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Zam - Out of 'booby trap chair' into Dewan Negara

Joceline Tan

"THIS is a booby trap chair." Former Utusan Malaysia editor-in-chief Datuk Zainuddin Maidin had thrown his head back and laughed uproariously at hearing those words from his predecessor Datuk Mazlan Nordin.

This was in 1991, on the day Zainuddin took on the top editorial job in this well-read and influential Malay newspaper from Mazlan who was retiring.

But its poignant significance was to come only years later when Zainuddin had to leave the top post under rather dramatic circumstances.

He wasn't asked to resign as widely assumed; he was appointed editorial adviser to the newspaper or, as they say in polite circles, "kicked upstairs".

He has since summarised the 1992 incident as a case where a campaign against English language commercials strayed from its aims and, as he wrote in his popular Awang Selamat column, "a serious issue became trivial".

Things then came to a head when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in a letter published in Utusan, refuted claims by the newspaper that he asked to use English on Indonesian television during the Non-Aligned Meeting in Jakarta.

Zainuddin was holidaying in London and his No. 2, Samad Mahadi - a nephew of Dr Mahathir - was in charge. But he took responsibility for what happened.

Thus ended a career with Utusan spanning 33 years, a third of which were spent on the "booby trap chair". In fact, his entire adult life till then had been spent in Utusan.

Now, seven years later, he is executive chairman of Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn Bhd.

Zainuddin - "everyone calls me Zam" - is 58, looks a good 10 years younger and has the "oomph" of someone even younger.

His cross-cultural roots - his mother was an Indian Muslim from Malabar - shows in his somewhat heavy-set features and, some say, is one of the reasons for his youthful looks.

His stocky figure has changed little in the last 20 years and he still has more hair than most men half his age.

And he has this boyish exuberance, a certain sense of impatience; he hardly sat still throughout the interview.

"I cannot rest... always have to be doing something - reading, driving, gardening," he confesses.

Tomorrow shall see this former journalist sworn in as a member of the Dewan Negara.

The Senator-to-be seems thrilled by the appointment, describing it as an "honour" and a "recognition of Malaysian journalism".

More interestingly, the appointment has generated talk that he has been "rehabilitated".

It amuses him for, as far as he is concerned, he has always been loyal to the "national agenda".

This was plain from his best-selling book, The Other Side of Mahathir, published in 1994.

His admiration for, and attachment to, Dr Mahathir was undisguised, so much so that quite a few readers thought he was trying to worm his way back into favour.

But, Zainuddin, more than anyone else, knew his departure was a no-return kind of journey.

And not once did it cross his mind to ask back for his job.

"I'm not like that," he says simply.

HIS sentiments for Dr Mahathir date back to his boyhood in Kedah and evolved as both their careers prospered in contrasting, yet interwoven directions.

According to an Utusan staff: "Zam already knew Dr Mahathir when he (Zam) was still riding a bicycle to assignments."

He admires Dr Mahathir, in particular, for his ability to criticise the Malays yet imbue in them confidence and pride, and for daring to resist religious extremism.

Those feelings, it appears, remain for he insists: "I don't have any grudges (against Dr Mahathir), not even a little."

In fact, he was known as "Mahathir's man". But Umno politics, as he readily admits, had something to do with his departure from Utusan.

Whether one cares to admit it or not, newspapers in Malaysia are intricately, if not unabashedly, linked to politics, politicians and political parties.

Thus, while Utusan prides itself as a voice of the Malay masses and a champion of what are known as bangsa dan negara issues, it also makes no bones about being an "Umno paper" in the sense that both share a common mission - the interests of the Malays.

According to Bernama chairman Datuk Abu Bakar Abdul Hamid: "It's difficult to explain. Utusan is pro-Government yet critical."

It was within such a socio-political context that Zainuddin managed Utusan - an open-minded man reined in by political considerations.

"Let's just say we are moderate. We do criticise... in a light way," he says while conceding that the paper does play a "different role during general elections".

Social critic and Utusan columnist Rustam A. Sani, known for his independent and original perspectives on issues, recalls that "everything I sent was published as it was".

"One interesting thing about Zam was his impatience with the conservative strands of Malay society... in spite of his religious school background.

"I think he tried to open his mind to everything modern. He is a liberal-minded Malay who supported certain Malay issues," he said.

Still, Rustam was surprised when the former editor invited him to write the foreword to his Mahathir book, which he obliged with grace.

Many say now that Zainuddin disliked taking sides in internal political feuds but as any Malaysian editor would know only too well, trying to stay neutral in politics is like walking a tightrope without a net.

For instance, some Umno leaders were known to be upset when he sent a team to write an investigative series on Umno's 1990 loss to Pas in Kelantan.

