

## Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

*Dark Clouds At Dawn: A Political Memoir* by Said Zahari. 2001. Kuala Lumpur: Insan; pages 316. Reviewed by Lee Poh Ping.

There are many who, after having been involved in political life, are much inclined to write their memoirs, in part to set the record straight over certain events in which they might have been involved in, and in part, as a general justification of their role. This is particularly the case with the 'victors'. They are mainly those who have emerged triumphant in the political struggle and who would have held high office. In some cases, money is not an unimportant consideration. For example, the purported sum of US\$12 million reportedly offered to Clinton must surely be a powerful inducement to him to write his memoirs! Of late in Malaysia and Singapore, we are getting accounts from the 'losers', those from the left. One is about Lim Chin Siong (not strictly a personal memoir as he passed away a few years ago) by scholars and many of his former political colleagues. Another, published about the same time, is a political memoir by Said Zahari, *Dark Clouds at Dawn*.

Said Zahari had been a significant journalistic figure in the then Malaya, and in Singapore, an important political and journalistic personality. He was the editor of the influential Malay daily, *Utusan Melayu*, at the time of the famous strike in 1961, and for which he was made *persona non grata* in Malaya in September of the same year by Malaya's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. This was only revoked twenty eight years later in May 1989 by Dr. Mahathir. Said had been the president of Partai Rakyat Singapura (People's Party of Singapore – PRS) in 1963, and before that a much sought after figure by the two contending political groups in Singapore, the PAP and the Barisan Socialis. In particular, Lee Kuan Yew was anxious that, even if Said did not join him, he should not 'drift' to the left. Lee Kuan Yew's anxiety was not allayed with Said assuming the presidency of the PRS in February 1963. Hours after assuming the presidency, Said was thrown into jail under Operation Cold Store, where he remained until 1979.

The memoir is an account of the happy boyhood of Said as a Malay of Javanese descent in a *kampung* in Singapore and his subsequent political involvement as he grew up. Two events were crucial to his political awakening: the Japanese occupation of Singapore and the Malay fight against the Malayan Union. The former made him aware that independence could be sought from the British and the latter instilled in him a desire for political involvement when he saw the Malays united to take on the British. But it was only through his entry into journalism that he entered into the world of politics. His active political participation was however short-lived as he was subsequently incarcerated for nearly seventeen years.

The memoir is the record of a man who wished to put his (and also his political supporters) side of the story, how he had been a victim of injustice, deprived of his liberty, and falsely accused of many things by what he calls 'political interests'. It is also an attempt to explain, if not justify, to his family for the years cut off from them by his incarceration. Particularly interesting is his version of many events. Here are two examples. One is his account about how his close friend, Salim Kajai, confronted the then editor of *Utusan Melayu*, Yusof Ishak, over the famous case of Samad Ismail's 'exile' to Jakarta. Yusof Ishak was forced to admit that it was not his doing, implying he, Yusof, had been pressured by some higher political authority (probably either the Tunku or Lee Kuan Yew) to do so. In another case, Said himself confronted Chin Peng, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), in Bangkok in 1999 over the role played by the 'Plen' (short for Plenipotentiary), a CPM emissary who had clandestinely met and negotiated with Lee Kuan Yew in the late 1950s. Said was angry with the Plen who, then out of a desire to form an united front with the PAP, sought to prove to Lee Kuan Yew that he was 'somebody' in the left. This he did by carrying out Lee's desire that an important figure in David Marshall's Workers Party should resign, and that not a single PRS candidate should be elected in the general elections in 1959. The Plen got nothing in return from Lee Kuan Yew. Said wrote that Chin Peng pointed to the difficulties of communication then and urged him not to put the blame solely on the Plen. He, Chin Peng, as CPM's Secretary-General then, would take personal responsibility for the Plen debacle.

