

PATRIOT

LEADER

FIGHTER



LIM KIT SIANG

LIEW CHIN TONG

With Wan Hamidi Hamid and Ng Wei Ling



Lim Kit Siang has served DAP and Malaysia in various capacities throughout his long political career. He was the party's first Organising Secretary. He was then appointed as its Secretary-General in 1969 while under ISA detention, leading the party through the turbulent times of the 1970s to 1990s. He was the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament for three non-consecutive terms between 1973 and 2008. He was also DAP's Parliamentary Leader from 2008 to 2018. He has been Member of Parliament and State Assemblyman for various seats. In 2013, he wrestled the Gelang Patah parliamentary seat (renamed Iskandar Puteri in 2018) from Barisan Nasional and helped pave the way for a change in government in the 2018 election.

Kit Siang, a name synonymous with self-discipline and hard work. He works tirelessly anytime, anywhere, and any day. The cover photo depicts the man with a laptop, absorbed in his thoughts, prolifically typing away his media statements in a homestay at a row of old shophouses near Bau, one of the many places he visited during the 2016 Sarawak state election campaign.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is not a typical biography. It does not pretend to be a dispassionate account of someone in the distant past though it strives not to be a hagiography either. I wrote this as a participant's account of a political movement's most important living icon and one of its most active leaders. This book sets out to weave historic events in the past five-and-a-half decades chronologically with rarely told stories and my personal experiences with Lim Kit Siang to showcase the man's unique qualities and his impact on the nation.

I have long been wanting to write a book about Kit, as he is affectionately called among friends and close associates, at least since my involvement in the production of a documentary with Tang Siang Ching for Kit's 70th birthday in 2011. My intellectual sparring partner for the last decade and a half, Dato' Dr Ooi Kee Beng, published *The Right to Differ* in 2011 and *Defying the Odds* in 2015. Just before Kit's 75th birthday in 2016, I thought of trying my hand to write a book on Kit. But, as fate would have it, I had Bell's palsy on 7 January 2016 and needed time to recuperate. During my illness, I still invited Kit to my house for two sessions of interview, which he very generously obliged.

In February 2020, Dato' KY Chan proposed that I write an 8,000-word piece on Kit. It was a challenge to focus my mind on the project, given that Kit was never an easy subject to write about. Without this request by KY, there would not be this book, for which I thank him profusely. The initial draft was written during the post-Sabah election quarantine that I underwent in October 2020. Followed by massive edits and additions by Wan Hamidi Hamid, we worked further on the manuscript again during Movement Control Order 2.0 in January and February 2021.

Kee Beng and other authors who had interviewed Kit would attest to the fact that the man doesn't talk much about himself, which makes interviewing him a difficult task. I am privileged and honoured that Kit tried his utmost to answer my questions, either over face-to-face interviews, meals, texts or emails. Kit has been a hero, a role model, and a great teacher, leading by example, and he simply is an inspiration to me in the past two decades or so, during which I have been personally associated with him.

I am immensely grateful for the support given by Ms Foo Yueh Chuan, Kit's long-time aide and chief of staff at DAP headquarters, without whom many of the details in this book would never be known to the public, particularly those combed from the internal records of the party, which she has been a faithful custodian of for nearly three decades.

Kit's daughter Hui Ying has been a great friend and she is ever ready to help my various endeavours throughout the years. This book project is no exception. Interviews with Kit's other children, Guan Eng, Hui Ming and Guan Choon, have shed new lights on our thinking about him. Two decades ago, his classmate and scholar Micheal Ong spent countless hours with me at his office at the Australian parliamentary library in Canberra, sharing his insights about Kit's upbringing and makeup. I am indebted to him. Kee Thuan Chye, who is working on a book on Kit, interviewed

me in three long sessions in 2020. Those interviews helped me to frame some of the issues in the book. I am also grateful to many others who have accepted our requests for an interview. They are mentioned in the relevant pages and footnotes in this book.

We tried our best to include verified details to present the vibrant context of the time that Kit operates and lives in, as we work on the assumption that the book is written for those who are a generation younger than me, while I am two cycles younger than Kit.

I met Wan Hamidi Hamid in 2006 through Guan Eng at an impromptu session, joined by his journalist colleagues Leslie Lau and Jahabar Sadiq. He has since become my best friend and in the intervening years he has either been working with my various outfits, for instance, as Editor-in-Chief of the *Rocket* when I was managing the paper between 2011 and 2015, or working at the DAP headquarters. We sometimes joke about Hamidi being at the ‘Hotel California’ - You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!

