This is an exploratory research to understand the Malay leadership qualities in politics and business.

The need for the research was borne out of the constant criticism of the Malays by political leaders and others about the inability of the Malays to be successful in business in spite of the enormous efforts by the Malaysian government to bring the Malays to be involved actively in business after independence.

A brief background at the outset of the research meandered through Malaya, which was what the country was known earlier, then to her independence, and later to her identity as Malaysia in 1963. The major economic problem facing the Malays then was that they seemed to lag behind the immigrant races of Chinese and Indians. The Malay economic problem which was not seriously addressed by the leaders of the newly independent country, where political power largely vested with the Malays, erupted into racial riots when the political dominance of the Malays was threatened after the general elections of 1969, when the Malay ruling party, UMNO and its coalition partners fared badly. The country entered unchartered terrain with this infamy, largely interpreted as the result of the Malays being marginalised economically in their own country which went against their not totally unreasonable expectations that their economic position would greatly improve after independence. The NEP was then formulated to help the Malays in the economic front with special affirmative policies aimed at the Malays having a share of 30% of the economic pie of the nation within a twenty-year period from 1971 to 1990.

However, despite the implementation of the NEP where affirmative policies were crafted in favour of the Malays, it did not achieve the target envisaged even after forty years. The failure of the Malays to take advantage of the government’s affirmative actions led to a widespread feeling that the Malays generally are not capable business leaders and entrepreneurs.

As much as the Malay business leadership was under scrutiny, the very Malays who were beginning to be branded as incapable business leaders were conversely, successful in providing political leadership to the country which made Malaysia an economic success story. Though the economic success of Malaysia could largely be attributed to the hardworking Chinese entrepreneurs in Malaysia, the impact of an appropriate and pragmatic political leadership and a framework of economic policies in which the Malay political leadership played a critical role cannot be disregarded and Malaysia could not have achieved the economic success it enjoys today, sans this political leadership. As one expert panel member aptly described “without Malay leadership, the rest will crumble.”

I therefore embarked on the research with a dual objective, the core, being to undertake an exploratory research using the clinical and psychodynamic approach to understand the lack of success of Malays in business; the ancillary, being the political leadership of the Malays to show how they have successfully managed the political management of the country.
Having articulated the paradoxical situation of Malay leadership i.e. their ability to lead and lay the foundation to make Malaysia a burgeoning economy and their inability to achieve the same level of success when it comes to their own involvement in business; the research looked closely at the “Political Administration and Management of Malaysia” where the leadership of all the five past prime ministers of Malaysia from independence in 1957 to 2009 were analysed to show their leadership styles and values. This provided the relevant economic pointers which contributed to Malaysia’s economic success under the past five prime ministers.

Having established that Malay political leadership had built an economically successful nation, it gave me the impetus to cast my research net a little wider to understand “the inner theatre” of the Malays better from the cultural and psycho-social aspects. I drew on the historical and contemporary writings about the Malays and used four different cultural models drawn from Hofstede, Schein, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner and Kets de Vries.

The Malay way of life, as seen through the various dimensions of the cultural models employed in this research, gained traction for it revealed the Malay as one who accepts high Power Distance, is Collectivist in nature with low Uncertainty Avoidance (i.e. he can accept changes without great anxiety), prefers Particularism (where bending rules to suit the situation is accepted), and Communitarianism (Collectivism and Communitarianism go hand-in-hand.) The influence of feudalism also makes him Diffuse in nature (evasive and tactful) and accept Ascription rather than Achievement (“who you know”, rather than “what you know”).

It further revealed that the Malay is one who lives in harmony with the environment, has a Being orientation (more of Fatalistic), hides his emotion (Neutral and not Affective) and has a High context in communication (preferring to be indirect). All of these cultural attributes of a Malay were identified as directly, indirectly or reversely-linked to Power Distance which is borne out of feudalism.

Through a literature survey of the Malays, we identified sixteen Malay characteristics and linked them to the various dimensions of culture drawn from the four cultural models.

Out of the sixteen attributes of the Malays, ten of them were directly or indirectly linked to Power Distance which is intertwined with feudalism. Feudalism combined with colonialism were preliminarily identified as the two main causes of the social and economic problems faced by the Malays, with strong support from available literature (Alatas, 1977; Andaya & Andaya 2002; Husin Ali, 2008; Milner, 2008; Omar, 2006; Zamani, 2002). A few writers identified feudalism and colonialism as the root cause of some serious psychological problems of the Malays (Abdullah, 1843; Alatas, 1977; Clifford, 1898; Dr Mahathir, 1970).

As the research identified that the Malays had psychological problems, it lent credence to the decision to use the clinical and psychodynamic approach from the onset of this research to understand the Malays.

