

**RAFIDAH AZIZ**

*Sans Malice*

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*by*  
Zhou Mei

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and

\* Cik Yasmin Abdullah

*This book is dedicated  
to  
Friendship.*



*This is the same sketch as that used on the cover. Done by Lucio Caceres Behrens, Uruguay's Minister of Transport and Public Works on 3 July 1996 in Kuala Lumpur. The words written by the artist (doodler?) read: 'To Fire Faridah, From Lucio'. (He had mis-spelt Rafidah's name; it was possible that Behrens was already acquainted with Rafidah Aziz's fiery temperament, hence 'Fire'.)*  
*(Courtesy of YB Datin Seri Rafidah Aziz)*

## INTRODUCTION

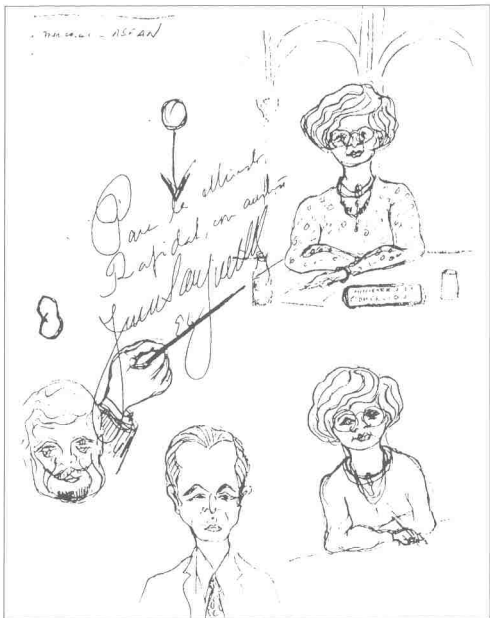
**RAFIDAH AZIZ** is a self-made person. As a young child, she already knew what she wanted more than anything else: an education. To her, education would be the route to a better life, a better tomorrow. As a schoolgirl, she thrived in a competitive environment. As an adult, she cherishes the discipline instilled in her during her schooldays. Her unwavering pursuit of excellence, aided by her intelligence and diligence, were duly rewarded. She would be the only one of her parents' four children to obtain tertiary qualifications.

She would have been content teaching Economics at the University of Malaya, her *alma mater*. But she was not one to say "no" when a career in politics came a-beckoning in post-independence 1970s. She had grown up during the historic years when Malaya reached for *Merdeka*. Politics would enable her to do her part for her country more directly. A member of the UMNO Supreme Council since 1974, a Cabinet minister since 1980 and the country's Trade Minister since 1987, Yang Berhormat Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is the personification of the modern Malaysian woman: educated, liberated and yet traditional.

As Trade Minister, she is known beyond the shores of the Federation of Malaysia. Today, interest in her overseas has risen beyond mere gender. Increasingly, she has won respect — personally as well as for her country — perhaps also admiration, for her professionalism, enhanced in no small measure by her articulateness.

At home, she remains largely an apolitical politician. Her personal abhorrence of politicking has not insulated her from others' shenanigan. But she dismisses the latter as the unpleasant baggage that comes with politics. It has not distracted her from her focus: to do her job well, to the best of her ability. Despite having been in politics for almost a quarter of a century — Dr Mahathir Mohamad is her third Prime Minister — the seemingly indefatigable woman is far from jaded. There is, as she would point out, so much more that needs to be done.





