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# Effective Leaders Are Bred, Not Born

By *Ooi Kee Beng*

**Abstract:** Leaders and followers have a dialectical relationship. If one imagines that leaders are born, and not bred, then one has also to say that followers are born as well, and not bred, which is a much harder claim for most of us to stomach. This article argues that if Leadership and Followership are to be studied as a science, we have to accept that the symbiotic relationship between the two pervades society at all social levels, relying on “breeding grounds” to regenerate. For national leadership, one can without much difficulty identify definite hierarchies that do churn out leaders and followers, such as the military, the unions, the universities, the civil service and religious organisations. These go on to determine society’s nature to a large extent.

Some form of leadership is required—or is in gestation—as soon as any collective action is undertaken. This could be between two friends, between siblings or between spouses, and all the way up to the level of governing a country.

To be sure, as a conceptual pole for the discussion, fair exchanges taking place between two persons as exact equals do exist. But, in actual fact, these are rare. Even a simple transaction between a buyer and a seller is not a matter between equals. Where the ambition is to achieve equal partnerships, we may call it an exercise in Mutualism.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the scale, we may imagine totalitarian leadership where, as the name suggests, no pretence at equality is offered between the leader and his followers. Interestingly, totalitarianism required modern means—alongside the breaking down of traditional states—to become thinkable and possible.<sup>2</sup>

In between extreme egalitarianism and extreme concentration of power, we have leadership of different sorts being exercised within a society, in all its collective nooks and crannies, from domestic bullying to government-to-government intimidation.

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<sup>1</sup> For a proper and perhaps the first discussion on Mutualism, see Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. New York: Dover Publications. 2002 (1902).

<sup>2</sup> See Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Penguin Books. 1973.

The types and combinations of leadership and followership are many, though far from countless. The nature of power on one hand, and the nature of subordination on the other, are there to be studied, both as a science and as an art, the latter most evidently formulated in books on strategy.

But are leaders born, or are they bred? If leaders are born as leaders, then we will have to agree that followers in general are also born as followers. That last proposition is a tougher one for most of us to swallow.

Indeed, it is clearer to us from experience and in our observations of people we grew up with, and in the varying contexts in which power is exacted and obedience obtained, that followers are made. They are bred. All forms of popularly formulated resistance, be this inter-ethnic, inter-gender or inter-class, suppose subordination to be an immoral situation in need of remedy.<sup>3</sup> Even when argued to be inevitable and even natural, they are accepted only with excuses, caveats and regrets.

## **Breeding Leaders and Followers**

Leadership types and functions within a society derive anthropologically and organically from within. The breeding grounds that exist therein, nurturing the particular ability to make effective decisions, define a society and stake out the paths open to it. The wish for sustainability of a particular type of leadership and of its dialectical followership varies greatly.

What this paper discusses and that which is of interest to society's development are those breeding grounds that are stable enough, and inter-generational enough, to have more than passing consequence; therewith the need for a term like "breeding grounds".

These breeding grounds—hierarchies, if you like—are not only the expression of the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-historical conditions of a society; more importantly, they also tend to be its major conserving dynamic.

Perceiving leadership that way, not as a given quality but as something organically generated in symbiosis with followership, opens up avenues for some interesting socio-political analysis.

Leaders, whether good ones or bad ones, make decisions with vast consequences for others. Therefore, the quality of their decisions, the reasons behind them, the impact range they are to have, et cetera, are subjects the understanding of which should be central to any evaluation and appreciation of a society. If one wishes to change that society—for example the nation-building process in any country—these are questions that need discussing and answering in detail.

In order for the quality, tone and purpose of leadership in a society to evolve in ways that are conducive to the growth of democratic values and egalitarian culture, one needs to study these natural generators of leadership, explore their inner dynamics and understand the types of leadership they favour. If leaders are bred and not born, then controlling the breeding grounds would determine to a significant extent what type of leaders a society ends up with. Cultivating leaders—favouring certain types of leadership and discouraging other types—and generating reflective subordination in the process, holds the key to positive and lasting change for a society.

It follows therefore that reformist agendas, to be successful in the long term, should go beyond merely the achieving of KPIs and the ticking of boxes. Structural changes that push society's customary

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see *Women Take Issue. Aspects of women's subordination*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Routledge. 2007 (1978); or any study on socialism or post-colonialism. More to the point perhaps, one should consider child upbringing and all the things that can go wrong with it.

leader-generating hierarchies towards inclusivity, openness and dialogic habits are needed—to the extent that the goal of the government is to create an inclusive, open and communicative society.

