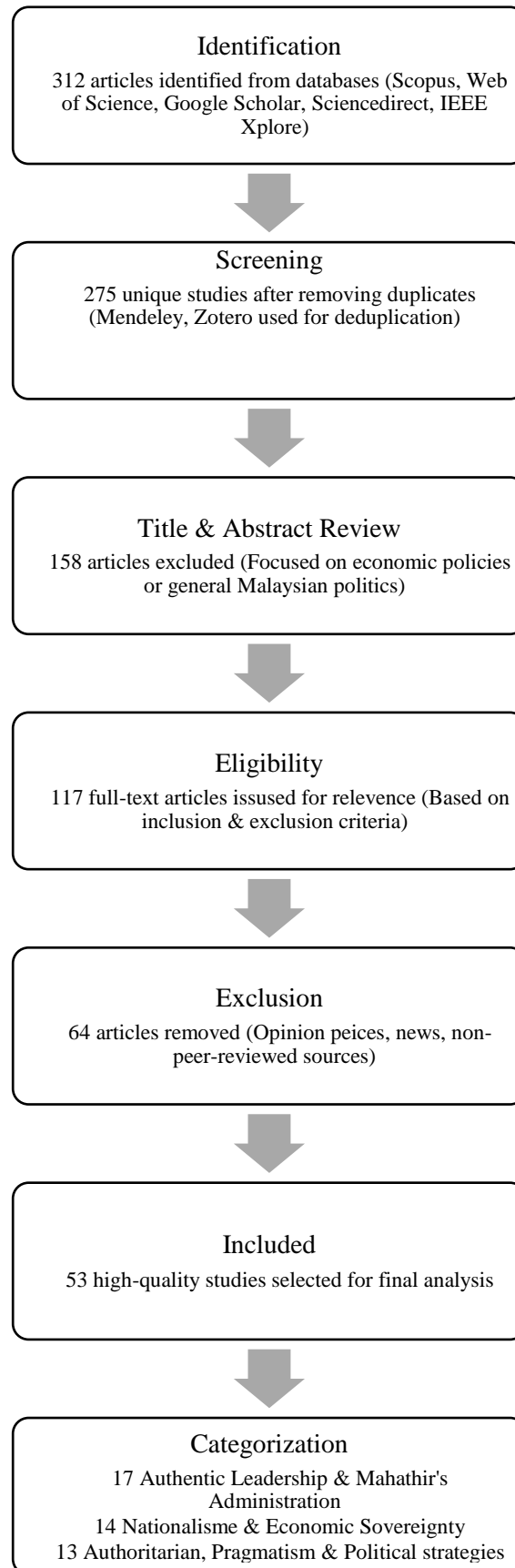
maintain national unity. His approach to governance was deeply rooted in his vision for Malaysia's future, and he remained steadfast in implementing policies that aligned with his long-term developmental goals. Despite criticisms of his firm-handed governance, particularly regarding restrictions on press freedom and political dissent, Mahathir's leadership was consistently driven by a commitment to national progress and modernization. This paper examines how Mahathir's leadership aligned with the principles of authentic leadership while shaping Malaysia's local leadership culture. His influence extends beyond policy-making, as he mentored future leaders and redefined Malaysia's political landscape. By exploring his leadership style, we gain a deeper understanding of how authoritarian pragmatism, nationalism, and modernization have shaped Malaysia's governance and development trajectory.

## Materials and Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The SLR method ensures a structured, transparent, and reproducible process in identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant academic literature. By applying the PRISMA framework, this study systematically evaluates scholarly sources related to Mahathir Mohamad's leadership within the context of authentic leadership and Malaysia's local leadership culture. The research begins with the identification phase, where literature was retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and IEEE Xplore. The search was conducted using keywords such as "Mahathir Mohamad," "Malaysian leadership," "authentic leadership," "political leadership," "nationalism," "authoritarian pragmatism," and "governance." The study includes publications from 1981 to 2024, covering Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister and his post-administrative influence, ensuring a comprehensive examination of his leadership over time. Following the initial search, a total of 312 articles were identified as potential sources. The next step involved the screening phase, where all duplicate records were removed using Mendeley and Zotero reference managers, reducing the count to 275 unique studies. Subsequently, the titles and abstracts of these articles were reviewed to determine their relevance. At this stage, 158 articles were excluded because they primarily focused on economic policies without leadership analysis or discussed Malaysian politics in general without specifically addressing Mahathir's leadership style.

