

... a collection of stories by Malaysia's silent heroes and a brief interview with statesman, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

THE PUSH *till the* LAST MILE

Tough Times Never Last, Tough People Do

Edited by
HUSNA KASSIM



THE PUSH *till the* LAST MILE

Tough times don't last, tough people do

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HK

Terengganu.

2023

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1013860



First published in 2023 by HK.
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ISBN 978-629-97960-0-8

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Published by:
HK
(Imprint of Gedebe Enterprise,
Sanctuary Telaga Papan,
21010 Setiu, Terengganu.)
email: khusna1951@gmail.com

Printed by:
Perusahaan Tukang Buku KM
No 8, Jln Puteri Bangi 2A/6
43000, Kajang, Selangor
WhatsApp / Telegram: +60194398519

Front Cover design by Illi Dhaniah
2nd Editor: Ivan Mario Andrew

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my grandfather, Haji Said Bin Umar. Through the years of his dedication to the study of the *tafsir* al-Quran and his *pondok* work, he was known to the locals as an *ulamak*, a *mufti*, a writer and a teacher of *tafsir* al-Quran. His work was used to teach students in *pondok* institutions, mosques and *musollas*. I have never known him, nor did I have the opportunity to speak with him about his work because he passed away in 1932, 19 years before I was born.

Haji Said was born in 1854 in Kampong Kuar, Jerlun, Kedah Darul Aman. He had Islamic education early in life from his father, Haji Umar Khatib, who used to give *qutbah* (religious speeches) to the community. He also got his early education from a *pondok* school in Patani, Thailand, called Pondok Bendang Daya. Here he was tutored by Sheikh Hj Wan Mustafa bin Wan Muhammad, among others. He also travelled to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, where he studied for many years. While in Makkah, he managed to buy a property close to Masjidil Haram and built pondoks for travellers to stay.

He used to travel from Kedah Darul Aman to Changkat, Kerian, Perak Darul Ridzuan to open *pondok* schools and when he returned to Kedah Darul Aman, he taught *tafsir* classes in Masjid Jitra. He was made Kadi for Jitra until he turned 75; he also became a *tafsir*

consultant, known as “Haji Muhammad Said Mufti.” As *Guru DiRaja*, he taught *tafsir* to members of the royal family.

Kept busy by his teaching classes, he only managed to write two *kitab*s, namely *Fatwa al-Qalah fi Ahkam al-Nikah* in 1902 and *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* in 1927. Only *tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* is widely published till today. Because of this *kitab Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan*, he became known as “*Guru Tafsir*”. This book was first written in *Bahasa Melayu Jawi Lama*, making the understanding of the *kitab* rather limited to those who have knowledge of *Jawi Lama*. To render the *kitab* readable by all, University Kebangsaan Malaysia’s *Fakulti Pengajian Islam*, took the initiative to conduct an in-depth study and convert the *tafsir* into a Rumi edition. The *kitab Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* Rumi Edition has been published many times over and remain the reference for *tafsir* classes in several mosques, such as Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Selangor Darul Ehsan and *pondok* schools in Kedah Darul Aman, such as Pondok Tuan Guru Haji Bakar, Parit Panjang, Baling, and Pondok Tuan Guru Haji Salleh Musa, Sik. It is also used as a reference in *tafsir* thesis work in universities. The *kitab* in Jawi format remains a preservation of *kitab Melayu Jawi* heritage. The *kitab* is special because it was the first complete al-Quran *tafsir* in *Bahasa Melayu*.

In many ways, my grandfather’s passionate dedication to his *tafsir* work, has inspired me to dedicate my remaining years to writing. While my grandfather dived deep into the spiritual, my own writing are on temporal subject matter.

Semoga roh Haji Said bin Umar dirahmati Allah ﷻ, Aamiin.

