

16/06/1998

## The many faces of Kamil

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LONG LEGS carry the man across the room. Shoulders hunched and head slightly bowed, Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar utters his greetings. He was, and still is, a magnificent sight with silver hair framing his bald dome and piercing but inscrutable eyes. He is in his trademark dress - striped shirt with white collar, braces that strap his large frame and a red tie.

Kamil's office, tucked away in a corner of Wisma Putra's inner chambers and only a few steps from the foreign minister's office, is not decorated ostentatiously and has a touch of military austerity. But it doesn't look lived in; a fact attributed to the almost nomadic life he assumes as Special Envoy to the Prime Minister.

As daughter Anis Kamil, a New Straits Times journalist specialising in foreign affairs, complains, 'Half the time I don't even know where my father is.' Kamil pleads guilty, 'I always say, don't ask me where I am going but just know that I am going.'

Age, he is now 62, has not made him relinquish cigarettes. He reaches for his ciggy apologetically, puffing throughout the interview and casting it down at every click of the camera. His demeanour is more professorial than charming diplomat, preferring to talk about foreign policies than himself. One gets the feeling he is averse to attention and maybe, he doesn't care for the spotlight at all.

It was not by design that Kamil became a diplomat. His ambition was to be a soldier which he describes as a natural choice after having gone through the worst part of the Emergency. But the dream was aborted due to parental intervention coupled with his own filial obligation. (His father, who came to Malaysia from Medan at the age of 12 and rose from an office boy to a government clerk, wanted his children to join the civil service). From his happy-go-lucky student days, Kamil seems an unlikely candidate for a high-flying diplomat. Sports was his passion: he was captain of the Bukit Mertajam High School's football team, he was in Penang's under-18 football team, played rugby at MCKK (his nickname was 'Chengkerik', presumably because of his tall and lanky body) and represented Universiti Malaya in soccer.

Datuk Majid Mohamed, former deputy secretary special duty and roving ambassador who came by to visit Kamil during the interview, recalls, 'We were a playful lot. We floated from one language class to the other like a merry-go-round until there were no more classes to attend.'

Kamil admits with a wide grin, 'I took history in UM but I spent most of my time on the field. When the final examinations were over, my professor said I flunked but he would give me third class honours for my efforts on the field.'

If anything, his keen interest in history, the political intrigues and the internecine struggles of the world's leaders and nation-states is relevant in the course of his diplomat career because, as he puts it, 'You need to know who your enemies are before you plan any move against them; possess a sense of the past to look at the future and understand the present; and learn to recognise the intrigues of the past and present leaders.'

It's an abiding interest. At the moment, he is engrossed in Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*, which he describes as an entertainingly framed outline of Western thought

concerning the education of 14-year-old Sophie Amundsen. Dry? Note that this exposition of the West's weightiest thinkers are enlivened by up-to-date stuff urging female equality and United Nations peacekeeping.

Looking back, Kamil says he would have not done it differently if given a second chance. In a Lear-like soliloquy, he describes his years with Wisma Putra, spanning more than three decades, as 'a life of sweat and tears, laced with disappointments and frustrations, fulfilment and joy, a life enriched'.

The poor Kulim-born boy, who often endured the six-mile walk from school and whose only childhood luxury was a pair of football boots, has fashioned a place for himself as one of Malaysia's outstanding and perhaps irreplaceable diplomats, highly regarded by both local and foreign diplomats.

His seven-and-a half-year tenure as secretary-general in the foreign ministry saw Malaysia being on the forefront of several international issues. Out of its surge of muscular internationalism came a new mission for the diplomatic corps, a mission that Kamil would ride to glory. But of all his enduring contributions, perhaps the greatest is that he and his peers have built Wisma Putra into a formidable institution.

Those were heady and impressive years: Malaysia's role in the restructuring of the Commonwealth Secretariat, its leading role in the G-15, its initiatives in the OIC Contact Group to mobilise support for Bosnia and its vocal stance in the United Nations, particularly in the reform of the Security Council and its decision making process, Rio and post-Rio, the Uruguay Round and the WTO, among others. When retirement age beckoned, the government was loath to let him go and so, his service was twice extended - a first in the history of Wisma Putra.

Next to the flamboyant Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Kamil and close chum, Tan Sri Razali Ismail (who made Malaysia proud when he was nominated as president of the UN General Assembly), stand as two of Wisma Putra's colourful personalities. Both are Kedah-born; pursued Form Six at Malay College Kuala Kangsar, cherished the challenge of sports and rebelled against the blue-blood tradition there; both studied at Universiti Malaya, concentrating more on physical pursuits than scholastic ones and both joined the foreign ministry upon graduation in 1962. On a personal level, both went through two marriages and both married a foreign spouse the second time around.

