

Vision and the Nation-State: The Ongoing Transformation of Malaysia and Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies the impact of vision on the ongoing political, economic and social transformation of two nation-states, Malaysia and Cambodia. Although these countries vary in terms of their political history, both constitutional monarchies had introduced an ideal image regarding their future orientations. In addition, what both countries have in common is that their visions aim to achieve the same objective: Becoming high-income economies within a specific time frame. The paper starts with the analysis of social systems, highlighting the role of vision as an enabler of the large-scale transformation of the nation-states. The sections of the paper presenting the analysis of Malaysia's *Vision 2020* and *Cambodia Vision 2050* document these transformations. The research paper also analyzes how each country creates, communicates and implements their respective visions. Vision empowers the nation-state, and it shows that a social transformation is feasible only when citizens understand and support the change effort. In its conclusion, the research paper attempts to outline how successful both countries will be in meeting their respective objectives.

Keywords: Social system, Nation-state, Vision, Transformation, Malaysia, Vision 2020, Cambodia Vision 2050, High-income economy, Change effort.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of vision is closely associated with the existence of social communities. And since time immemorial, humans have always been captivated by the prospects of good life. As the process of organizing social communities became more complex, it has become increasingly evident that a well-functioning social community could help its individual members to achieve this prospect faster. Thus, our research starts by examining how societies (social systems) operate.

To begin with, this research paper follows the Parsons' structural-functional theory of society.¹ The social system consists of subsystems, where each and every single subsystem performs its unique functions. As Parsons rightly observed, in order for the social system to perform basic functions, its subsystems – such as political, economic, socio-cultural components – must work together. More importantly, this interlinking of subsystems guarantees the overall stability of the social system. On the contrary, antagonism among these subsystems is a direct threat to the stability of the social system. Thus, stability and instability are the two contrasting scenarios that the particular social system can experience.

Understandably, Parsons' theory of social systems was not the first attempt to understand how individuals – social human beings – enter their economic or political interactions with one another. These ideas had already occupied center stages in Classical Greek Philosophy (Socrates' speeches, and theories put forth by Plato and Aristotle). But as societies had begun to organize themselves around the nation-state principle, and with the subsequent arrival of the Westphalian system and the onset of modern nation-states, political scientists began to wonder why certain nations succeeded, while others failed.

In addition to this, scientists also observed that just as the antagonism occurring within the particular social system would ultimately lead to its weakening, antagonism between two social systems could potentially lead to their mutual confrontation. The horrendous casualties of World War I and II – propelled by the aggressive nationalist and racist doctrines, are the testimonies to that. To some extent, this antagonism survived World War II and fuelled yet another global conflict. The Cold War – a bipolar conflict which lasted more than four decades, required a mobilization, and a subordination of economic and social resources of the nation to overreaching military objectives. The ideological enemy was perceived as an existential threat to the nation. From this perspective, a situation on the battlefield – and the populace's reaction to it – had begun to determine the stability of the social system to a significant degree.²

Tragedies of the twentieth century made many in the West, as well as in the Far East realize that one country's pursuit of a better life is not about finding *Lebensraum* beyond its boundaries to be pursued at the expense of other countries. It became very clear that if countries decided to follow this roadmap of development, they would be putting themselves on a collision course with others. Consequently, a completely different approach had to be devised and deployed, so countries could realize their full

¹ Talcott Parsons was an American sociologist and the author of the book, *The Social System*. In his pivotal book, Parsons analyzed factors which make human societies stable and functioning.

² For instance, in their book *That Used To Be Us*, Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum refer to the Sputnik moment that galvanized the American public to double their efforts in order to match the Soviets achievements in the space exploration programs. According to Friedman and Mandelbaum, the United States needs another Sputnik moment in order to reinvent itself.

potential without setting themselves against each other. This approach received considerable attention, namely among those countries whose political independence and national sovereignty were attained in the second half of the twentieth century.

1. WHY VISION MATTERS

At the close of the Cold War and with the added influence of the overall decrease of armed conflicts among the nation-states, focus has inevitably shifted towards understanding those factors that:

- a) **Enhance political stability of the nation-state without preventively striking another nation-state;**
- b) **Provide a blueprint for the country's economic growth without pursuing the conquest of resources present in another country;**
- c) **Create a more cohesive and inclusive society by eradicating racial, ethnic, and religious barriers;**
- d) **Modify a rural society by deploying transformational change, designed to equip its citizens with a mindset and skill set that would allow them to meet the challenges of a highly competitive and globalized economy.**

We are not talking about the factors determined by the outcomes of military battles, nor referring to a debt-based growth, cleverly disguised as the road and belt initiative. Quite the opposite, we are talking about the factors that stem from an ideal image of what could or what should be achieved in the future. Moreover, this ideal should be inspiring. It should also possess the quality of uniqueness. This ideal is called a vision.³ Thus, if the stability of social systems is indeed determined by the coexistence of its basic components, as Parsons has suggested, then a vision seems to offer the practical solution as to how the mutual cooperation of these subsystems should be secured.