## **Are Elections Conservative or Transformative?**

There lies the moral crux of the problem. Who decides how the breeding grounds for leadership in a society are to evolve? The first step, to my mind, is to make the issue evident. A comparative study of how different societies in modern times manage—or mismanage—this issue should provide food for further thought, and suggest solutions adaptable to separate situations.

The irony—and greatest hindrance herein—is that reforming any system will require leaders to modify the breeding grounds from which they came, from which their most important supporters come from, and in which all of them are most comfortable. We see why so many political thinkers in history ended up proposing “revolution” of one kind or another as the only way through which humanity can progress.

Therein lies the desire to embrace democracy as a system that not only allows popular participation in politics, but also one that promises peaceful change—peaceful revolution, if you like—with every election.

We have come to a point in the development of modern political thought where “democracy” is offered as the best possible solution. Now, modern democracy as practised ideal was born out of revolution, resistance and revolt. For reasons we do not need to go into in this context, modern democracy emerged on the eastern and western coastline of the Atlantic Ocean, in both France and North America in the late 18th Century (around the

time Penang was settled), and in England and the Netherlands. Emerging democracy, emerging capitalism and emerging colonialism went hand in hand, historically.

## **Postcolonial Breeding Grounds**

Given how persistent and dominant colonialism and imperialism have been over the last 200-400 years, it is not difficult to see how militarism and dictatorships became popular paths to national liberation and independence. At the same time, democracy in our day came to provide the promise of sustained liberation for the nationalist movements of the 20th Century.

Some nationalist movements tended to be more militant in nature, as in the case of Japan and China, or where Southeast Asian is concerned, in the case of Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. This militancy anchored the military’s various arms as “breeding grounds” for post-independence and postcolonial leadership, be this the infantry or the navy—or the political parties associated with their origins.

In countries with a communist heritage, we see how the party apparatus and its liberation army continue to provide leaders to lead them.

Unionism never took off properly after the Communist Insurgency broke out in 1948, to be nominally crushed only after four decades. This situation discouraged, and in effect banned proper class-based analysis in the country.

This also meant that scholars—especially social scientists, the people who could best discuss and study the nation-building, state-building and national-economy building processes which are so central to developing a country—were side-lined, incarcerated, or worse. Interestingly, professionals in politics in the founding years

tended to be overrepresented by lawyers and medical doctors. These are of course careers which allow for private practices, and perhaps the individuals who would choose politics and public service tended to come from privileged families.

This signals another key breeding ground for leadership, namely privileged households, be these aristocratic or upper or middle class homes.

While political parties both bred and channelled leaders to fill positions in the governing ecosystem, often recruiting graduates from the colleges founded during British times to train young members of the Malay elite for public service, the country's union movements and public universities were successively neutralised as training grounds for political leaders.

Another point about Malaysian political leadership is the low profile played by the military. This point is noteworthy especially in how it so starkly contrasts with the situation in almost all other Southeast Asian countries.

The hotchpotch nature of Malaysia's community structure, cultural identity and geopolitical history should also draw attention to the layers of compromise that must be required to unite politicians enough for governance to be possible. Religious institutions,

communal bodies and exclusive clubs function as pressure groups, when they are not acting like political opposition or like government supporters.

Summarily then, we have technically identified the following—admittedly incomplete—list of breeding grounds for leadership (and followership): For Malaysia, the most prominent of these are political parties, the public service and the educational institutions that feed it, forces in charge of internal security, religious leaders, and upper-class families; while those with clearly limited impact are unions, universities, private sector institutions, and civil society organisations.

A longer-term perspective on social progress requires us therefore to look at how leadership and followership are bred in a particular society, and to consider how viable and sustainable these modes are going to be, given where we want society to go. Identifying society's relevant breeding grounds for leadership and followership, and analysing their nature and desirability for the future becomes a serious matter of public policy. Improving their dynamics once identified, or establishing new breeding grounds designed to create effective, inclusive and progressive leadership–followership matrixes, becomes a science to master, and an art to achieve.



Dato' Dr Ooi Kee Beng is the Executive Director of Penang Institute. He is the prize-winning author of political biographies such as *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS) and *In Lieu of Ideology: An Intellectual Biography of Goh Keng Swee* (ISEAS). Other books include *The Eurasian Core. Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World* (ISEAS) and his most recent *Signals in the Noise. Notes on Penang, Malaysia, and the World* (Faction Press)