Foreword

Husna is an old friend from the days of St Nicholas Convent in Alor Setar, Kedah Darul Aman in the 1960s and Tunku Kurshiah College, the premier all-girl fully-residential school in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan Darul Khusus. Tunku Kurshiah College produced many exceptional talents who finally graduated into high-ranking public positions, one such personality being the first female current Chief Justice, Tun Tengku Maimon Tuan Mat, who presided over a high-profile court case involving a former prime minister of Malaysia.

Husna has found her passion in writing and is now a published author. Over the last six years, she wrote several books, such as “A Train to Catch,” published by Partridge Singapore in 2016. In 2021 she co-authored a book, “Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives” with a few other friends from Tunku Kurshiah College. In the same year, she wrote “People & Places: Walk My Journey” and published her first eBook and later, a print book. This book contains, among other essays, one entitled “The Reluctant Politician,” which Husna wrote about my time as the first woman Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia to the 7th Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir.

Everyone has a story to tell, of how their life experiences have shaped them into who they are today. This book, “The Push till the Last Mile,” contains inspirational stories about people who mustered their strengths and determination to go the extra mile to achieve their dreams. These are stories of exceptional people who achieve their dreams by having a winning mentality; stories of how the cycle of poverty was broken through education; stories of a few who fell through the cracks; and finally words of hope to carry on. Included too are the stories of the little heroes of Palestine and their exceptional will-power to survive and the unconquerable Afghan spirit. The experiences shared here connect us in a most incredible way. I would encourage readers to read this book because these stories could inspire us to greater heights.

Dato Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail
Member of Parliament, 2022

Acknowledgement

Many writers have likened writing a book to childbirth: slow, painful, and anxiety-driven. The pain is doubled when contributors are busy professionals, juggling deadlines. Even as the book is ready to go to the printers, I find myself still thinking of tweaking here and there, as if the book is never quite finished. And like a child once born, the book, once completed, requires even more effort to put it out on the bookshelves.

In appreciation for the contributions made by this group of friends, I would like to record my gratitude to: Ariffin Mamat, Dr. Umar Man, Syed Sobri Syed Ismail, Syed Nur Azman, Ruhanas Harun, Dr Rohaty Majzub, Datin Mardhiah Zin and Dr. Nik Isahak Wan Abdullah, without whose effort, this book would not have been possible. I hope this writing passion continues to flourish, for future undertakings of memoir and creative non-fiction writing.

I would also like to thank Ivan Mario Andrew for his editorial contribution, even though the final version is more of my editorial work and he should not be held responsible.

I would also like to dedicate my gratitude to my family for their encouragement: Yusrina Aleia, Dr. Nurainar, Mohd Hafiz, Muhammad Hakim, Imran, Leena, and Cristiano

Hamzah. My utmost gratitude to my beautiful friends who have kept me entertained through the years.....

“Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you; spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life forever.”

Synopsis

Everyone has a story to tell, of how their life experiences have shaped them into who they have become. Narrated here are stories colouring various shades of life's journeys: inspirational stories of a winning mentality with accounts of endurance, perseverance and courage; stories of how the cycle of poverty was broken through education; stories of one unfortunate being and a few who fell through the cracks; and finally words of hope to carry on. These stories are about paths taken by people who go the extra mile to achieve their dreams.

Since the writing of this book commenced during the peak of a Malaysian high profile court case involving betrayal of trust by the highest office, it is inevitable that corruption coloured a few essays. This book contains 12 personal narratives, three poems and one interview which involved the 97-year-old statesman who led Malaysia for more than 22 years as Prime Minister of Malaysia. Among the personal narratives is one involving a Malaysian scientist, who invented a Covid-19 terminator; another involved the uncelebrated Malaysian civil servants; then another, about young Tunisian youths chasing their dreams in a way they could; another narrative was about challenges faced by the unconquerable Afghans, after US withdrawal in 2021;

and not forgetting the narrative about the fighting spirit of the little heroes of Palestine against Israel's systematic oppression, aggression and domination.

