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Of memories that are not rose-tinted

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NOT everything in the journalist's formula of the 5Ws - what, when, where, who, why - is in the news report which appears in the newspaper the next day. Missing, for example, is why a leader said or did something.

In matters political the explanation might come later, especially if the journalist himself is involved. When he writes his memoir, that is.

One such is *Cerita saya* - sebuah memoir politik by Said Zahari, once editor of the *Utusan Melayu* for several years, and considered leader of the editorial staff and workers' strike in 1961 which lasted 93 days.

In the aftermath he was banished from Malaya (as it was then known) and about a year later after his return to Singapore he was picked up during "Operation Cold Storage" and thereafter became a political prisoner for 17 years until his release in 1979.

In May 1989 the order barring him from entering Malaysia was revoked by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Several years later Said was appointed *Karya Tamu* at Universiti Kebangsaan and it was there he began to write his memoir.

Recounted was his involvement in the *Utusan Melayu* strike, his detention in Singapore and his meeting with Chin Peng, secretary-general of the defunct Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in Bangkok early this year.

It took place after Said had already completed his book some passages of which referred to the role of "The Plen", the MCP intermediary during the turbulent days before Singapore's merger with Malaysia.

Ironic for Said was the invitation to attend the 50th anniversary of *Utusan Melayu* in May 1989 and to write a special article on the strike.

Thus mentioned in the memoir is his view that the strike was not only a momentous event for *Utusan* itself but also of historic proportion for the print media and journalism in Malaysia. It was a watershed.

Of great interest is the story of his meeting with Chin Peng in Bangkok following an invitation to attend an international seminar on the global economy and politics at Chulanlongkorn University in March this year.

Together with him at the seminar was Professor K.S. Jomo from University Malaya. Said writes in his memoir's epilogue: "The main purpose of my meeting with Chin Peng was to seek his views and opinion on my analyses and criticisms of the politics pursued by 'The Plen' in Singapore".

He recalled seeing Chin Peng for the first time in December 1955 during the Baling peace talks with then Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. Said was then the *Utusan Melayu* reporter covering the talks.

Mentioned then was Chin Peng's greeting in fluent Malay and Said's reply in Mandarin at their first meeting at breakfast which lasted till lunchtime. At times Chin Peng's Malay was interspersed with Javanese.

Referred to by Said was a chapter on Partai Rakyat Singapore in his memoir on political happenings in Singapore in 1957/58 involving 'The Plen' (Chuang Pi' in Chinese) who played a role in the defeat of four of the party's candidates in an election.

Chin Peng came again as Said was about to return to Kuala Lumpur. The story continues: "Ching Peng expressed his desire to invite me for lunch.

"After lunch we continued chatting for about four hours till the arrival of the taxi to bring me to the Bangkok airport.

"Suddenly I discovered that I didn't have any Thai baht in my wallet to pay the airport tax for the return trip to Kuala Lumpur. I asked Chin Peng how much the airport tax was as I wanted to change my Malaysian ringgit.

"Chin Peng quickly replied, Said, there's no need for you to change any more money. Here's 500 bahts for the airport tax. Don't give it a thought, please accept.

"I accepted the money, saying `Thank you Chin Peng' in Mandarin."

Presented to Said and autographed by Chin Peng was a book The Communist Party of Malaya, Malaysia and Thailand - The talks ending the armed struggle of the Communist Party of Malaya by General Datuk Kitti Ratabachaya.

Quote: "As Chin Peng was signing the autograph Dr Jomo came along. I told him about the airport tax. Jomo immediately took 500 bahts from his pocket and passed them to Chin Peng, and jokingly remarked, `Pak Said is forgetful as he's getting old'. We laughed."

Noted too in the memoir was Said's visit to Jakarta in 1983 in his capacity as editor of Asia Research Bulletin, the monthly economic journal published by Dow Jones and Times Organisation Singapore.

During the brief visit he met with Adam Malik, once Indonesian Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Foreign Minister for several years before becoming Vice-President.

He recalled that they once had dinner at the Latin Quarter Restaurant in New York.

There was dinner with old journalist friends, including a few editors of once-influential newspapers in Indonesia in the old days.

Some had lost their jobs following the abortive coup on Sept 30, 1965 (Gerakan Sept 30) given the acronym Gestapu.

For Said, now 71, looking to the past is not meant to be nostalgic. For him memories are not rose-tinted.

Reaffirmed is the motivation for his stance in matters journalistic and political. To change after 17 years as a political prisoner would be a betrayal of one's self.

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