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# No stopping Ghazali

by Zainon Ahmad

**T**HE impression I formed of Tun Muhammad Ghazali Shafie the first time we met in 1965 stayed with me throughout my relationship with him from then till three years before his death on Sunday. I [e could be most intimidating at times and charming when he chose to be.

Many may have forgotten who he was and his many contributions to this country, lie worked for Malaysia even before Merdeka serving at the Malayan Commission in London and New Delhi.

He was Tun Abdul Razak Hussein's right hand man throughout the dark days of the emergency following the May 13, 1969 incident and thereafter. As minister with special functions he had the power to poke his nose in the affairs of all government departments

Despite his overbearing and hectoring ways he was for a long time Malaysia's number one diplomat. A tough negotiator he came to dominate many meetings of Asean and it was then that diplomats in the region and beyond as well as journalists crowned him king - King Ghaz.

We met when I was one of ten students selected for a "mission" abroad. I was a member of the National Union of Malaysian Students (NUMS) and in one of our forums we had discussed *konfrontasi* and blasted Indonesia for taking such a violent course to oppose Malaysia.

What the ten of us did not realise was that we were "noticed" and in August Encik Ghazali Shafie, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, invited us to be "mini ambassadors" to counter our neighbour's propaganda that had seeped into the influential Afro-Vsian student politics.

Before the month-long odyssey began - stopping in Rangoon, New Delhi, Karachi and

Cairo before breaking up into two groups to tackle Africa - we were briefed by officials of the ministry on domestic as well as international issues that our counterparts had used to malign Malaysia in their speeches and publications.

On the third day Ghazali appeared. He harangued us for two solid hours and demolished many of our pet notions of local politics, race relations, non-alignment, and Malaysia's position vis-a-vis the United States and the Soviet Union and the Vietnam War where American planes had just bombed a strategic city in North Vietnam.

He stopped midway and glaring at one poor fellow asked: "What is Malaysia's view of that?"

"We support ... the ... the ... bombing ... I think," came the hardly audible answer.

What followed was a typhoon. Screaming at the top of his voice Ghaz let loose a string of unmentionables before saying: "How can you say that Didn't you read the newspapers? We support the American presence in Vietnam, yes. But to say we support the bombing is clearly telling everyone that we support the killing of innocent civilians."

Silence followed as he glared at each one of us in turn.

"How do we respond to questions on special Malay rights," asked a Chinese student leader in a hesitant and trembling voice. I looked in despair at Mokhtar Hashim, now Datuk, the leader of the group comprising two Malays, seven Chinese and an Indian.

The storm raged again. "You haven't read the constitution, have you? Had you read, you would have noticed there is no such thing as Malay or bumiputra rights. The constitution only accords the Malays and bumiputras special position, not rights or privileges."

Later it was a charming Ghaz that we met over lunch at the old Bilal Restaurant in Jalan Ampang. He beamed at us as he sat down and told Mokhtar that we would be given sufficient money "to eat well at clean restaurants".

As we ate the special *biryani* rice with heaps of chicken, mutton and huge prawns he regaled us with stories and jokes about politicians including cabinet ministers, their follies and inaptitudes.

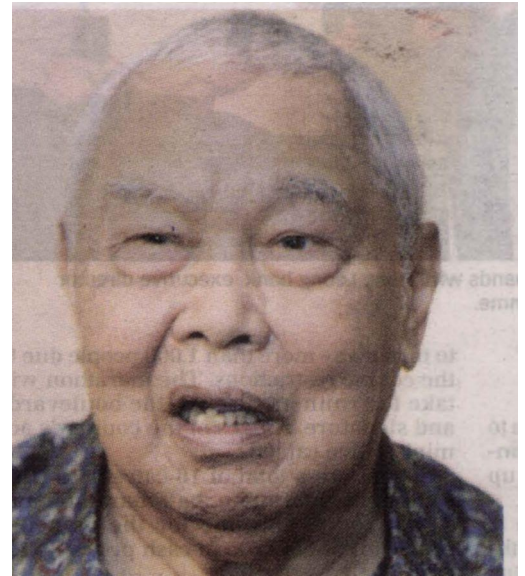
We laughed a lot and at the end of the lunch we decided that he was "a jolly good fellow" after all. Even the two luckless fellows agreed and shook hands with him warmly as we parted.

I met him again in 1970 when I was among a group of students, mostly from University of Malaya, selected to be his sounding board on a number of ideas that he was working with at the time, Rukun Negara and the new economic policy.

We met for dinner at his house, an old colonial bungalow not far from the old Wisma Putra, and chatted until well past midnight. I knew that Ghaz was a voracious reader but what I didn't know till then was that he also read in the toilet. The three walls of the cubicle attached to his bathroom had shelves upon shelves of books from the floor to the ceiling.

Members of the group changed every time we met but I and two or three others were the constant. Maybe it was because the session was after dinner but he was all smiles and geniality.

"The Malays must change their attitudes as



well," he declared one evening and then turning to me he asked that I recite an old *pantun* or lullaby which began with "*buai laju laju.*"

It was easy as all Malay children knew it by heart. *Buai laju laju/Sampai balik sana/ Beli baju baru/Dai kedai Cina.*

"See! Brainwashed from young, that when you want to buy something you buy it from a Chinese shop," he said.

Another time he said: "You know, guys, the Malays are scared of living. They don't want to try. They have no sense of adventure."

And he went on to talk about the Malay and I be rose. "A Malay is afraid to enjoy the rose because he is scared of the thorns, but another Malay who enjoys the rose too much that he makes a fatal error. He forgets the thorns."

When I joined the *New Straits Times* and then *theSun*, we met many times during the course of our work and many limes alter work.

A few years after he stepped down as foreign minister in 1984 we met at the ISIS Roundtable Forum at the Awana Genting Highlands Golf and Country Resort. I had written something about Asean before the meeting.

One day during coffee break Ghaz, who was Tan Sri at that time, walked up to the table where I was sitting with Mervin Nambiar, an AFP correspondent, and Ismail Kassim, a correspondent for *The Straits Times* of Singapore and addressed us.

"Why do you guys persist in maintaining the myth that Asean was formed purely for economic and social reasons? Include politics and security when you write your next article on Asean. I know that because I and a few others formed it," he said and was about to walk away but turned back and, lowering his voice, added, "we discussed it while being massaged in Bangkok."

Shortly after Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister I wrote in my column in *theSun* that Ghaz deserved to be made Tun for all his contributions to Malaysia. I would like to think I helped to jog someone's memory of Ghaz. A few months later, my friend became Tun.

I met him for the last time when he came to a memorial service for veteran journalist M.G.G. Pillay at a Hindu temple in Brickfields. He could not walk properly and had to be supported by his sons.

As he passed where I was sitting, he stopped. I stood up and we shook hands. And then patting me on my arm he said: "Thank you, Zainon."

Goodbye Tun, may you rest in peace.