

INTERVIEW

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin - 'The Quiet One' Speaks Up*

In an exclusive interview with *ISIS FOCUS* on Sept 7, 1990 newly appointed Chairman, **Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong**, spoke at length on his career and revealed many anecdotes of his personal life. By **Mustafa Mohamed Najimudin and Soo Ewe Jin****

He was born on March 3, 1933, the third child of his father's third wife. At the height of *Konfrontasi*, he was the third member of Wisma Putra's 'counter-confrontation trio' three top civil servants who accompanied 'King Ghaz' (former Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie who was then the Ministry's Permanent Secretary) to every peace-making meeting with the Indonesians.

was promptly appointed Chairman of the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority. He became Chairman of Perwaja Steel in March 1989.

On July 3 this year, he notched up his third major post-retirement chairmanship, when he was appointed Chairman of ISIS Malaysia, taking over from the late Tun Hussein Onn who passed away on May 29.



THE CHAIRMAN SPEAKS: YBhg Tan Sri Zainal Abidin in a jovial mood as he fields questions posed by the writers

The number three has a way of cropping up in Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong's life. After retiring from the Civil Service in 1988 as the No 1 Bureaucrat at Wisma Putra, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin began his career in the fledgling Malayan Civil Service in October 1957, the year of independence, a period he remembers as being full of hope and excitement.

'I had just graduated from Universiti Malaya with an honours degree in Malay Studies,' he tells *ISIS*

FOCUS in an exclusive interview.

'I had the choice between becoming an academician or joining the Malayan Civil Service. In the end, I decided I was just not the academic type. So I opted to join the Foreign Service and see the world.'

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'Family quarrel'

Academia's loss proved to be the Civil Service's gain. In his three decades of service, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin has not only fulfilled his dream of seeing the world, but also played a crucial role in many important chapters of the nation's history.

But it is a role shrouded in typical Civil Service secrecy, details of which are etched only in his memory and the many files of his department at Wisma Putra.

Reminded of a newspaper report in 1966 which referred to him as 'The Quiet One', Tan Sri Zainal Abidin looks amused. 'I don't remember that label,' he says. 'But it was the height of *Konfrontasi* then and there were the three of us. Ahmad Nordin was more on the public relations side, so he had to talk. Jack [deSilva] and I dealt mainly with policy, so there was no cause for us to talk. But Jack talked anyway. He and Ahmad Nordin monopolised the show... there was no need for me to talk because they were talking all the time!'

On *Konfrontasi* itself, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin likens it to a family quarrel. 'It was unnatural ... you have to realise that we are from the same *rumpun*, the same family, so to speak. It's not natural to be at loggerheads this way. Therefore such quarrels should be quickly patched up. In the long run, the interests of Malaysia and Indonesia depended on our ability to see our future together. Many people believed in that. 'So although officially we were in *Konfrontasi*, but on the quiet, there were lots of movements. All of us have relatives in each other's country. So there were informal networks and groups working for an end to *Konfrontasi*.'

When it was over, there was a kind of honeymoon. If you start a quarrel with your wife, the loveliest part is the making up and a few days after that. Having been so involved in the whole process, it was pertinent that the first ambassadorial posting for Tan Sri Zainal Abidin was to Jakarta.

'It was an enjoyable and useful experience,' he relates. 'I was there for five years. I came to know Indonesia better, to understand its people, its politics. And because the posting was so soon after *Konfrontasi*, there were many challenges. It was a time to normalise the relationship, to build up ...'

Anecdotes such as this constantly cropped up that Friday afternoon in the chairman's office at ISIS when Tan Sri Zainal Abidin finally found time to talk to us. His reflections helped to fill in some gaps in the story of his life, which according to our research, was not only interesting but had all the trappings of a 'bestseller' waiting to be written.

Consider the subject of his marriage. Then Third Secretary at the Malaysian diplomatic mission in New York, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin appointed his father to stand in as his proxy at the ceremony conducted in Kuala Lumpur on October 15, 1959.

Asked why he opted for such an arrangement, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin replied: 'I had just been posted halfway round the world. We wanted to get married. Either I came back and married her or she had to go there to marry me. Both arrangements (would have) cost lots of money, and I was only Third Secretary. Travelling in those days was also not easy. You took days to travel from KL to New York.'

'It was too complicated so I appointed my father to stand in. He was really worried, that he might say the wrong things during the ceremony. Even the kadi was worried but just when the ceremony was about to start, my call from New York came through to reassure him that I had sanctioned the whole thing.'

'We had a small party in New York too. The bonus was that my wife could now fly and join me and the government had to pay for her. It's as simple as that.'

Moscow to New York

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin laughs. Despite being described as aloof, he came across as a warm person during the one-and-a-half hour interview. In between sipping his iced nescafe and doodling on a writing pad, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin spoke extensively on his job and the postings abroad that have earned him yet another label - 'Diplomat Extraordinaire'.

From Jakarta, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin was posted to the Soviet Union. There from 1977 to 1980, he remembers the posting as one that forced him to experience a different life altogether.

'Well, in Malaysian terms, communists were equivalent to terrorists, so there I was about to be posted to a communist-terrorist country. It was an experience to have to live under a socialist system. You have to get yourself adjusted, not only to the weather, but to the system. We were given three months to get used to the tempo of an organised, centrally-controlled country. On the whole, after nearly three years, one got used to it somewhat.'

