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Azizan, man of character, calibre

By Kalimullah Hassan

WHO was Azizan Zainul Abidin that king and prime minister, highest executive and low-salaried worker turned up in thousands to pay their last respects to when he died Wednesday?

He was seen differently by different people.

Second Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop saw him as "the quintessential public servant of the highest rank."

Nor Mohamed's Cabinet colleague Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein said Azizan was "a man of calibre who loved his race and nation".

Exxonmobil Malaysia chairman Rob Fisher found him "a man of integrity, honour and wisdom".

And Shell Malaysia chairman Jon Chadwick describes him as "a special Malaysian who has contributed so much to his country".

Most of us knew him as the chairman of Petronas, Malaysia Airlines and Putrajaya Holdings. But he wore many other public service hats, accepting every call to service from a Government which recognised him as a hardworking, honourable and decent man.

He was 69, overseeing, as chairman, almost a dozen government-linked companies, and yet, when asked to become a member of the Royal Commission on the Police Force earlier this year, he accepted without a murmur.

Yet, while those in the highest circles of Government and industry and those who have had the privilege of working with him knew who Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin was, he remained a faceless public servant to the larger Malaysian citizenry.

Perhaps, former journalist Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee's description of the man is one of the more succinct. Noordin said:

"Some men must be measured by the scale of their contribution; some by the content of their character. Tan Sri Azizan must be measured by both.

"He never sought accolades. He never needed the limelight to show him the way to service and duty. To his last day, he was quiet and unassuming. Never in the shadow. Always in the background.

"As ever, making a difference. History will not accord him a large place. It should."

Yes, it should.

For Azizan was that rare breed of Malaysian who selflessly served his country quietly but honestly, diligently carrying out whatever duties a Government, which recognised his sterling qualities, heaped upon him.

Azizan was orphaned at a very young age. Born into poverty, he lived with one, and then another relative, never knowing the constancy of a normal home.

These early years shaped Azizan. He developed a steely ambition to excel and discard the shackles of destitution. The testing life he led gave him the humility that would be his hallmark as he progressively made his way up in later years.

Friends and people who knew him well recall that Azizan was kind and gentle to everyone, be they his subordinates, his peers or his superiors.

In some ways, Azizan symbolised the "Malaysian Dream".

He was born in Penang in 1935, at a time when Malays on the island were marginalised and eked a life of meagre subsistence.

Despite the subsistence-level life he endured, Azizan slogged his way into the country's premier school then, the Penang Free School. He went on to the University of Malaya in the 1950s. Not many Malays, especially

those who did not come from nobility or royalty, had the opportunity or means for a tertiary education then.

After graduating, in 1960, he joined the civil service.

It was here that he showed his mettle, developing a reputation as a good administrator, a man of honour and integrity.

He worked in different jobs but perhaps he became known to the top echelons of Government and politics when from 1971 until 1984, he served consecutively as principal private secretary to three Prime Ministers - Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Being gate-keeper to the Prime Minister is indeed a powerful job. Yet, Azizan's name was never linked to any abuse or favouritism in allowing people inside those gates. In fact, as Nor Mohamed said, Azizan's reputation as the "quintessential public servant of the highest rank" only grew.

On Wednesday, Azizan, working till the last, died.

Nor Mohamed, the last person to meet Azizan officially less than 12 hours before his death, said "a man like Azizan is not born every day".

He could not have been more right, especially in today's world.

When a man like Azizan passes on, it holds to reason that his country becomes that much poorer for the loss.

Media and telecommunication tycoon T. Ananda Krishnan is one of those privileged to have known and worked with Azizan for many years.

One of the strongest characteristics of Azizan, Ananda remembers, was that he was "extremely devoted to his wife, Puan Sri Noor Ainee Che Teh, and his family".

Perhaps, say some, because Noor Ainee and his three children are the only family he has really known.

The sad picture of an inconsolable Noor Ainee at his grave site best depicts how strong their relationship was.

