GOOD CHARACTER, CORRUPTION, AND LEADERS: A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE ON AL-GHAZĀLĪ’S AND MAHATHIR MOHAMAD’S VALUES AND THEIR TIMES OF ISOLATION.

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Abstract

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has often spoken on the theme of good character and against corruption, and asserts that leaders are particularly tempted by corruption, and that this in turn undermines society. Al-Ghazālī also warned against corruption and he taught that high moral standards must be gained through personal spiritual struggle against temptations. Such personal growth is essential for a leader to be respected and effective, and when leaders do not exhibit high moral standards then societies in turn become corrupted. The sustainability of any society depends on a level of moral strength that often dissipates over time. Ibn Khaldūn famously observed that the third generation of societies almost inevitably become lazy and corrupt, but this decline however is not inevitable if leaders develop a strong moral base for themselves and their people. This character can only be achieved through the specific disciplines of humility, honesty, self-control, etc. as explained in depth by Al-Ghazālī. Mahathir too outlines a number of moral standards needed for any person or society to flourish, such as hard work, good behaviour, exemplary leadership, etc. This paper discusses aspects of the values of these two leaders, and the similarities between their approaches. It develops a New Historicist perspective and argues that the teachings of Mahathir and Al-Ghazālī on personal and societal moral excellence are derived from their particular historical contexts and their somewhat similar lived experiences of seclusion. Their times of isolation allowed them time to reflect and develop a coherent framework of teaching on values, and this is apparent in their works.

Keywords: Values; Corruption; Leadership; Al-Ghazālī; Mahathir Mohamad.
1.0  INTRODUCTION

Many societies today seem to suffer high levels of corruption which are often a reflection of their leadership. But the temptations of power and money for leaders are not new, and neither are the prescriptions for preventing degeneration. For a society to be healthy and sustainable there must be leaders and people with the moral standards that hold them together, namely, honesty, justice, hard work and so on. The sustainability of any society depends on a level of moral strength that often dissipates over time. Ibn Khaldûn famously observed that the third generation of societies almost inevitably become lazy and corrupt.1 This decline however is not inevitable if leaders develop a strong moral base for themselves and their people. Ibn Khaldûn wrote specifically about family dynasties and corruption yet his observations and prescriptions refer equally well to democratic societies.2 The forces of degeneration he discusses also operate in modern democracies and he seems to imply that knowing these factors can enable rulers to avoid the decline.3

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mohamad Mahathir has often spoken against corruption, and asserts that “(A) position of power exposes a leader to the threat of corruptions. The leader must be resistant to the ‘pressure’ of temptations.”4 He also shows that he is quite aware of the importance of values in shaping societies and the danger of poor morals. He says, “(H)istory has inevitably taught us that the rise and fall of civilisations has been chiefly due to its citizenry. It is the people that make up the civilisations. It is the quality of the citizens that is the most important ingredient to effect dramatic changes to society and nations.”5

Mahathir’s time of expulsion from UMNO was a period of separation from society and during this semi-seclusion he was able to reflect on personal and national values. He says, “(I)t is so difficult to fight for good. But we must fight for good, because the progress of the Malays, Islam and the Malaysian nation depends on the practice of these good values.”6 This is especially so for leaders of nations, as they set the example for others. As Mahathir

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says, “(A) leader must have something extra.”

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Tusi Al-Ghazālī (hereafter Al-Ghazālī) is also concerned with the state of societies as evidenced by his *Nasīhat al-muluk*, (“Counsel for Kings”, a kind of Mirror for Princes). Yet he writes far more about the development of good character through inner spiritual growth, and he teaches extensively on fighting the temptations presented by the *nafs* (or ego, or lower soul), using very practical examples of how to develop good behaviour, that are also applicable to leaders. As Rosmizi and Yucel have rightly written:

Many aspects of al-Ghazālī’s life and teachings are still relevant to current Muslim society. Undoubtedly, most of his abiding spiritual insights are always relevant across the time because they are based on pure truths and *ma’rifah* [gnosis] that were revealed to him during his extensive seclusion.8

Aim and Methodology

In this paper I will discuss some key values for civilizational sustainability as identified by Al-Ghazālī and former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. I will identify some key events in their lives that shaped their particular perspectives, using a New Historicist method to investigate connections between their experiences and their stated values. The role of times of seclusion, or in the case of Mahathir, semi-seclusion, will be especially highlighted. According to Clinton, such times of withdrawal are often seminal in focussing the thoughts and values of leaders.9 In comparing the lives and values of Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir there is no intention of placing them on the same plane, but this paper does note that the difficult time of separation from the mainstream was a life-changing event in both leaders, and both share many of the same perspective on the role of good character in society. Regarding the term “seclusion” in regards to Mahathir, strictly speaking it was more a semi-seclusion, but because it lasted all of five years (in contrast to Al-Ghazālī’s ten years), it will be described as separation. In this paper I will not be addressing whether Mahathir lived according to his stated values throughout his years as Prime Minister, as that would be

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well beyond the scope of an article. The results would be unclear anyway, or as Case says, “ambiguous.”

In analysing the way that specific experiences shaped the teaching of Mahathir and Al-Ghazālī, I am using the New Historicist methodology of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. This approach analyses texts to discern “the ways in which elements of lived experience enter into literature.” New Historicism investigates how a “textual fragment” reveals and reflects the “particular set of circumstances, structures, and assumptions” of the “life-world of that moment.” In the case of both Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir their works expose their inner thinking quite clearly, and also show how their personal times of separation and seclusion impacted their teaching. Drawing on Auerbach, Gallagher and Greenblatt argue that each text has a “buried network of assumptions,” that reflect a “lived experience.” With Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir their reflections on their isolation and their very self-aware writings bring these assumptions quite close to the surface, and I will discuss their perspectives which are surprisingly similar.