In the eligibility phase, 117 remaining articles underwent full-text evaluation based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected studies had to be directly related to Mahathir Mohamad's leadership and incorporate concepts of authentic leadership, nationalism, authoritarian pragmatism, or Malaysia's leadership style. Empirical studies and theoretical discussions with clear methodologies and publication in peer-reviewed journals were prioritized. In contrast, opinion articles, news reports, non-academic sources, and studies that lacked a leadership perspective were excluded. As a result, 64 studies were further removed, leaving 53 high-quality studies for final analysis. The selected articles were categorized into four major thematic areas that emerged from the literature review: authentic leadership and its

influence on Mahathir's administration (17 studies), nationalism and economic sovereignty under Mahathir's policies (14 studies), authoritarian pragmatism and political strategies (13 studies), and comparative analyses of Mahathir's leadership with global leaders (9 studies). To ensure systematic and rigorous analysis, NVivo software was utilized to conduct qualitative coding and identify recurring patterns in the selected studies. By adopting the PRISMA methodology, this study ensures that only relevant, high-quality, and academically significant sources are incorporated into the discussion. The systematic approach allows for a deeper understanding of how Mahathir Mohamad exemplifies authentic leadership in Malaysian politics and how his leadership approach has shaped Malaysia's local leadership culture (*Figure 1*).



**Figure 1.** Submission preparation guidelines.

## Results and Discussion

The systematic review of studies on Mahathir Mohamad's leadership highlights key aspects of authentic leadership theory, demonstrating how his leadership approach incorporated self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing while also integrating elements of pragmatic authoritarianism and strategic governance. Several studies specifically analyze Mahathir's leadership traits, identifying him as visionary, trustworthy, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, and ethical (Razali et al., 2022). Theoretical perspectives on authentic leadership, such as those by Iszatt-White and Kempster (2019) as well as Gardner et al. (2011), provide a framework for understanding how Mahathir's strong moral convictions and decision-making strategies align with authentic leadership principles. Further research by Hwang (2003) and Teik (2003) discusses the personalization of politics under Mahathir's leadership, revealing his internalized moral perspective and self-awareness in governance. Additionally, Walumbwa et al. (2008) as well as Luthans and Avolio (2003) explore authentic leadership development, reinforcing the idea that Mahathir's leadership-maintained authenticity despite the need for pragmatic decision-making in a complex political environment (*Table 1*).

**Table 1.** Included articles in addressing authentic leadership of Mahathir: Malaysia local leadership Style.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Topic of Discussion	Elements Related to Authentic Leadership
Razali et al.	2022	Mahathir Mohamad as a World-Class Leader: A View from The Great Man Theory of Leadership	Examines Mahathir's leadership qualities through the lens of the Great Man Theory.	Identifies Mahathir as visionary, trustworthy, authentic, resourceful, pragmatic, people-oriented, with good communication skills, highly ethical, and core value-based.
Suhaimy et al.	2021	Development of Nation State of Malaysia Based on Mahathir Mohamad's Leadership Model Framework	Discusses Mahathir's leadership elements in implementing actions and policies to modernize Malaysia.	Highlights 11 leadership elements practiced by Mahathir, including intellectual motivation, good governance, valuing togetherness, ideal influence, being organized, assertive, far-sighted, considerate, appreciative of contributions, and confident.
Cheah et al.	2017	Tun Dr. Mahathir's Leadership Communication: The Confucian Perspective	Analyzes Mahathir's leadership communication strategies from a Confucian values perspective.	Emphasizes Mahathir's relational transparency and internalized moral perspective in his communication approach.
Khattak and Shakir	2019	A Stylistic Analysis of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's Speeches	Analyzes the stylistic features of Mahathir's speeches to understand his leadership style.	Highlights Mahathir's self-awareness and relational transparency through his speech delivery.
Iszatt-White and Kempster	2019	Authentic Leadership: Getting Back to the Roots of the 'Root Construct'?	Provides a comprehensive literature review on authentic leadership concepts and theories.	Discusses the core elements of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized ethics, and balanced processing.
Hwang	2003	Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir	Examines the personalization of politics in Malaysia under Mahathir's leadership.	Analyzes Mahathir's internalized moral perspective and self-awareness in his political strategies.
Teik	2003	Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents	Discusses the political landscape of Malaysia post-Mahathir's tenure.	Reflects on Mahathir's balanced processing and internalized moral perspective in his leadership decisions.
Wain	2009	Malaysian Maverick:	Provides a critical	Highlights Mahathir's self-

		Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times	analysis of Mahathir's leadership during challenging periods.	awareness and internalized moral perspective in navigating political challenges.
Temiz and Islam	2019	Charismatic Political Leadership and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Malaysia: Power, Control, Stability and Defence	Analyzes Mahathir's charismatic leadership and its impact on Malaysia's political stability.	Discusses Mahathir's relational transparency and internalized moral perspective in maintaining national stability.
Reza and Yasmin	2019	Development of Malaysia under the Leadership of Mahathir Mohamad	Explores Malaysia's development trajectory under Mahathir's leadership.	Highlights Mahathir's self-awareness and internalized moral perspective in driving national development.
Fauzi and Ting	2025	A Stylistic Analysis of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's Speeches	Analyzes the stylistic features of Mahathir's speeches to understand his leadership style.	Highlights Mahathir's self-awareness and relational transparency through his speech delivery.
Gardner et al.	2011	Authentic Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Research Agenda	Reviews existing literature on authentic leadership and proposes future research directions.	Provides a framework for understanding authentic leadership elements applicable to Mahathir's leadership style.
Luthans and Avolio	2003	Authentic Leadership Development	Discusses the development of authentic leadership and its implications.	Highlights the importance of self-awareness and internalized moral perspective in leadership development.
Walumbwa et al.	2008	Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Measure	Develops and validates a measure for authentic leadership.	Provides insights into the components of authentic leadership relevant to analyzing Mahathir's leadership.
Parris and Peachey	2013	A Systematic Literature Review of Servant Leadership Theory in Organizational Contexts	Reviews servant leadership theory and its application in organizations.	Discusses aspects of authentic leadership that overlap with servant leadership, relevant to Mahathir's leadership approach.
Reid and Dold	2018	Burns, Senge, and the Study of Leadership	Explores leadership theories by Burns and Senge.	Provides theoretical insights into leadership applicable to understanding Mahathir's leadership style.
Razali	2022	Kepimpinan Autentik Mahathir Mohamad 1981-2003	Analyzes Mahathir Mohamad's Islamic thought and its implementation in Malaysia.	Demonstrates Mahathir's authenticity in leading the nation through challenges.
Lynn-Sze and Ahmad	2017	Nilai Kepimpinan Mahathir Mohamad dari Perspektif Konfusianisme	Analyzes Mahathir's leadership style from a Confucian values perspective.	Shows the application of Confucian values in Mahathir's leadership communication.
Suppiah et al.	2020	Komunikasi Kepimpinan Mahathir Mohamad dari Perspektif Agama Hindu	Examines Mahathir's leadership communication from the perspective of Hinduism.	Demonstrates the importance of cultural understanding in effective leadership communication.

Mahathir's leadership communication also played a crucial role in maintaining his authority and public image. Studies by Cheah and Ahmad (2017) as well as Cheah et al. (2017) explore how Confucian values shaped his communication style, emphasizing relational transparency, respect for hierarchy, and collectivism. Meanwhile, Fauzi and Ting (2025) as well as Khattak and Shakir (2023) conducted stylistic analyses of Mahathir's speeches, highlighting his self-awareness and ability to connect with the public through effective communication. Further, Suppiah et al. (2020) extends this discussion by examining Mahathir's leadership communication from a Hindu cultural perspective, demonstrating the importance of cultural sensitivity in leadership discourse. Collectively, these studies suggest that Mahathir's communication strategy was deeply rooted in cultural awareness, which allowed him to engage effectively with Malaysia's multicultural

