

A Diplomat To The End*

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Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong in an interview with theSun reporters **Zainon Ahmad** and **Karen Arukesamy** revealed that he was still a diplomat at heart, although he had left the Foreign Ministry as its Secretary-General more than two decades ago. And he agrees with the saying: Diplomats are like old soldiers: they never die but just fade away. ISIS Focus reproduces the interview here**

In less than three months you will end your long service with the government, 31 years at the Foreign Ministry and 21 years as Mida chairman. Any regrets about becoming a civil servant? You could have joined the private sector and earned a much bigger salary.

I was a civil servant when I was with Wisma Putra. Now I am not technically a civil servant but I am in government service. But I can say that I have been in service to the government for about 52 years now. I joined the government service or became a civil servant about two months after Merdeka. In those days the glamour was being in government service. I have no regrets at all and am very happy to have been given the opportunity to serve the country.

Having been in government service for almost the age of the nation and having been more or less used to the culture, lifestyle and ethos of the service and where most of your friends are,

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*** Lightly edited for clarity*

aren't you a little sad that it is finally coming to an end? Have you assessed yourself? Do you feel a sense of relief that finally it is all over?



I am not sad at all. In fact personally, I'm full of satisfaction that I have been able to contribute for this long. Some people say it is a form of slavery because [we are called] government servants, and servants are sometimes treated like slaves. I do not feel like that at all. I had served with honour and I am fully satisfied that I did. Yes, I have assessed myself, the first time when I was about to leave Wisma Putra.

I was in two sectors, one, on foreign affairs, and two, the policy sector. You can visualise that in Wisma Putra you deal mostly with government and foreign government representatives in the area of strategies. In the areas of policies and strategies, actually our feet don't touch the ground in terms of high policies and strategies, that is the area Wisma is good at -- political and security issues.

You have the satisfaction of contributing in the macro dimension of government requirements but ... if you are good at cementing a relationship with another country, the result does not come to you or your ministry but your country and the

people. You see the results benefiting areas like trade, defence and so on. The ministries dealing with them benefit. You have the satisfaction of knowing that you contributed.

But here in Mida, I get a different type of satisfaction. I get satisfaction on the implementation end and the policy end. I still deal with the foreign teams – not government representatives but foreign corporations. Generally, it's just what I was used to doing but only that this time around I deal with international business agencies.

At Mida, we are a promoting and implementation agency. We can see the results of our work coming up literally from the ground. We can see the factories virtually rising from the ground and thousands of people being employed as the result of our work. So it gives us tremendous satisfaction here.

So you are actually looking forward to retiring?

Yes, at 76 I'm looking forward to relaxing at home. But having been used to working for such a long time it also worries me about what to do next? One of my old friends told me that we should accept the fact that we are old, nobody is indispensable. Another friend told me, you are retiring but your brain must be active, ... , don't just twiddle your fingers until your thumb wears out. He said get together with a bunch of friends and chat on every subject on earth but just don't try to solve anything because then next week you won't have anything to talk about (laughs).

During your time in Wisma Putra, as permanent representative at the UN, as ambassador in Jakarta and Moscow, and being active in Asean, especially in dealing with the post-Vietnam War situation, which role were you most happy to play?

That's easy. The highlight of my career at the Foreign Ministry was when I was assigned to be ambassador in Indonesia after the Confrontation.

Tan Sri Yaacob Latiff, who later became the mayor of Kuala Lumpur was there before me. I enjoyed my stay there for the whole five years, from 1972-1977. Our relationship [as nations] at that time was like [that of] a couple in a honeymoon stage.

A couple who make up after a quarrel usually enter into a sort of a honeymoon stage. In that stage both try to ensure that nothing goes wrong. I was happy there because I had access to the Istana and could see President Suharto anytime I wanted. So I got tremendous satisfaction because I was able to get on well with the top fellow in the country. And because of that we were able to achieve much.

The Indonesian armed forces was the most powerful institution at that time and Suharto was ... its head. Many in the armed forces became my close personal friends. People like Ali Murtopo and Benny Murdani were two of my closest friends. It was a very significant moment in the relations between the two countries and I was living there. Because I had many friends and was welcome everywhere I went, my tenure there was just like living in Malaysia.

But why did the government send an important person like you to be ambassador in Indonesia? Professor Chandran Jeshurun in his book Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy 1957-2007 described you as an intelligent Wisma Putra official. Surely they could have sent someone else?

I've no idea. I'm not sure if I was an important person but maybe because I was dealing with the subject – the formation of Malaysia that led to Confrontation – Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein thought I was the most suitable person to be there. Tun Razak also knew I had a lot of friends there. I still have.

You were involved in the formation of Malaysia with Tun Ghazali Shafie. How significant was your role?