2.0 AL-GHAZĀLĪ

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Tusi al-Ghazālī, commonly known as Al-Ghazālī, was born in 450AH/1059CE and died in 505AH/1111CE. He is known as the Hujjat al-Islam or "Defender of Islam" (literally “Proof” of Islam), because of his extensive writings covering and consolidating a wide range of Muslim topics, and because of his challenging of deviations from the Islamic norm. Al-Ghazālī is famous for being the integrator of Muslim thought and practice, unifying in one corpus the previously often conflicting streams of traditional Islamic theology, Sufi practice, and Hellenistically-influenced Islamic philosophy.

There is quite an extensive literature on Al-Ghazālī, investigating various aspects of his

philosophy, theology, and ethics. Bowering summarises the main events and issues surrounding Al-Ghazālī’s life and works. Rosmizi and Salih Yucel also provide a good introduction to Al-Ghazālī. Smith explores many aspects of Al-Ghazālī and notes his more mystical emphasis without covering his teaching on character in any depth. The famous study by Watt mainly explores the philosophical and intellectual themes in Al-Ghazālī, but also does not discuss his approach to spiritual struggle and character. Umaruddin is one of the few who treat Al-Ghazālī’s ethical teachings in any depth, but he does not draw any connection between them and his years of isolation.

The specific virtues taught by Al-Ghazālī are listed in Umaruddin, with the main four virtues being “wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice.” Umaruddin also discusses Al-Ghazālī’s extensive writings on the evils in the heart and ethics, but also does not connect these with Al-Ghazālī’s separation time. Only a few scholars have discussed Al-Ghazālī’s time of seclusion, and usually in relation to its rationale, but none have examined his values in the light of this experience. Abu-Sway for example discusses the various theories concerning Al-Ghazālī’s motives for leaving Baghdad, concluding that the autobiographical explanations in Al-Ghazālī’s “Deliverance from Error” (al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl) are authentic.

Given that others have provided such detail on Al-Ghazālī’s life, I will now briefly outline just the main events in his life that bear most relation to his development of teaching on character and values. Because his father died when he was young, Al-Ghazālī was raised by a Sufi who greatly influenced his future life, instilling in him an appreciation for the Sufi approach

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20 Umaruddin, M: The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali (Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1996).
21 Umaruddin, The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali, 198-202, 204; See also Sherif who covers much the same ground, Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, Al-Ghazzali’s Theory of Virtue (Albany: State University of New York, 1975), 38-72.
22 Umaruddin, The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali, 224-247.
to character building. As a young adult he then spent time teaching at Khurasan before being appointed the Chair of Theology at Baghdad’s Nizamiyya College in 1091, where he gained great prestige. During this time he observed the character and impact of various leaders and saw first-hand how a person’s inner life was reflected in their outer ostentation, pride, greed, and corruption. Being in contact with the leaders of society he also noticed how much such poor character can corrupt society as a whole. Böwering notes that he was also at this time “particularly disillusioned by the corruption affecting the scholarly circles of the college.” His teaching on inner spiritual conflict and social virtues is developed later during his seclusion period based on this specific historic context. While others may have also drawn similar conclusions, it was the more unique next phase of Al-Ghazālī’s life that cemented these lessons in his mind, and enabled him to write with such great depth.

Despite all his academic knowledge, it seems that Al-Ghazālī was unhappy with the state of his heart. For six months he struggled with what to do to cure his soul, and suffered an emotional breakdown, before leaving his teaching position to pursue in solitude a detachment from the world, especially from reputation and wealth. Smith summarises that “he had come to realise that knowledge of the way to God was not the same as experience of that way; that to know the meaning of the renunciation of worldliness was not the same thing as actually to renounce this world and all its gifts. From his study of the writings of the Sufis and their lives, he saw that Sufism consisted not in words but in actual experience.”

He says that he engaged in (italics mine) "retreat and solitude, self-discipline and self-mortification, being pre-occupied with the cleansing of the soul, the amendment of character, and the purification of the heart for the recollection of God Most High.” This self-description uses many terms that are explained at length in his works, especially his most important, “The Revival of the Religious Sciences” (Iḥyā’ ‘Uṣūl al-Dīn, hereafter simply Iḥyā’). Al-Ghazālī was very attuned to issues of character especially humility and self-discipline. He mostly terms this inner struggle to develop character as the jihād against the nafs, or struggle with the lower

26 Watt, Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī, 108-16.  
28 Smith, Al-Ghazālī the Mystic, 25, citing Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh, 22; See also Watt, Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī, 143-47.  
30 Smith, Al-Ghazālī the Mystic, 25, citing Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh, 22; See also Watt, Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī, 143-47.  
31 Watt, Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazālī, 151.
soul. His understanding of the inner spiritual struggle displays a depth of lived experience and shows that he reflected much on his own inner temptations, and it was during this time of seclusion that he wrote his *Iḥyā’* as well as the Persian work *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk,* ("Counsel for kings," a kind of *Mirror for Princes*). Böwering says that this “intellectual exile” was a “period of intense intellectual incubation.” It was this time of separation and seclusion that greatly clarified and amplified Al-Ghazālī’s insights.

After returning to society, al-Ghazālī’s works and person became so popular that the Vizier appointed him as a teacher at the Maymuna Nizamiyya College in Nishapur. He again had close contact with the leaders of his country and sought to influence them for the better. His own personal “transformative experience” of God thus prepared him for a new leadership role. It is worth noting that in contrast to the quite pessimistic view of Ibn Khaldûn, Al-Ghazālī says that human nature can change. He has a very positive view, based on his understanding of the Qur’an, that Muslims can improve through struggle and self-discipline.