population while maintaining a strong leadership identity. Beyond personal leadership traits and communication, the studies reviewed also explore Mahathir's political strategies, nationalism, and governance style. Research by Suhaimy et al. (2021) as well as Reza and Yasmin (2019) highlight Mahathir's developmental policies and modernization strategies, emphasizing his commitment to economic self-sufficiency and national progress. Meanwhile, Temiz and Islam (2019) examine Mahathir's charismatic leadership and its role in maintaining political stability, demonstrating how he balanced relational transparency with authoritarian decision-making. Wain (2009) further provides a critical analysis of Mahathir's governance during crises, reinforcing his self-awareness and strategic adaptability in high-pressure situations. These studies illustrate how Mahathir's leadership was not only authentic but also strategically adaptive, allowing him to navigate economic and political challenges while ensuring national stability.

Additionally, foundational studies on authentic leadership theory offer theoretical insights into Mahathir's leadership approach. Parris and Peachey (2013) link authentic leadership to servant leadership, reinforcing Mahathir's people-oriented governance style, while Reid and Dold (2018) explore leadership theories by Burns and Senge, providing conceptual foundations that align with Mahathir's transformational leadership model. These theoretical perspectives contribute to a broader understanding of how authentic leadership can coexist with pragmatic, and sometimes authoritarian, governance strategies. The findings of these studies offer several key insights. First, Mahathir's leadership aligns with authentic leadership principles, particularly in self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective. Second, his leadership was shaped by cultural influences, incorporating Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu values into his governance and communication strategies. Third, while he maintained authenticity, his leadership also included authoritarian pragmatism, as he exercised firm control over political institutions while demonstrating a people-centered leadership approach. Fourth, Mahathir's governance style was highly consistent, particularly in economic development policies, modernization strategies, and nationalist agendas, all of which were aligned with his long-term vision for Malaysia. Fifth, his ability to navigate crises and adapt to changing political landscapes demonstrated his strategic flexibility, reinforcing his reputation as a transformational leader. Finally, despite criticisms of authoritarian governance, Mahathir maintained public trust and legitimacy, illustrating the coexistence of authentic leadership and strong-state governance. These findings have important implications for leadership studies and governance research. By extending authentic leadership theory into the political domain, this study demonstrates how leaders can exhibit authenticity while employing strategic governance measures. Additionally, Mahathir's leadership underscores the importance of cultural awareness in leadership communication, offering insights into multicultural leadership models. Furthermore, Mahathir's leadership exemplifies strategic authenticity in governance, where authenticity does not necessarily equate to democratic leadership but instead aligns with national interests and political stability. These insights are particularly relevant for future political leaders, policymakers, and governance scholars in understanding how vision, pragmatism, and ethical governance intersect in leadership.

Mahathir Mohamad's leadership style embodies the key attributes of authentic leadership, demonstrating passion, interconnectedness, consistency, compassion, high ethical values, and self-awareness. His passion for Malaysia's development was evident in Vision 2020, a transformative plan aimed at positioning Malaysia as a fully developed nation by the year 2020 (Razali et al., 2022). He believed in modernization, technological advancement, and economic self-sufficiency, which led to bold policies such as the Look East Policy and the national car project (Proton). His leadership was characterized by a deep understanding of Malaysia's socio-economic landscape, ensuring that his policies addressed both short-term challenges and long-term national aspirations. Even after stepping down from office, Mahathir's unwavering commitment to national progress remained evident. His strong sense of duty and leadership role drove him to return to politics at the age of 93, marking an unprecedented comeback as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister (Wain, 2009). His decision to re-enter the political arena was not merely symbolic but was driven by his belief that Malaysia required strong governance to restore stability and integrity. This persistence demonstrated his consistent dedication to the nation's welfare, reinforcing his legacy as a leader who prioritized Malaysia's future above personal retirement. Interconnectedness was a defining trait of Mahathir's leadership, as he recognized the importance of fostering relationships across various sectors and cultivating a shared national purpose. His Look East Policy was a strategic initiative that encouraged Malaysia to emulate the work ethic, technological advancement, and economic models of Japan and South Korea. This policy was not merely an economic strategy; it also served as a diplomatic tool to strengthen bilateral ties and mutual growth with other Asian nations (Ramlan et al., 2021; Reza and Yasmin, 2019). By shifting Malaysia's focus away from Western economic models, Mahathir aimed to enhance Malaysia's regional identity and independence, ensuring that the country could stand alongside other developed Asian economies.