"I do not believe in giving support to any one side... then you are promoting someone just because he belongs to one team.

"Sometimes, even Dr Mahathir was not happy with us. That's why (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) said I am a difficult friend to Dr Mahathir."

He remembers an evening at the National Press Club where Dr Mahathir was the guest of honour. At one point in the evening, he says the Prime Minister, in that direct manner of speaking associated with Kedah people, asked him, "who voted you to speak on behalf of the people?"

Zainuddin was unfazed and when he stood to speak, this "difficult friend" to Dr Mahathir said, among other things: "People vote us everyday when they buy our newspaper but politicians are voted in only once every

five years."

What was very clear though is that he "lived and breathed news".

"Zam does not have many close friends... Utusan was his life," says Rosnah Majid, former economic editor of the paper and now a full-time politician.

"He really cared for the paper, it meant everything to him... we knew that, so we put up with his ways," adds Utusan deputy group editor Khalid Mohamed.

Among some of "his ways", according to associates, was a near obsessional devotion to his job, a pepper-hot temper and a taste for seven-day work weeks - which would have been fine had he not expected the same of others.

He seemed fuelled by an endless supply of adrenalin. His day would begin early with a perusal of more than a dozen newspapers; by the time he reached his desk, he already had the day's story ideas mapped out in his head.

He is also said to belong to the old school of editors who thought a good ticking-off - never mind if it could be heard from the other end of the room - was one of the best ways for a reporter to learn.

But in many ways, he never let go of the kampung boy part of him.

For instance, he would find time, no matter how busy, to nip over to his favourite stall in Jalan Masjid India for roti canai and teh tarik. He often drove straight there from the airport after an overseas trip.

But as pointed out by the man himself, his dedication to Utusan was possible also because of his wife Datin Zaiton Zainol Abidin's devotion to their home.

Zainuddin was only 19, fresh out of school, when he began stringing first for Warta Negara and then Utusan in Alor Star. Actually, his father who ran a modest coffeeshop in Kuala Muda wanted him to be a religious teacher.

But several events steered him towards journalism. One was the way people rushed for the newspapers to get the latest on the Natrah affair.

And he was intrigued that reporters witnessed history-in-the-making such as Said Zahari's (then with Utusan) reports on the Baling talks.

Aziz Ishak's (also with Utusan) experience at being called up by Gerald Templar for reporting that one of the Sultans didn't fast during Queen Elizabeth's coronation also left a lasting impression on the young man.

"After being scolded by the general as a wartawan tikus, Aziz Ishak wrote that he had planned to slam the door on his way out but unfortunately, the heavy door closed so slowly, it failed to make a sound. I could never forget reading that."

He credits Said Zahari for giving him a deep sense of nationalism and Tan Sri Melan Abdullah - another editor he worked with - for nurturing in him the love and pride for the paper.

"But my mentor was Mazlan Nordin. He made me into a real journalist, introduced me to books, encouraged me to socialise, to listen, to be inquisitive. I had excellent teachers."

Zainuddin evidently passed on what he had learnt. Rosnah, one of his best "students", credits him for honing her into the never-say-die political journalist that she was.

"He was very receptive to ideas... he let me do stories many editors would not go near," says Rosnah.

But Zainuddin was no high-brow intellectual going by his Awang Selamat columns. He preferred simple language, down-to-earth anecdotes and folksy analogies. His reasoning: Utusan was meant not only for the elite but for people from all walks of life.

And he was realistic about himself. At his farewell party back in 1992

he told the Utusan staff: "I did not have qualifications but, with experience, built up the newspaper. But (Datuk) Johan (Jaaffar) (his successor), with qualifications and no experience, will do even better."

He was probably trying to be magnanimous but it is possible this very seasoned newsman had also sensed the shifting moods of the times.

For he says now: "I had been there a long time. I could see how different the younger reporters were from (myself) when I started. The company is just an employer to them... so different from how I felt about Utusan."

He insists he does not miss his old job. If that's true, then he has let go of the intoxicating allure of power far more easily than others.

After all, a newspaper editor's job, particularly of Utusan's influence, is not to be scoffed at; the post, "booby trap chair" and all, holds a power that has to be experienced to be defined.

Zainuddin did have one final meeting with Dr Mahathir after the incident. He recalls the Prime Minister telling him that he missed his Awang Selamat column whereas he told Dr Mahathir of his wish to spend some time abroad.

"I said to Mahathir: `I don't want my shadow to disturb Johan. I don't want to be like Tunku (Abdul Rahman) who could not accept you because I accept Johan."

His loyalty to Utusan, too, has not changed an iota.

"It is still the best paper as far as I'm concerned," he says of the newspaper to which he had devoted the best part of his life.