Before examining al-Ghazālī’s monumental *Iḥyā’* and its teaching on proper behaviour, I will briefly note some important principles in the *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk,* which is commonly attributed to him. The authorship of this text is still debated, with Crone arguing for stylistic reasons that Al-Ghazālī did not write it, whereas Böwering and Hillenbrand assert that he did. Whether penned by Al-Ghazālī or one of his followers it is still true that this work emphasises the importance of good character and non-corrupt leadership in a similar way to al-Ghazālī’s other works, and I will adopt Hillenbrand’s position that this is indeed a work by al-Ghazālī.

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33 Böwering, *Ḡazālī, Abū Hāmed Mohammed,* paragraph 2.
34 Muhammad Hozien discusses this ten year period of crisis and seclusion, and shows that attempts to explain this period away are invalid. http://www.Al-Ghazālī.org/articles/crisis.htm (Accessed 29 March 2017). See also Umaruddin, *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali,* 81-3.
35 Smith, *Al-Ghazālī the Mystic,* 31.
36 Mohd Rosmizi and Salih Yucel, “The Mujaddid of His Age: Al-Ghazālī And His Inner Spiritual Journey,” 7-8; Umaruddin 84-5.
In his *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*, Al-Ghazālī says:

1. The ruler should rule in such a way that he is the subject and the other person is the ruler.

3. The ruler should not indulge his appetites or be extravagant in clothes or food.

7. The danger and responsibility of governing should be known.

8. The ruler should thirst for the spirit of devout ‘ulama.

10. The ruler should avoid anger and pride.  

These principles all reflect themes in al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* and we shall see similar ideas in the writings of Mahathir. In his *Mirror* Al-Ghazālī nowhere explains exactly how the ruler will gain the required character, but this is because his earlier work the *Iḥyā’* clearly sets forth these details at great length. I will therefore now discuss several central themes in al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* in relation to the development of good character through internal spiritual struggle and self-discipline. It is important to note that al-Ghazālī’s says that a person must “first reform himself” before attempting to reform others, and this applies especially to leaders who must be a good example for other people to imitate.

### 2.1 Al-Ghazālī’s teaching

Al-Ghazālī’s “The Revival of the Religious Sciences” (*Iḥyā’ Ulum al-Din*, hereafter simply *Iḥyā’*) is his most clearly ascetic work wherein he develops at great length various ideas of inner *jihād*. The work is divided into four “Quarters” each of ten books, making forty “Books” in total. Each “Quarter” has a particular focus, with the first being the “Acts of worship” (*Rubbʿ al-ʿibādāt*), covering *zakat*, *salah*, *hajj* (poor tax, ritual prayer, pilgrimage) etc. These are the so-called Pillars of Islam and related practices and here Al-Ghazālī is quite traditional. The second “Quarter” is titled “Norms of Daily Life” (*Rubbʿ al-ʿadāt*) with books on the etiquette of travel, marriage, earning an income, music, and eating etc. On most of these topics Al-Ghazālī is not exceptional, except that on music he follows other Sufis and praises good music and its beauty as a blessing from God. In some sense these first two “Quarters” form a pair, discussing the broad range of Islamic personal and social practice.

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42 Hillenbrand, “A Little Known Mirror for Princes by Al-Ghazālī”.
The last two “Quarters” more clearly form a pair, dealing with the two ways of life, the condemnation of evil behaviour, and the praise of good behaviour. “Quarter Three” is titled “The Ways to Perdition” (Rubbʿ al-muhlikāt) and “Quarter Four” is “The Ways to Salvation” (Rubbʿ al-munjīyāt). Al-Ghazālī’s understanding of soul-discipline is that the correct response to God is of obedience to a set of moral standards. This is an aspect of the Islamic notion of the ‘abd, the servant of God, who is meant to choose the ways of life. Hence when approaching al-Ghazālī’s writing it is important to recognise that he is fundamentally interested in right behaviour, and because this is prevented by the nafs, this lower soul is thus the enemy. This explains why “Quarter Three”, although titled “Ways to Perdition”, starts with three books on disciplining the heart. It is only through a victorious battle against the nafs that the ‘abd (believer, servant of God) can overcome the vices condemned in the last seven chapters, vis, rancor and envy, the tongue, the world, love of wealth, ostentation, pride and conceit etc. In some ways these three books are the key to the whole last twenty as they introduce the positive practices that bring salvation, which is the theme of all the last Quarter. The final ten chapters of the last Quarter deal with patience, thankfulness, hope, right intention, poverty, vigil and self-examination, and remembrance of the afterlife. It is in these and in the third Quarter that Al-Ghazālī is most clearly teaching the way of inner soul-discipline and spiritual battle (jihād) against Satan and the nafs. His central theme is that “the soul is an enemy which struggles (mujāhadat) with one, and which must be fought.”

