

**The Merdeka Gang's last stand**  
**New Straits Times (Columns)**  
**24 Aug 2007**  
**Rehman Rashid**

SOME of our 50-somethings seem to be in fine fettle and feisty form these days, have you noticed? Some of my generation seem to be making a late charge up the back straight in a break for the finish. It's the Last of the Baby Boomers' last hurrah; the rumble of the silverbacks and grizzlies.

They're the Merdeka Generation, show some respect. You may not have given them much thought all these years, sandwiched as they were between the Founding Fathers and Generation Wee. All those quiet, hardworking, self-sacrificing mums and dads of Malaysia now marrying off their children and watching their grandkids arrive may not seem to have amounted to much compared with what went before and might come after. But there's a good reason for that.

Born with the nation and coming of age with the New Economic Policy, the Merdeka Generation learned to defer.

They deferred to the new realities and priorities of their nation, and the policies emerging therefrom. They deferred to the new national objectives and adopted the new terminology: "Rukunegara", "Bumiputera", "Barisan Nasional". They understood that the burdens would always be greatest on those most able, and that they'd been granted the privilege of bearing that burden, if they were able.

It seemed a hard-won honour. They humbly accepted the onerous task that had been bestowed upon them: To remake their homeland in a stronger, better, more just and durable way.

Perhaps they shouldn't have been so deferential. Educated at the people's expense to eliminate the ignorance and immobility that had taken just 12 years to ravage the system, perhaps they should not have kowtowed so deeply to the system upon their dutiful assimilation into it thereafter.

But many accepted that the only way to repay the gift of a universal education was to support what had enabled and paid for it, and made the compromises necessary for their subsequent "national service".

A few made fortunes out of it, some had the life sucked out of them, others got by as best they could. But mostly the NEP's lead generation abided by received wisdom and stated policy, upheld national ideals, and submitted to the will of the majority as expressed in the electoral process.

After 30 years or more of this valiant self-denial, some of them are mad as hell and aren't going to take this any more. (To invoke Peter Finch in his most memorable cinematic moment, as Howard Beale in *Network*, 1976, showing either that Beale was a generation ahead of his time or this is a permanent social condition.)

It's about time, too. Some kind of mojo fires up at 50. It's the new 40, all right. Life begins – if only because everything else has ended. Ambitions, hopes, dreams, illusions, delusions, fear of the future – heck, the future – done, gone, over. In their place looms retirement, the end of EPF and the beginning of prostate concerns. With or without all the money in the

world, the final fantasy is of somewhere comfortable to sit.

Small wonder that for some of us, going gentle into that good night is not an option. Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, 53, seems to be pulling out the stops and going hell for leather, damn the torpedoes and mix the metaphors, he's Finched.

Raja Nazrin Shah, 51, meanwhile, is dazzling his audiences with ideas polished to crystalline clarity by long contemplation. Now he's letting his thoughts fly to such magnificent heights, Raja Nazrin must guard against deification. (Too late as that may be for legions of smitten schoolgirls.)

And then there's Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, 56, lawyer and member of parliament for Kota Baru, who this week launched his book *In Good Faith* (Zaid Ibrahim Publications, Kuala Lumpur; 364pp; RM30).

It's his usual brilliant stuff, somewhat off-handedly tossed together as a compilation of his speeches, interviews and published articles on governance, the judiciary, the media, human rights, politics, culture and religion.

It serves as a handbook of principles; a reminder not just of some important ideals and realities but of how learned, lucid and very well argued Zaid can be. (He's sold me on a Judicial Commission, for instance. On municipal elections and syariah jurisprudence, we-e-ell, we should talk, Datuk, let's do lunch.)

But there's a problem with advocating systemic remedies for institutions vulnerable to deeply human limitations. (Such as, say, a burnt-out judge with a backlog so impossibly huge his spirit breaks and he gives up, waiting only for some kind of axe to fall.) Human institutions are only as good as the human beings operating them, and we're human-capital challenged.

It would be unquestionably good to double the number of High Court judges, as Zaid recommends. Perhaps it would be easier to find 50 suitable candidates for the High Court than just one for Chief Judge of Malaya.

But Zaid's ideas draw on the strengths of principle, not the frailties of man. (He atones for this in real life in an understated but direct way. Sales of this book will benefit the Kelantan Foundation for the Disabled, which Zaid runs with his wife, educationist Suliana Shamsuddin Alias.)

That's the trouble with our pitifully few brilliant ones. They're not necessarily popular with or comfortable among the "grassroots", especially of those particular varieties that have grown wild and luxuriant in this past generation of deference.

So what do we do with the best we have? We hope for the best for them. Be grateful they did not drain their brains to other countries, and hope the courage of their convictions will gain their ideas the attention they deserve and effect the changes they seek.

We hope they won't be crushed to dust by the grinding realities against which they tilt their free lances.

To be sure, there's something to be said for being an heir to a throne, a member of parliament or chairman of the country's biggest law firm, but it remains gratifying that such educated, eloquent voices rise to their special privileges in taking ownership of the issues

and speaking for the betterment of this nation.

Personally, I'm glad at least some of my generation are mounting this heroic rearguard action for all that was lost on our watch: The national unity, commonality of purpose and mutual understanding our parents' generation had managed to pass to us, but which ours deferred from passing to the next.

Zaid Ibrahim deserves a much wider hearing, but must resist any move to nominate him for Commonwealth secretary-general.

### **Rukunegara revisited**

IT's "Rukunegara", one word; not "Rukun Negara", two words. It doesn't matter if that's how it's rendered these days even on official signage. It doesn't matter if no one under 30 gives a toss about the Rukunegara, that's what it was. Five principles, one concept, one word, as it was in the beginning and shall be at the end. Which may come sooner than it should, if it's already been torn in half.

Copyright © 2007 NST Online