Yet they are contrasting figures: Armani-clad, physically trim, fair Razali and ala Turnbull & Asser-clad, dark Kamil. Razali exudes vitality but Kamil is less exuberant. Razali, by his own admission in a previous interview, is vain but Kamil is less bothered with his physique. Razali is a mesmerising talker whereas Kamil is a contemplative albeit authoritative talker. Their styles differ and each reached the pinnacle of their career in different forms. But both are brilliant diplomats and skillful negotiators possessing sharp minds, quick wit and commanding presence. But Kamil is self-deprecating. He considers himself privileged to be part of the formulation, evolution and maturing of the country's foreign policy. He attributes Wisma Putra's achievements to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. 'It's his aggressive and pragmatic approach to the country's foreign policy that has enabled us to play a more assertive and meaningful role in international relations and propelled Malaysia onto the global scene,' says Kamil.

As he stoically insists, 'I never achieved greatness. I never knew I would be where I am today (pause) ... maybe I got it through wit. Flair? If so, nothing else but flair.'

His tone is one of blunt irreverence. Kamil does not consider himself an icon. Razali's tribute to him on his tenure as secretary-general suggests

the high regard he is held by others, 'There is Kismet, there is Karma and there is Kamil all working together. Nothing can go wrong.'

Kamil pursued his career with an almost messianic zeal. As observed by Datuk Hashim Muhd Dais, former deputy secretary-general who spent 30 years with Wisma Putra, 'He has always been bound by one sole objective - excellence.' Kamil relished the challenges, sallying into places no one would want to go as casually as if he were taking a stroll along Jalan Ampang. He recalls those early years when he and Razali were in service, 'We saw ourselves as soldiers and we had pride in our bosom to be representing a new country in the world. There was a sense of mission to launch Malaysia and stamp its claim so everyone would be aware of us. 'We were part of the evolutionary process, we got our feet wet in the foreign policy, we started from scratch and came to understand things without teachers, books or references but we went along. You know, we were the only batch that was never sent abroad for training. But I've to say that the guidance was given by our elders such as Ghazali Shafie and my predecessors. We were kicked in the ass all the time by the quick-tempered Ghazali and we could not afford to be faint-hearted in approaching our work for fear of facing a proper dressing-down by him.'

Still, pride did not compensate for inexperience. 'I was called up by Ghazali after only two weeks in office and was asked to put up a minute to the prime minister about an overflight of our airspace by a Russian aircraft. I had to find out what "a minute" was. Then, I happily put down my recommendation - that we agree to the overflight and that our fighter planes escort the Russian aircraft. I had the minute thrown back into my face within seconds. "What fighter planes?" he snapped at me. I quickly learned at that time that we had plenty of air and no force,' he reminisces.

Some describe Kamil as intimidating. Hashim explains, 'In the process of wanting his underlings to produce excellent work, he can be intimidating. In most cases, he would provide guidelines and advice. But it's not just a question of caning you. He "canes" you if you make mistakes despite the guidance given. He always delegates authority. If he has confidence in your ability, he expects results. If you make a mistake, he will publicly defend you. In private, he'll trash you. I don't consider that intimidating, it's necessary leadership.

'The other aspect of Kamil's leadership is that whatever he does, it is always done with a lot of magnanimity. He expects excellence but he doesn't push you to the wall. He always has his officers' welfare at heart and he'll fight the system so that the boys at Wisma Putra will be given the due recognition.'

Beyond disclosing the salient details of his childhood, he has little to say about how it actually affects him. One gets the feeling that when it comes to emotions, he detaches himself. But this is vintage Kamil. He has the ability to shift from one persona to another as a means to match, if not triumph over, his adversaries. An elusive quarry for anyone trying to understand him. Perhaps, his only true confidant is the man he sees in the mirror when he shaves.

It is an asset in his current position. As special envoy to the PM, he is said to be working behind the scenes - handling delicate and diplomatically sensitive missions. He won't say what the job entails but he admits, 'I do issues outside of conventional diplomacy.'

But it is probable that Kamil spends some of his time in the hot-spots in Africa or perhaps elsewhere too. The surge of Malaysia's muscular internationalism spells a new mission: mediator and peace-maker. Perhaps unknowing to many, Kamil is playing an instrumental role in mapping the country's influence in creating a New World Order. As he says, 'Towards

the end of my tenure as sec-gen, I was doing some work which is not known to many.' For instance, at the height of the bloodletting in Bosnia, he was there where he says, without elaborating further, 'I almost got shot.' There are framed photographs of Kamil posing with some of the world's eminent personalities, a few whom the West calls trouble-makers. One picture shows a kaftan-clad Kamil like a latter-day T E Lawrence schmoozing with the Africans. He can pass off as an African or Arab. He blends easily; there is really nothing prominent in his features that make him stand out like a sore thumb in places like Somalia. Why, you marvel, he could easily play Agent Bond. Wild thoughts? Maybe. Kamil remains impassive as he speaks of his many roles in the diplomatic corps, 'I was many things at different times - some that can be said and some which had better not be said.'

But his ability to expunge sentiment when and where necessary does not make him a hard person. Hashim describes Kamil as a caring person, a friend-until-we-die type who will walk the extra mile for his friends. In professional or personal dealings, it is common to hear Kamil say, 'So-and-so kawan aku, tolong jaga dia ...'

Hashim says, 'He values friendship. He'll defend his friends. But to be a friend, you have to go through various experiences. I can't disclose the cases but take it from me, there've been many occasions where he'll make sacrifices for his friends.'

