

Alatas the thinker

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by **Patrick Pillai**

PROFESSOR Syed Hussein Alatas, the prominent Malaysian academic, who passed away on Tuesday night, has been described as Southeast Asia's foremost sociologist, a compassionate intellectual and a committed activist. An internationally recognised author of fourteen books, he was previously head of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya. He was also a Senator and respected leader of the first major multi-ethnic opposition party in Malaysia.

His writings on ideology, the sociology of religion, corruption, the role of intellectuals, politics, social theory and development have contributed new insights to understanding major problems arising from colonialism and modernisation.

Some labelled him a Weberian but he says he is not a follower of any particular school of thought, but combines the insights of the leading thinkers in the social sciences. "My approach is more akin to that of Karl Mannheim," he says.

As an activist, Alatas is more a reformer than a radical. "In the

Philippines, my spiritual affinity is with Jose Rizal (the national hero), in Indonesia it is Hatta and Natsir (rivals of Partai Komunis Indonesia), whom I knew personally." He also has "a great deal of sympathy" for non-Communist writers and reformers in the pre-revolutionary Soviet Union, such as Tolstoy and Alexander Herzen, and the nineteenth century Muslim reformer Jamaluddin Al-Afghani.

One of Alatas's first books is *The Democracy of Islam*, (W Van Hoeve, The Hague, 1956). This book discusses the Islamic conception of democracy which is based on moral leadership. It argues that, contrary to Western critics, the Islamic concept of democracy is not restrictive to development.

His second book on Islam, in Malay, is an introduction to Islamic social thought called *Islam dan Masyarakat*, (Islam and Society) (Pustaka Antara, Kuala Lumpur, 1959).

Another book on religion, *Reflections on the Theories of Religion*, his doctoral thesis at the University of Amsterdam, was published in the Netherlands in 1963. This book critically evaluates the various theories of religion suggested in the sociology and psychology of religion.