

## The Interview that never was ...

**W**hat was the scene at ISIS when news of Tun's demise reached us? What kind of imprints did Tun leave in the Institute of which he was so much a part? This article attempts to provide some answers. By **Soo Ewe Jin**, former ISIS Focus Editor and currently Deputy Executive Editor at the Star Publications Berhad.

THE heartbreaking news from halfway across the globe was transmitted to No 1 Pesiaran Sultan Salahuddin almost immediately. Another working day was about to start at the nation's premier think tank and as the staff trickled in, the news of Tun Hussein Onn's death in San Francisco — conveyed through a phone call from the Prime Minister's Department — was received.

There was an air of despondency, of sorrow; a feeling of emptiness which words could not articulate. Tun, as he was affectionately referred to, was very much a part of ISIS. And ISIS was very much a part of Tun. Some of us knew him at close quarters. Most of us knew him only from afar. But there was no doubt that the profound loss of one of the nation's favourite sons was felt by one and all on the morning of May 29.

When I joined ISIS in September 1988, I had marked in my diary that I would like to do an interview piece with Tun for ISIS Focus one day. He was not only our first chairman but a living historical figure with much to reveal and share.

His role was unique. His contributions to the institute, by all reckoning, were immeasurable. In the one and a half years since I joined ISIS, I had been taking down notes, making observations, figuring out the man from afar. I was looking through his speeches, selecting pictures, listening to him speak at conferences, at the dinner table — it was a journalistic trait of trying to learn as much about your subject before coming face-to-face with him.

Pulling out the diskette of these jottings on the morning of May 29, I found it to be in near com-



*Tun Hussein Onn*

plete shape — except for the part where I was to let Tun speak for himself. This then is the story of the interview that never was.

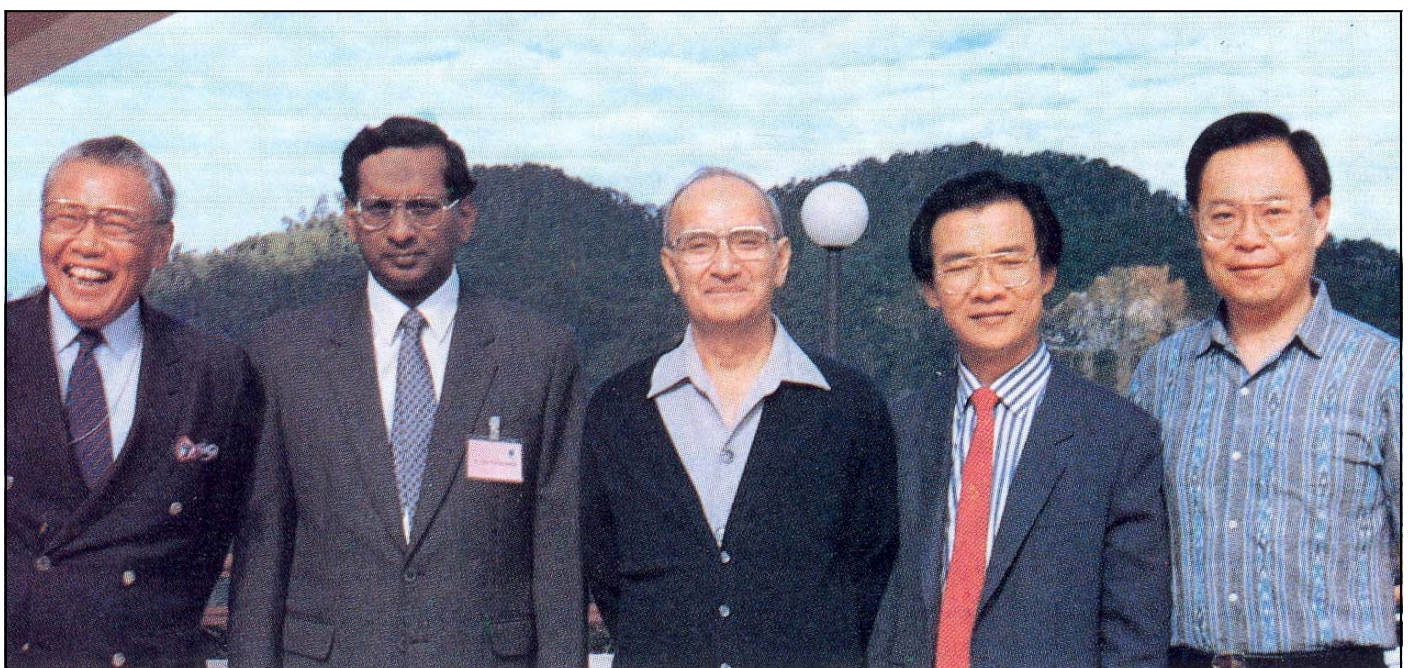
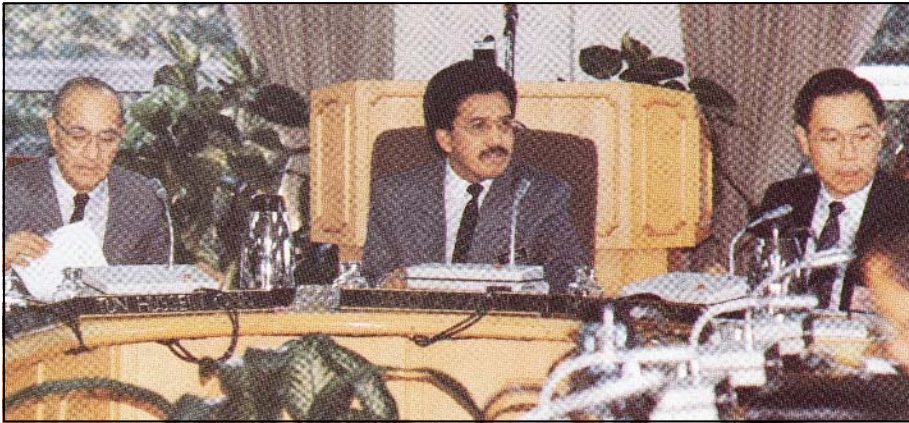
January 14, 1976. I remember the moment well. It was the day Tun (then Datuk) Hussein Onn announced to the nation that Tun Abdul Razak had passed away in London. I can still picture the tears. I can still hear the emotion-choked voice. It is an image that never fades away.