On the domestic front, Mahathir played a pivotal role in uniting the Malay majority under UMNO's leadership, which was the dominant party within the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. His ability to consolidate power and maintain a strong political structure enabled political stability, ensuring that Malaysia's multi-ethnic society was governed under a relatively stable framework (Teik, 2003). Through alliances with various ethnic-based parties, he reinforced Barisan Nasional's multiracial governance model, balancing Malay political dominance with economic inclusivity for the Chinese and Indian communities. His leadership approach emphasized cohesion and pragmatism, allowing Malaysia to navigate complex political landscapes while maintaining economic progress and national unity. Consistency was at the core of Mahathir's leadership, as he remained steadfast in his values and beliefs throughout his tenure. He was a strong advocate for economic self-sufficiency, consistently pushing Malaysia towards reducing reliance on Western economic models and developing national industries. One of his most notable initiatives was Proton, Malaysia's first national car, which symbolized his vision of industrialization and technological independence (Suhaimy et al., 2021). His policies reflected a long-term commitment to economic sovereignty, ensuring that Malaysia developed its own industries rather than depending on foreign investments and imports. Beyond economic policies,

Mahathir's compassion extended to cultural and religious considerations, particularly in shaping Malaysia's governance within an Islamic yet moderate framework. He strongly supported Islamic values in governance, ensuring that Malaysia upheld its identity as a Muslim-majority nation while maintaining harmony in its multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. His policies sought to balance modernization with Islamic principles, reinforcing Malaysia's position as a progressive Islamic nation on the global stage (Razali, 2022). Through his leadership, he navigated the complexities of a diverse society, striving to create a nation where economic growth and social policies worked hand in hand to benefit all segments of society (Suhaimy et al., 2018; Cheah et al., 2017).

Compassion was a defining element of Mahathir's leadership, particularly in his efforts to uplift the Bumiputera (Malay and Indigenous) community. Recognizing the economic disparities between ethnic groups, his government implemented affirmative action policies, most notably the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy aimed to increase Bumiputera participation in business, education, and wealth ownership, ensuring that the Malay majority had greater access to economic opportunities (Temiz and Islam, 2019). While the NEP and similar policies were sometimes viewed as controversial, they were driven by Mahathir's belief that economic empowerment of the Bumiputera was essential for national unity and long-term stability. His leadership reflected a commitment to reducing socio-economic gaps, even when these measures were met with debate and criticism. Beyond economic policies, Mahathir's compassion extended to cultural and religious considerations, particularly in shaping Malaysia's governance within an Islamic yet moderate framework. He strongly supported Islamic values in governance, ensuring that Malaysia upheld its identity as a Muslim-majority nation while maintaining harmony in its multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. His policies sought to balance modernization with Islamic principles, reinforcing Malaysia's position as a progressive Islamic nation on the global stage (Razali, 2022). Through his leadership, he navigated the complexities of a diverse society, striving to create a nation where economic growth and social policies worked hand in hand to benefit all segments of society (Cheah et al., 2017). High ethical values were a fundamental pillar of Mahathir's leadership, particularly in his emphasis on anti-corruption measures and accountability in governance. Throughout his tenure, he consistently advocated for clean and efficient administration, recognizing corruption as a major threat to national progress. His leadership was marked by bold criticisms of global superpowers, as he often highlighted economic and political injustices faced by developing nations. Mahathir's strong stance against Western dominance and exploitation positioned him as a leader who championed fairness and sovereignty for smaller nations (Khattak and Shakir, 2023). His ethical convictions extended beyond Malaysia, as he used international platforms to call out global economic imbalances and unjust foreign policies that disadvantaged the Global South.