It was not me. It was King Ghaz (Tun Ghazali Shafie) who played a major role. He was permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry then. But a very powerful official for many reasons. He was one of the very prime person[s] who really contributed to the country. He was very close to Tun Razak, schoolmates I think, and therefore he had direct access to the top leader of the country. He was very persuasive and very convincing. At that time you need(ed) to be like that, especially when trying to convince the people from Sabah and Sarawak who had no idea of politics whatsoever. So Ghaz was the man who convinced everyone – including us at the Foreign Ministry – of the viability of Malaysia. Yes, he was powerful.

And he was not even a minister or a deputy minister, he was just a civil servant. Without him there, the discussions would have fallen flat. It would not have happened if you had sent the deputy minister, it would not have worked out that well. The deputy minister would not know what to say. I would say he was not only the spokesman of the project – who could speak persuasively to anybody about it – he was also the brain, the man behind the idea. As you would say today, he was very hands on. I was fortunate to serve under him. In fact in looking back I would say that working with him was a highlight in my career at the Foreign Ministry.

This idea of Malaysia, was around for some time even before Merdeka. Our colonial masters, the British, were toying with the idea even long before Merdeka. Do you think our leaders were made use [of] to form Malaysia or was it really our own initiative to form Malaysia?

I'm not so sure. As you say the idea of getting together has been there for some time. Even during the British time, there were a number of suggestions but nothing was done. But as to what made our then prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman ... make the idea public at the Foreign Correspondents' Association lunch in Adelphi Hotel in Singapore, I'm not sure, because there was no background paper or anything on it. It

came suddenly to all of us, even to Wisma Putra. But probably Ghaz had foreknowledge of the project ... But many people are wondering who or what made Tunku think about Malaysia. In my own assessment, it's probably Tunku's communication and contact with Lee Kuan Yew that got him thinking in that direction. Lee's People's Action Party (PAP) was strongly challenged by the Socialist Front, a leftist organisation.

So my own assessment is that Tunku must have been also very concerned with what was happening in Singapore – on how to deal with it. Lee had high regard and respect for Tunku and he acknowledged the leadership of Umno. He probably wanted Tunku to do something to save Singapore. So my assessment is that while we came up with project Malaysia for geo-strategic reasons, we also wanted to make sure that Singapore was in the right hands, not to go communist. So [it was] in our interest to form Malaysia. How else to do it?

It was the height of the Cold War, right? And so the project became urgent. In fact, in the 1959 Singapore election Lee Kuan Yew used the theme 'battle for merger' in his campaign.

Anyway there was a big problem in Singapore at that time. The PAP and the Socialist Front under Lim Chin Siong were fighting it out. The danger of Singapore going left was seen as very real. So, very crudely, you can say that Lee would have probably told the Tunku 'you come and help me arrest all these fellows.' So you can say that in a way, we helped the PAP to survive, and helped Singapore not to go left. That's why some people say that when Singapore [was] in trouble, it always looked to us.

I think Singapore also knew that they are linked to us, almost like a Siamese twin. But there is so much hostility in the air between us. Of course to say bad blood is an exaggeration.

I don't know whether it is really bad

blood. Many scholars, even journalists asked me, what is actually going on between you and Singapore and my answer is I really do not know. Because as you said, the bad feeling is really in the air. But I don't understand why. If you go to the ground – and I can quote my experience in Mida and can give figures and statistics to show that our linkage with Singapore is stronger than ever before. Of course, they are always in the top five in terms of investments in Malaysia. In terms of trade, we still have very strong linkage with them.

Every weekend they invade us by the thousands, they come all the way to Malacca, not only to shop but also to buy property. And hopefully also to make friends.

Malaysia is lucky to have [had] many good people at the Foreign Ministry in its formative years till the mid-1990s. People like R. Ramani, Zain Azrai, Jack de Silva, Razali Ismail, etc. But that crop of people is coming to an end. The last of them would probably be retiring. What about the new crop of officials?

In our time, we had no choice. We had to learn the hard way to respond to various things. We were more or less baptised that way, like the baptism of fire. People nowadays go to universities, they have PhD's. They are more clever than us in a way and the difference is that they are now asked to be more professional. I do not know what the word professional means. We were asked to be good diplomats and in my time we were more than just diplomats. We were committed personally in the course of our work.

That is the difference. To put it bluntly, maybe if you ask me to be professional now, I would say okay. I'd calculate how much I can and how much I have to work. See that is the main difference. [It was] more of personal conviction. We were in a way politicians as well, we were politically committed, but as civil servants. We can work 24 hours without a complaint because we got the satisfaction.



In those days, as ambassador, you probably had to also act on your own in decision-making sometimes. Because of poor tele-communications. But now with information technology and communication, I think the officers have to play a different role.

Yes, a completely different role now. In those days you were most of the time out of date. There was a possibility your boss knew more than you. It made your job more difficult. You are good only when you are ahead of your boss in terms of knowledge about the country you are resident [in]. It mostly happened during Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's time as prime minister. He taught us to be proactive. We should act first. Don't wait for people to criticise you in an issue; you criticise first.