I remember too the days of apprehension at the height of the Harun crisis. I was still in Penang, far removed from the stand-off in Kuala Lumpur, but the school authorities were not taking chances — we were all prepared to be sent home at any time should the situation take a turn for the worse. I











remember then the firm hand of the judiciary, and the firm hand of the government of the day under Tun Hussein.

These are the two most vivid images of Tun each time I see him at any ISIS function. Tun, the man of compassion. And Tun, the man who told the nation — and especially the man who held a nation hostage — that all are equal before the law.

I wanted to find out from Tun himself what kind of thoughts ran through his head at those critical junctures. What manner of man is he who, on the day he took over the helm of the government, would break down so unashamedly in front of the nation he was to govern? What kind of man is he who, faced with an acute political problem that threatened to turn nasty, would hold firm and true to the calling of his office?

Tun Hussein resigned as Prime Minister on May 16, 1981, after undergoing a heart operation in February the same year. On his last day in office, he was quoted in the Press as saying he was going home to sleep. To many, that was a sign that Tun was going to relax and enjoy his retirement. The burden of public office was at last lifted from his shoulders and the nation was more than glad to wish him all the happiness he deserved.

But it was not long before Tun was back in the limelight when he was appointed Chairman of ISIS. With his commanding stature as a former Prime Minister and his vast experience in statecraft, Tun was the logical choice to head the fledgling institute when it started operations in January 1984.

It was an appointment befitting his status and a chance for him to continue serving the nation. Those who suggested that Tun would do no more than become a figurehead were terribly wrong.

The institute would not be where it is today if not for the able stewardship of Tun. His influence ensured us a stability which was much needed in the

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formative years. He steered the institute towards an agenda that included two of his pet topics — national unity and world peace.

And he worked hard at them. One needed only to attend an ISIS event to realize the ease with which Tun, the elder statesman, was able to welcome visiting heads of government and heads of state and compare notes with them. The intimacy and the frankness with which he was able to converse with these people who had a decisive hand in world affairs cannot be underestimated.

As an elder statesman, Tun was held in high esteem by individuals from all across the political spectrum. Those who found that they could not agree with each other were often seen to be more accommodating in the presence of Tun.

As ISIS Chairman, he was involved in major conferences as well as minor in-house meetings. Whether in a room of ten or in a big conference hall of 100, Tun was there to share his expertise and his wisdom. In his very humble way, he moved delegates to speak, sometimes from their heads, sometimes from their hearts, but rarely from their texts.

Tun believed that lasting peace in the world could be built brick by brick. He believed that institutes such as ISIS can go beyond the normal world of diplomacy to build bridges and tear down walls. It was a mission he was firmly committed to.

Many of the traits that were faithfully documented in his life as PM were brought very much into his role at ISIS.

It was apparent, for example, that the legendary six-inch white ruler with which he used to go through every speech, continued to be very much in use at ISIS. Tun would go through every draft of the speeches he was to deliver at ISIS functions with the same thoroughness.

Those of us who had to make the changes when the drafts were returned would often be amazed and tickled by the results. I used to comment, after each exercise, that Tun would make a very good sub-editor indeed. He did not like verbiage and would strike out long-winded phrases and replace them with simple words. His tightness in editing would have made any editor proud.

Tun also did not like the pronoun 'I'. One could see that here was a man deliberately and consciously making sure that it was the speech and not the speechmaker that was to take the limelight.

At meetings and conferences, Tun would measure his words before delivering them. Yet some of the most intimate 'confessions' could be heard within the closed walls of ISIS. In a soft-spoken voice, he would captivate the audience with his simple but profound observations of the many issues of the day. And when Tun talked, everybody listened.

The image of Tun as the gentleman statesman is accurate in every respect. At ISIS, he has shown the way for us all to be a little more gentlemanly, a little more statesmanlike. Long before ISIS was even conceptualized, Tun was quoted as saying: 'Many of the miseries of life are due to sacrificing the future for the present; the happiness of years to come for the satisfaction of the moment.'

He could not have realized that he would one day lead an institute committed to such a philosophy — and that his imprint would be there for all to see. In many ways, all of us here at ISIS have lost not only a leader, but a mentor and a friend.

It was Alexandar Pope who said, in 'Moral Essays':

*Statesman, yet friend to truth! Of soul sincere In action faithful, and in honour clear, who broke no promise, served no private end, who gained no title, and who lost no friend.*

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