Many from the new generation of political activists in DAP who emerged in the last decade have Hamidi to thank for his pioneering work at *Sekolah Demokrasi*. Writing an accessible introduction to Kit’s life and his struggles has been a shared aspiration of Hamidi and I for a while now. I am eternally grateful that Hamidi helped make this book a reality. He has been a great co-author.

My aide and Executive Secretary of the DAP National Political Education Department Ng Wei Ling has ably researched on various topics for the content of this book on top of co-writing and editing it. Her sharp eyes for details and choice of words are phenomenal. Since she joined my team in February 2018, she has constantly impressed me with her readiness to take up different challenges and roles and her ability to perform well in them. Special thanks to my parliamentary colleague Dr Ong Kian Ming, the DAP National Assistant Political Education Director, for generously sparing time

to read the manuscript and provide helpful suggestions. I would also like to thank my staff Ithrana Lawrence for assisting in the final edits and proofreading of this book.

Last but not least, I thank my parents, Liew Sooi Yong and Choo Mee Lan, for their support, sacrifices and forbearance. They live a frugal and modest life, not without episodes of hardship. They are the proverbial ordinary Joes who are almost at the bottom of the society's food chain and would suffer at the first instance if any economic downturn were to happen. Yet their honesty and uprightness are exceptional. My parents have not been politically active but, like many others, they admire Kit's leadership since the early days. As I pursue a political life that doesn't bring much material comfort to my parents and family, I hope my life work contributes to a better Malaysia that they can be proud of.

Liew Chin Tong

March 2021

INTRODUCTION

When I began my career in journalism as a reporter in early 1988, Lim Kit Siang was already a household name, a very prominent opposition politician. At that juncture, he was still spending time as a political detainee in the Kamunting detention camp in Perak. He was one of the detention-without-trial victims of the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) when the government under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched its Operasi Lalang in October 1987 to arrest opposition leaders and social activists. When he was released in April 1989, I was a junior reporter for a Malay language daily *Berita Harian*. Despite my interest in politics, I had to wait for my turn to cover political events; in those days, political beat was for the senior reporters.

I kept on pestering my chief news editor to allow me to cover something political, at least the trade union beat as it had some political interest in there. He was initially reluctant because our top bosses perceived trade unionism as part of opposition politics. But with the help of some senior colleagues of our sister newspapers

the *New Straits Times* (NST) and *Business Times*, I managed to convince my boss that the beat was not just about the workers but also the employers and the human resource ministry. It was through the union beat – covering Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Congress of Unions for Employees in the Public and Civil Service (CUEPACS) which is the umbrella body for the government servants' unions, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), and the HR ministry – that I met some opposition party leaders such as V. David of DAP, Ahmad Nor who later joined DAP too, and Tan Sri Zainal Rampak who had a colourful career of being on both sides of the political aisle.

Since I could write both the trade union and the opposition stories, my chief new editor began to have confidence in me for a more senior level coverage. With that, I could roam freely during the 1990 general election, and it was then I managed to meet Lim Kit Siang, although only as a journalist from the mainstream media that was not supposed to give much coverage to the opposition. Here's the bombshell: I was not very impressed with him. He was serious, stern, and perhaps a bit humourless. Not very friendly, even. Of course, at that time it didn't occur to me; why should he be friendly to a reporter who represented a newspaper that had nothing good to say about him, his party and the opposition?

But to be fair to myself, I also said this about him because I could compare him to his other opposition colleagues at that time – the cautious but flamboyant Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, former UMNO leader turned Semangat 46 boss, the serious yet jovial Datuk Fadzil Noor of PAS, and the smiling but sceptical Syed Husin Ali of Parti Rakyat Malaysia. That was how I looked at the opposition and its leaders in 1990 from the perspective of a junior and sometimes naïve reporter in his mid-20s.

About the man who is the focus of this book

Thirty years later, things have gone from bad to worse for the country, except for a brief period of 22 months between 2018 and 2020 when Malaysians chose to elect a new government. Throughout the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, I continued to see Kit Siang from time to time, either at parliament, press conferences or forums. It was the political tsunami of the 2008 general election that brought me closer to the man who never gave up his dream. I was still in the mainstream media then, but I decided that since the people had spoken, I too must do the right thing in life. I quit my job, and looked for something worth doing. In less than a year, I had to go through a couple of job changes before I landed with DAP, doing this and that since late 2008.

From then on, I began to get closer and personal with Kit Siang. Yet the man rarely lets his guard down, so it's quite difficult to know the inside of his personal life. But for me, to get to know his political insight is good enough. I have to admit that although I concur with most of his views, there are certain things that I couldn't agree with him. Yet I consider these to be minor differences that are to be expected. It's only natural. One special thing about him is his willingness to listen, even to young people, as young as those in their early 20s. It's a rare trait among politicians, particularly senior leaders.