One of the most prominent aspects of Mahathir's international ethics was his outspoken criticism of Israel's policies towards Palestine and Western hypocrisy in global politics. He frequently condemned Western double standards, particularly regarding military interventions, human rights violations, and economic control over developing nations. His firm moral stance on global affairs and Malaysia's

sovereignty shaped his foreign policy and earned him both admiration and controversy. Domestically, although his methods of governance were sometimes viewed as authoritarian, Mahathir justified them as necessary for maintaining national stability and economic growth. He believed that strong leadership and firm governance were crucial in ensuring Malaysia's long-term success, even if it meant implementing strict measures to curb political opposition and dissent (Sabtu et al., 2020; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Self-awareness was a critical factor in Mahathir's success as a leader, as he possessed a deep understanding of his strengths as a strategic thinker and pragmatic policymaker. He often made bold and unconventional decisions, deviating from traditional governance models to implement policies that he believed would benefit Malaysia in the long run (Gardner et al., 2011). His ability to analyze Malaysia's economic position and future potential led him to advocate for industrialization and foreign investment, ensuring that the nation could compete on a global scale. At the same time, he was committed to preserving Malaysia's cultural and political sovereignty, refusing to allow foreign influence to dictate the country's domestic affairs (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2015). Beyond policy-making, Mahathir was also acutely aware of his polarizing leadership style. He recognized that while many Malaysians admired his strong-willed and visionary leadership, others criticized his authoritarian tendencies and firm control over political institutions. Despite these differing opinions, he remained true to his vision, believing that his approach was necessary for Malaysia's long-term success. His ability to adapt to political challenges without compromising on his core beliefs demonstrated his resilience as a leader (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Even in the face of opposition, he stood firm in his convictions, shaping Malaysia's development according to his strategic vision while navigating the complexities of governance with confidence and adaptability.

Overall, Mahathir Mohamad's leadership encapsulated the essence of authentic leadership, as he seamlessly combined passion, interconnectedness, consistency, compassion, high ethical values, and self-awareness to drive Malaysia's development. His visionary approach and unwavering commitment to national progress were evident in his economic policies, diplomatic strategies, and governance style. By implementing transformative initiatives such as Vision 2020 and the Look East Policy, he positioned Malaysia on a trajectory toward modernization and industrial self-sufficiency. His ability to build relationships across sectors, both domestically and internationally, demonstrated his skill in fostering unity, economic growth, and political stability. At the same time, Mahathir's leadership was defined by a delicate balance between pragmatism and strong convictions. His firm decision-making and bold leadership style made him one of the most influential and polarizing figures in Malaysia's political history. While he faced criticism for his authoritarian tendencies and strict governance measures, his approach was always rooted in a deep-seated belief in national sovereignty and long-term stability. His ability to adapt to changing political landscapes while remaining steadfast in his core principles solidified his legacy as a transformational leader whose impact on Malaysia's development remains profound and enduring.

## Conclusion

Mahathir Mohamad's leadership serves as a profound example of authentic leadership within the Malaysian political landscape. His tenure was marked by a strong sense of purpose and unwavering dedication to national progress, shaping Malaysia's trajectory as a modern and industrialized nation. His leadership was deeply rooted in passion, as he tirelessly worked toward achieving economic self-sufficiency, reducing Malaysia's dependence on Western powers, and fostering a resilient national identity. Through his bold policies and visionary strategies, Mahathir left a lasting impact on Malaysia's economic development, political landscape, and international standing. A defining aspect of Mahathir's leadership was his ability to integrate interconnectedness, consistency, and compassion into governance. He recognized the importance of building relationships across different sectors and ethnic groups, ensuring that Malaysia's political stability and economic growth were inclusive. His policies, such as the Look East Policy and Vision 2020, were designed to uplift the nation while fostering strong diplomatic ties with economically successful countries. Despite facing criticism for implementing affirmative action policies favoring the Bumiputera, Mahathir remained steadfast in his belief that such measures were necessary to create a more equitable society and prevent economic disparity from threatening national unity. While his nationalist approach and modernization efforts strengthened Malaysia's economic foundations, his bold decision-making and strategic governance also attracted criticism, particularly regarding his authoritarian tendencies. Mahathir's leadership was often associated with strict political control, suppression of dissent, and media restrictions, which some viewed as undemocratic. However, his goal-oriented and pragmatic leadership style ensured that Malaysia remained politically stable and economically resilient even during turbulent times, such as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. His ability to navigate complex challenges while maintaining control over national policies solidified his reputation as a strategic and results-driven leader.

