

A salute to Said Zahari



By [Jomo Kwame Sundaram](#) - April 19, 2016 @ 11:00am

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Behind Said Zahari the icon, was Said Zahari the man.

More than anyone else in Malaysia and Singapore, Said Zahari’s name will surely be immortalised as symbolising the struggle for press freedom. The defining moment was, of course, the Utusan Melayu strike of 1961, when he led his colleagues to resist the takeover of the newspaper by interests tied to Umno, the ruling party then and now.

The strike was remarkable for many reasons, two of which need special mention.

FIRST, it involved Malay workers in a country where labour struggles had mainly been associated with ethnic Chinese and Indians. The strike lasted over 100 days – impressive by any standards – and marked the end of the honeymoon of organised labour with the post-colonial government; and,

SECOND, and even more remarkable, the strike was not primarily over workers’ welfare, but instead, sought to resist the imminent takeover and transformation of the previously independent Malay-language newspaper into an instrument of the ruling party.

Said was also one of the most prominent victims of repression by Lee Kuan Yew’s government in Singapore. He was arrested with over 100 others during the republic’s “Operation Cold Storage” in February 1963. He remained incarcerated without trial for 17 years, at the end of which he was confined by the authorities to a small island in the Tebrau Straits separating the island republic from Johor.

Throughout this time, his Malaysian-born-wife, Salamah, suffered great tribulations supporting their family, including their youngest daughter Norlinda, who was born after his arrest. In the early 1970s, Said’s poems from prison, smuggled out, were compiled, edited and published by his closest friend, the late Usman Awang, with English language translations by another dear friend, the late Dr M.K. Rajakumar, the last chairman of the Labour Party of Selangor, with assistance from former senator Dr Syed Husin Ali, himself a political detainee for six years after his arrest following the 1974 student-led

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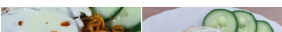
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by Said’s selfless and resolute determination despite his ordeal.

But behind Said Zahari the icon, was Said Zahari the man. His memoirs, published two decades ago, reveal how a “good son” — and grandson — grew up to make extraordinary and selfless sacrifices for a better, more just and democratic post-colonial nation with no thought of personal gain or advantage. They also reveal Said for the human being he was. Affable, generous, trusting, loving, humble and all too human, but also principled, defiant and uncompromising when it counted.

Said’s memoirs were not just political, but also personal, candidly sharing reminiscences of a long- gone era, without the cosmetic editing “great men” demand of their biographical narratives. Born of Javanese parents and just a little younger than Kuan Yew and (Tun Dr) Mahathir Mohamad, he grew up as a young Muslim-Malay boy in a rustic Singapore that no longer exists.

His memoirs tell of growing up, the Japanese occupation, coming of age, and his early working life in what must surely have been among the most exciting working environments in late colonial Malaya — the *Utusan Melayu* editorial office in Singapore, led by Yusof Ishak (later, the first president of Singapore) and A. Samad Ismail, the doyen of Malaysian journalism and unofficial patron of the progressive nationalist Malay literary movement, Asas 50.

Said was then sent north in 1955 to open the Kuala Lumpur office before Merdeka and covered the historic Baling peace talks. His memoirs revealed that Federation of Malaya chief minister Tunku Abdul Rahman never wanted the talks to succeed, but agreed to them to gain political advantage.

To break the *Utusan* strike in 1961, Said was banished from re-entering Malaya by Tunku. The following year was no less eventful, as the nationalist Parti Rakyat Brunei (PRB, the People’s Party of Brunei) captured all but one of the elected seats for the local authorities in the colonial sultanate. At the end of 1962, many PRB leaders were detained or exiled after a failed insurrection doomed from the outset. The rebellion occurred after the newly elected PRB-dominated legislative council was ignored by the colonial authorities.

Barely two months later, in early February 1963, Said himself was arrested under Operation Cold Storage for 17 years, only hours after he agreed to lead PRB’s fraternal party in Singapore, Parti Rakyat Singapura (PRS). (A fuller account of developments in the region then can be gleaned from Greg Poulgrain’s *The Origins of Konfrontasi*.)

After such an extraordinary life, Said remained modest, but generous and avuncular in his dealings with all. It says so much of him and so many of his colleagues that they came out of their protracted experiences of incarceration with so much of their humanity intact, if not enhanced. I often wondered whether Said would have made a successful transition from journalism to politics if he had not been so cruelly, cynically and quickly contained on the night of his political elevation.

But the course of subsequent events suggests that history is on Said’s side, namely the side of truth. Very importantly, too, Said’s memoirs reveal a complex and diverse Left, quite unlike the monolithic image promoted by the powers that be, left historians and the hostile media. This was

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with Chin Peng, the long-time secretary-general of Communist Party of Malaya.

Before being allowed to move to Kuala Lumpur two decades ago, he often stayed with us in Petaling Jaya when he was allowed into the country. I remember how some who had collaborated to cause him untold misery sought to redeem themselves, and always marvelled at his generosity of spirit.

One can only feel privileged to have known him when one contrasts his magnanimity with the petty vindictiveness that characterises so much of our society's modern political and social life.

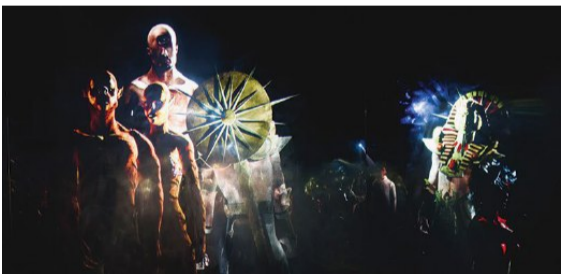
Although he said little about the matter, I saw how Said sought — despite his limited means — to try to make up to his family for his protracted involuntary absence. This must surely be one of the most difficult crosses one like him has had to bear. Can one ever compensate? How does one do so? How does one retain a broader perspective in trying to do so?

During his lifetime and beyond, we have all partaken of his love for truth, freedom, humanity and other cherished values, for which we will be eternally grateful. His was truly a life of great sacrifice for principles that continue to move us more than half a century later. Malaysia, Singapore, and indeed the region, will forever owe him and his comrades a debt that can never be repaid. It is a privilege to salute Said Zahari, and in doing so, to be inspired by his life.

(Revised from the foreword to Said Zahari's political memoirs published in Malay, English and Chinese)

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, an economist, is the third holder of the Tun Hussein Onn Chair in International Studies for 2016-2017

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