

30/08/2001

Seize the opportunities

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IN the days leading to the proclamation of Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957, lawyer Abdul Aziz Zain, who was then 35, was preparing for his trip home from England. He had trained as a special prosecutor at the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in London.

He arrived in Kuala Lumpur on the eve of the historic day, beaming with pride but conscious of the challenges that lay ahead for the fledgling nation.

Earlier in 1955, having just been admitted to the Middle Temple as a barrister-at-law, he had met Tunku Abdul Rahman in London when the Tunku led the Merdeka mission of the Alliance Party to negotiate independence with the British.

Aziz and other Malayan students in London had hosted a dinner for the Tunku's delegation at one of the British capital's leading hotels.

The significance of "independence" couldn't be better encapsulated than in Tan Sri Dr Abdul Aziz Zain's personal experiences. Now approaching 80, he has lived through four colonial administrations.

First, it was the British, then the Japanese. The Japanese entrusted the civil administration of Kedah to the Siamese in 1944 when it dawned upon them that they were losing their grip on Malaya. After the Second World War, it was the British Military Administration. They were all foreign, and all were calling the shots.

In the 1920s, Kedah was one of the unfederated Malay States in Malaya. Under the terms of the British-Kedah treaty, it had a British Advisor whose "advice" was in effect iron-clad law.

Kedah folk, as were other Malaysians elsewhere, were subservient to the whims, fancies and decisions of their subjugator. The locals had no luxury of choice - they had to toe their master's line; they were there to be seen but not heard; to obey and not to question.

That was the scenario when the young Aziz was growing up in Alor Star. Born in 1922 and the son of a Malay school headmaster, Aziz was one of five Malay boys from the prestigious Sultan Abdul Hamid College who obtained a Grade A in the Senior Cambridge examinations, no small feat in 1939.

"The British Advisor called up the five of us. Up till then, for a school to produce more than one 'A' student was unprecedented. The school had achieved the best result in all of Malaya," remembers Aziz.

"Either by design or otherwise, the British had sowed the notion that the Malays were incapable of becoming anything but farmers.

"In school, we were told to take up either farming or carpentry as hobbies, as befitting our socially structured future vocations," he says, illustrating the colonialist's surreptitious means to perpetuate the myth of the hapless natives.

In their own imperialistic scheme of things, the British were not keen for the Malay masses to pursue higher education. Scholarships were reserved only for the "privileged" few each year, one's genealogical lineage being an important criterion in the selection.

"When I told the Advisor that I wanted a scholarship to study law, he insisted that I follow my father's path and be a teacher. I said 'thank you very much, but one teacher in the house is enough'," says Aziz.

"How different it is today," he muses. "Malay students today are given all assistance for higher education. But it's a shame that such help is

now taken for granted," he says, adding that "such apathetic attitudes will only lead to mediocrity".

If nothing else, independence has proffered to the youths of the nation the opportunity to chart their destinies, something that was so nearly denied to Aziz.

He recalls his schooldays in Alor Star when he had to trudge six kilometres through padi fields and dirt roads to reach his school. It meant waking up in the early hours of the morning and not be home till late in the evening. "One had to be mentally tough to persevere through the hardships then.

"Schoolchildren nowadays have never had it so good. If a household has a Mercedes and a Honda, they will insist on being driven around in the Mercedes," he says. He doesn't grudge them the good life but is concerned that they are taking it for granted.

The Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941 temporarily put paid to Aziz's law ambitions. He was absorbed into the Kedah Civil Service and served as a "non-qualified" magistrate in Alor Star.

It was the start of a distinguished career in the legal field spanning more than 30 years, and culminating in his becoming a (then) Supreme Court judge before opting for retirement from the judiciary in 1972.

The war years were a bleak period in Malaya's history. It was also then that Aziz began to question his *raison d'etre* both as a Malay and a Malayan. "Nationalism" took root in him (see story on Page 3).

The British surrender to the Japanese had debunked the myth of the white men's superiority. The Japanese occupiers impressed this fact upon Aziz, although the paradox of the situation was not lost on him then.

Just months after the war ended, a new development crystallised the upsurge of Malay nationalism. Ironically, it was the British who sparked the ire and fuelled the simmering fires of the disparate Malay nationalist groups all over the country.

The British government, through its representative, Sir Harold McMichael, had earlier persuaded the Rulers of the Malay States to consent to the formation of the Malayan Union - an entity that would have usurped the powers of the Malay Rulers and negated the special position of the Malays.

In Alor Star, Aziz and other members of Saberkas swung into action to protest against the Malayan Union. Together with other nationalist groups, Saberkas galvanised the Malay masses and set about pasting anti-Malayan Union posters all over Alor Star.

Among others, Aziz remembers a young man by the name of Mahathir Mohamad who was actively involved in such anti-Malayan Union activities.

Aziz's nationalist activities did not go unnoticed by his British masters. He was duly transferred to Jitra as the assistant district officer. "I was not given any administrative work. Instead, my job was to drive a three-tonne military truck and transport cattle and padi to Kuala Lumpur," he recalls now with amusement.

Such distractions did not douse his law ambitions which had simmered within him throughout the Japanese Occupation. With his basic law training before the war, he was eventually appointed the Jitra district magistrate, albeit "unqualified".

One particular case in 1948 provided the spark that was to fire him into realising his ambitions. "It was an appeal case brought before the Chief Justice of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He was sufficiently impressed by my judgment that he advised me to resign from the Kedah civil service and be formally trained as a magistrate in Kuala Lumpur."

Aziz later went on to become the chairman of the National Electricity Board (now Tenaga Nasional Bhd) and was special assistant to Tunku Abdul

Rahman, who was then secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

He reflects on the prosperity enjoyed by the nation since independence.

"The Almighty has blessed us with richness; first it was tin and rubber, then oil palm. We prospered even more with natural oil and gas. There are no typhoons or earthquakes here. The country enjoys a dynamic and responsible leadership.

"I have had friends who surrendered their Malaysian citizenship when they migrated to other countries. After some years, they came to me and asked for assistance to redeem their lost citizenship; they were even willing to pay for it," he says wryly.

Reflecting on his past struggles, Aziz hopes that Malaysian youths today will seize the opportunities given them and not take their good fortune for granted.

"It is easy to be complacent and think that everything will turn out fine in the end, but 'there is no shortcut to success'."

It is pertinent to recall the late Tunku's plea to the youth of the fledgling nation on Merdeka Day in 1957:

"To the youth of this country, I have a message. You have a wonderful future ahead of you. Unlike us, you have a country free from any domination. You will grow up with your heads held high as masters in your own country.

"As masters, you have your privileges as well as your duties and responsibilities. The future of this country rests on you; whether our star rises or falls, it will depend on you solely."