Said's memoir will surely be disputed as his version of many events would be at variance with official accounts. For example, when a correspondent in the *International Herald Tribune* wrote about how this memoir offered an account of history quite different from the Singaporean official account, a Singapore government representative wrote to the Tribune in critique of the memoir, especially of the veracity of Said's account as to the reason for his continued detention even after the political struggle was apparently over. It is also likely that many non-official but non-leftist intellectuals might similarly question his interpretation of events. All these notwithstanding, this is the memoir of a man who stood by his political principles at the cost of his own freedom. Particularly refreshing and moving is his account of his close personal and political friendship with many of the Chinese left of Singapore. One would have thought that an aging Malay political figure in these times and having his memoir published in Kuala Lumpur would downplay his relationship with this group and overplay his devotion to Malay causes. Not Said Zahari. While obviously proud of his Malay roots, as seen in the early part of his memoir, he nevertheless appreciated the struggle of the Chinese left. He writes of his respect and friendship for Lim Chin Siong and how Lim, like him, had been so unjustly maligned by the authorities with appellations such as 'communist' or 'foreign agent'. A particularly moving account is in the last chapter before the epilogue. There he describes

how in the late 1940's he was at a rally in Farrer Park, Singapore and how in the confusion when shouts of 'Merdeka' (Independence) filled the air, a Chinese lad asked him to join his queue. Upon asking this young boy as to what queue he (Said) had joined, the boy calmly replied that it was the Communist Party of Malaya. 'I was not sure', writes Said, 'if the young lad thought I wasn't happy to have joined him in the queue. I wasn't sure either if he himself was a communist. It did not occur to me to ask. But, I certainly don't regret having gone to Farrer Park that morning. If anything, I only wish I had come to know the lad better'. The Chinese left, to Said, was not the ogre they were to many Malays but human beings like him willing to sacrifice their careers, their freedom, and even their lives for the betterment of humanity.

Said's memoir is not badly written. It is in fact quite readable. To those who might like to know something about a part of Malaysian and Singaporean history differently from standard accounts, you could read this memoir.

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# Panduan Kepada Penyumbang

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*Akademika* ialah sebuah jurnal berwasit yang komited kepada perkembangan ilmu pengetahuan dengan menggalakkan perbincangan mengenai pelbagai cabang sains kemasyarakatan dan kemanusiaan. Jurnal ini menerbitkan artikel, ulasan buku, dan nota penyelidikan yang menarik minat para sarjana, terutamanya daripada segi kandungan dan pendekatannya.

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*Akademika* menerbitkan manuskrip yang ditulis dalam Bahasa Melayu. Walau bagaimanapun, manuskrip dalam Bahasa Inggeris juga diterima.

Manuskrip yang diserahkan untuk diterbitkan dalam jurnal ini hendaklah merupakan karya asli yang belum pernah diterbitkan atau tidak dihantar untuk pertimbangan oleh mana-mana penerbitan lain.

Dua salinan manuskrip, ditaip selang dua baris di atas kertas bersaiz A4, hendaklah diserahkan kepada Ketua Editor, *Akademika*, Fakulti Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Para penulis yang manuskripnya telah diterima untuk penerbitan dikehendaki menghantar sesalinan manuskrip akhir yang telah disunting beserta dengan salinan fail dalam disket 3.5". Satu nota ringkas biografi penulis perlu disertakan bersama-sama dengan manuskrip. Semasa manuskrip masih dalam pertimbangan Lembaga Editorial, para penulis bertanggungjawab menghubungi editor untuk memaklumkan tentang sebarang perubahan alamat.

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Semua ilustrasi termasuk rajah, carta dan graf, mesti dilabel dan disediakan dalam halaman yang berasingan daripada teks. Kedudukan ilustrasi seperti yang dikehendaki dalam teks hendaklah ditanda dengan jelas. Semua ilustrasi ini harus dirujuk dan dinomborkan secara berturutan sebagai rajah. Semua ilustrasi

hendaklah sama ada dilukis dengan jelas menggunakan dakwat kekal, difotografkan dalam bentuk hitam putih atau warna dan dicetak di atas kertas yang bermutu, atau dalam bentuk imej digital, dan disediakan dalam bentuk *camera-ready*.

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