Al-Ghazālī’s framework for understanding inner jihād can be most clearly seen in his specific book on how to cure the soul. This is Book Twenty-Two (22) in his “The Revival of the Religious Sciences” (Iḥyāʿ ulum al-din), usually translated in English as “The Book of Disciplining the Soul, Refining the Character, and Curing the Sickness of the Heart.” The title Al-Ghazālī gives this section uses three phrases which include several of the key words in his thought. Riyāḍat alnafs means “disciplining the soul”, and has the connotation of competitive exertion. The second phrase tahdhib al’akhlaq (Refining the Character), introduces khuluq, meaning character or ethics. The Muslim is to “refine” the character, with tahdhib (from the Arabic root hadhaba) having the sense of train, clean, and improve. Finally, “curing the

44 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyāʿ 22.8, (Winter p. 56). In these references I will give the section of the Iḥyāʿ as well as the page numbers in Winter’s translation.
45 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyāʿ 22.1, (Winter p. 3).
46 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyāʿ 22.1, (Winter p. 3).
47 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyāʿ 22.1, (Winter p. 3).
sicknesses of the heart” (mu`alajat `amrad alqalb) is clearly usage of a medical metaphor, and Al-Ghazālī explicitly expands upon this in his book. In his prologue he says (emphasis mine), “Foul characteristics are the very sicknesses of hearts and the disease of souls, constituting an illness which deprives man of everlasting life.” He adds that “In this Book we shall indicate a number of sicknesses of the heart, and provide a general discourse on how these are to be treated, without giving details of cures for specific ailments, since these will be set forth in the remaining Books of this Quarter.”

The importance of this book within the Iḥyā’ as a whole can be seen from the summary that Al-Ghazālī provides at the end of the final section. He says that “Having presented these two books”, that is, Book One on the nature of the heart, and Book Two which is this Book 22 under discussion, “we must … now complete the ‘Quarter of Destructive Devices’ with eight further books” and he lists and briefly summarises their contents. Al-Ghazālī explains the role of Book 22 as being “an overall indication of the way by which the traits may be refined and the diseases of the heart cured.” Here again he indicates his overall approach and the framework through which the later books should be interpreted. His dominant metaphor of spiritual sickness is medical, and his cure is a mix of medical analogy, military fighting, and psycho-social self-discipline and soul-rebuking.

2.2 The character of a good person and leader

Good character (khuluq) is central to al-Ghazālī’s teaching on the inner struggle and forms a major part of Chapter 22. Good character for Al-Ghazālī is only obtained through “a long inward struggle.” He also warns against the person who thinks that he has already obtained good character and therefore that he can “dispense with any further struggle (jihād).” Good character is extremely important for Al-Ghazālī who argues that “good character is equivalent to faith.” He cites the hadith about Muhammad (pbuh) that “He was once asked, 'O Emissary of God!"
Which believer is best in faith?’ and he replied, ‘The one who is best in character’.

Ghazālī establishes the importance of good character with his opening chapter by quoting many hadith, for example he cites the well-known hadith that Mohammed said that “I was sent only to perfect the noble qualities of good character.” He equates the ascetic life with noble character by citing al-Kattani (d.934) as saying that “Sufism is good character, so anyone who improves your character has improved your Sufism also.” He also cites the famous Sufi al-Junayd (d.910) who says that the four key virtues that lift a person “to the highest degrees” are “forbearance, modesty, generosity and good character.” He makes the connection between khuluq and the metaphor of soul punishment when he cites Al-Hasan al-Basri (d.728) as saying “A man of bad character punishes his own soul” which highlights the irony that one who does not correctly “punish his soul” will endure more painful and destructive punishment.

This emphasis on good character has a solid base in the Qur’an where Mohammed (pbuh) (specified in v2) is said to be of “great moral character,” as it says: “(A)nd indeed, you are of a great moral character.” At the prophet’s tomb in Medina the epitaph even emphasises the character (khuluq) of Mohammed. The triliteral root of khuluq is khā lām qāf (خ ل ق) which occurs 261 times in the Quran, in eight derived forms, so it is clearly an important idea. According to Lane, khuluq means “a natural, a native, or an inate disposition or temper,” “moral character,” and “fashion of the inner man.” The Quran 2:21 says that God “created you,” using a related verb khalaqakum. There is a connection between these two ideas- because God created humans to be holy, their true character is the created one, and implies that it is appropriate for humans to be like how God intended, that is, upright

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56 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.1, (Winter p.9).
57 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.1, (Winter p. 7). Winter notes several sources of this hadith, see Winter, On Disciplining the Soul, 193, note 19.
60 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.1, (Winter p. 13).
61 Qur’an 68:4, which has the Arabic khuluqin, moral character.
63 184 times as the form I verb khalaja (خَلَّأ) ● twice as the noun khallāq (خَلَّٰق)
● six times as the noun khalāq (خَلَّٰق)
● 52 times as the noun khalq (خَلْق)
● twice as the noun khuluq (خُلُق)
● 12 times as the active participle khaliq (خَالِٰق)
● twice as the form II passive participle mukhallaga (مُخَلْلَّٰقا)
● once as the form VIII verbal noun ikhtilaq (إِخْتِلََّٰقا)

in character. This connection is made explicit by Al-Ghazālī when he quotes the hadith that Mohammed said that “Never shall God make good the character (khuluq) and created form (khalq) of man and then allow him to be devoured by Hell.”\(^{65}\) He further teaches that “Creation’ (khalq) and ‘character’ (khuluq) are two expressions which may be used together. We say, for example, that ‘So-and-so is good in his creation and his character’, meaning that both his outward and inward aspects are good.”\(^{66}\) Here Al-Ghazālī is emphasizing the relation between the two derivatives of the same root which apply to the outer and inner person, and this connection between the two realms is common in both Sufi and Christian tradition.

One aspect of good character is courage, and the connection between the character of courage and inner jihād is seen most clearly when Al-Ghazālī writes “Striving (al-mujāhadat) with one’s self (al-nafs) is courage.”\(^{67}\) He expands his understanding of courage as inner jihād using very Aristotelian language when he clarifies that this courage “proceeds from the use of the irascible faculty under the control of the intellect and with just moderation.”\(^{68}\) Al-Ghazālī discusses bad traits of character at great length in his books.\(^{69}\) He uses some especially vivid metaphors for bad behaviours in Book 22 “Disciplining the Soul”, when he states that “Bad traits of character are vipers and stinging scorpions” and that a sensible person would be busy “removing and killing the scorpion in question.”\(^{70}\) These images show the fighting nature of the effort to resist bad character. In the rest of Chapter 22 Al-Ghazālī expands on the methods of struggle so as to obtain a good character.