This study highlights how authentic leadership principles were integrated into Mahathir's governance, offering valuable insights into effective leadership within a multicultural and rapidly developing nation. It provides a comprehensive analysis of his leadership style, contributing to political science, leadership studies, and Malaysian governance research. The findings demonstrate that authentic leadership, when combined with strategic governance and pragmatic policymaking, can drive significant national progress. Mahathir's legacy serves as a notable case study for leaders navigating the complexities of political leadership in diverse and evolving societies, emphasizing the importance of vision, resilience, and adaptability in shaping a nation's future. This study offers valuable contributions to the discourse of leadership by providing theoretical, practical, and research-based insights into the application of authentic leadership in a political context. By analyzing Mahathir Mohamad's leadership through the lens of authentic leadership theory, this study broadens the understanding of how leadership authenticity interacts with pragmatism, nationalism, and governance strategies in a developing nation. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the existing body of leadership research by demonstrating how authentic leadership principles, self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and

internalized moral perspective, can be contextualized within a non-Western, political environment. While authentic leadership is often discussed in corporate and organizational settings, this study extends its application to the political domain, showing how national leaders can embody authenticity while simultaneously employing strategic and sometimes authoritarian measures to achieve national goals. Additionally, the findings contribute to the debate on leadership styles in multicultural societies, highlighting the interplay between ethical leadership, nationalism, and political pragmatism. Practically, this study provides valuable insights for political leaders, policymakers, and leadership practitioners. By examining Mahathir's leadership, the study highlights the importance of balancing vision with pragmatism, and authority with authenticity. Leaders in developing nations can draw lessons from Mahathir's ability to implement bold policies, maintain political stability, and drive national progress, even in challenging circumstances. Moreover, this study serves as a reference for leadership training programs in public administration, governance, and political leadership, offering real-world applications of leadership theories. The findings are particularly relevant for leaders operating in politically diverse and economically transitional environments, where strategic decision-making must be aligned with national interests while maintaining ethical leadership standards.

This study opens multiple avenues for future research in leadership and governance, particularly in examining the long-term impact of Mahathir Mohamad's leadership and the broader application of authentic leadership in political settings. One promising area of research is comparative leadership analysis, where scholars can examine how Mahathir's leadership style compares to other influential leaders, such as Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, or Narendra Modi. A comparative framework could highlight the similarities and differences in leadership approaches, decision-making strategies, and governance models across different political and cultural landscapes. Such research would provide valuable insights into how authentic leadership principles interact with varying degrees of authoritarianism, nationalism, and democratic governance. Another important avenue for future research is the impact of leadership on institutional development. While Mahathir's policies and leadership style were instrumental in shaping Malaysia's economic and political trajectory, further studies could explore how his leadership influenced the country's political institutions, bureaucratic efficiency, and governance frameworks. This includes investigating whether his leadership strengthened or weakened democratic institutions, how his policies shaped Malaysia's judiciary and civil service, and whether his governance model has had lasting effects on Malaysian politics beyond his tenure. Understanding these institutional dynamics could provide a more comprehensive view of leadership's role in nation-building. Finally, future research could explore the application of authentic leadership in crisis management, particularly by analyzing how Mahathir's leadership approach influenced Malaysia's response to major crises, such as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Studying his decision-making processes, crisis response strategies, and leadership communication during these critical periods could offer broader insights into how leaders navigate economic and public health crises while maintaining public trust and national stability. Such research would contribute to the growing body of literature

on leadership effectiveness in high-pressure environments and provide practical lessons for future political leaders facing global challenges. By addressing these research gaps, scholars can further enhance the understanding of authentic leadership within political contexts, offering new perspectives on effective governance, leadership adaptability, and the role of national leaders in shaping institutional and economic progress. By integrating authentic leadership theory with political leadership analysis, this study advances the discourse on leadership effectiveness in governance, particularly in multicultural and rapidly developing nations. It bridges the gap between leadership theory and real-world application, offering meaningful implications for scholars, policymakers, and future leaders. As leadership continues to evolve in response to globalization, political instability, and economic shifts, the insights from Mahathir Mohamad's leadership remain relevant in shaping future leadership models that prioritize national interests while upholding ethical governance.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank the Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia for providing the supports for this study. This research was supported by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme – Early Career (FRGS-EC/1/2024/K568).

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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