Asian Wall Street Journal journalist Leslie Lopez had many encounters and meetings with Azizan since the late 1980s.

He remembers Azizan as "a man whose love for his country knew no limits".

Azizan would get incensed, says Lopez, at the slightest impropriety and abuse of public funds.

"I always felt our country's resources (Petronas) were in safe hands with him there," Lopez said.

It was two days after Azizan's death and at the dinner where Lopez and other friends were present, the conversation centred on the Petronas chairman.

Penang Port chairman Datuk Latif Abdullah recalled that many years ago, he invited Azizan for dinner in Japan and ordered the best abalone.

When everyone at the table raved about the high quality of the meal, Azizan politely enquired how much the abalone cost.

Latif was a little embarrassed, because he knew Azizan's dislike for extravagance, but eventually revealed the abalone alone cost US\$200 per person.

"I think he was only too happy that it was not Petronas or the Government which was paying the bill," Latif says, describing the surprise on Azizan's face.

Ananda sat on the board of Petronas together with Azizan from the early 1980s, and was his deputy chairman on the board of Kuala Lumpur's most prestigious real estate development, KLCC.

Ananda is quite affected by Azizan's death.

He says Azizan was "one of the last of the classic civil servants ... a very good administrator who made the successful transition to business".

Ananda recalls that when Petronas and he agreed to jointly develop the

multi-billion ringgit KLCC area, "we only signed a three-page memorandum of understanding".

It was based on this three-page agreement and a gentleman's handshake that Azizan proceeded with the highly successful development.

Ananda credits Azizan as the man who played a pivotal role in the radical re-organisation of Petronas of which he became the first president cum chief executive officer in 1988.

"He created an organisation out of Petronas. He got rid of favouritism and allowed talent to emerge and develop.

He was unique; he did not play favourites. Everyone had a chance.

"When he was young, he was an elder brother; when he became older, he was the father figure, always kind, always gentle, always responsive," Ananda recalls.

But perhaps, says Ananda, it was his inability to decline the calls to public service that finally weighed down on his health.

A selfless man with no interest in material things; a man who had so much love for his wife and family; for his colleagues and his country - that is how Ananda says he will remember Azizan.

Besides serving the three prime ministers, Azizan was also the powerful secretary of the National Operations Council formed after the May 13 riots in 1969 and was boss to a young civil servant assisting him called Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Thirty-four years later, Abdullah became Prime Minister and Azizan's boss. But as ever, he was always respectful of Azizan.

Abdullah, too, like Ananda, was visibly affected by Azizan's passing. Hours after Azizan's funeral, he returned home for an interview with Financial Times journalists.

The first thing he said, as he shook hands, was, "We have lost a very good man today ...a very good Malaysian."

The integrity and dignity Azizan brought to the civil service is also reflected in the way that Petronas has expanded under his stewardship, becoming the 186th of the Fortune 500 companies and the most profitable oil company in the world today.

For the financial year 2004, under his guidance and the leadership of his protege, Tan Sri Hassan Marican, Petronas recorded unprecedented revenues of RM97 billion, an increase of 20 per cent over the previous year. Its pre-tax profits rose 39 per cent to RM37 billion.

Today, Petronas is the one real global Malaysian company with a presence in more than 30 countries and is a source of pride to Malaysia and all its people.

In his last 16 years in Petronas, Azizan came under a lot of pressure, recall those who knew him. But he was never afraid to stand firm when others would try to curry favour and score points, says AWSJ's Lopez.

Trusted by Tun Mahathir, Azizan was able to let Petronas stay the course. The professionalism that people like Azizan and Ananda brought into the Petronas board when Tun Mahathir revamped it in the 1980s remained intact, says Lopez, allowing the oil company to thrive.

Lopez says: "He was one of the protectors of our country's resources."

Azizan was many things to his country, his people and his family. He was little heralded when he was alive. Almost an unsung hero.

But hopefully, Noordin Sopiee is proven wrong. Hopefully, Malaysia would accord Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin his rightful place in our nation's history.

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