

Malaysian Diplomats: Our Stories



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Volume 1



Asmah
2017.



TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMMAD

Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun,

Enjoy reading the snippets
of a diplomat's life.

Thank you and salam
hormat.

MALAYSIAN DIPLOMATS:

Our Stories

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Volume 1

~~Rahimah Yee~~

Rahimah Yee
Institute of Diplomacy and
Foreign Relations,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

11th February 2014.



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Director General

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MALAYSIA**

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Message

I am pleased with the effort made by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations in coming up with the first in what is planned as a series of publications, detailing the experiences of ten of our diplomats representing Malaysia abroad. It is indeed a sequel to *Number One Wisma Putra* which was published in 2006.

Our diplomats have been playing a major role in our international relations long before the establishment of the current Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Among the pioneers in the early days were Ghazali Shafie, Zainal Abidin Sulong, Zakaria Ali, Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, Othman Mohamed, Nik Kamil Nik Mahmood, Gun Lay Teik, Omar Ong Yoke Lin, Chelvasingam MacIntyre, Ismail Abdul Rahman and P.G. Lim, Malaysia's first lady ambassador. Following in their footsteps were equally well-respected individuals such as Razali Ismail, Halim Ali, Abdul Kadir Mohamad, Hasmy Agam, Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak and Rastam Isa. There are too many of them to list on these pages but I, on behalf of the Foreign Ministry, acknowledge all their contributions, experiences and sacrifices. Our diplomats have all made a mark for themselves and have helped elevate Malaysia's standing in the international arena.



I know that these first-hand recollections are just the tip of the iceberg. There are definitely a lot more priceless memories and experiences that can and must be shared for posterity. I wish to commend those who have contributed to this first volume, and encourage those who have not done so, to fathom into the recesses of their minds and share their experiences for future volumes. I truly believe that no experience is too small or insignificant and there is always something that can be learnt from each one.

These are... their stories.

Dato' Sri Anifah Aman
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

Foreword

When I was told after my arrival at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) that the Publication Unit was compiling articles contributed by our former and current serving Heads of Mission to be turned into a book – a sequel to its well-received predecessor *Number One Wisma Putra*, I was indeed very pleased.

As diplomats, we face many challenges, some more extreme than others, while serving our country abroad. These first-hand experiences need to be shared, so that the nation will understand what we go through and the sacrifices that we sometimes have to make when serving King and Country.

A few diplomats have personally experienced war in countries such as Iraq, Bosnia Herzegovina, Libya or Vietnam. Others have had to shoulder the task of repatriating our citizens from war-stricken countries or ensuring the safety of our citizens during major calamities such as earthquakes and floods. A few have had the misfortune of witnessing the breaking of diplomatic ties and having to return home in very short notice. Many, especially in the last few years, have had the difficult task of trying to help our citizens who are languishing in foreign prisons. Setting up a new

Mission is no easy task either, especially in a country full of bureaucracy and red-tapes. There were also others who had to forgo attending funerals of loved ones because of distance. Despite all that, we faced each challenge that came our way in our stride and soldiered on. However, that is not to say that there are no perks to being a diplomat, even though they do not outweigh the challenges. Having the opportunity to meet Kings and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers is one of them. Being a witness to the birth of a new nation, or seeing a country freed from its 'despot' ruler or attending a royal wedding that is watched by millions all over the world, is yet another experience that no amount of money can buy.

It is my fervent hope that this first edition will be the start of a yearly undertaking and many more recollections by former and current serving diplomats, detailing their personal experience which can be shared with all; be it as a guide for future diplomats in navigating a successful career as Malaysia's representatives abroad, as a historical value for future generations, for knowledge sake, or simply just for everyone's reading pleasure.

Dato' Ku Jaafar Ku Shaari
Director General
Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Malaysia

Acknowledgements

The idea to publish this book came after the successful publication of *Number One Wisma Putra* (edited by Dato' Dr. Fauziah Mohamad Taib), a collection of 31 articles detailing our diplomats' varied and priceless experience serving our King and Country. Contributions were solicited from former and current serving Heads of Mission, and many of them accepted the challenge of recalling their experiences and penning them down, to be shared with and benefited by all.

Malaysian Diplomats: Our Stories Volume 1 would not have come to fruition without the contribution of the following individuals: the late Prof. Dr. Chandran Jeshurun, former Director of the Academic Studies, Research and Publication Division who painstakingly edited the first round of drafts, Puan Rozanah Ibrahim, Director of the Language Division who helped to look over the drafts after the publication was put on hold due to unforeseen circumstances, and Ambassador Dato' Ku Jaafar Ku Shaari who personally selected the ten articles to be included in this volume. IDFR would also like to extend its deepest appreciation to Tan Sri Mohd Radzi Abdul Rahman, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia for his support and encouragement.

IDFR would also like to acknowledge the contributors for this volume, for without their article contributions to start the ball rolling, the publication of this book would not have been possible.

Thank you.

Rahimah Yeop
Editor

The Art of 'Fried Banana Diplomacy'

Abdul Samad Othman

AFTER AN EMOTIONAL farewell organised by the Malaysian Guangdong Association exactly on the last day of 2006, I finally departed from the cosmopolitan Canton, ending my two and a half years of a colourful life in the vibrant and fast growing city of Guangzhou.

I returned home to receive my Letter of Credence from the newly appointed Yang di Pertuan Agong, His Majesty Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Mahmud Al-Muktafi Billah Shah, as Ambassador to the Republic of Yemen. I was at home in Taman Setiawangsa with my family when I was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or better known as Wisma Putra, where I was 'instructed to leave for Sana'a immediately as the Prime Minister will be visiting Yemen in two weeks' time.'

