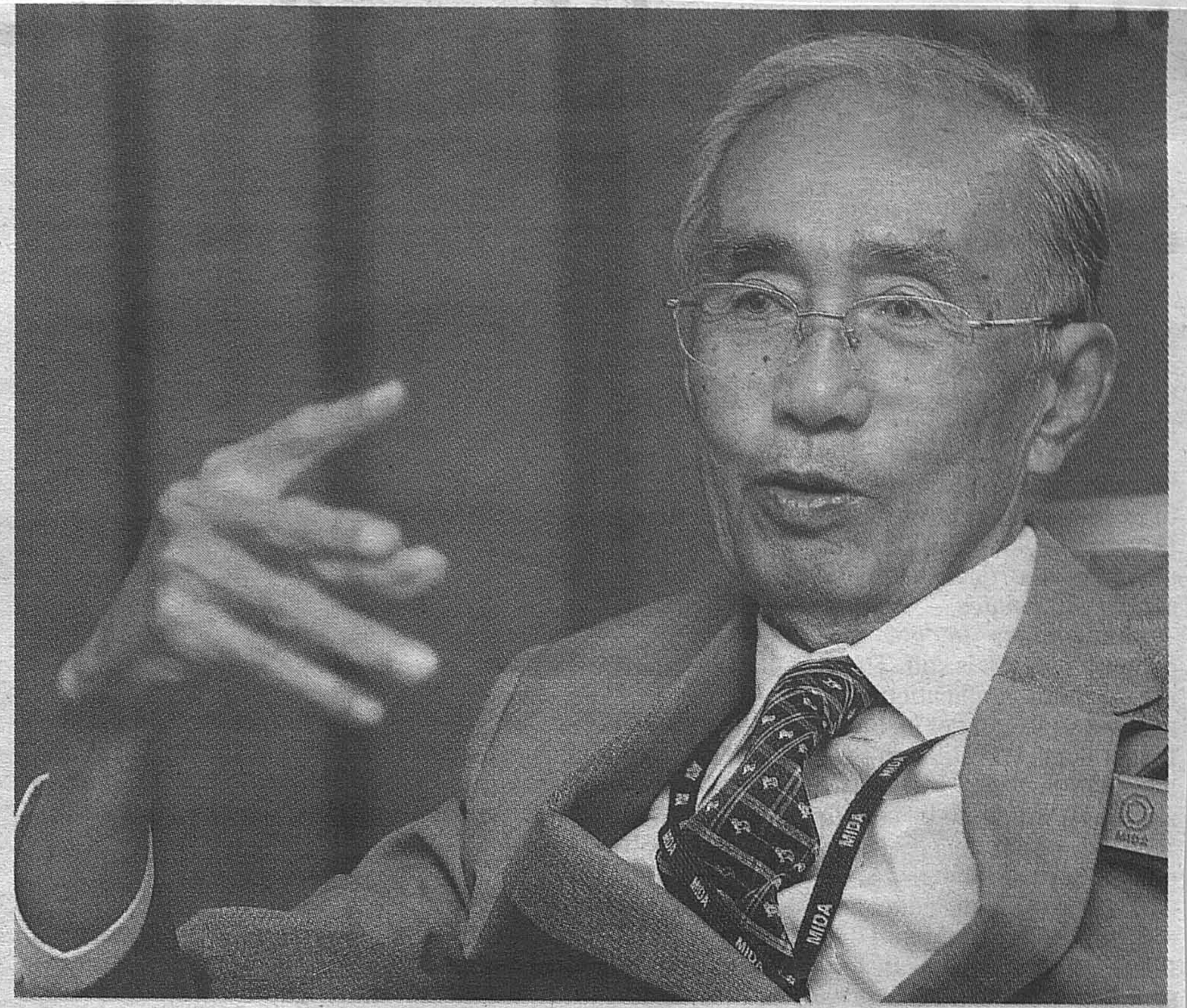


# On making our presence felt, our views known

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He joined the Foreign Service to see the world. But former Wisma Putra secretary-general Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong tells **SANTHA OORJITHAM** he spent most of his early years in Kuala Lumpur — encouraging leaders in Sabah and Sarawak to join in the formation of Malaysia and countering Indonesia's 'Ganyang Malaysia' campaign



The support of tribal chiefs in Sabah and Sarawak was crucial to the Malaysia Concept being accepted, says Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong

THE young graduate of the University of Malaya's Malay Studies programme was excited about becoming a cadet officer with the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 1957.

