

# Voice in the background that spoke volumes

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The date Aug 31, 1957, marked the end of almost 450 years of foreign domination and the beginning of a sovereign nation known as the Federation of Malaya. However, many may not be aware that the historic date was actually decided by an Islamic theologian from Penang, who was also a prominent astronomer and public figure. The man was Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah Ibrahim Haji Abdullah, better known as Abdullah Fahim, the grandfather of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. ZURAIDA ABDUL RAHMAN traces his story

TUAN Guru Haji Abdullah Ibrahim Haji Abdullah, better known as Abdullah Fahim, was not only a man of wisdom but was also an established writer, poet and politician.

According to the people of Kepala Batas, the name "Fahim" originates from the Arabic word "Fahimun", which means a highly knowledgeable person on religious matters.

Among others, he established the Sekolah Agama Daeratul Maarif Al-Wataniah in Kepala Batas, Seberang Prai.

Although his views were constantly sought by the leaders of the day, like Datuk Onn Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, Abdullah Fahim chose to keep a low profile in the struggle for Merdeka.

Popularly referred to as Tok Ngah Lah by the locals, he is said to have been born in Kampung Sha'ab Ali, located close to the Masjidil al-Haram, in Mecca, in 1870.

But there are some who believed that he was born in Kampung Kubur Panjang, Kedah, before moving to Mecca with his father Sheikh Ibrahim Tahir who became a religious teacher at the sacred mosque.

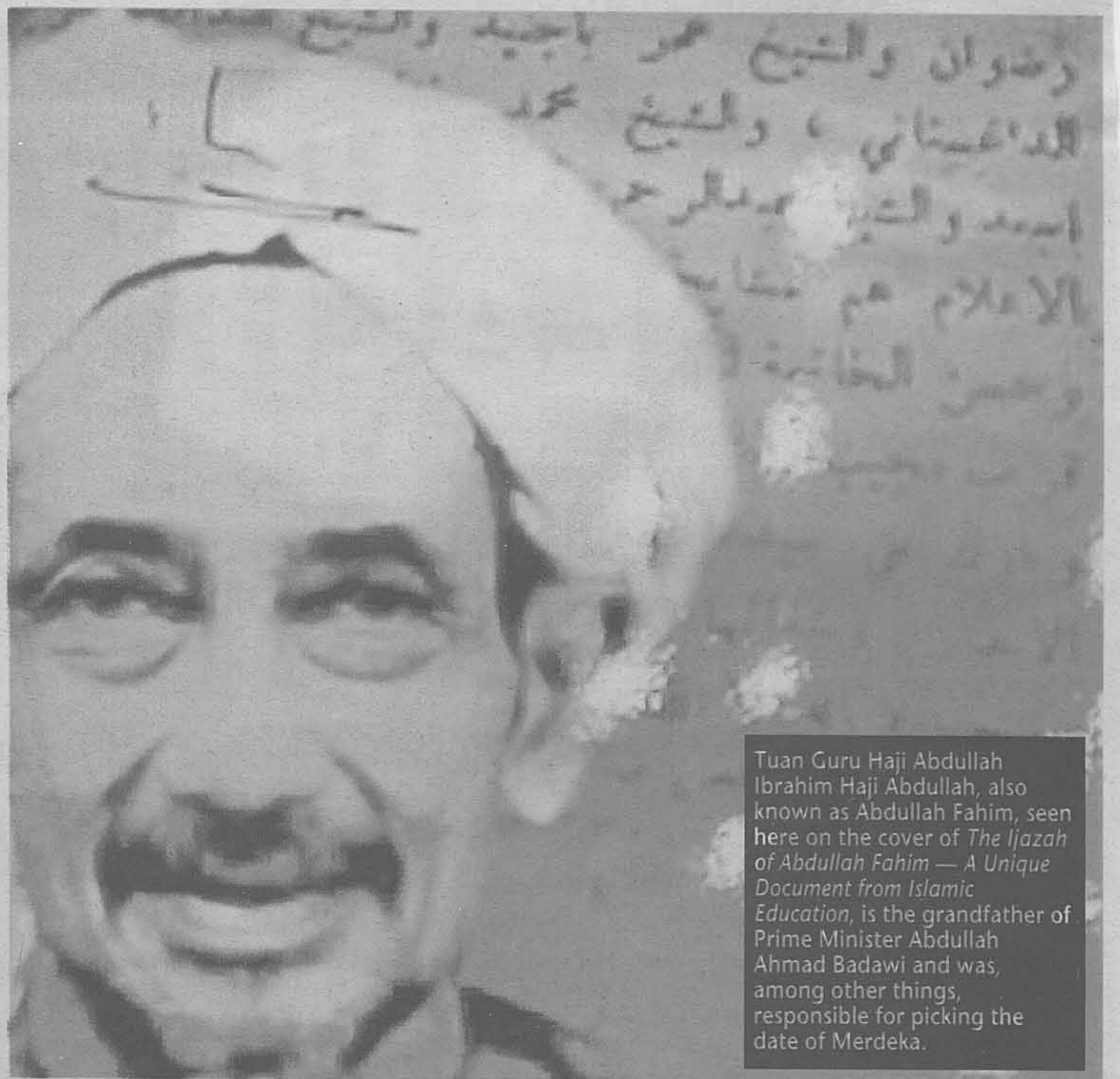
The father, and later the son, once represented the Masjidil al-Haram board and while in the holy land, Abdullah Fahim also took the opportunity to learn international and Islamic politics.