2.3 Disciplining and Restraining the Soul

There are many places where Al-Ghazālī describes this internal jihād as disciplining the soul or constraining it. “Good traits of character may be acquired through self-discipline,”\(^{71}\) and “through spiritual struggle and exercise.”\(^{72}\) The person who has not yet attained to good

\(^{65}\) Iḥyā’ 22.1, p.8, for source of this hadith see p. 194, note 26. A further hadith has Mohammed asking God “Thou hast made good my creation (khalqi), therefore make good my character (khuluqi)”. Iḥyā’ 22.1, p.9, note 37.

\(^{66}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.2, (Winter p. 16).

\(^{67}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.2, (Winter p. 23).

\(^{68}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.2, (Winter p. 23).

\(^{69}\) See for example Iḥyā’ Books 23-30.

\(^{70}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.7, (Winter p. 53).

\(^{71}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.4, (Winter p. 35).

\(^{72}\) Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.4, (Winter p. 32).
character should “occupy himself with self-discipline (al-riadat) and struggle (mujahada).”\textsuperscript{73} Al-Ghazālī likens the soul to a young child that must be “disciplined” and “habituated to and instructed in goodness.”\textsuperscript{74} He uses several examples at one point to demonstrate good character and then concludes that “These souls were made humble through discipline.”\textsuperscript{75} This again draws a link between khuluq and discipline. After explaining that good character comes through spiritual struggle he clarifies his meaning by writing “By this I mean the constraining (himl) of the soul to perform the actions which necessarily proceed from the trait desired. For example, a man who wishes to acquire the quality of generosity must oblige himself to do generous things.”\textsuperscript{76} While this may seem obvious as a way to build good habits, al-Ghazālī’s use of the word “constrain” evokes an image of exertion and struggling. He explicitly says “he should persist for a lengthy period in imitating the behaviour of the modest and struggling (majahid) against his soul” thus equating the two ideas in typical parallelism. Changing behaviour for Al-Ghazālī is hard work, a kind of inner violence somehow like external jihād.\textsuperscript{77}

Elsewhere he summarises the “scholars and sages” who agree that “there is no path to felicity in the Afterlife except the denial of the soul’s whims and desires.”\textsuperscript{78} He also writes of the one who “restrains his soul from its whims.”\textsuperscript{79} He asserts that the soul should not be given free rein and that “one should restrict oneself to what is necessary.”\textsuperscript{80} Further, “the bondsman (sic) of God is required to restrain it from forbidden things. If the soul is not accustomed to being confined to the essentials, its desire will gain control.”\textsuperscript{81} This use of “restrict” and “confined” again evokes images of the prisoner or captured animal which no longer has freedom of movement. The soul must be restrained and limited. al-Ghazālī’s use of “control” also highlights the power conflict between the two sides of the “battle.”

\textbf{2.4 Training}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.9, (Winter p. 74).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.10, (Winter p. 75).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.9, (Winter p. 74).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.4, (Winter p. 32).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.9, (Winter p. 74).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.4, (Winter p. 32).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.8, (Winter p. 60).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.8, (Winter p. 56).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.8, (Winter p. 60).
  \item Al-Ghazālī, \textit{On Disciplining the Soul}, Iḥyā' 22.8, (Winter p. 62).
\end{itemize}
Ghazālī at times uses the concept of training (tarbiya) to explain the struggle for the improvement in character. He says that character will “only be perfected through training”, and that a person must “train his soul.” In an extended simile Al-Ghazālī likens the soul to “falcon to be trained.” He outlines how trainers use dark chambers and meat to train a falcon and likens this to how the Sufi must train the soul. “The soul is similar: it does not become tame before its Lord or enjoy His remembrance until it is weaned from its habits.” He then discusses the training of a horse to extend the simile, using the key term “restraining” again. Al-Ghazālī writes “Similarly, the riding-beast initially shies away from the saddle and bridle, and will not be ridden, and has to be forced to endure these things, and must be restrained with chains and ropes from roaming at will. He then summarises, “The disciplining of the soul is similar to that of birds and riding-beasts” showing again his understanding of the soul as needing training and as being somehow animal-like. That Al-Ghazālī sees various training terms as equivalents is shown in this section by his interchanging of “trained”, “restrained” and “disciplining.” These are a cluster of related ideas that Al-Ghazālī uses repeatedly and interchangeably for affect.

The experience of seclusion allowed the very disillusioned Al-Ghazālī to reflect on his own inner struggles and to develop a clear set of values for a healthy society. He understood from his time of withdrawal that the core values of courage, self-discipline, humility and so on require a training of the soul. Good character is only obtained by special effort.

3.0 MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Now we can briefly consider the thoughts on corruption and virtue of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in comparison with Al-Ghazālī’s teaching. Mahathir served as Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years, so he is well positioned to have seen both good and bad character and to reflect on what is needed to build a nation. In fact he speaks often about these issues in his books, personal blog, and in various public speeches.

