

Discovering the real Hussein Onn
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These are excerpts from a speech by the writer at the launching of 'Legacy of Honour' - a pictorial biography of three Johor leaders.

COMMENT When the Noah Foundation approached me to write about Ja'afar Onn, Onn Ja'afar and Hussein Onn (right), I jumped at the opportunity. I knew much about these three men, because my father, the late Anwar Malek, was a comrade of Onn from the 1920s when they were young government servants in Muar.

In 1946, my father, Onn who was then the district officer of Batu Pahat and Noah Omar, then a magistrate in Batu Pahat, and with three other friends spent 24 hours huddled together to discuss the formation of a United Malays Organisation, to fight against the Malayan Union.

Together they drafted the seminal letter sent to Utusan Melayu in Singapore, making a clarion call for all state-level Malay associations to come together under one umbrella to oppose the Malayan Union, which would have transferred the sovereignty of the Malay States to the king of England.

This book has been 16 long years in the making! It was a journey of blood, sweat and rewrite. But I thoroughly enjoyed the research, the interviews, the writing.

I started at the Johor Baru archives in 1995, going through all the Menteri Besar files of Ja'afar. I must thank the friends of the JB Archives who had transcribed many of the Menteri Besar's hand written notes and letters - 800 in total - from Jawi into romanised script.

Those that were not transcribed I photocopied and took home to my mother, who read them to me as I found it difficult to read the old-fashioned elongated Jawi tarek script, as it was called.

I have included a selection of these letters in the book to show the pride and seriousness with which Ja'afar took on his duty as Menteri Besar, be it reprimanding the British postmaster-general or the commissioner of public works for their imperious behaviour towards Malay clerks underneath them, or expressing his misgivings to the young Sultan Ibrahim about the appointment of a British general advisor to Johor.

Another aspect of the research I enjoyed most was the interviews with so many incredible old men and women, comrades, colleagues and family members of Onn and Hussein. They were spirited, strong-willed, opinionated, candid - even though they were 70, 80 and 90-year-olds.

They spoke about events that occurred 50, 60 years ago as if they occurred yesterday - sometimes heaving with pride talking about the demonstrations they organised against the British, and sometimes their eyes brimming over with tears at the indignities Onn suffered at the hands of lesser politicians, as he fought a lonely political struggle after he left Umno.

Onn was a charismatic and fearless leader, who could have been the first prime minister of independent Malaya. But he chose to resign from Umno rather than compromise on his belief that Umno must open its doors to all races as equal members in order for Malaya to gain independence and become a united nation.

A man who spoke his mind

My biggest surprise in the research, however, was discovering the real Hussein Onn. I spent many weeks in the library of the New Straits Times going through every single newspaper clipping on Hussein. What clearly emerged was a leader with a strength of character, a steely sense of honour and integrity on what

is right and wrong, fair and unfair.

Somehow all the values he stood for, seen from his biting criticism on the ills that beset Malaysian politics - be it corruption, abuse of power, political opportunism, character assassination, were overlooked.

The journalists of those days headlined their stories with the boring news that the prime minister today opened this or that event, while his strong words of reprimand and chastisements, which should have made headlines, were buried in the final paragraphs in nine-point print, as if they were of no significance.

Here was a man who spoke his mind, who called a spade a spade, who scolded and cajoled Umno members, his backbenchers in Parliament and the civil servants, willing them to serve with honour; and yet the warnings he gave as early as 1974 on the evils of corruption and abuse of power never made the headlines, nor capture the public imagination.

Hussein was a man who believed that without integrity and honesty, a political leader is nothing but an opportunist. But in a world that admired style over substance, and toughness over consultation, a political leadership grounded in morality was dismissed as weak, and shunted aside.

We all owe a gratitude to the Noah Foundation for redressing this injustice done. I am honoured by this opportunity to show to the public that in Hussein was a rare man, and an even rarer politician.

Temptations and enticements surround men in power, but few have the moral fibre and strength to resist them. Hussein was a singular man, who lived by his principles, in public and in private; and in the end, he found modern day politics too distasteful for him to bear.

I do hope this book will be translated into Bahasa Malaysia to reach a wider audience, in particular the Umno members - for them to know and to remember a lost world where politics was not about the pursuit of personal power and advantage, but one of dutiful and honourable service.

ZAINAH ANWAR is the former executive director of Sisters in Islam (SIS), and is currently a member of the SIS board of directors. She is also a former member of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia.

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