Introduction

The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic was a time of unprecedented struggle and upheaval. The global pandemic brought changes to how we conduct our everyday lives. With economic uncertainties causing loss of jobs, political turmoil, and personal trauma like the loss of loved ones, the pandemic has put an enormous strain on us all. If you characterize life's various struggles as battles and adversity as the opponent, endurance would be a crucial ingredient in "victory." A famous French philosopher and writer, Simone de Beauvoir, once said, "the characteristic feature of all ethics is to consider human life as a game that can be won or lost and to teach man the means of winning." If you consider living in this way, endurance is one of the keys to winning a game.

But there are other qualities that impart a winning mentality. One quality of a confident character is courage, not being afraid or easily intimidated but being incautious. Courage is the ability to do something one finds frightening. Therefore, courage is not the absence of fear but rather acting despite of it. Endurance is the side of courage that faces hardship with serenity and acceptance. Endurance can be duty faithfully shouldered, or pain patiently borne.

Then there is resilience and patience. Other attributes such as emotional intelligence (key to both personal and professional success) and perseverance (single-mindedness to achieve something) have similar positive effects on a person's success in life.

Undoubtedly, the sum of all of the above attributes spells success for a person in whatever he or she attempts in life. The above attributes impart a winning mentality. Whether one is a Prime Minister, a CEO of a multinational company, a mother bringing up three children single-handedly, or a man on the street, they will succeed, given these positive attributes. But some are somehow trapped in a poverty mind-set, a mind-set that can persist across generations and will not help one to get out of.

This book "The Push Till the Last Mile" is a collection of life's journeys and experiences of various personalities penned by nine Malaysians from diverse professional backgrounds. The book title is taken from the title of the first essay. The first essay, an interview of the statesman, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the 4th and the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia, drives the theme of the entire book.

My essay / interview of Tun Dr Mahathir in "The Push till the Last Mile" is a very brief peep into Tun's views and decision-making as two-time Prime Minister of Malaysia. Tun Mahathir's answers are his views, which people on the street may or may not agree with. Although his answers are brief, they are his perspective.

Despite the criticisms, recent achievements attributable to the resilient Tun M must not be forgotten. Tun M achieved what the opposition could not do for many years i.e to end

the rule of Barisan National or BN in the nations's first ever transfer of power in the 2018 GE14. Secondly, according to Kean Wong (in his book "Rebirth: reformasi, resistance, and hope on the road to new Malaysia"), Malaysia may have been saved from kleptocracy by the world's oldest prime minister.

Touching on resilience, extreme endurance and courage, the subject would not be complete without the mention of the little heroes of Palestine in "Of Bombs, Bullets and Stolen Childhood." Constant attack and harassment by the Israeli government forces in Gaza and West Bank, forced the Palestinian children from early childhood to conclude they were entirely unwanted and their voices unheard, based solely on their front-line experiences of the conflict. Mark Muhannad Ayyash, an activist, recalled his own childhood and wrote:

"From the very first years of childhood, Palestinians in Gaza receive a clear message from Israel and indeed from the world, that: you are not human and we do not care" (*middleeasteye.net*). The Israelis could kill Palestinians with little or no impunity, as the United States & United Kingdom continue supporting Israel with arms sales. As the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories continues, so does violence against Palestinians and the children are not spared (*interactive.aljazeera.com*). Hardly a month into the year 2023, there were already 35 Palestinians killed by Israeli occupation forces in West Bank making it the bloodiest year in the history of Palestine.

Families trapped in the cycle of poverty, with a mind-set that persists across generations, have few resources to break the cycle. One resource that helped some personalities break

this cycle of poverty is education. The *kampong* boy who became a CEO of a global company in Jeddah (narrated in the essay “I am a Farmer’s Son”), and another who came from a rubber estate, going bare-footed to school, to finally become a Chairman of an international school (essay “From Poverty to Promise”) are examples of resilience and perseverance. They managed to break the cycle of poverty using their only resource.... education.