He attacked first as a form of defence and when people counter-attacked he could respond to them because he was very well-informed.

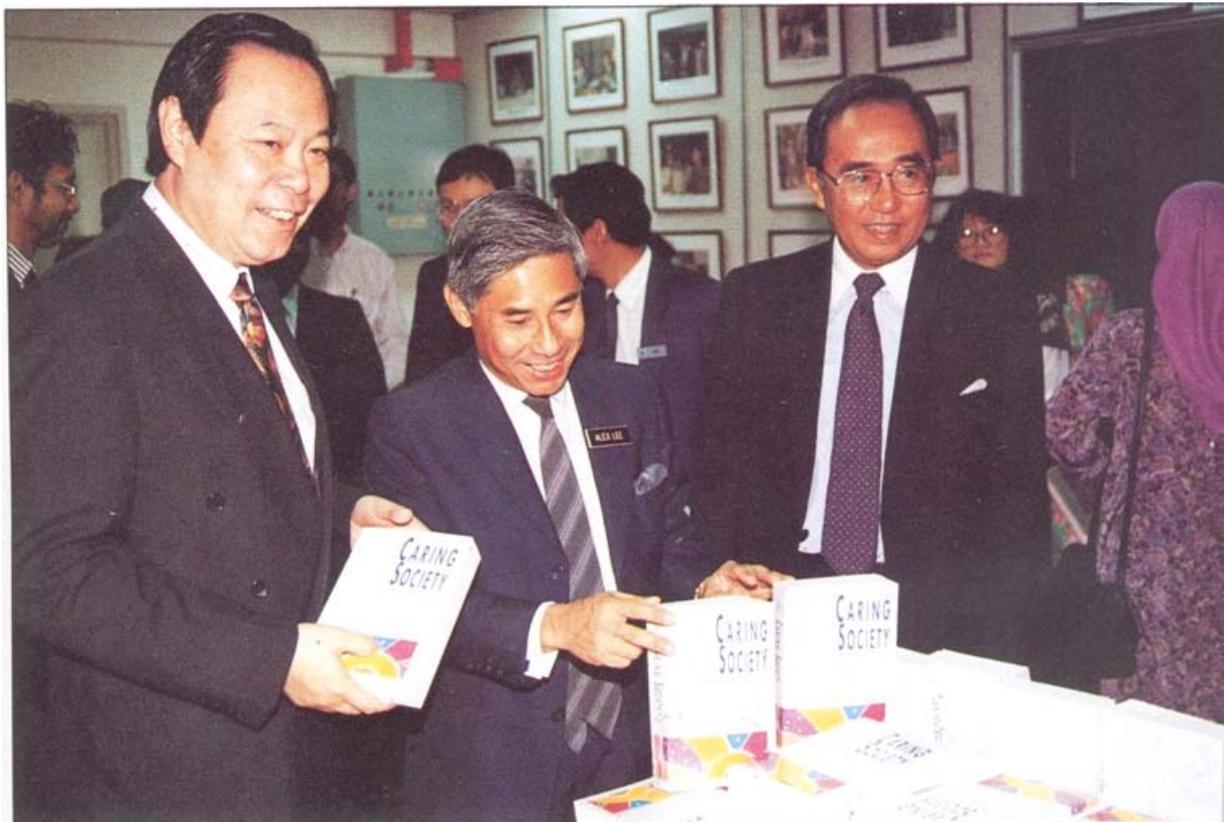
True, an ambassador in the Internet age has a different role to play. If he thinks he knows more about what is happening in the country [in which] he is the Malaysian ambassador, he may be wrong. The chances are his boss, the foreign minister or even the prime minister may know much more about the country than him. When he was prime minister, Mahathir certainly knew much more than many of his ambassadors.

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What were your first few tasks as a civil servant?

After I joined in October 1957, I was sent immediately to study international relations at the London School of Economics. After a year there I was assigned to New York as the Third Secretary of our permanent mission there which was then under Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. It was quite an experience and good exposure. I was not married at that time but later on while I was still in New York I got married by proxy. It became news at that time because those days only the sultans married that way.

The akad nikah was in KL and my father was the proxy. The Pak Imam was not sure if it (the akad nikah) was genuine or not but it so happened that when the ceremony was about to begin I called my wife-to-be and also spoke to the Pak Imam and that convinced him. I had no money to come back and she had no money to go there, so we got married that way. Of course after she became my wife the government paid for her passage to New York.



(From left) Dr Noordin Sopiee, Director-General of ISIS Malaysia; Dato' Alex Lee, Deputy Minister of National Unity and Social Development; and Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, Chairman of ISIS Malaysia, looking at the proceedings of the First National Conference on the Caring Society, December 5, 1990.