

15/11/2000

(Book extract)

Excerpted from A. Samad Ismail: Journalism and Politics, edited by Cheah Boon Kheng (Utusan Publication and Distribution)

A genuine nationalist

By S. Husin Ali

IN July 1976, A. Samad Ismail was arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA). I heard the news while I was at the detention camp in Kamunting where I had already been detained for more than one and a half years under the same law.

A few days after A. Samad Ismail's detention, I was transferred to Kuala Lumpur and locked up in a cell, in a place the whereabouts of which I am still uncertain. My cell was always locked except for a few minutes when it was opened to allow me to go to the toilet.

I spent about six and half months in that cell. During the first two months, I had to sleep on the cement floor without the comfort of mattress and pillow. My clothes, spectacles, toothbrushes, comb and towels were not allowed to be kept in the cell. I was also denied reading material, pens and pencils.

I was never told why I was locked up there. But gradually it dawned upon me that it had something to do with A. Samad Ismail's detention. During the interrogations, I was asked a lot of questions about my relationship with him.

On the day of my arrival in the cell, at about 2.00 a.m., I was rudely awakened from my sleep and taken to an air-conditioned room ... I was questioned by several officers, sometimes by two, and at other times by five, officers ... I believe that for three days and nights, I did not have a wink of sleep.

They asked me a lot of questions. They asked me questions about myself, about other people and about A. Samad Ismail. I remember one of them asked me: "What are your views about A. Samad Ismail?"

"He is a good man and a very clever man," I replied frankly.

"Clever? Lee Kuan Yew also says he is very clever. So you agree with Lee?" another officer asked.

"There are many of Lee Kuan Yew's views with which I don't agree. But in so far as they concern A. Samad Ismail's brilliance, I agree with him," I replied.

"But he is a communist," another officer interjected.

"Lee Kuan Yew, who knew him long ago, has said he is a communist," said the first officer.

I thought to myself that the communist bogey had often been used by certain people to destroy their political enemies. I had known long ago that the Singapore authorities had an intense dislike for A. Samad Ismail. Even before my transfer to Kuala Lumpur from Kamunting, I had read that A. Samad Ismail was arrested because of a so-called confession by a detainee in Singapore.

But I was reluctant to reveal my thoughts on the matter. I only said: "Actually, I do not know whether A. Samad Ismail was a communist or not. But I know that he loves his people. He is well-known for his fight against colonialism. He fought for independence. To me, he is a genuine nationalist."

They insisted that A. Samad Ismail was a communist. They even tried to force me to confess that I too was a communist. They said that if I

confessed, I would be released.

They resorted to various tactics from the soft approach to the tough stance. But I refused to admit to something which was not true.

They also wanted me to admit that I was the middleman between the communist underground and Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Musa Hitam. Why did they want me to invent such stories? I could not understand it at the time.

Only when I was brought back to Kamunting and read the back numbers of the newspapers which I could not read while I was in solitary confinement in Kuala Lumpur, did I understand that there was a power struggle within Umno. There were people who were bent on becoming Prime Minister and wanted to "fix" Mahathir and Musa ... When I was freed later, I was told that these groups had wanted to force A. Samad Ismail to implicate Mahathir and Musa too.

If during those days of solitary confinement, A. Samad Ismail and I had submitted readily to them by making false confessions, it is possible that the history of this country would have followed a very different path. Mahathir might not have become the Prime Minister or Musa his Deputy.

Soon after, A. Samad Ismail made a confession over television that he had been involved in communist activities. But that was long ago when he was a young man. Why detain him and torment him in his old age?

Until today, I do not know why A. Samad Ismail made the confession. My experience in detention has taught me that there are many reasons why a detainee makes confessions. A. Samad Ismail surely has his own reasons.

Even if it was true that he was once involved with the communists, over the years of my relationship with him, I grew to recognise him as a genuine nationalist. From his activities and his writings, I have the impression that his love for his people and his concern for the freedom of man is so strong as to transcend everything.