A vision isn't just the glue holding societies together, it also provides the nation-state with a roadmap toward achieving the above-mentioned political, economic, and social transformation. In addition to this, the vision embodies an underlying platform of organizing whole society in a way that the country's political, economic, and cultural realities flow in accordance with its objectives.

Furthermore, there seems to be enough historical evidence for the theory, claiming that visions are crucial for the nation's well-being. Based on the historical analysis of ancient Greece, Rome, Spain, England, and the United States, historian F. Polak has concluded three main observations:

- 1. Significant vision precedes significant success;
- 2. A compelling image of the future is shared by leaders with their followers;
- 3. A nation with vision is enabled, and a nation without vision is at risk.⁴

³ Manning, G., & Curtis, K. (2009). *The Art of Leadership*. New York, United States: McGraw-Hill. pp.61.

⁴ Ibid., pp.70.

These conclusions are quite significant because they highlight a country's need for establishing a long-term direction that would go beyond the traditional framework of four, or five-year election cycles. Before, however, we turn our attention to the two nation-states located in the Southeast Asian region that decided to implement their respective visions, it is important to state that nation-states are, at their core, socially coordinated units – organizations.

What nation-states have in common with other organizations is this: They shape their own future by first creating a mental vision for any project, large or small, personal or impersonal. They don't just live day-to-day with no clear purpose in mind. They identify and commit themselves to the principles, relationships and purposes that matter most to them.⁵

2. MALAYSIA'S VISION 2020

The story of modern Malaysia starts in 1957, when the country declared its independence from British colonial rule. Throughout the 1960s and 1970 their economy gradually transitioned from mining (tin mining) and agriculture to a more service-oriented one. However, Malaysia still experienced very low levels of competitiveness and productivity. It also suffered from the other ills of a developing country – high levels of poverty and child mortality, along with low levels of education among its population.

A rapid development and significant transformation of Malaysia came as a result of the policies launched by Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's longest serving Prime Minister to date. Mahathir assumed power in 1981 and remained in office until 2003 – ruling the country for 22 years.⁶ During his premiership, Malaysia adopted liberal economic policies, leading to a brisk industrialization of the country. Economic reforms contributed markedly to the political and economic stability of the country, which in turn led to an increase of foreign direct investments (FDI). In addition, further infrastructure developments significantly contributed to Malaysia's overall development.

Under Mahathir's governance, the country's economic development was guided by Vision 2020 (*Wawasan 2020*) that was formulated in 1991. Vision 2020, a twenty-five-page document, was an ambitious program, aimed at converting Malaysia from a developing country (low-income nation) to a fully developed country (high-income nation) by the year 2020. Mahathir's vision was a forward thinking and ambitious plan that was central to Malaysia's advancement.

Vision 2020 had a strong economic pillar. It was guided by a compelling narrative to grow the country's GDP eightfold by the year 2020 from what it was in 1990. In reality, this required an annual GDP growth of 7% for an extended period of time (thirty years). In order to achieve this goal, Malaysia had to overcome nine strategic challenges – building competitive, dynamic and resilient economy, establishing a fully moral and ethical society, fostering and developing a mature democratic society, establishing a united Malaysian nation – to name a few. The vision stated that "Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally. We must be fully developed in terms of national unity and social cohesion, in terms of our economy, in terms of

⁵ Covey, S. (2005). *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. New York, United States: Simon & Schuster. pp.152.