More than 45 prominent scholars in almost all aspects of Islam tutored him in 15 disciplines of Islam. Later, he too taught astronomy, *usuluddin* (tenets of Islam), al-Quran and *hadith* (traditions of the prophet) at the mosque.

According to the former Kepala Batas Umno secretary Datuk Md Noor Ahmad, 70, a man closely associated with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's family, Abdullah Fahim's thoughts, writings and poems instilled awareness on the fate of the Malays and he called for a *jihād* (struggle) to free them from occupation.

He said Abdullah Fahim's own *jihād* started while he was in Mecca and this was evident based on the lines of the *nasyid* antiphony he penned while he was there.

Abdullah Fahim also wrote a



Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah Ibrahim Haji Abdullah, also known as Abdullah Fahim, seen here on the cover of *The Ijazah of Abdullah Fahim — A Unique Document from Islamic Education*, is the grandfather of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and was, among other things, responsible for picking the date of Merdeka.

book entitled *Khutbah Penyedar* (Awakening Sermons) and compiled a prayer calendar, Md Noor said.

Upon his return to Malaya in 1916, being more fluent in Arab, he taught Islamic theology from his family home in Kepala Batas before being invited to teach at Pondok Tuan Haji Wan Sulaiman Wan Sidik at Kampung Limbung Kapal, Alor Star.

He returned to Kepala Batas four years later and continued to teach from his family home until he was invited by the Perak Sultan in 1931 to head the Madrasah Idrisiyah in Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar.

Upon his return to Kepala Batas in 1934, Abdullah Fahim gained recognition as an ulama (Islamic scholar) and students from as far as Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei came to learn from him.

Md Noor said the Malay nationalism started to emerge around the 1940s before it went into high gear after World War II. The religious figures in Seberang Perai joined in the rising tide of nationalism.

The Malays there also established the Seberang Perai Malay Association as a front to clamour for independence and Abdullah Fahim was the head of the organisation's religious portfolio, he said.

Mohd Noor recalled that Abdullah Fahim's serious involvement in the struggle for Merdeka happened around 1945 when the British wanted to establish the Malayan Union.

Many of the Malays in Kepala Batas, Butterworth, Bukit Mertajam and Penang at that time joined Umno and denounced the proposal.

One fateful day, Tunku, accompanied by (Tun) Abdul Razak, Ahmad Maliki, Sulaiman Palestin and others, met Abdullah Fahim at his home. While sitting at the verandah, Tunku sought his views on the condition set by the British that the non-Malays too must be part of the independent federation.

"Tok Ngah Lah advised Tunku to adhere to the condition because Britain would only consider giving independence if all the races reached a consensus. He told them to agree with what the British wanted and show that we were all fighting for the same cause so that there would not be any delay to the independence," Mohd Noor said.

Heeding his advice, Tunku then started negotiations with the Chinese and Indian community leaders, paving the way for inter-racial co-operation through the Alliance.

Before leaving for London with the Alliance leaders to negotiate independence, Tunku again met Abdullah Fahim to seek his advice.

"He (Abdullah Fahim) advised Tunku to leave for London on a ship so that they would have ample time to negotiate and reach a consensus, especially with the representatives of the Malay rulers. He said they should then return immediately on an airplane, giving no time for anyone to change their minds over what they had agreed," he said.

Tunku is said to have met Abdullah Fahim again after that to decide on the date of Merdeka for the Federation of Malaya.

Based on his calculations from the Islamic calendar, Abdullah

Fahim provided the date of Aug 31, 1957. The learned ulama had noted that it was the earliest auspicious date and if Britain did not agree with the date, then Malaysians would have to wait another five years for the next auspicious date, Aug 31, 1962.

"However, he also related to Tunku his premonition that if Britain agreed with the 1957 date, the Federation of Malaya would see a change of name within seven years," said Md Noor.

"Tok Ngah Lah was right because after six years and six days, the Federation of Malaya became Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963, with the inclusion of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak."

Another veteran in Kepala Batas, Datuk Othman Said, 69, described Abdullah Fahim as a pious man, soft spoken, benevolent and charitable.

"Allah had given him strong intuition and good instincts and that is why whatever he said turned out to be true. He even foretold that his grandson, Abdullah, would one day lead the country."

Ismail Said, 75, said he got to know Abdullah Fahim when he was young.

"I was a naughty boy but Tok Ngah Lah was patient with me. He would ask me to pray, recite the al-Quran and eat before returning home."

"As time passed by, I realised my mistakes and this made me change for the better. Tok Ngah Lah's hospitality made the locals, regardless of their race, seek him out whenever they had problems," he said.

Abdullah Fahim died on April 28, 1961, at the age of 91. — Bernama