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In His Majesty's Civil Service

iewed by Sharifah al-Attas

YANG MENURUT PERINTAH

By Datuk Wan Mansor Wan Abdullah

Arkib Negara Malaysia, pp247

URUSAN Seri Paduka Baginda. The words, bold and black upon the envelope, lend weight to its contents even before it is opened. And - lest, upon reaching the end of the letter within, the recipient neglect to accord it due deference - the final phrase reminds him of its gravity: Yang Menurut Perintah.

It is this latter that Datuk Wan Mansor Wan Abdullah has chosen as title for his memoirs - memoirs spanning three decades in the nation's civil service.

What, one may well wonder, is so interesting about 30 years as a government servant? Ah - but what years they were!

Chronicling the growth of a new nation, Yang Menurut Perintah encompasses independent Malaya's first general election in 1959; the end of the Emergency the following year; the 1963 formation of Malaysia; Confrontation with Indonesia; the Federal Land Development Authority schemes of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein; the turmoil and tragedy of May 13, 1969 ... all events which strike an unmistakable chord in the national consciousness.

It also offers intriguing observations about the personalities of the nation's movers and shakers. The country's first Prime Minister, when presented with a 27-year-old Wan Mansor, groaned in mock dismay: "Depa ni hantak kat saya orang muda-muda, nak suruh saya latih!"

Tunku Abdul Rahman, recalls the author, was a great believer in the power of a noonday nap. After lunch, he would invariably urge the writer to pi balik tidok. Resuming after asar, he and his officers would take tea in an atmosphere of easy camaraderie, working steadily until maghrib.

The Prime Minister was an early riser. After subuh one morning, wishing to compose a speech, he had his bodyguard, Corporal Arshad, take dictation. After a time, he asked that the result be read back to him - whereupon Pak Chat was forced to admit that his jawi hadn't been equal to the task!

"Celaka, hang!" moaned Tunku Abdul Rahman in mild chagrin, "Berbuih mulut aku - satu apa pun hang tak tulis!"

As private secretary, Wan Mansor was instructed to use his discretion regarding which letters addressed to the Prime Minister he should bring to the latter's attention, and which he was to kalpiakkan himself ... meaning deal with as he saw fit.

What, Tunku Abdul Rahman was asked on a 1964 visit to L.B. Johnson's United States, was the difference between his private secretary and his personal secretary?

"One," answered the premier, "looks after my office.

"The other looks after me!"

Tun Abdul Razak, notes Wan Mansor, was of another character altogether. No-nonsense and to the point, he demanded diligence - and rewarded it.

Informed that the country's Treasury had refused to purchase the headlease of historic Malaysia Hall, at Bryanston Square near London's Marble Arch, he didn't mince words:

"The Treasury sometimes makes stupid decisions," he declared. "Cable them immediately, saying I agree."

Wan Mansor's refreshingly frank recollections continue.

"Meetings with Dr Mahathir," he writes of the fourth Prime Minister, "were serious affairs. He made pronouncements as though they were commands. No one dared question him, or comment.

"If someone emboldened himself to open his mouth - especially if he disagreed - Dr Mahathir skewered him with a stare which instantly paralysed his thoughts! All present tensed, and the meeting was swiftly brought to a close.

"Perhaps it was this that gave rise to the accusation that Dr Mahathir is dictatorial."

It's a shame that this fun and forthright book, written in informal Malay, is not illustrated with images as arresting and evocative as the events it describes. With a singular lack of imagination, the publisher has peppered Yang Menurut Perintah not with the treasure trove of photographs it undoubtedly possesses, but with a meagre selection of predictable pictures and posed portraits: the author with colleagues; with Malaysia's High Commissioner in London; with the Sultan of Selangor.

At the last, Wan Mansor reminds the civil service:

"Their responsibility is great. It would be sad indeed if they interpreted only literally the phrase `Yang Menurut Perintah'."