

Remembering Samad Ismail, a thwarted intellectual and political prisoner

Malaysiakini

18 April 2024

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Today marks exactly 100 years since the birth of Abdul Samad Ismail, a beacon of Malaysian journalism who also spent five years in detention without trial under the draconian Internal Security Act.

This Sunday afternoon, the life of Samad will be commemorated by three men who knew him well in a tribute titled “The Man Behind The Enigma: Centenary Remembrance in Praise of A Samad Ismail”.

The speakers will be former PKR deputy president Syed Husin Ali, ex-Nibong Tebal MP Dominic Puthucheary, and veteran journalist Terrence Netto who worked with Samad at the New Straits Times.

“He was one of the big guys in the thwarted formation of the Malaysian mind.

“A true intellectual and one of the first to exert himself in contributing to the growth of thoughts and ideas to shape the Malaysian mind.

“To let the occasion go by without marking it would be like cultivating the amnesia that goes on in the whole country,” Netto told Malaysiakini.

Precocious talent

Samad (1924-2008) was a prodigiously talented writer, becoming a journalist at the age of 16 and editor of the Japanese-era publication Berita Malai by the age of 21. Aside from being a journalist, he was involved in his early years in left-wing political activities.

Born in Singapore, he was initially close to Lee Kuan Yew before the pair fell out. By the time Samad co-founded the People’s Action Party (PAP) with Lee in 1953, he had already been detained twice before - in 1948 and 1953.

“He started out as a journalist when he was a teenager. He was a precocious talent and his father was a politically conscious man who told him to be a journalist. Immediately, there was the Japanese occupation but he managed to carve out a role for himself,” said Netto.

He added that even while working with the Japanese as editorial overlords, Samad was able to grow as an intellectual.

Eventually, Netto said, Samad was involved as a pioneering journalist (Utusan), conduit for the Indonesian revolution (1945-49), a midwife at the birth of a newspaper (Berita Harian in 1958), the rebranding of another (New Straits Times in 1972), political party convenor (PAP), literary movement founder (Asas '50), and speechwriter to both former premier Abdul Razak Hussain and ex-deputy prime minister Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (1970-73).

In 2021, Syed Husin spoke about Samad saying, "Of all people, he told his lawyer Kuan Yew that he had been a member of the Communist Party and I believe this was used against him later. His alias was "Lanaiz", which was Zainal spelt backwards.

"At another stage, he was almost banished to Indonesia, but he came back and concentrated on newspaper work.

"He was a very ideological and analytical writer and went on to lead Berita Harian and the New Straits Times. In 1976, when I was already detained, Samad got detained again as well, this time for five years. But he bounced back again and regained a prominent footing," said Syed Husin.

Netto said he began working under Samad at NST in 1973 and noticed that he was a man of intellect but who was very open-minded.

'Free spirit but not irresponsible'

"He had the kind of mindset where you already have some ideological preferences but you allow the environment to modify and filter your development.

"He was a free spirit, but not irresponsible, and always wanting to test the parameters.

"He wanted to play a role in this country's development, but in the end, he was a thwarted liberator of minds," recalled Netto.

He said the detention of 1976 was a crippling blow.

"Samad was already assembling a team and revving up to be group chief editor. At 52 years old, he was just the right age.

"He could have developed journalism to fulfil its role in society, to inspire critical thinking. Instead, he was foiled.

"The detention of Samad and other great intellectuals signalled the defeat of progressive thought among the Malay community, giving way to the present hegemony of different strains of right-wing ideologies," Netto added.

“The Man Behind The Enigma: Centenary Remembrance in Praise of A Samad Ismail” will take place at Gerakbudaya, No 2, Jalan 11/2, Petaling Jaya, on April 21 at 3pm. Call 012-2833515 for more information.

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Source: <https://www.malysiakini.com/news/702772>