Now I also learn that the man whom I was not very impressed with in 1990 is really a warm and sometimes funny person who is at ease with his surroundings. Imagine the man who had been in detention without trial twice in his life, and still being vilified by vicious self-righteous racists. Yet for Kit Siang, he is still pursuing his Malaysian dream, without fear or favour. Love him or hate him, he is indeed a living legend. But more than that, his struggle and his fight for freedom, justice and equality have inspired thousands of

young people throughout his political career. And he continues to inspire the young generation of today.

About this book and its author

This book is author Liew Chin Tong's tribute to Kit Siang. Yet this book is also about Chin Tong's sharing about the joy and sorrow, disappointment and hope, intertwined with his own experience with the man. My role is to advise Chin Tong in terms of putting the context of Kit Siang's political life throughout his half a century's contribution to Malaysia. This is especially true in understanding Kit Siang's perseverance in the nation's highly volatile political scenario rife with racial and religious emotions, as well as rumours, lies and character assassinations. I also assist the author in revising and editing this book.

A bit about the author. I first met Chin Tong in 2006 when I was a journalist with NST. In the 2008 general election, he contested for the first time in the Bukit Bendera parliamentary seat. As a NST journalist, I roamed around a few states including Penang during the election. Although I was confident the DAP was capable of denying BN's two-thirds majority in the state, I didn't think Chin Tong would be able to oust incumbent Gerakan secretary-general Datuk Seri Chia Kwang Chye. Anyway, he surprised everyone by becoming a giant killer when he defeated Chia with a thumping majority of 16,000 plus votes. And the DAP formed its first ever state government, with the assistance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) in 2008.

By late 2008, I joined Chin Tong's Kuala Lumpur-based small think tank Research for Social Advancement (REFSA). Despite being in and out of the organisation a few times in the last decade, I'm still helping him in whatever way I can. I guess that's what

friendship is all about. I may disagree with some of his ideas, I may feel uncomfortable with some of his political perspectives, I may even think some of his very optimistic views are quite scary, but in the Malaysian context, I believe we do need a few idealists like him who can actually carry out their visions, no matter how ridiculous those ideas may sound right now. Because too many pragmatists could be bad for the nation; pragmatism usually means having too many compromises, stifling young voices, and clinging hard to the *status quo*. We need to be realistically hopeful.

Road map of this book

Chapter 1 focuses on the early life of Kit Siang, his school days, his journey from a young journalist to a political secretary, as well as his life as a family man, his reading habit and his simple, modest life, and his health.

Chapter 2 introduces his debut in Malaysian politics with DAP, the 1969 general election and the subsequent May 13 tragedy, and his first ever detention without trial.

Chapter 3 sketches the gruelling 1970s when the young leader and his party were in essence the last few men standing in the way of an increasingly hegemonic but fractured ruling party.

Chapter 4, the longest in this book, unveils a largely forgotten well-funded flank attack on Kit Siang being anti-Chinese-educated which almost drowned DAP in the 1982 election as well as the rise of Dr Mahathir and the racially polarised years until the mass arrest under Operasi Lalang in 1987. This chapter also touches on the first opposition coalition, albeit in two different groups, and DAP's attempts to wrest Penang from BN.

Chapter 5 tells of DAP's massive defeat in the 1995 general

election, the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim and the beginning of the *Reformasi* era, the party's internal crisis and the defeat of Kit Siang in the 1999 general election.

Chapter 6 deals with the new opposition coalition Barisan Alternatif and its demise, and Kit Siang's return to parliament in the 2004 general election. It also explains the resignation of Kit Siang as secretary-general and the story of his successor Kerk Kim Hock, and the new direction of the party.

Chapter 7 tells the great political breakthrough of 2008 including the success of the first ever DAP-led state government of Penang. It also details Kit Siang's refusal to be complacent but continues to work hard opening up new grounds as well as his venture into Johor in the 2013 general election.

Chapter 8 chronicles Kit Siang's indispensable role in realigning the forces to bring about the fall of the one-party state that was once deemed permanent. In author Chin Tong's eyewitness account, it details the difficult process of reconciliation among long-time political foes in their struggle against the reigning kleptocrats.

Chapter 9 examines the path towards the great political change in the country – the defeat of BN and the establishment of a new government. It also tells about the immediate attacks on the ruling coalition and subsequent betrayals that led to the downfall of the Pakatan Harapan government.

