

Ex-activist not bitter despite 17 years in jail

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SINGAPORE: In the twilight of his life, a former political prisoner who was arrested in 1963 and detained without trial for 17 years says he bears no ill will towards Singapore.

"I don't have this sense of vengeance, or feel bitter about what happened to me.

"Singapore is my country, I love it," says Said Zahari, an ailing 78-year-old who lives in Malaysia. "I only wish that it would become a more open society."

Said also wants young Singaporeans to get another perspective on the often tumultuous events that shaped the road to independence in 1965 and Singapore's first decades of nationhood under the ruling People's Action Party.

The party, gearing up for parliamentary elections, still dominates. Lee Kuan Yew, the man who led the party at the time of Said's arrest, remains a powerful force in politics.

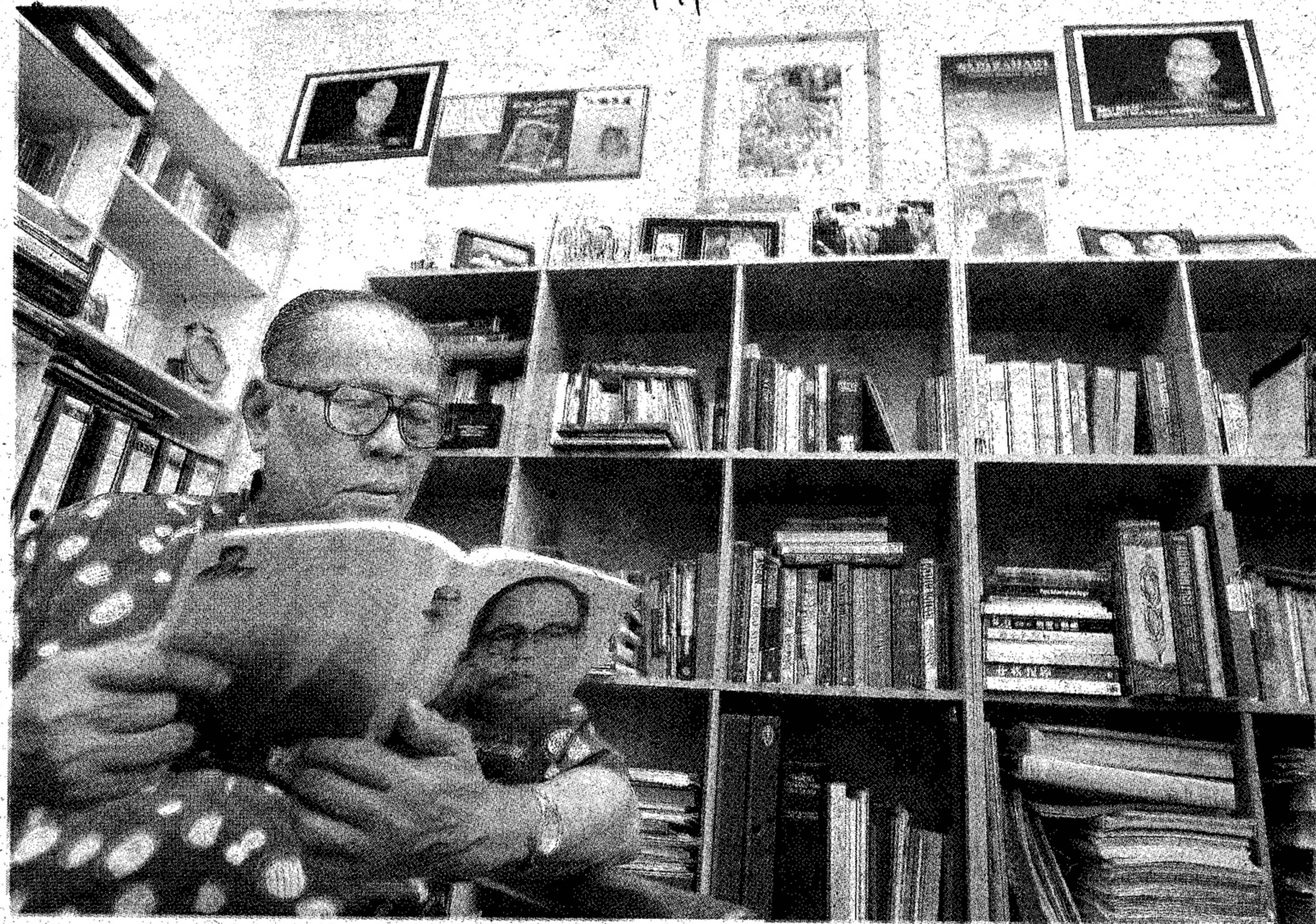
Said has written memoirs about life as a political prisoner, the second of which, entitled *The Long Nightmare: My 17 Years in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison*, will be published in Malaysia next month.

Said wants his book to be distributed in Singapore, and his previous political memoirs, *Dark Clouds at Dawn*, is available in at least one Singaporean bookstore and the national library.

However, A.R. Madeei, assistant director of publications at the state Media Development Authority, says Said's book, like all imported publications, will be "subject to the laws of the land". Such laws include prohibitions on publications deemed objectionable on moral, racial or religious grounds, or detrimental to Singapore's national interests.

"The book deals mostly with our lives in prison, those political detainees arrested together with me, and others following that," Said says.

He recounts that some de-



Said reads his memoir at his home in Kuala Lumpur. — AP picture

tainees were beaten and deprived of sleep for days, and that he and other inmates held a three-month hunger strike.

Singapore's longest-serving political prisoner, Chia Thye Poh, was jailed without trial for 23 years from 1966 for alleged communist activities.

British colonisers gave self-government to Singapore in 1959. In the early 1960s, authorities arrested left-wing politicians, trade unionists and students involved in strikes and rallies, accusing them of being violent subversives planning a communist state.

Said, former chief editor of Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, was detained

on Feb 2, 1963, hours after he was appointed president of the left-wing Partai Rakyat Singapura.

Singapore, which was planning a merger with the then Malaya, said the swoop was aimed at individuals threatening to use violence to sabotage the proposed amalgamation.

Said was held for years, sometimes in solitary confinement, after the merger failed in 1965 and Singapore became independent.

"In solitary confinement, you're deprived of everything. You don't know if it's morning or noon or night, and you've no one to talk to for days, weeks and months," he says.

"So I talked to myself, as if I

were dictating to a tape recorder, about my life, about what I did. By doing so, I had relief of the tension in my mind."

He missed many things, including the birth of his youngest daughter and when his wife had breast cancer. "Those were the days when I felt so horrible to see things happening outside, things happening to my wife that I couldn't do anything about."

Said was released in 1979, at age 51. A stroke in 1992 prompted his move to Malaysia, where his children had relocated.

The new book is the second instalment of a planned trilogy. — AP

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