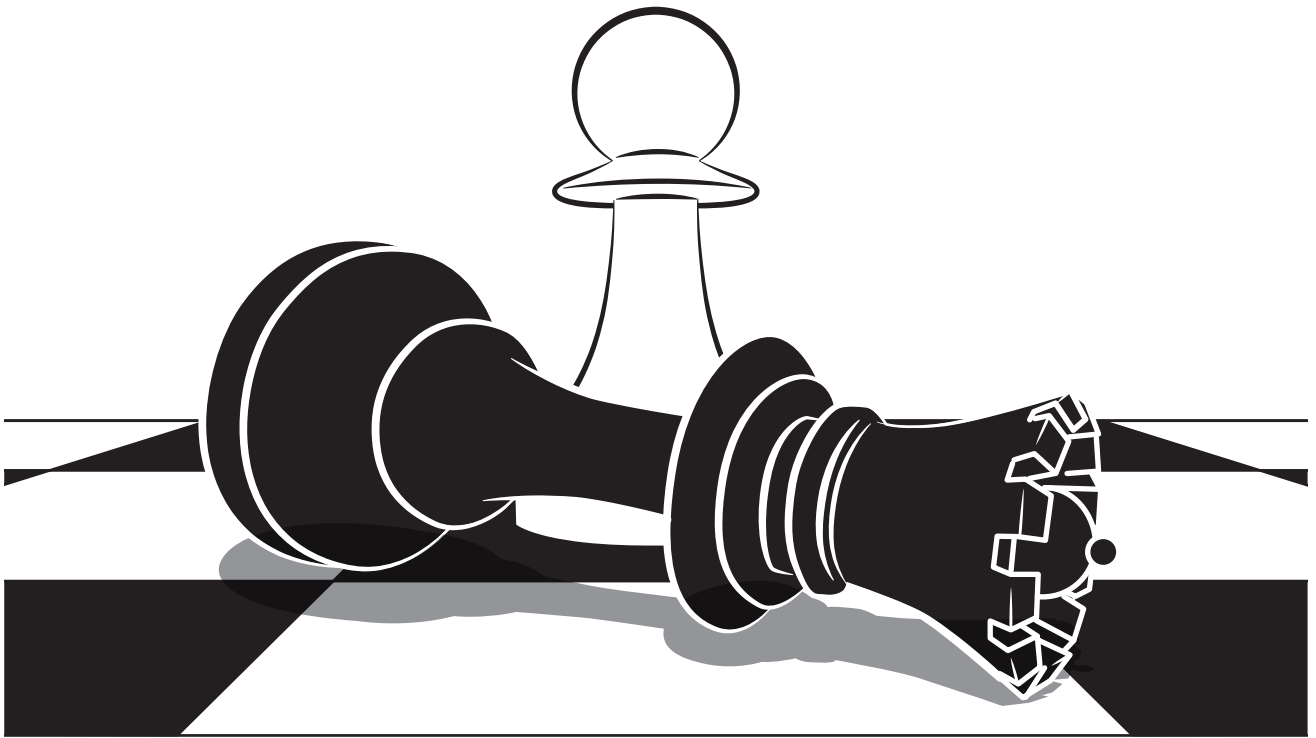


# Leaders: From Hero to Zero

BY DR MUHAMMAD HANIFF HASSAN



Many leaders throughout history began their careers as heroes, but the tide of public opinion turned on them. Their legacies as heads of state are now remembered in a different light.

Some notable examples include;

- Sukarno, who was honoured as Indonesia's father of independence from Dutch colonialists and its first President for 22 years (1945 – 1967). He was forced to relinquish the Presidency to Brigadier General
- Ferdinand Marcos, who was respected for his participation in the independence struggle against Japanese occupation during World War II, which helped him to win the post of President of the Philippines
- Suharto, who was a hero of the Indonesian people for successfully denying PKI power in the October 1965 *coup d'état* attempt. He took over the presidency from Sukarno in 1967 and stayed in power for 31 years until

and hold it for 21 years (1965 – 1986). He was forced to flee the country in 1986 to Hawaii following a popular uprising known as the 'People's Power Revolution' against his corrupt and authoritarian rule.

he was forced to vacate the post by the people's revolution in 1998 following the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

- Hosni Mubarak, who was the President of Egypt for 30 years (1981 – 2011) following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, and was later forced to vacate the presidency by the Egyptian military following the Arab Spring revolution that swept Egypt.
- Muammar Gaddafi, who ruled Libya for 42 years (1969 – 2011). He began his rule as a respected figure for successfully bringing down an oppressive monarchy and was later despised by the Libyan people as an oppressive ruler himself. He was captured by Libyan militias who revolted against him in October 2011, following the Arab Spring that spread across many Arab countries. He later died in humiliating conditions while held captive.
- Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for 37 years as Prime Minister, and subsequently as Executive President, was forced to relinquish his post in November 2017 at the age of 93. He came to power as a popular leader for successfully fighting for the independence of Rhodesia (former name of Zimbabwe) from British colonial power in the 1970s.