"I thought it would be a chance to see the world," recalls Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, who is now 74.

He was whisked off for a one-year course in International Relations at the London School of Economics and then assigned to the Malayan delegation under Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman at the United Nations as third, and later first, secretary.

(Later, from 1980 through 1984, he served as permanent representative to the UN.)

But after his return in 1961, Kelantan-born Zainal spent the next decade in Kuala Lumpur. One of his first tasks as assistant secretary was to set up the "Malaysian" desk at Wisma Putra.

"I was with the delegation to Singapore when Tunku pronounced the Malaysia Concept in May 1961 at the Adelphi Hotel," he remembers.

"Pronouncing it was one thing, to translate it was another! We had to fill in the gaps and substantiate it."

Singapore and the Sultan of Brunei supported the formation of Malaysia but, as Zainal notes: "There were no established political parties in Sabah and Sarawak, so the bulk of the effort and programme was concentrated there."

Zainal travelled upriver, staying in longhouses along the Rejang and Baram rivers in Sarawak and the Keningau area in Sabah. He communicated with tribal chiefs there, as well as the Bajaus and the



Suluk along the coast.

"Their support was crucial to the idea being accepted," he points out.

At their recommendation, hundreds of chiefs were flown over to the peninsula to meet the leaders.

"Almost every 'tuai rumah' was invited. The most important part of the programme was to show them our Felda schemes."

Zainal took the leaders to visit some of the early projects such as Sungai Buaya near Rawang and Lembah Bilut near Bentong, Pahang.

"They could translate what they saw to what could happen for them if they joined Malaysia and, to me, that was what attracted them most."

Zainal also made sure there were enough people to meet the Cobbold Commission, which was assessing public opinion in both of the British colonies about joining Malaysia.

Later, he had to deal with Indonesia's opposition to the formation of Malaysia. When the *Konfrontasi* campaign began in April 1963, Zainal was shocked.

"I thought we did all the right things," he explains. "We had communicated to establish what it was all about. Earlier, Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Subandrio said they had no objections. We thought

we had the green light."

To counter Indonesian president Sukarno's allegations of "neo-colonialism", says Zainal, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman sent delegations to Afro-Asian meetings "to make our presence felt and our views known".

"We even became a member of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, although it was known as a leftist organisation."

Zainal was the secretary to a delegation headed by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, which visited 17 Afro-Asian countries within five weeks to meet local leaders and present Malaysia's case.

"We were not only successful and well received, but it was also an eye-opener for me," he recalls. "I hadn't realised that parts of Africa were so highly developed."

In August 1965, Zainal got another shock when media contacts told him he should go to Parliament, where members were voting on a bill to amend the Constitution providing for separation with Singapore.

"I couldn't believe my ears," says Zainal. "It seemed the most illogical thing to do after working so hard for the formation of Malaysia."

As principal secretary for the Southeast Asia and Australia division in Wisma Putra, he was part of the delegation to Jakarta for the signing of the Peace Agreement on Aug 11, 1966.

And as deputy secretary-general for political affairs, he was involved in the formation of Asean.

The idea of Asean was mooted by Tunku, who was very committed, he recalls.



Ambassador Zainal Abidin Sulong (centre) hosts a reception at his residence in Jakarta after presenting his credentials in 1972. The posting was like a 'honeymoon'.

"When we talked about regional co-operation, we knew we couldn't succeed without Indonesia. We were still going through Confrontation, but we had to bring Indonesia into the fold."

Asean's formation in 1967 "was the way to make sure Confrontation was never repeated", he says. And when he was finally posted overseas as ambassador to Indonesia in 1972, it was like a "honeymoon".

Today, as non-executive chairman of the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, Zainal notes that economic relations between Malaysia

and Singapore remain "intact or even stronger".

Every weekend, thousands of Singaporeans "invade" Malaysia all the way up to Malacca. They buy their weekly needs and even a big bulk of real estate assets.

In terms of investment in Malaysia, Singapore is always among the top five, while Malaysian companies are also investing in Singapore.

And as Malaysia celebrates its 50th year of independence, Zainal can look back on half a century in government, including three decades in the foreign service.

In the private sector, he has

served as chairman of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, chairman of Perwaja Steel Sdn Bhd and chairman of Standard Chartered Bank Malaysia Berhad.

"Over the past 50 years, Malaysia has put itself on the map through development at home and activities overseas."

He says the country's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of the Islamic Conference and Asean are "recognition by the international community of what we have achieved so far in international relations".

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