*This was done by Dr Julio Maria Sanguinetti, President of Uruguay. He led a Uruguay delegation to Malaysia and did this during a meeting on 3 July 1996. Malaysia's sharp-eyed Minister of International Trade and Industry spotted him and Lucio Caceres Behrens doodling during the briefing and asked for their respective works after the meeting. The two visiting dignitaries graciously consented. The President inscribed: 'For Minister Rafidah, with friendly affection' (Courtesy of YB Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz)*

## KEY DATES IN THE LIFE OF RAFIDAH AZIZ

Born (Selama, Perak)	1943
Graduated (University of Malaya)	
* Bachelor of Arts (Hons)	1966
* Master of Economics	1970
Married Mohamed Basir Ahmad	1966
1st child, Rohaiza, born	1967
2nd child, Alfian, born	1974
3rd child, Rohaila, born	1975
1st grandchild, born to Rohaiza	1996

## CAREER

### Academic

Worked at University of Malaya	
* Assistant Lecturer	1970-73
* Lecturer	1973-76

### Political

#### Appointed:

* Senator	1974
* UMNO Supreme Council member	1974

#### Elected:

* Member of Parliament since	1978
* President of Wanita UMNO	1984-96

#### Office:

* Parliamentary Secretary, Public Enterprises	1976
* Deputy Minister of Finance	1977-80
* Minister of Public Enterprises	1980-87
* Minister of International Trade & Industry	1987-

## QUOTATIONS

(*Simpulan Bahasa: Malay idioms*)

*Kerja beragak tak menjadi,  
kerja beransur tak bertahan.*

**Delaying your work will bring no results.**

*Mulut tempayan boleh ditutup,  
mulut manusia tidak boleh ditutup.*

**One can put a lid on an earthen water-barrel,  
but not on a person's mouth.**

## RAFIDAH AZIZ's 'firsts' ...

- 1963: The first Malay girl to be offered a Colombo Plan scholarship (and the first to turn it down).
- 1963: The first Malay girl to be offered a Bank Negara scholarship (and the first to accept one).
- 1970: The first Malay woman to obtain the Master of Economics (and the first to lecture Economics at the University of Malaya).
- 1976: The first woman to be appointed a parliamentary secretary (and the youngest).
- 1977: The first woman to be appointed a Deputy Minister of Finance.
- 1980: The first female Minister of Public Enterprises (and held the portfolio the longest).
- 1984: The first tertiary-educated woman to be elected president of Wanita UMNO.
- 1987: The first female Minister of Trade and Industry (now of International Trade and Industry and has held the portfolio longer than any of the ministry's ministers before her).



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*Sheer bliss: Rafidah became a grandmother at end-1996.  
(Picture taken on 14 February 1997)  
(Courtesy of YB. Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz).*

## PROLOGUE

### *A Life Complete*

SHE IS a woman fulfilled.

As eventful and hectic 1996 drew to a close, a relaxed Rafidah Aziz glows with an inner contentment. "I'm now enjoying a higher level of happiness," beams the new grandmother who turned fifty-three years old in November that year. To be elevated to the status of *nenek* has been a milestone she has longed for: ever since her eldest child married more than five years ago. Now at last, Rohaiza, her twenty-nine year old first-born has presented her with the greatest gift a child could give her parents: her own first-born, a bundle of cuddly joy named Raihanna.

It is alien to Rafidah's nature to scheme or plot or manoeuvre for political office or favour. But it is very much her nature — as a woman, one with set unwavering family values — to long for the arrival of the third generation. Nothing could possibly compare with the sheer bliss that filled her whole being to hold her grandchild in her arms. She feels that her sojourn in life is now complete. It is how it should be.

But lest that be misinterpreted as a withdrawal from 'life', far from it. Rafidah Aziz the workaholic does not recognise the need to 'retire'. Age is irrelevant to her. She has every intention of carrying on indefinitely. "So long as there is job satisfaction, I'll continue to work. And right now, I am still enjoying my work very much; there is so much more to be done at the ministry."

What about life after politics or political office? She is not prepared to seriously consider this. But idle she would not, that she is very sure about. "Basir (*the man she married in 1966 and father of her three children*) and I will think of something we both want to do," says she light-heartedly, flashing her infectious smile. There are also all those hobbies and sports she would like to take up or be better at. Ceramics, for example. But of course arm-wrestling belongs to the past; no more of that. Golf, definitely, slipped discs notwithstanding.