What made these leaders, who were respected at the beginning of their careers, later become despised and deposed from power by the people after decades of rule? Why are many leaders inclined to stay in power for so long even as old age has caught up with them, leaving them with possible deficits as a geriatric? Why do many leaders not learn from past incidents and repeat the same mistakes despite numerous examples in history?

This article seeks to remind young leaders of the pitfalls of leadership that come with staying too long in power.

### THE POWER LURE

One key reason that makes leaders stay in position for a long time is the lure of power that comes with leadership. Power will always come with leadership or otherwise, leaders will not be able to

function effectively. It also elevates leaders to an honourable status that generates respect, legitimacy, and obedience from people.

In return for the great responsibility carried by leaders, they are accorded intangible and tangible benefits; the former is honour, respect, and the right to be obeyed, and the latter is financial remuneration and other material wealth. The greater the responsibility, the bigger the benefits accorded to leaders in general.

Often, these tangible and intangible benefits lure ordinary people to leadership posts. For those who have been in power, this lure is even greater. They are like irresistible sweets to children. The lure and the temptation are constant, even when the risks to health such as diabetes and obesity are apparent and prevalent.

Leaders occupying high and important positions soon realise that status and power can open up various other opportunities such as gifts, business opportunities for close family members, and more social and power networks that would enhance the existing ones, in addition to the official benefits accorded to them.

Since humans have an innate love towards wealth and adulation, a long period of leadership cultivates a strong desire to attain the position and to remain in power as long as possible. The longer the stay, the greater the difficulty will be for a leader to vacate his post – like a child who already has sweets in his hands, it will be more difficult to take them away from him. This explains why leaders who have been in power for a long time would often deploy the means to thwart possible contenders for power, even when there are many signs of unpopularity among people and obsolescence of competency due to the changing of time.

Lord Acton's popular quote is apt in describing the above, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The same expression was also made by William Pitt, Prime Minister of Britain (1766 – 1778), and written by Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine in a

compilation of his essays in *France and England: A Vision of the Future* (1848).

Truly, not all leaders seek direct material gains from leadership positions such as those who are serving non-profit charities and social organisations. However, this does not mean that the above is not relevant to them. Elevated status, honour, respect, and many other non-tangible benefits are enough to create a strong motivation for a leader to remain in and enjoy power for so long. Examples of the long-serving leader of charity organisations who have had to be dishonourably brought down are abundant too. The rivalry also is not less ugly than in the political arena.

### EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

Not all long-serving leaders are corrupted by power or do so with malicious intent. There are those whose integrity and credibility remain untarnished. However, this does not mean that the long-held position is good, liked by the people, or relevant to new challenges.

Many such leaders adamantly want to continue staying in the top post due to emotional attachment to the work that they have done and the position they have held in an organisation they have built for decades. The important contributions they made during their long leadership tenure have created an indispensable emotional bond which makes letting go of the position to others very hard to accept.

The emotional bond blinds them from the fact that the position is not a personal entitlement, despite their great contributions. They also forget that age and changing contexts have a significant impact on the efficacy of their leadership. In some situations, the decline of efficacy has caused a serious negative impact on people's well-being due to bad policies and decisions.

Although not all long-serving leaders became corrupt by power, it is not a justification for condoning the practice because the risk of an emotional bond is real too. As mentioned, the leader, despite his integrity and good intention to serve the people, may have lost perspective that age and time are not in his favour anymore. The policies and decisions he made may lack effectiveness in dealing

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with current and new challenges and this, if continued, would fuel people's grievances, and often lead to the leader's humiliating downfall.

#### **'ONLY I CAN DO'**

The 'only I can do' syndrome refers to the notion held by long-serving leaders that the contributions they made for the people are too great to be handed over to others and, thus, they have to stay in the position to preserve them in the name of 'people's interests'. Some of them fear the loss of their great works when giving away the post because there isn't a new or young capable leader yet to succeed them. However, a new, young, and capable leader is almost non-existent in their eyes.

A sub-type of long-serving leaders who are affected by the syndrome are those who have drafted a great vision for their people towards the future and think that no one is capable to fulfil it but only them. Thus, they must remain in the post until the vision is achieved.

