

# For love of the nation, Azahari is still serving

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**He was a young newspaper reporter who was enjoying his job when a couple of veterans roped him into the fight for independence, writes ADIB POVERA**



Tan Sri Azahari Taib says the struggle for independence included organising pickets, poster wars and door-to-door meetings.

HE had always been passionate about politics, but he never ventured into it, except for the occasional pieces he wrote for his newspaper.

But politics did not leave him be.

The young Azahari Taib, then 23, was a reporter with *Utusan Melayu*. While on an assignment one eventful day 61 years ago, he "bumped into" (Tan Sri) Senu Abdul Rahman and (Tan Sri) Khir Johari.

"I knew who they were but little did I realise that they had been observing me," said the former reporter (now a Tan Sri) at his house in Alor Star recently.

Senu, who had been one of Azahari's teachers, pulled him aside and started "lecturing" him about the local political scenario, especially about the growing wishes of the people for independence.

"Both of them, Senu and Khir, spoke a great deal about getting the people to fight against British rule.

"They said it was high time we galvanised the people's support to determine our future."

Thanks to the two veterans, Azahari was one of the very few people who worked alongside Tunku Abdul Rahman and other leaders as they fought for the country's independence.

He may be 84 today but this unassuming veteran remembers well the early days when they were very active, working with the people as they agitated for independence.

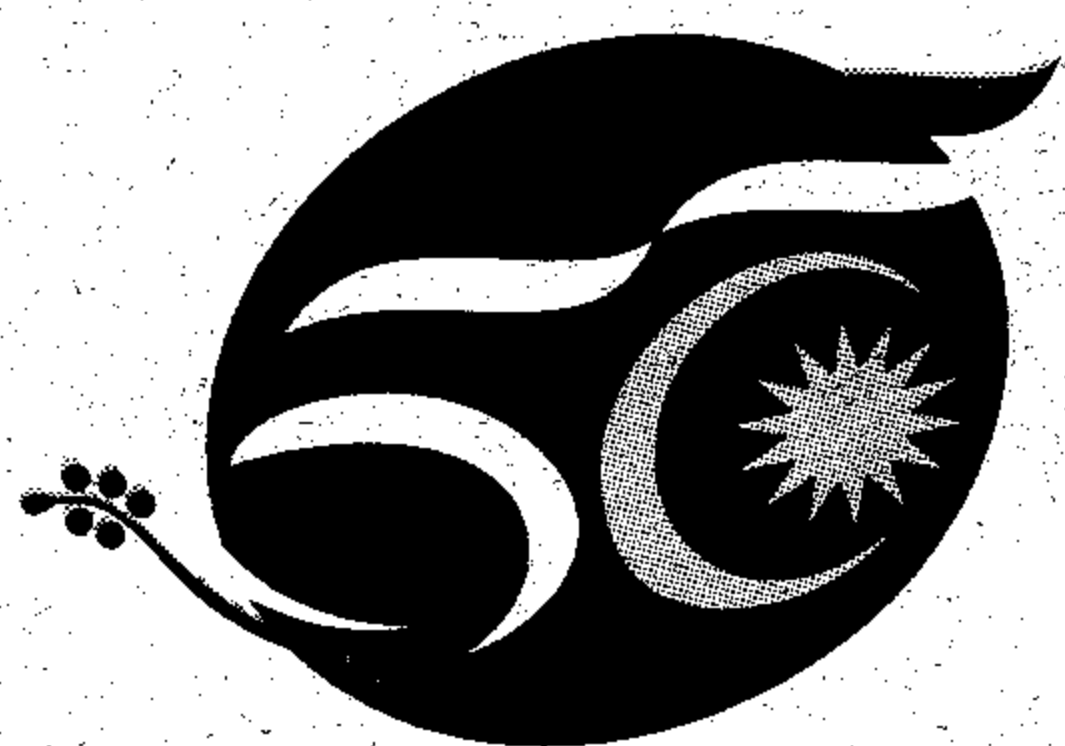
And just as unassuming as its occupant is his single-storey house in Lorong Haji Putih, which is in a quiet neighbourhood.

The only outstanding feature of the house, where decorations are spartan, is the very large hall.

He is blessed with 28 grandchildren and seven great grandchildren, and this is where he has his hands full today, looking after them.

"I am trying to make up for some lost time with my nine children," he said, drawing a tinge of a smile from his wife, Puan Sri Dalilah Abas, 77.

Unlike the busy pre- and post-independence days, Azhari today



*Malaysiaku Gemilang*

leads a quiet life, still serving politics as adviser to the Kedah Umno Liaison Committee.

Recollecting his debut in politics, Azahari said he joined Saberkas almost immediately after the talking-to by Senu and Khir.

He said the Kedah-based Saberkas was one of the many Malay-led organisations formed to oppose the British's post-World War Two plan to strengthen its hold on Malaya with the formation of the Malayan Union.

Saberkas is short for "Sayang Akan Bangsa Ertinya Redha Korban Apa Segala".

("For the love of the race, the people must be prepared to make the highest sacrifice.")

The Tunku was Saberkas chairman while Senu and Khir were among the handful of leaders hand-picked by him.

Azahari needed no further motivation to join the fight for independence and with his journalistic background, he was appointed Saberkas information chief.

According to him, the struggle included organising pickets, poster wars and door-to-door meetings.

One young doctor later joined Saberkas and he was none other than (Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was a hardworking member.

The Malays then, said Azahari, were not very united and parochialism was very strong.

Datuk Onn Jaafar then set up the Peninsular Malays Movement to unite the Malays.

Later, the Kongres Kebangsaan Melayu SeMalaya held a meeting at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, and Azahari was among several people who represented Saberkas.

He was among the delegates from 115 Malay-based organisations who attended the four-day meeting, which began on March 1, 1946, to discuss ways to oppose the British plan to introduce the Malay Union.

Azahari said many of the Kedah representatives hitched a ride on fish lorries that usually left Alor Star early in the morning for Kuala Lumpur.

Times were difficult and money

was hard to come. But the people sacrificed their time, effort and money for the independence cause.

Azahari clearly remembers that famous meeting at the Meng Seng Hall in Malacca in 1955 when the Tunku said there was insufficient funds for him and his delegation to go to London for independence talks with the British.

A woman stood up, took off the gold jewellery she was wearing and handed it over to him.

On cue, the others present pulled out whatever amount they had in their pockets or whatever jewellery they wore and handed it to Tunku.

"Such was the commitment of the people. They were always ready to share to achieve a common goal," said Azahari.

And when the time finally came, Azahari was among the thousands waiting anxiously at the Selangor Club field in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building to witness Malaya's freedom of self-governance.

He knelt down and kissed the ground at the Selangor Club field when the clock struck midnight on Aug 30, 1957.

"Tears welled in my eyes and I said a prayer, thanking God for his gift of independence."