With the historical understanding of the Malays as well as their “inner theatre” providing the background for the research, the case for the selection of an appropriate methodology for this research which is largely qualitative and multi-disciplinary in nature, was then put
forth. After careful evaluation, a multi-disciplinary approach using grounded theory, interpretive methodology, experiential data, fieldwork involving focus groups and expert panel interviews and 360-degree feedback instruments providing empirical data, were selected as appropriate for this exploratory research to study Malay leadership using the clinical paradigm.

Because the study aims to understand the Malays as a race, psychoanalytical theories involving large groups such as large-group identity and large-group regression expounded by Volkan proved to be an insightful dimension in understanding and appreciating the Malay problems which had hardly been studied through clinical lens.

It was explained in the chapter on Research Methodology (Chapter 4) that this research on Malay leadership relied on more than one method to understand the Malays. Ergo; it called for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter; metaphorically, like the peeling of the layers of an onion. I called them the five levels and at each level, the objective was to go deeper and beneath the surface.

At the surface level, the research began by going through a literature survey of published works about Malays from historical accounts. Then works of contemporary writers who wrote about Malays and their social and economic problems were analysed. At a deeper level, focus groups and expert panel members who were all Malays, (except 3 of the 20 expert panel members – one of whom is a British Malaysian, another a Chinese Malaysian and another an Indian Malaysian) provided first-hand information about the various issues faced by the Malays from the political, cultural, educational, religious and family dimensions as well as the competition from the Chinese.

Based on the focus group discussions and the expert panel interviews, some of the key themes that emerged as impediments to Malay leadership in business are:-

- Malay culture of feudalism which led to the dependency and subsidy mentalities;
- Lack of experience and appropriate training;
- Politicians’ desire to perpetuate the handout system leading to corruption;
- Education not tailored to improve Malay acumen in business;
- The inability of the Malays to compete with the experienced and hardworking Chinese because of lack of adequate training and appropriate education;
- Misguided religious beliefs and conflicts.

The discussions with, and views of, the focus groups and expert panel members about the Malays and their respective assessment of the problems faced by the Malays in business leadership, laid the groundwork in taking a random sample of Malays numbering about 41 and subjecting them to an empirical test through 360-degree feedback instruments. Several distinguished and eminent corporate personalities of the country undertook the five different 360-degree feedback instruments and the results compared with international database of business leaders across the globe and Asia. The results of these instruments showed that generally, the Malays tended to rank themselves higher than the global leaders. This over-rating by the Malays could be due to the factors of self-esteem and positive self-image; social desirability; feudalist and hierarchical mindset with high Power Distance; leniency and kasihan (sympathy) factors.

Notwithstanding the dissimilarities between the Malays and global and Asian leaders, a surprising element that arose out of the comparison of the four of the five instruments viz
the Global Executive Leadership Inventory (GELI), Personality Audit (PA), Leadership Archetype Questionnaire (LAQ) and Inventory Leadership Style (ILS), is the similarity of patterns between the Malay, global and Asian leaders. This similarity of patterns suggests prima facie evidence that well-educated Malays with good exposure and training who occupy senior corporate or governmental positions are not very different from those in the database of global and Asian leaders. This finding however, is very preliminary and needs to be affirmed by further wider and deeper research. This is a very important aspect for the research because if further research could re-affirm the preliminary finding of this study, then we could more confidently hypothesize that once the Malays are taken out of regression into progression through proper education and experience, they are capable of competing with any global business leaders. In other words, there are no other inherent weaknesses in the Malays other than being regressed due to historical factors which have been elaborated throughout the research.

Having gone through the research journey of understanding the Malays at five different levels, (historical accounts, contemporary writings, focus group discussions, expert panel interviews and 360-degree feedback survey), the facts and data were integrated and interpreted with the focus on the crux of the Malay leadership problems in business. With the benefit of clinical lens and the psychoanalytic theories of large-group identity, large-group regression and transgenerational transmission of trauma, the origins of Malay civilisation could be traced and argued with historical support from several writers that the Malays are victims of large-group regression which effectively prevented them from being successful in business. Unless the Malays are consciously brought into a progressive mode, success of the Malays in business is likely to be limited.

Amid a backdrop of regression, other weaknesses surfaced which contributed to the failure of the Malays in business. These include the failure of the government to recognise that creating successful Malay business leaders is an adaptive challenge, not a technical issue which could be solved merely by providing the Malays with licences and finance. Other factors include the beneath-the-surface racial relations and competition from the well-entrenched Chinese entrepreneurs who, through their own subtle ways, check-mate the Malay advancement in business and the weaknesses in the implementation of the NEP.

The research pinpoints fundamentally to the failure of the government to understand the Malay psychological situation and the “inner theatre” of the Malays as the probable primary cause for the lack of success of the Malays in business.

Some thoughts and reflections for future work have been offered in this research to address the past failures unearthed in this research. As this research is only exploratory in nature, it is to be espoused that further rigorous testing and a deeper reflection is key in making that quantum leap in ferreting answers to the dilemma of the Malays’ lack of success economically and in business.