⁶ Mahathir's second term in the office started after his victory in the general elections, held on May 9, 2018.

social justice, political stability, system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence.”⁷

Therefore, apart from focusing solely on the economic development, Mahathir’s vision also intended to reduce poverty, break down ethnic, racial barriers through educational programs. Vision 2020 had a very strong social dimension as well. As indicated above, the economic development was only perceived as an enabler of the large-scale social, psychological, spiritual, and cultural transformation. “A full partnership in economic progress cannot mean a full partnership in poverty. In order to achieve economically just society, there is a need for a mental revolution and a cultural transformation.”⁸

Vision 2020 was all encompassing, aimed at enhancing the overall stability of the social system. For instance, as more Malaysians were lifted out of poverty, more citizens were able to pursue their academic degrees. Consequently, more Malaysians graduated from local universities. In order to meet specific requirements of their recruitment policies, local enterprises were able to rely on their domestic workforce, instead of being forced to attract foreign labor workers. Inevitably, this served to keep the country’s unemployment at low levels. Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia had avoided the political turmoil brought about by high levels of unemployment, especially in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Another interesting aspect of Vision 2020 was that Malaysia’s economic development should not happen at the expense of the country’s cultural identity. Mahathir introduced a ‘*Look East*’ policy, whereby he highlighted the example of Japan – an Asian country that was able to develop its economy, while maintaining its national and cultural identity. Moreover, an indispensable role of government in the process of advancing economic goals of the country had also been recognized. “The state will not abdicate its responsibility for overseeing and providing the legal and regulatory framework for rapid economic and social development.”⁹ Lastly, the fact the country’s economic development did not occur at the expense of the country’s natural resources is also worth mentioning. Unlike other countries, Malaysia’s economic development and social transformation did not lead to a rapid deforestation of the country. As of February 2019, some 48 % of the country is still covered in virgin forest.

Undoubtedly, Mahathir is not the only political leader who has tried to develop the country. He is, however, one of the very few who felt the need to institutionalize his dream in the form of a publicly available document, which Vision 2020 had become. **Vision 2020 was extended to schools and universities, and filled the content of Malaysia’s mainstream media for one purpose only: So Malaysians could familiarize themselves with its content and collectively identify with its objectives.** Mahathir was well aware of the change management golden rule: A change – irrespective of its nature – happens through people. Thus, the need for change had to be effectively communicated to the public. Vision 2020 implied that the prospect of the good life is within reach for all Malaysians, regardless of their race, ethnicity or religion. Furthermore, what had initially commenced as the personal vision of Mahathir Mohamad, it quickly became a shared national vision

⁷ Mohamad, M. (2018, November 17). *Malaysia: The Way Forward (Vision 2020)*. Retrieved from <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/p2.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mohamad, M. (2018, November 17). *Malaysia: The Way Forward (Vision 2020)*. Retrieved from <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/p2.html>.

– bearing in mind the indispensable role the communication process played between the leader and those following the agenda set forth. What had initially started as a blueprint for the country's economic advancement, it quickly became the roadmap for a broader of political, legal and socio-cultural transformation. This transformation is well underway and nearing fruition as 2020 approaches.

Although Malaysia's transformation, powered by Vision 2020 is still ongoing, this process had received significant attention both in the East as well as the West. Malaysia's experience with Vision 2020 has inspired other countries to initiate similar projects. In 2000, Rwanda introduced its own ideal – similarly titled Vision 2020. In 2008, Kenya launched Vision 2030. Bahrain followed the suit in 2008, announcing its own dream: Vision 2030. And despite the fact that Malaysia's neighbor Singapore had experienced even more remarkable transformation than Malaysia, it appears that vision plays a vital role in the process of transformation of the nation-state.

3. CAMBODIA'S VISION 2050

Throughout the Southeast Asian region, it is very difficult to think about any other Southeast Asian country that has suffered more than Cambodia. Having experienced a genocide that targeted the most educated segments of its society, Cambodia had been a victim of its own political schism (from the 1970s until the 1990s), as well as suffered the cruel geopolitical realities of the Cold War. By the same token, of all the Southeast Asian countries, it is hard to think about any other country than Cambodia that needs to reinvent itself around a meaningful vision in order to provide its citizens with lasting peace, stability, and prosperity.

Cambodia faces enormous challenges. Although a physical infrastructure can be restored in a relative short period of time, healing the deep psychological wounds the population was left with will take much longer. "The estimated mental health burdens in Cambodia are staggeringly high, especially when compared with worldwide prevalence," and that "mental health related problems in Cambodia are reaching up to 80 % for mood related disorders and up to 86 % for symptoms of trauma related disorders."¹⁰ Unfortunately, these numbers paint a dismal picture, which leaves Cambodia's current policy-makers with a complicated task. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew had once stated that "Cambodia is like a porcelain vase that has been smashed into myriads of shards. To put them together will be a slow and laborious task. As with all mended porcelain, it cannot withstand much pressure."¹¹

Understandably, Cambodia is actively trying to mobilize its resources around a long-term vision, which aims to achieve the status of high-income economy by the year 2050. Formulated by Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2013, Cambodia's **Vision 2050 intends to turn this constitutional monarchy into an upper-middle-income country by the year 2030, before becoming a fully developed, high-income country by the year 2050.** Echoing Malaysian Vision 2020, the Cambodian government had decided to put economic changes at the core of its vision.¹²

¹⁰ Cornet, A. (2017, July). Mind your students! A first exploration in mental health support for Cambodian students. *Journal of Accounting, Finance, Economics and Social sciences*, 1 (1), 146.