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83 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.5, (Winter p. 43).
84 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.8, (Winter p. 63).
85 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.8, (Winter p. 64).
86 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.8, (Winter p. 64).
87 Al-Ghazālī, On Disciplining the Soul, Iḥyā’ 22.8, (Winter p. 64).
88 Umaruddin, M: The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzali, 205.
Mahathir Mohamad’s life has been well-documented in many books and an autobiography. These texts and various articles have mostly addressed Mahathir’s political platform, his pro-Malay position, and various controversies. Mahathir’s own “A Doctor in the House” provides many examples of his teaching on good character, but the main virtues are not developed in any consistent organised way because it is more an historical narrative. “Malaysian Maverick” presents slightly different angles on events and also does not analyse Mahathir’s specific values in regards to good leadership and healthy societies.

Ahmad discusses Mahathir’s incorporation of Islamic values into Malaysian political life as the foundation for personal and social health without going into detail about those values. Khoo Boo Teik says that it was “an obsession of Mahathir’s to search for and inscribe” values that would make Malaysia great. He also notes how Mahathir promoted a more nuanced Islam that sought to overcome weaknesses in Malaysia’s current Islam. J. Victor Morais also presents an historical review of Mahathir’s actions, mentioning various values, but does not bring these into focus nor link them to Mahathir’s time of withdrawal. These are all good resources on the former Prime Minister’s life but mainly address the political, and they do not attempt to discern values and any specific life experiences that may have shaped them.

3.1 Separation and semi-seclusion

Very little has been written about Mahathir’s five years of expulsion from UMNO except as a painful political chapter best forgotten. Yet Mahathir himself says that this was a time when his “mind kept turning” especially about the future of Malaysia. He writes that “I was made persona non grata twice in my political career,” and this is clearly important for him given that he writes two chapters on this theme. The first of these periods was instrumental however in providing the time and space to reflect on his painful situation and on the nature of human hearts and how to live as an ethical politician. Mahathir writes about his hobbies

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90 Ahmad, Mahathir’s Paradigm Shift, 67-74.
92 Khoo, Paradoxes of Mahathirism, 163-76.
93 Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 228.
94 Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 210-28.
95 Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 211.
during this time of partial seclusion including that he built five boats. His time alone in the “political wilderness” enabled him to think through the issue of values in depth. Mahathir openly discusses the loneliness of this time of separation from politics when there were only a few people who were bold enough to visit him. Such isolation became a fruitful time of reflection and learning which changed how Mahathir engaged in politics after his return to UMNO. During this seclusion time he gathered his new thoughts into a book, “The Malay Dilemma,” which became instrumental in the future of Malaysia and its future Prime Minister.

The painful separation from UMNO also revealed to Mahathir the importance of humility, a theme I will return to below. The level of impact that the wilderness time had for Mahathir is also shown by the various comments on his life from both supporters and detractors, who admit that Mahathir “baffles,” and exudes “a mystique”. Teik asserts that “Mahathir continues to defy any easy characterization,” and that he “appears to act ‘out of sync’ with his milieu.” Such a radical independence comes from a set of values derived from an individual experience such as Mahathir’s separation period.

3.2 Hard work

Following the New Historicist approach it is now appropriate to note those particular aspects of Mahathir’s life and those incidents which helped shape his approach to moral values. Mahathir grew up in a “lower-middle class” family and his mother taught him that he had to work hard to achieve anything. His father emphasised a good education and his mother insisted that he know his religion of Islam. According to Mahathir “(M)anners were given a great emphasis in our home.” His mother also schooled him in modesty and the “values of tolerance and respect.”

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100 Mahathir Mohamad, *A Doctor in the House*, 203.
could not get his daughters into the secondary school, a grave injustice. These early family influences become evident in the values that Mahathir teaches, for example justice, hard work, and respect. For example, in 1993 Mahathir wrote that “(W)ell-being in this world is not achievable without persistent determination and struggle to progress from a less comfortable to a better position. He also developed a strong commitment to education and the elimination of poverty as a way to build Malaysia. These family-derived values were evidenced at the UMNO General Assembly in 1984 where Mahathir called for “putting in practice Islamic values like trust, discipline, loyalty, industriousness, and persistence, close bonds between Muslims, boldness arising from honesty, tolerance and consideration, justice, repentance and gratefulness and other honoured values.” This list of values overlaps many of those mentioned by al-Ghazālī. Mahathir sought to instil these behaviours in both himself and in the nation, and writes that, “(I) believe firmly in leadership by example,” and cites hard work as one aspect of this.

In “The Malay Dilemma” Mahathir writes about the strengths but also weaknesses of the Malay character, and this nuanced perspective arose from his thoughtful reflection during his time of isolation. From this period he developed an understanding of the way forward for the Malay people, as exemplified in a 1993 speech about youth: “(T)heir hard work must be accompanied by positive attitudinal changes. This means that they should not moan and groan when confronting work pressure. Everyone has problems. But the test is whether one can solve these problems without loss of confidence.” This passage could almost be a summary of the lessons Mahathir learnt from his time in the political wilderness. While tempted to be despondent, he instead focusses on lessons to be learnt and the way forward.

3.3 Good Character and Ethics

Good character is vital according to Mahathir both for the individual, for business, and for the nation as a whole. He writes, “(T)he first example that we must show is cleanliness in all its

108 Mahathir Mohamad, cited in Mahathir: The Awakening, 429. See also Ahmad, Mahathir’s Paradigm Shift, 8; and Hasan Haji Hamza, Mahathir: Great Malaysian Hero (Kuala Lumpur: Mediaprint Publications, 1990), 14.
109 Ahmad, Mahathir’s Paradigm Shift, 14.
111 Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 39, 40. He also notes the importance of sacrifice, Ahmad, Mahathir’s Paradigm Shift, 5.
112 Hamza, Mahathir: Great Malaysian Hero, 94-97; Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 229-237.
aspects both morally and physically. To be morally clean means to possess good thoughts and ideals and to carry out our duties as promised without any ulterior motive or unworthy intentions.”\textsuperscript{114} Such an understanding is reflected in his first administration’s motto, “bersih, cekap, dan amanah” (clean, efficient, and trustworthy).\textsuperscript{115} He thinks that the future of Malaysia depends on having a strong ethical base,\textsuperscript{116} and this includes having trustworthy public servants.\textsuperscript{117} This emphasis on good behaviour and intentions is very similar to Al-Ghazālī, and Mahathir asserts that “(T)he importance of good ethics cannot be overestimated.”\textsuperscript{118}