It may be an objective truth that the long-serving leader has made great contributions by looking at the facts such as continuous economic growth, modern mega infrastructural development, international recognition, overcoming crises, strong military power, and improved security and peace that brought prosperity to people's life. However, what makes the 'only I can do' notion problematic is it assumes that continuing to stay in power is the only solution to preserving and continuing their great works or attaining the planned vision, whereas there could be many ways to overcome it like adopting a different leadership formula or reformulating the vision to suit the need for leadership regeneration.

Again, this syndrome emerges not due to malicious intent or corruption on the part of leaders. They may hold to the problematic notion for good reason. However, the solution, which is to continue in power for so long, is erroneous given the risk of power lures and the greater good in developing leadership institutions not based on individual personality. Leaders who are reluctant to vacate their post to a successor due to the 'only I can do' or

'nobody is as capable as me' notions should perform self-reflection too; whether such notions are real or misplaced due to their personal flaw – an inability to have confidence towards others, which they must overcome. If this is the real reason behind the notion, the problem then, is with the leaders, not the absence of eligible candidates. Until this is overcome, the leaders would continue to think that no one is a good successor, although the reality is otherwise.

#### **PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

Without a doubt, there are advantages to long-serving leaders. They provide stability, consistency, enough time to achieve a plan or vision, and experiences to deal with crises and challenges. Admittedly also, not all long-serving leaders fall from the position in disgrace. However, the existence of numerous examples of 'from hero to zero' leaders as listed at the beginning of this article poses a stark reminder of the inherent risks. Many times, the harm that come with it is greater and write off the good works the leaders have done at the beginning of their careers.

In this regard, prudence requires proper measures that would balance the need to capitalise on the advantages and mitigate the risks.

One common measure is to put a term limit for a leader to stay in power. The duration varies depending on the number of years per leadership term *i.e.* two, four, or five years each term. For example, many countries allow a leader to be elected to the high post for two consecutive five-year terms only. This means the leader could be in power for a maximum of 10 years. For a term that lasts for two years only, as practised by many local social organisations, the number of terms allowed could be increased to give the leader enough time to implement his vision and plan successfully.

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The problem is that a time-limited leadership requirement does not necessarily come together with a systematic leadership renewal plan. Often, this is overlooked by organisations. They amend the organisational rules to limit the duration for top positions, but they do not have proper leadership development and succession plan that would train the activists to take over outgoing leaders. This situation poses a few risks: a) the absence of the right and capable leadership candidate to continue the works of the outgoing ones, b) internal struggle for leadership posts that could be divisive and detrimental to the organisation, and c) justifying an incumbent leader to remain in power beyond the legal limit by amending the rules or via other ways.

Another measure that could be explored is the promotion of active citizenry among people or active membership in social organisations. This refers to the cultivation of a sense of importance in taking part in matters concerning public or organisational interests be it as ordinary members, committee members, middle managers, executive councils, or office bearers. Active citizens or members would develop a sense of responsibility to provide checks and balances to leaders. They function as feedback providers and offer critique when things do not appear to comply with rules, plans, good practices, or common sense.

At the individual level, the need to cultivate good values and virtues continuously among leaders must not be forgotten as a means of instilling internal control in them from being corrupted by the lure of power. Leaders must be reminded to always perform self-reflection on how powers have or have not corrupted them; from the intention to serve the people in the beginning to the desire for personal gratification and glory. From time to time, honest self-reflection must pose the question of whether the time is near or has arrived for them to step down honourably, before being forced to

disgracefully considering all factors such as age, competency, and changing time.

## CONCLUSION

Power that comes with a top leadership position has the potential to corrupt leaders from their original noble intention. The longer one stays in power, the greater the lure and temptation to corrupt leaders. Good intention and mission, in the beginning, may not last over time due to the lure of power. It could even potentially blind leaders from honest self-reflection to realise that the time is up to step down honourably. Putting a limit to the leadership tenure is a prudent move to mitigate the risk of power abuse and to institutionalise a leadership succession plan. In a system that does not provide a limit to leadership tenure, good leaders should have the conscience to self-limit their time in power voluntarily, to protect themselves from being corrupted by power or becoming irrelevant, and, as a result, be deposed dishonourably.

This article begins with examples of leaders who turned from heroes to zeroes. All of them were heads of state. However, this should not be understood as relevant to national political leadership only. They apply to social organisations too, including Malay/Muslim organisations. ■

*This article is adapted from “Kejatuhan Mugabe: Pengajaran Bagi Para Pemimpin (Fall of Mugabe: Lessons for Leaders)”, written by Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari and first published on Berita Mediacorp on 15 December 2017.*

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