## CHAPTER I

### *Safe In Sleepy Selama*

“IT’S A GIRL,” beamed the *bidan*. It was the wee hours of the fourth of November 1943 when the motherly midwife — known for her experience and expertise, having delivered more babies than she could remember — held twenty-one year old Madam Rahimah’s first-born up for inspection. The baby’s lusty howl reassured Madam Rahimah’s husband and her parents waiting anxiously outside of the makeshift delivery room that all was well.

But all was not well outside of the immaculate though sparsely furnished attap-roofed wooden house raised on stilts in the midst of lush greenery. Madam Rahimah binte Mohd Kahar and Abdul Aziz bin Mohd Jaafar had married barely two years ago, just before the Japanese invasion of the Malayan peninsula. After months of anxiety caused and aggravated by rumours, the Japanese confirmed their deadly aggression by dropping bombs on Kota Baru, Kelantan, on the north-east coast of the peninsula, on 8 December 1941. That same evening, the island of Singapore off the southern tip of the peninsula was the target of similar bombing and shelling. Ten days later, the invading army took control of Penang island, off the north-west coast of the peninsula. In less than a week after the fall of Penang, Kuala Kangsar, the royal capital of Perak state, had fallen. Before the year was out, mining town Ipoh of the same state was lost too.

The Japanese invaders (the twenty-fifth Army under Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita) advanced southwards with precision. With superior air power, the Japanese soldiers on bicycles were unstoppable. They had effectively taken care of British might on the seas when, on 10 December 1941, the pride of the British navy, nicknamed *HMS Unsinkable* — the *HMS Prince of Wales* (a battleship) and the *HMS Repulse* (a battle cruiser and aircraft carrier) — were speedily and ignominiously rendered useless by Japanese superior air power when the British foolishly sailed northwards in

the South China Sea, off the Pahang coast of the peninsula, without air coverage. The ultimate target of the Japanese southward advance was Singapore. By 8 February 1942, the Japanese were at Singapore's doorstep, poised to cross the 1.2-kilometre long causeway. The defenders of Singapore had blown a gap of about fifty metres in the causeway. It took the invaders just four days to repair the damage. On 15 February 1942, the first day of the Lunar New Year of the Horse, the British in Singapore surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese.

War, peace or hostile occupation, it was the custom that a daughter heavy with child would return to her parents for the delivery and observe a forty-day confinement. Thus, when her time was near, Madam Rahimah too returned to her parents' humble dwelling in Selama, a little township north of Kuala Kangsar, near the Perak-Kedah border. During peace time, Madam Rahimah's father worked for the British administration as a tax collector. But now, like so many Malays of the country, he would live off the land as best as he could.

Perak was one of the nine Malay States administered (and supposedly, protected) by the British before the Japanese Occupation. Nature had been exceedingly benevolent in bestowing the peninsula with mineral wealth under its soil. It was rich with a natural resource much in demand — tin — and Perak was enviably the richest of the peninsular states in tin deposits. It was the exploitation of this industrial resource which had first attracted the British. (Perak stands on record as the state where the first British resident sent there was murdered in 1875, soon after his arrival.) Inevitably, immigration surged, mostly from China but also from the Indian subcontinent as well as settlers of other states of the peninsula. Some were entrepreneurs and investors but the vast majority came to provide the mines with the much needed labour.

Japanese expansionist aggression in turn had much to do with Japanese search for resources and tin aside, the peninsula, with the states collectively referred to as Malaya, was then the world's leading producer of natural rubber. Indeed, by the time of the Japanese Occupation, Malaya was the world's primary source of tin and rubber, sold mostly to the United States of America. To the British Empire, Malaya was a cash-cow, a major dollar-earner, second only to Canada. Many a fortune had been built on Malaya's twin pillars of its economy: tin and rubber. However, for the ordinary folks of Malaya, nature's benevolence did little to enrich their lives. The option

to switch from subsistence farming to life as rubber-tappers or mine-labourers did little to improve their lot.