Chapter 10 is Chin Tong's concluding observations on Kit Siang's stature as the man who lives by his words, the person who knows there is no shortcuts in politics, and the leader who knows that democracy is not a linear process and needs time to mature.

About house style for this book

The house style of this book is neither too rigid nor too flexible. Both Chin Tong and I, with the assistance from his aide Ng Wei Ling, aim to provide some form of consistency and sensibility pertaining to spelling, capitalisation, abbreviations and the use of names, places, events, dates and time, italic, etc.

For names, we write full names with titles and honorifics in the first mention, and subsequently the person's first name or surname. For example, if the first mention is Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the subsequent mention would be Dr Mahathir or Mahathir, depending on the context and structure of the sentence. Another example is Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon in the first mention, followed by Dr Koh. As for Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the second mention is Tengku Razaleigh although Razaleigh is also used interchangeably. Please note that due to many different levels of datukship titles as well as their spellings, such as Dato' or Dato' Seri or Datuk Paduka, we decided to follow the Malaysian newspapers' general house style of using the spelling 'Datuk' for all datukships.

For the names of Lim Kit Siang's family, it is more intimate because author Liew Chin Tong knows them personally. Thus, he writes the name of the man as Kit while his sons as Guan Eng and Guan Choon, and daughters Hui Ying and Hui Ming; although Kit Siang's wife is written as Mrs Lim, affectionately. The same goes for people who are close to Chin Tong – some he refers to as Tony Pua or Teresa Kok while others such as the late Kerk Kim Hock as Kerk, and Chow Kon Yeow as Chow. The exception is when the persons involved have the same or similar surname when their names are mentioned together.

Initials are mostly in capital letters, such as DAP, PAS, UMNO, PAP, MCA, MIC while others in small letters such as Pakatan Rakyat,

Pakatan Harapan, Bersatu, Amanah, Bersih, etc. All these are based on popular style in most mass media in Malaysia. Capitalisation may not seem to be rigidly consistent but they are mostly spelled in small letters for institutions, ministries, departments, events and generic names. For example, it is the High Court but in general it is a court; it is the parliament but for its member, it is Member of Parliament (mostly we used the abbreviation of MP). For government positions, we use small letters such as prime minister, deputy minister or parliamentary secretary. For political parties and other organisations, it is chairman, secretary-general or treasurer.

As mentioned earlier, our house style is not too rigid, and sometimes may be a bit unconventional, but we hope it will not in any way impede your reading pleasure. We know that if anything is too rigid, it can be distracting for the readers.

Wan Hamidi Hamid

April 2021

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Chapter 1

THE MAN

The crowd of hundreds was already dispersing at the end of a *ceramah* in a small town known as Siniawan within the Bau district in Sarawak. A few local DAP leaders were chatting with each other and with some remaining supporters who did not want the night to end just yet. An elderly man had earlier retreated to a nearby coffee shop and in a moment, the sound of fingers furiously typing on a laptop could be heard. The elderly man, in his trademark glasses, periodically squinted at the words in his statement, which he had delivered earlier in his *ceramah*. Soon, he would email his statement to the press, before allowing himself a drink and some food to relax. The next dawn, he would be up before everyone else, typing away another statement before going on the campaign trail.

This scene has been repeated countless times throughout the political career of Lim Kit Siang and has been witnessed by many DAP leaders and supporters. Over his long political career and almost daily media statements, Kit easily has more than 10 million

The story of Lim Kit Siang is greatly intertwined with that of the nation. This book, however, is not a typical biography. It is neither a comprehensive account of the life of a statesman nor a hagiography. It is a tribute and a personal story of Lim Kit Siang's political life, and the organisation he is associated with - the Democratic Action Party (DAP) - in the past five-and-a-half decades. It touches on his successes and failures, joy and sorrow, and hope and despair.

Lim Kit Siang's political life is a fascinating story by itself, venturing into politics at the young age of 24 when he became political secretary to DAP's first secretary general C.V. Devan Nair in 1965. First elected to parliament in 1969, his dream has always been to build a democratic, united and prosperous Malaysia. Despite countless trials and tribulations, his determination and spirit never once wavered.

Besides some research, author Liew Chin Tong interviewed close family members, friends, colleagues, and of course the man himself. While Lim Kit Siang is not a person who easily opens up about himself, there are still a lot of captivating stories told in this book – about his passion for the Pokemon GO game, his voracious reading habit, life in detention, accidents and mishaps, and even personal heartbreaking moments in life.

At 80, Lim Kit Siang shows no sign of slowing down. His vision and actions will continue to guide the path of the party and the nation in the many more years to come.

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