I had known about A. Samad Ismail long before I met him personally. When I was a small boy, my father used to ask me to read the Utusan Melayu to him while he lay down to rest. Once in a while he would mention A. Samad Ismail's name. He said A. Samad Ismail was a courageous and brilliant journalist.

When A. Samad Ismail was arrested in 1951 and later released together with Devan Nair after nearly three years of detention, I read all the news about him in the Utusan Melayu. When I asked my father about it, he would explain that Samad Ismail was detained because he had fought against British colonialism ...

Not long after that, I followed the polemic between A. Samad Ismail and Alex Josey, a British journalist and former director of information in the Federation. The debate centred around the position of the Malay language and the English language ...

To me, A. Samad Ismail's writing during the debate on language had succeeded in demolishing the traditional feeling of awe and inferiority vis-a-vis the English language and the so-called privileged position of the colonized. I am not exaggerating when I say that his writings inspired me to have great confidence in the Malay language and in my own people, and sowed the seeds of nationalism in my heart.

I first met A. Samad Ismail personally in 1955 after entering the University of Malaya in Singapore. At that time, Singapore was the centre of intellectual activity among the Malays. One of the centres where Malay politicians, journalists and writers met and gathered was the Utusan Melayu ...

My impression of A. Samad Ismail during the meeting was not altogether favourable. I had worshipped him from afar for so long. But when I came close to him, I felt something of a disappointment. He did not at all appear to be an overpowering or extraordinary personality as I had

imagined all the while. He was carelessly dressed. Throughout the function, he slouched over the wooden chair and continuously picked his teeth with a matchstick. Once in a while, he would break into loud laughter although I could not quite understand what amused him.

My relationship with A. Samad Ismail after that was not close. I went to Utusan in Cecil Street quite often. A. Samad Ismail and his friends used to attend functions held by us in the University, especially functions of the Persatuan Bahasa Melayu Universiti Malaya (PBMUM). At such gatherings, A. Samad Ismail spent most of his time joking with us and telling us dirty stories. He could be amusing and shocking at the same time.

But in serious situations, A. Samad Ismail was a different man. At work, he was the most disciplined and diligent of men. At meetings or discussions, A. Samad Ismail overshadowed others with his mature views. It was under such conditions that A. Samad Ismail really impressed me ...

My relationship with A. Samad Ismail became closer after he moved to Kuala Lumpur to become the editor of the Berita Harian ...

I began frequenting A. Samad's Ismail's house at night. He rarely went out at night after a day's work in the office. My relationship with him and with Kak Midah became closer. I felt as if I was a member of his family.

I often noticed some kind of restlessness in him. But he could still tell us outlandish jokes and laugh in that familiar loud voice of his. Every time I went to see him, he would treat me with warmth and friendliness. We talked a lot but it was mostly just plain talk. But sometimes some serious subjects would crop up at my insistence and we would talk about culture, social problems and politics ...

When A. Samad Ismail moved from his home in the old section of Petaling Jaya to his new rented house in Jalan Lembah, we found him busy pounding on his typewriter. He had started to write his novels.

Every night whenever I visited him, I could see A. Samad Ismail typing furiously, and within a month he had a novel ready for publication. But A. Samad Ismail never bothered to clean up the raw manuscript. Such work was invariably entrusted to Usman Awang.

He wrote novel after novel, and if I am not mistaken, he wrote about eight novels within two years. Most of the novels deal with some aspects of his life, although they scarcely scratch its surface. The stories normally relate to incidents or issues of the moment in society ...

A. Samad Ismail became close to some of the leaders of Umno and the government. Often when I visited him at home, he would be busily engaged in some serious writing. He never told me what he was actually doing, although sometimes he would laugh loudly and say, "Ah, sit down, Sin ... I have to finish this work in a little while."

Relations between A. Samad Ismail and some of his close friends with the nation's leaders must have been very close, much to the envy of some of his old friends across the causeway. They must have felt ill at ease and a little threatened, perhaps. There were people on the little island who thought that A. Samad Ismail could be dangerous if he was allowed to be too close with the leaders in the Federation. It seems this was one of the reasons behind the allegations that he had carried out activities detrimental to Singapore, allegations which ultimately led to his detention in 1976.

(END)