¹¹ Lee, K.Y. (2013). *One man's view of the world*. Singapore, Singapore: Straits Time Press.pp.327.

¹² Royal Government of Cambodia. (2013, September 13). "Rectangular Strategy" for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency Phase III of the Royal Government of Cambodia of the Fifth Legislature of the National Assembly. Retrieved from http://cnv.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/26sep13_rectangular-strategy_phaseIII.pdf.

Cambodia's Vision 2050, however, is being proposed at a difficult time. On the one hand, a transformational change cannot be implemented overnight. On the other hand, Cambodia races against the time. As the export-oriented model of economy fades, and the 4.0 Industry slowly arrives, Cambodia could be threatened by global processes the country is unable to control. What the country is capable of doing is to decide how the vision will be communicated to the country's key stakeholders.

To emulate Malaysia's efforts, Cambodia needs to ensure its vision is effectively communicated to all segments of its society. Based on informal discussions with many young Cambodians, the following conclusion can be made: Many people are unaware of the existence of Vision 2050. This is a very important point, especially when we consider the fact that young people make up 65 % of the total population. Understandably, they are the driving force of the transformation process. Apart from communicating its vision more efficiently, the government needs to answer the following question: How to provide its citizens with tangible short-term benefits stemming from a large-scale transformation? These benefits must be felt by the population. Moreover, additional reforms in all areas of public governance are needed. In conjunction with its vision, Cambodia needs to decrease its reliance on the foreign aid, tackle corruption, reform its education system, and provide some basic social safety nets for the poorest.

CONCLUSION

This research papers has shown that both countries share the same dream: Becoming high-income economies within a specific time frame. As both visions are currently being implemented – Malaysia's Vision 2020 enters its last year, while Cambodia's Vision 2050 has just recently been initiated – it would be premature to deliver the final verdict on how successful the two countries will be in meeting their objectives. In spite of that, we will still try to present the following comprehensive summary.

Firstly, as shown, a vision is the future-oriented dream. It does not focus on the current state of affairs, but rather sets forth an ideal position which nation-states wish to achieve at a defined point in future. From this standpoint, the vision must be positive, inspiring, and realistically achievable.

Secondly, a vision must unite people and provide them with a sense of purpose. It acts as a motivational guide for the country's citizens. Moreover, it acknowledges a need for change – while change signals improvements. And although people naturally resist change, the vision must assert the resultant change will ensure a better life for the country's population. Thus, the vision carries an immense emotional connotation. It is very important to emphasize this point – given engaged, motivated, and inspired citizens are the ones who ultimately enable the change to occur.

Thirdly, it would be incorrect to claim that countries are politically, economically, and socially stable only because they follow a clearly defined vision. Neither do we claim that the country's economic growth happens only because its population dreams of having more prosperous life. Realities of globalized world are far too complex, but there is enough evidence to confirm a boldly formulated vision leads to a country's success, and that nations with visions are better enabled to succeed.

Some critics claim visions are usually too general, and far too abstract to be followed by individuals, let alone countries. This is not the case here. Both Malaysia and Cambodia launched their ideals on

the premise of achieving specific and measurable targets: To become nations with high-income economies. According to the World Bank, “high-income economies are those with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of \$12, 056 or more – in 2019.”¹³

With its current GNI per capita of \$9, 650, Malaysia nears to its target. In the case of Cambodia, the country has just achieved the status of lower-middle-income economy. Both visions similarly include a strong economic dimension. Economic development usually goes hand in hand with wider socio-cultural changes. In both countries, their visions attempt to facilitate this kind of transformation, while enhancing the overall stability of the social system. A vision is the glue that holds society together – and in case of Cambodia – it also revives those social settings that had been previously torn apart by the past conflicts.

Lastly, a vision aims to bring traditional agrarian societies into the age of modernity. The vision implies that the country is willing to move away from those post-colonial realities that once plagued the nation. It also suggests that the country is capable of forging its own path. It must be emphasized that although it is impossible to predict the future, it is better to sail toward it with a well-equipped society, empowered to achieve its dreams. This hallmark achievement toward realizing national advancement for both country and citizens is particularly relevant to those countries that began their nation building projects merely sixty years ago.

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