In the essay “*Brick by Brick*”, an architect from rags to richers, together with friends who had the same passion and commitment towards design and architecture, grew their design firm into an international player, participating in contracts beyond the Malaysian borders through sheer hard work and perseverance. What started out as a group design partnership with 14 staff, became a 500-strong outfit with a presence in different parts of the world, getting involved in new projects, facing new challenges and dealing with a spectrum of clientele.

A Malaysian inventor working on innovations almost alone, pushed for commercialization on his own. The essay “*Innovate & Differentiate*” is about that Malaysian researcher whose many inventions resulted in many successes, including the Malaysian Covid-19 terminator. His is an example of a Push method (where he found the technology first before commercial applications were made). Still, he worked tirelessly in his laboratory, with a varied team of researchers, using funds he sourced on his own, out of sheer determination to succeed.

Extreme will and endurance are further exemplified in sports, such as endurance riding. A good friend once told

me how he had given his all to the one passion that cost him dearly in “From Hero to Zero.” He used to ride 60, 120 and even 160-kilometer endurance races in his forties. Now at 70, he had installed six screws and a pair of pins and plates in his much-abused lumbar spine, which took him about 3 months to get back on his feet. He remembered the World Equestrian Game in Jerez, Spain, in 2002, where some 200 riders from 50 countries participated. The riders were soaked to their bones in their riding jodhpurs and could hardly hold back their super-fit pure Arabian horses, all raring to go. This kind of endurance race requires the ability of the rider’s muscles to work continuously without getting tired. It also needed his mind to stay positive in order to stay in the race. Unfortunately, the 160-kilometer endurance race he participated in Jerez, saw him dismounted from the high horse of a potential hero to a zero on the same day.

Life is afterall a race against all odds. You may not like what is before you, but you fight it and endure it and only the resilient survive among the strong, while the weak crumble. Many whose life stories are laid bare here have shown determination to achieve beyond their dreams.

“The oak fought the wind and was broken; the willow bent when it must and survived...”

Should one bend to survive? Or should one fight to achieve? It is all a mind game. Malaysia needs more than the resilience or courage of one leader to push to the last mile. Malaysia needs the capable leadership of the next generation. Malaysia needs courage and psychological endurance to right the wrong and to bring it towards the path of glory once again. Malaysia needs a winning mentality to break the cycle of corruption that has plagued the entire population.

Malaysia needs change. Will the newly-elected government be able to affect this change? We will have to wait and see because change takes time.

"Bangunlah Malaysia" ...one poem begs.

Husna Kassim
19th November 2022

A WINNING MENTALITY



“The book reminds the reader of an elusive last mile. It is about the human spirit of survival. The book is best remembered for stories of exceptional Malaysians who have gone through hard graft and determination, to be lifted from poverty to position of power, from innovation to invention. Malaysia is almost there but for the sudden appearance of rampant corruption threatening the “last mile”.”

Askiah Adam, freelance writer and one time, lead writer for NST

Everyone has a story to tell, of how their life experiences have shaped them into who they are today. This book, “The Push till the Last Mile,” contains inspirational stories about people who mustered their strengths, endurance and determination to go the extra mile to achieve their dreams. These are stories of exceptional people who achieve their dreams by having a winning mentality; stories of how the cycle of poverty was broken through education; stories of a few who fell through the cracks; and finally words of hope to carry on. The experiences shared here connect us in a most incredible way. I would encourage readers to read this book because these stories could inspire us to greater heights.

Dato Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, MP.

Some essay titles:

“The Push till the Last Mile” (Husna Kassim)

“From Hero to Zero” (Dr Nik Isahak Wan Abdullah)

“The Uncelebrated Civil Servant” (Datin Mardhiah Zin-Aziz)

“I am a Farmer’s Son” (Ariffin Mamat)

“Brick by Brick” (Syed Sobri Syed Ismail)

“From Poverty to Promise” (Dr Umar Man)

“Bangunlah Malaysia” (Pn Sri Dr Rohaty Majzub)

“Afghanistan: Moving into the 21st Century”(Ruhanas Harun)

ISBN 978-629-97960-0-8