From Moscow, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin returned to New York but this time in the very powerful position of Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Perhaps it was Wisma Putra's sense of mischief that sent him scurrying from the heart of socialism to the heart of capitalism.

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin laughs. 'The Russians kept on telling us about the evils of capitalism, the exploitation of man by man, the waste in capitalist society, and that profit is a dirty word.'

'Now New York was the direct opposite of Moscow. The Americans say how beautiful Fifth Avenue is the manifestation of wealth, shop windows and all that. To the Russians, that was a kind of waste. If the economy is efficient, things should not be put on display like that.'

On the United Nations, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says: 'The UN itself is again a good experience. The UN is a world unto itself. Resolutions, statements, words, become very important. You quarrel for hours over a comma or a full stop, things like that. To be able to get a resolution adopted is the height of one's achievement, even if the resolution is forgotten the next few days.'

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin believes that the UN is currently functioning closer to its ideals as outlined in the Charter. When he was Permanent Representative, the Cold War was still in force and it was difficult to imagine the kind of cooperation among the Big Powers at the Security Council level.

Only on one given subject which we were dealing with, somehow the Russians and the Americans worked together, and that was on the Antarctica. The issue went right across all that rivalry, the ideology.

And how has all this jet-setting affected his family life? 'Well, the children travelled with me when they were small. It was easier because they are all boys so they are fairly independent. But once they reached secondary school level, we let them stay at home, to get culturalised, so to say, otherwise they will be like foreigners.'

'It's funny but it seems none of them wants to follow in my footsteps,' Tan Sri Zainal Abidin smiles as he reels off the list of jobs his sons are holding now - two are engineers and two are bankers while the fifth one is studying in the United States.

Asked if he was disappointed, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin shrugs his shoulders. 'Not really. They should decide for themselves. But in my inner, inner heart, I wished they would consider joining the civil service. Maybe the fifth one, who is studying at Boston University. But he is taking up economics or business subjects ...'

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Down-to-earth

His voice trails off. 'I'm afraid joining the government is not on the priority scale of young people. The money is not there. All young people want to make money fast. In the private sector, the pay is better, opportunities better ...'

On what motivated him to join the Civil Service, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says: 'Actually in those days, growing up in Kota Bahru, everyone's son wanted to be a district officer, a schoolteacher, a lawyer or a doctor. We had no knowledge of what else was available in those days. After university, the first priority was to join the government. It was priority one for almost all Malays, apart from the fact we were all on scholarship.'

While there is much to be written about Tan Sri's past, there is also much to be said about his present positions and his future hopes.

On MIDA, for example, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says the job has been both interesting and educational.

'I regard it as complementing my previous job. When I was in the Foreign Office, I dealt mainly at the level of policy. But at MIDA, although we also deal with policy, the job is more down to earth and deals with concrete projects. So in a way, that gives me exposure to the other side of the coin. It's a good complement.'

'Dealing with business people who have specific problems and specific projects is a challenge. You have to help them to resolve them vis-à-vis government policies or government red tape. I think my previous post [as Secretary-General] did carry a certain amount of weight and influence over interdepartmental, inter-ministry matters.'

'I could pick up the phone and talk to the various secretaries-general without any difficulty, and they always cooperated. That made my job easier.'

'And the most obvious aspect is to be able to see the result of your work emerging a few months later ... in terms of buildings coming up and hundreds or thousands of jobs created. To know that you have contributed somehow is really a satisfying experience.'

On Perwaja, which is emerging stronger these days after the many initial problems, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says his post is non-executive but he keeps himself up-to-date through on-site visits to Kemaman.



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'I get to know a lot from [chief executive Tan Sri] Eric Chia,' he says. 'He is quite an interesting fellow in the sense that he is a man who rose from the bottom. He is one of the pioneers in this country who managed to reach the top. He has his own style. You can learn from how he organizes his factories and production units. Very successful. It's a good exposure for me.'

On his latest appointment, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says coming to ISIS is like a continuation of Wisma Putra days.

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Tan Sri Zainal Abidin remembers that when he was in Wisma Putra, there were cynics who felt wary over ISIS and warned him that 'if we are not careful, foreign policy will be run from ISIS.'

'I don't believe in that. Whatever ISIS does is really input into the development of policy. All fresh ideas and thinking on any given policy should be welcomed by everybody, most of all by Wisma Putra.'

Stretching the argument further, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin says the Civil Service should get used to the fact that inputs and ideas can come from every direction.

'As the implementors, they are the executives and they probably should come in themselves with much better inputs, on the basis of their own experience on the ground. The policies have to be implemented by them anyway.'

'Views might be different on any given issue but we must accept the fact that the political masters have the prerogative of deciding which is which. Once the decision is made, they have to implement.'

The official records will show that Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry, went on leave on February 4, 1988 prior to retirement on March 3, 1988.

'But I still maintain the same daily routine as before,' he says. 'Except I say now that since I have retired, I should go to office half an hour late. So instead of turning up at eight o' clock, I turn up at 8.30, just to prove the point that I have retired.'

Or has he? As this article shows, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin still leads a fairly active life. In between reading a Frederick Forsyth novel and the occasional round of golf, he remains true to his calling - to serve the nation first, always, and every time.