Dalil Awin, a close friend to both Kamil and Razali since their school days and former purchasing manager with Motorola, relates how Kamil brought a traditional medicine-man from Thailand to nurse one of Dalil's family members who was ill. Kamil paid for the expenses. 'He regards me as a family member,' says Dalil. As Hashim says, 'With Kamil, it is susah dan senang bersama.'

Kamil speaks his mind, or as he emphasises it, 'I always have to speak my mind', which has earned him the respect of many. His friends regard him as an anchorage of honesty in a world of flattery and guile. Still, his candour may not endear him to a few. Hashim says, 'Then, that is because they don't like to be told the truth. But those who know him know he is sincere.'

Agrees Dalil, 'He is very sincere and direct. If people don't like it, it is because they expect him to move with the wind ... and he would never do that.'

The trait came into play throughout his career: Two of his postings were brief since he 'couldn't agree with the ambassador and on the second occasion, there was a clash of perceptions'. 'I was sent to the UN, New York and soon, I got the hang of the work where you just "bang, bang, bang". They must have liked what I was doing because I was sent there to "bang" for a second time.' By his own admission, he 'used to quarrel a lot with Ghaz over the boat people issue.' Often, he did not mince his words like the time he told the Japanese they should not robotise relations during his Tokyo posting.

He comes across as a principled thinker, seemingly unconstrained by apolitical. All his life, he had been an Umno card-bearer. That is, until recently. He did not get any reply when renewing his membership with the Kulim Umno branch after the Umno split in the mid-80s. Perhaps, someone out there doesn't like the idea of Kamil in active politics.

'When I applied, I never got it (membership) back. There was no response in the last two years. I told Pak Lah (Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) about it and he tried to get me into Bukit Bintang Umno branch but my application was not accepted. So I told PM, forget it. I told him I was rejected, or if not rejected, not responded to,' he says indignantly.

He lights up a cigarette and takes a few long, appreciative puffs.

'Maybe they are afraid of me. I'm not interested in being a minister, I'm not interested in office. I've had enough of work. Perhaps, this is one of the low points in my life.'

Has he ever harboured some political ambitions in early life?

'Yes, but I was toying with the idea of contributing in a different way. I wanted to immerse myself in work for a few more years but as I got more groove to the kind of diplomat life, it was quite difficult to change course half-way. The thought of joining politics became less and less. I was happy to remain where I was. As I said, I will not change it ... but I'll tell you something interesting. When the late Tun Abdul Razak was alive, he told me to join politics as he had something in mind for me. I told him to give me a few years but unfortunately, he died shortly after that.'

At the 1996 Umno general assembly, Dr Mahathir put on record his appreciation for Kamil - to the surprise of delegates who responded by giving a thunderous clap. It was the first time a civil servant was honoured in an assembly whose protagonists are largely the powers-that-are, aspiring politicians and power-seekers. Some, who pondered on the significance of the honourable mention, saw it as a grand political design to bring Kamil into the fold of main stage Umno politics. His name was bruited about for some kind of political candidacy but the rumour was squashed after Dr Mahathir appointed Kamil to his present designation. Smiling serenely, Kamil lights another ciggy and blows the smoke nonchalantly past his thick glasses. It drifts back over his silverish pate. Evidently, he is leading a blissful semi-retirement life. Home is at Jalan Ampang's Eastern Apartments with wife, Lena, and feline companions. He had never liked cats until he was 'adopted' by a stray non-pedigree cat which took a liking to his bearlike figure. It slept on the bed one day and presented the couple with a litter of kittens and needless to say, man and feline live happily together.

The twelfth in a family of 20 where 14 survived, Kamil has only two children - a choice dictated by first-hand observation that 'having to feed 14 children was no easy task for my father'. He has not dwelled much on whether his nomadic life has exacted a toll on his family. As he says, his wife understands his job while the children had been living apart from him since their early childhood. Still, he ponders, 'I don't know how we adjust to living apart and getting ourselves knitted back in the family unit. It can be quite trying. But it's a question of how you adjust to life itself.' A long pause and a shrug of the shoulder, 'Perhaps, all mistakes will affect one's life.'

He has an arrangement with the prime minister that he is free to pursue other things such as corporate functions and his interest in the local and regional art scene. His personal art collection includes pieces by Ibrahim Husin and Latif Mohideen.

Apart from being the chairman of Sutera Harbour Resort Sdn Bhd, he is also co-chairman of Malaysia-Thailand Joint-Venture Growth Triangle. He has also formed his own company which he says, 'does nothing but just in case something comes along'. Sports? 'I play bad golf on Sundays,' he says wryly.

Age has made him delightfully mellow. His low point in life, he says, was when he was told 'by the girl (at campus) whom I thought was the girl for me that I was not the right boy for her'. This from a man who has no regrets! He does not care to write any memoirs, not even as an obligation to history, since he deems such books to be self-serving. And don't write any eulogy yet. He plans to 'live up to 87, just like my father did, so there's plenty of time before that'. Yes sir, we'll be hearing more of

Kamil.

(END)