It was in fresh and cool air in the early morning of 11 February 2007 that my wife, our two sons and I departed for Sana'a. It was certainly not at all an exciting trip, unlike my previous experience

when travelling to a new post. I was preoccupied and with so much worry about the Prime Minister's official visit to my new 'home' in two weeks' time. When I looked out the window of the Malaysia Airlines aircraft, I saw the beauty of the universe that God had created and I smiled. However, deep in my heart, only God knew how worried I was. In silence, I prayed for the smooth running of the forthcoming visit. That was all I could do, at least for the time being. At 8.30 that evening, the aircraft that carried us finally touched down at the Sana'a International Airport.

The next day, I went to the Embassy and asked Edi Irwan, the Second Secretary, to immediately inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of my arrival and to seek an appointment for a courtesy call on H.E. Dr. Abubakr Abdullah Al-Qirbi, the Minister of Foreign and Immigrants' Affairs. The following day, I handed over a copy of my Letter of Credence to him.

The days were fast approaching and every second was very stressful. While I tried to put everything in a proper perspective, the headquarters kept asking us to do so many things and perform miracles. At the same time, I was also pushed by the Yemeni Prime Minister's office for all sorts of data and information regarding the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Despite my efforts to persuade Wisma Putra to believe that he should not visit Hadramout for simple logistical reasons, the Malaysian Foreign Minister eventually succeeded in convincing Pak Lah to proceed with the plan. For a while, I was happy when the Protocol office told us that the then Yemeni Prime Minister, Abdul Qader Ba Jammal, would accompany Pak Lah to Hadramout, his home province and a special aircraft would be provided for the Malaysian delegation to fly to this ancient region of Yemen.

However, just three days before Pak Lah's arrival, I was furious when the Chief of Protocol informed me that his Prime Minister would

not accompany Pak Lah to Hadramout. Hence, there would be no Yemeni aircraft provided for the Malaysian delegation. I had to quickly look for other possible options and one of them was to charter an aircraft. The other, of course, was to cancel altogether the Hadramout trip as I had suggested from the very beginning. Both options were not accepted by the headquarters and, instead, I was told that since “you are on the ground, you should solve the problem”.

Meanwhile, the ‘big day’ arrived so quickly. At 6.30 p.m., 27 February 2007, the Malaysian Executive Jet that ferried Pak Lah, Dato’ Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Dato’ Seri Rafidah Aziz, plus other senior officials from Damascus landed. I went up to the cabin together with the Chief of Protocol to receive Pak Lah and escorted him down. Other Ministers and Chief Ministers who arrived earlier as well as the Yemeni Prime Minister and his Cabinet Ministers lined up to welcome Pak Lah.

While I was in the aircraft, I saw Pak Lah and Dato’ Seri Syed Hamid smiling all the way, an indication that their visit to Syria was a success. I really prayed and hoped that they would maintain their smile for another two days, although I knew very well that the trip to Hadramout was still uncertain and that I had yet to find a solution. At the Pre-Council briefing held that evening, I kept silent on that issue and luckily, no one raised it. My heart was still pumping very fast until late that night when the Protocol Office finally rescued me by confirming that a special aircraft will finally be made available for the delegation to go to Hadramout. I sat in solitary silence in a corner of the Malaysian secretariat for a while, sighing with relief and thanking God for sending me this miracle.

Naturally, the climax of the visit was the courtesy call on President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Pak Lah and his delegation were ushered to the banquet hall for lunch hosted by the President. It was such an exotic and typically Yemeni lunch and every one enjoyed it. From

where I was seated, I could see Dato' Seri Syed Hamid enjoying the food so much, especially the Yemeni lamb. I loved it too. Unfortunately, Dato' Seri Syed Hamid had to rush to the airport immediately after lunch as he had to attend an ASEAN meeting in Cambodia the next day. He was sent off at the airport by his Yemeni counterpart – his close friend and long-time acquaintance.

The next morning, while everyone else was rushing to the airport for the Hadramout trip, I was left alone with Pak Lah in the Prime Minister's Presidential Suite. Suddenly, he said to me, "Ambassador, I told the President yesterday that you will send him *pisang goreng* (fried bananas) soon. Can you please ask your wife to prepare *pisang goreng* and send to him personally?" I was shocked and asked myself whether I had heard him correctly or if he was just pulling my leg. Immediately, I asked him, "Why *pisang goreng*?" He told me that the day before, during lunch with the President, we were served fresh bananas with honey, a typical Yemeni dessert. After tasting the dessert, Pak Lah commented that taking fried banana with honey would taste even more delicious. The President apparently had never heard of fried bananas before and Pak Lah happily offered to have the Malaysian Ambassador send the President fried bananas so that he could try it with the famous Yemeni honey.

The best lunch we had was hosted by the Hadramout's Governor that day. Almost everything was accompanied with *Wadi Dao'an* honey, the best in the world. When we talked about honey, Pak Lah looked at me and again with his smile, whispered, "*Samad, jangan lupa hantak pisang goreng kepada Presiden* (Samad, do not forget to send the fried bananas to the President), this is your Prime Minister's personal request." While enjoying every morsel of Hadramout's food and honey, my mind was again preoccupied with the Prime Minister's instruction. Dr. Abdelnasser Munibari, the then Yemeni Ambassador in KL, who sat next to me

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