This good character is essential in business dealings. Mahathir writes, “(I)n order to be successful, it is important for us to have good values and attitudes. Our success should be achieved through a clean, orderly and acceptable manner, not through evil means such as stealing, robbing or cheating.”\textsuperscript{119} He also speaks against cheating in business, and I will return to his many comments on corruption below.\textsuperscript{120} One aspect of bad character he mentions is arrogance, which he saw in fellow politicians many times. He says that, “(A)rrogance is a sign of weakness, not strength. It is a hallmark of insecurity, not of character. Let me add that arrogance is by no means the monopoly of those in positions of authority.”\textsuperscript{121} This quote also demonstrates that although Mahathir directly saw politicians’ arrogance, he was able to generalise the danger of arrogance to a broader population.

### 3.4 Courage

Victor Morais titles his 1982 book on Mahathir “A Profile in Courage” because it shows the then-Prime-Minister as a “dynamic and fearless leader with a passion for hard work.”\textsuperscript{122} Courage certainly characterises Mahathir in many ways, and this is also one of his stated values. He writes, “(F)or my part, when asked a question I just state the truth as I see it,” even though “my viewpoint regularly clashes with the perceived wisdom of the day.”\textsuperscript{123} From

\begin{footnotes}
\item[115] Khoo, Paradoxes of Mahathirism, 180.
\item[116] Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 342.
\item[117] Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 361.
\item[121] Mahathir Mohamad, cited in \textit{Mahathir: The Awakening}, 337.
\item[123] Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 243.
\end{footnotes}
1964 to 1969 Mahathir was an MP and discovered the pain of standing firm on moral decisions even though they were unpopular.\textsuperscript{124} He discovered that people are fickle and often insincere and thus he learnt how dark the human heart can be.\textsuperscript{125} During his five years of expulsion he would have had much time to reflect on his previous experiences of courageous stances, and his later speeches demonstrate that this setback did not deter him from further fearless action. In a recent lunch hosted by the MIDF Investment Bank Bhd, he explained that a leader is, “(S)omeone who leads and willing to stick out his neck and take risks, for benefits of others.” He added that, “a leader is ‘privileged’ to be made one.” This also shows the importance of serving others and not the self.\textsuperscript{126}

3.5 Corruption

In regards to the dangers of corruption, Mahathir has made many comments from the beginnings of his political life right through to today. In speaking explicitly about corruption he says that:

\begin{quote}
(A) position of power expose a leader to the threat of corruptions. The leader must be resistant to the ‘pressure’ of temptations. It is a good habit to resist temptations and one is likely be a good leader (along with the other qualities). If corrupt leaders be allowed to carry on, it will become a culture that will destroy the whole society and impair development of the country.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

This emphasis on resisting temptations is very closely aligned to al-Ghazālî’s ideas of disciplining the soul and refusing the \textit{nafs}. It also reflects an awareness of the possible corruption of the leader and the need for humility. This is shown further when Mahathir writes that, “(A) good leader must be able to communicate, from his immediate deputy to the lowest ranking person in his organisation.”\textsuperscript{128} During his years as a politician Mahathir became exposed to levels of corruption that disturbed him greatly, yet he says that he never abused his power, and it is evident that such corruption is abhorrent to him.\textsuperscript{129} He writes,

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\textsuperscript{124} Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 180-209; Wain, \textit{Malaysian Maverick}, 22-28.
\textsuperscript{125} Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 188, 211.
\textsuperscript{129} Mahathir Mohamad, \textit{A Doctor in the House}, 23.
\end{footnotesize}
“(W)e should not be involved in any form of crime or bribery. We should not misuse or abuse authority and we should not be arrogant.”¹³⁰ It is possible again to see in this quote the influence of Mahathir’s early hurtful time of exclusion from UMNO where authority was used against him.

More recently Mahathir has been very vocal about what he perceives as destructive corruption in the Malaysian government. He writes:

Corruption has become part of Malaysian culture. It starts with awareness among UMNO members through bribery money that a person can get a place in the party to become minister in the Government. (Rasuah sudah jadi sebahagian dari budaya warga Malaysia. Ia bermula dengan kesedaran di kalangan ahli UMNO bahawa melalui sogokan duit seseorang boleh mendapat tempat dalam parti sehingga menjadi menteri dalam Kerajaan.)¹³¹

Mahathir thus shows both an understanding of this temptation from his own experience and from observing others. His upbringing taught him that this corruption was wrong, and if he had any doubt about this, then during his time in the wilderness it seems he grew resolved not to copy the bad behaviour of others. A certain realism is evident in this quote which shows evidence of deep reflection on what is pragmatically possible for a society:

Indeed, no society succeeded in curbing corruption a hundred per cent. But when leaders encourage this practice and engage openly with corruption, then corruption is rampant when followers take a lesson from the practice of the leader. (Sesungguhnya tidak ada masyarakat yang berjaya membendung rasuah seratus-peratus. Tetapi apabila pemimpin tertinggi menggalak amalan ini dan terlibat secara terbuka dengan rasuah, maka rasuah lebih menjadi-jadi apabila pengikut ambil iktibar dari amalan pemimpin.)¹³²

Mahathir seems to show some deep grief over Malaysia in several of his recent blog posts. In relation to the affects of corruption he says:

We see the damage to the country, the sharp fall in the value of the ringgit, the lack of money- the Government is forced to cut the budget by 30%, there is not enough money for a scholarship, (they) had to wring the money of the poor and the rich through the GST and others because of choosing leaders who use bribery to win. (Kita lihat kerosakan negara, kejatuhan teruk nilai Ringgit, kekurangan duit Kerajaan yang terpaksa potong budget 30%, tidak cukup duit untuk biasiswa, terpaksa perah duit rakyat miskin dan kaya melalui GST dan bermacam lagi kerana memilih pemimpin yang menggunakan sogokan untuk menang.)