\*

Madam Rahimah and her husband named their first-born Rafidah, daughter of Abdul Aziz: Rafidah binte Abdul Aziz. (Later on, Rafidah would shorten her name to just Rafidah Aziz.) For the Azizes who would have three more children (two boys and another girl), life during the Japanese Occupation was bearable. Normally, a daughter would stay at her parents' home for the delivery and confinement, all in for about two months, before returning to her marital home. But with the on-going uncertainty under hostile occupation, Madam Rahimah and her husband did not leave her parents' place until the Japanese had left. The Japanese presence was, however, hardly felt in their daily lives in the semi-rural area where they were. Jobs were scarce but fortunately, land was plentiful. One could always till the soil. Being in the tropics meant that crops could be cultivated all round the year and just about every family would rear its own poultry. Since time immemorial, in the tropics, nature has always been a generous provider: in the forests as well as in the rivers. And so it was then.

Abdul Aziz had lost his government post when the British left. Being self-employed tilling the land seemed the ideal solution to him. For him, it was not a matter of having green fingers. Agriculture was what he had studied in college before his marriage, with a diploma from the Serdang College to prove it. What better time to put his knowledge to good use? As the Azizes lived out the Occupation quietly in Selama, they were spared the excesses and atrocities the occupying forces inflicted on some hapless Malaysians, especially the town-dwellers and of course, against the underground resistance fighters in the jungles.

A year after the arrival of Rafidah, there was another addition to the household when Madam Rahimah gave birth to a son, Tajul Arus. Rafidah took her first steps in the serenity and warmth of her maternal grandparents' home. With the arrival of a baby brother, she had a little playmate to roam with her. Neither would have any traumatic memories of those anxious times. And soon, it would be peace — and time for the Azizes to move on.



## CHAPTER II

### *Indelible Horrors*

AS NORMALCY returned to the daily lives of the people of Malaya with the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, there were good times awaiting the Azizes. Soon after the restoration of British administration, Abdul Aziz was called back by the government to serve as a rubber planting officer, to be based in Kajang, Selangor. But as eldest child Rafidah recalls, in the years ahead, the bad times tended to outnumber the good for the family. Abdul Aziz's quick and hot temper had much to do with his seeming inability to stay employed for long. When roused, he was very capable of walking out of a job without notice.

Normalcy was soon strained by an abnormal state of affairs in the country, affecting both Malaya and Singapore. It was nigh impossible for ordinary folks to escape the repercussions of political tests of will, when ideologies clashed, when the spurned turned to violence to underscore their deadly intent and determination. While the Japanese Occupation years left no scars on the mind of Rafidah the toddler, not so with the post-war years of guerilla warfare and terrorism that spilled out of the jungles of Malaya into the towns. The heroes who defiantly and valiantly fought and did what they could to undermine the detested Japanese during the Occupation years metamorphosed into terrorists and saboteurs. They, of the former Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army — whose members and supporters formed the core of the Malayan Communist Party — saw communism as the route to post-war self-rule and political independence from the British. When their way was rejected by others who similarly sought political freedom, they opted for the urban underground of Singapore and the jungles of the Malayan peninsula.

Their defiance of the rule of law and the authorities culminated in the killing of three European rubber estate managers in Sungai Siput, Perak state, on 16 June 1948. That triggered the start of the oppressive 'Emergency': on that

day, a state of emergency was summarily proclaimed to cover initially Perak and Johor states; two days later, the whole of the peninsula came under it and a week after, the island of Singapore too. The Emergency would remain for twelve full years, officially ending on 31 July 1960.

It was during those dark and dangerous years when the rural landscape of Malaya saw the mushrooming of 'new villages'. There would altogether be some six hundred such settlements, each averaging about a thousand dwellers, where the harsh treatment meted out to the hapless dwellers and where the sparse facilities were often compared, with justification and without hyperbole, to concentration camps. In those villages, the inhabitants' freedom was drastically curtailed, with curfews strictly enforced come nightfall each day and where rubber-tappers who left home before the crack of dawn to do their daily round of tapping and would not return until the day's work was done many hours later — they were not allowed to leave with their day's lunch, no matter how meagre the sustenance.