After all that he has written over many years advocating for a free and independent Malaysia, and despite all his efforts to gain such, in relation to the sale of Proton to an overseas company he laments, “(F)rankly Malaysia would be a better country if we stayed as the colony of Europeans or other developed countries. They obviously know better than us about governance and the development of countries.” Further he says, “Once upon a time Malaysia was called an Asian Tiger. Today Malaysia is not even a pussycat. We have become one of the ten most corrupt countries in the world.” These quotes show evidence of Mahathir’s inherent optimism about Malaysian society that has been shattered by a lack of character and endemic corruption. From a New Historicist perspective, only someone who has themselves suffered greatly to create a healthy country would evidence such grief and loss of hope.

3.6 Humility

There is one final value that is clearly evidenced in Mahathir and which would have been strengthened by his time of expulsion from UMNO, that of humility, and its partner of self-scrutiny. In his personal blog Mahathir has emphasised several points about humbly learning from self-scrutiny. He also shows that he understands the historic trends towards degeneration in a society when he writes:

History has many lessons for us. As George Santayana said: "those who forget the lessons of history will be punished by making the same mistakes over and over again."

again” or words to that effect. But we never like to learn from history. We think our case is different.  

This resonates with al-Ghazālī’s words in his *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*. Mahathir also writes, “(I)t is therefore important that we do not just focus on ethical values, but more importantly we scrutinise the practice of these values. And scrutiny must be followed by corrective measures.”

This emphasis on self-scrutiny is very reminiscent of al-Ghazālī. Mahathir also demonstrates the importance of humility when he says:

1. I would like to thank everyone for their comments on the above. I appreciate very much the positive comments and I accept the negative ones also. I am not perfect. I make mistakes. But some of the wrongdoings attributed to me are just not true or correct.

2. We see what we want to see. Everyone is like that. So do I. But I try my best to be factual.

3. My greatest mistake is in the choice of people. I seem to be picking the wrong people all the time. They not only did not live up to my expectations but they went all out to do all the wrong things, including abusing me.

4. I accept the blame for making wrong choices. But they were all so good before they were chosen.

In these comments Mahathir admits that he is not perfect, which is the opposite of how most leaders present themselves. His frank openness requires a certain level of courageous detachment from the opinion of others, and this can be seen as a result of his time of exclusion. The expulsion time also cemented a life-long habit of self-scrutiny and humility, and an awareness of his own temptation to be arrogant. He writes in his autobiography about his angry letter to Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1967 that, “(W)hen I read it now, I see that I was most intemperate in my language,” and “(I) now regret my harsh tone very much.”

Further, “(W)hen I see most urban Malays today I grieve … I had no idea this

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139 Mahathir Mohamad, *A Doctor in the House*, 202, 03.
would happen when I suggested Malays move into the towns and cities. I was naïve." Self-scrutiny is a humbling experience and one that both Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir mention and exhibit.

This brief summary of the recurring teaching on values as shown by these quotes shows that Mahathir has for many years emphasised hard work, striving to achieve, courage, good behaviour, respect for others, honesty rather than corruption, and humility. In all of these values it is possible to see the influence of his time of withdrawal. Seclusion for Mahathir deepened and sharpened his ethical position. These mentioned values are not his only ones nor necessarily the dominant values, but a quantitative analysis of his writings to determine core values is well beyond the scope of this article. The virtues noted are those that follow somewhat Al-Ghazālī’s four overarching themes and are also highlighted in his autobiography and recent blog posts. Many other values could also be explored, such as justice, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Both Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir saw first-hand from surrounding leaders the results of personal weakness and its corruption of society. They both underwent a time of separation and seclusion that deeply shaped their understanding of themselves and of the inner spiritual fight for correct values. Their teaching on how leaders should live thus emerges from specific historic contexts. In this paper I have briefly noted the themes of social collapse or sustainability as described by Ibn Khaldūn and Al-Ghazālī. I have explored in some depth al-Ghazālī’s teaching on the inner fight with the nafs and his approach to self-discipline. Such self-control and good character is essential for a good leader to shape society in healthy long-lasting ways. The words of Mahathir show evidence of how these values can be expressed today. Good leadership and healthy societies are possible if leaders follow the path of spiritual renewal.

While Ibn Khaldūn thought that leaders would inevitably become proud, Mahathir teaches the kind of humble character that Al-Ghazālī emphasises. He clearly understands the role of leaders in developing healthy countries and also their role in creating history, and highlights the themes of hard work, humility, selfless service, and self-discipline. These are

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140 Mahathir Mohamad, A Doctor in the House, 245.
also common elements in Al-Ghazālī, and it could be argued that these values are essential for ongoing social development in any society. There is always the temptation for leaders to follow their nafs and mislead their countries, which ends in the downfall described by Ibn Khaldūn and warned about by Mahathir. This however is not inevitable and any leader who follows the path set by Al-Ghazālī and Mahathir, can ensure that their society flourishes at least in their generation.

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