It was British High Commissioner General Sir Gerald Templer who had come up with draconian measures to cut off the terrorists' sources of sustenance and support, with Chinese villagers the main suspects. Sir Gerald had arrived in 1952 as replacement for Sir Henry Gurney. The latter had been a victim of terrorism when he was killed during an ambush on the road to Fraser's Hill (a hill resort close to the Pahang-Perak border) on 7 October 1951. It would seem that Sir Gerald's heavy-handed merciless prescriptions produced the results sought. Be that as it may, at the end of it all, the price paid in terms of human lives (thousands) and suffering (untold) were sobering.

\*

For Rafidah the child, she knew not what was a communist or a terrorist. But the first-hand exposure to what those branded as terrorists or communists could do has not faded from her memory with the passage of time: "It's like it just happened. I can never forget what I saw." The populace had barely time to heave a collective sigh of relief and get back to life as a free people with the defeated Japanese gone when the heroes turned terrorists made their methods noticed and felt. For the Aziz family members, they had their first dreadful experience as early as 1946, when the family moved to Kajang, Selangor. Since Abdul Aziz's work would require him to inspect rubber estates, he rented a modest house for his family on the fringe of these estates.

It was during those days when the word 'communist' registered on Rafidah's mind. The word would often be muttered and murmured by adults, with fear and dread in their voices, as though the very word was laden with evil. Through association, 'boots' meant communists. Heavy steps made by boot-wearers would be a tell-tale warning that communists were in the vicinity. Rafidah recalls vividly the occasions in the evenings when, quite out of the blue, her father would tell his children to hush up while lights were swiftly switched off and he would order the whole family to lie flat on the floor and not stir or make a sound. For he had just heard the distinctive dull heavy 'thud' of boots; it meant that the communists were lurking out there, in the dark, somewhere.

The year 1948 marked the beginning of the Emergency. By then, the Aziz family had moved to Kuala Lumpur (then part of Selangor state; since independence, Federal Territory), with another rented house — in Kampung Baru — to call home. Not far from where they lived was the Lucky World, an amusement park which offered a wide range of entertainment, for both adults and children. By then, there were Rafidah and her brother Tajul Arus. (The Azizes' would have two more children in the 1950s.) There was one balmy evening when Rafidah's parents decided to give the children a treat by taking them to the open-air amusement park. The children could never tire of the bright lights, the music, the noise and the general air of festivity and fun in such places.

The parents led the two excited children by hand while they looked for suitable entertainment for the young. They stopped to watch *ronggeng* (Malay style of dancing) under the star-lit sky. The presence of some members of the special constabulary in uniforms did not seem to alarm or bother anyone. There was a good crowd milling around, with much laughter and banter, over and above the rather loud music. Rafidah's eyes darted from grinning dancer to giggling dancer, from mustachioed man with flicked-back greasy hair to voluptuous *kebaya*-clad woman, from slim and trim youthful couple to the more mature, rounded and pot-bellied, while her brain clicked away at super speed, busily figuring out what exactly the dancers were doing. Suddenly, Rafidah was jolted out of her private musing by an eardrum-piercing explosion. (Later, she would learn that someone had thrown a bomb at the dance floor.) There was pandemonium as the screaming crowd instinctively turned to get away as fast as their legs could run. The panic-stricken adults pushed away everything and everyone in their path as they sought safety for themselves.



Rafidah had been holding the hand of one of her parents but the sudden human stampede caused her to lose grip. The little five-year old girl stood there, stunned and confused. Then came into focus a most gruesome sight: an ashen-faced man, his clothes torn and drenched in blood, walked unsteadily past her. As Rafidah gaped, she gasped for breath when she saw that he had lost one arm and where the arm should be, blood continued to ooze. "I'll never forget that. Never," shudders Rafidah almost half a century later at the recollection of that evening's unscheduled nightmarish melodrama. Fortunately for Rafidah, someone noticed her standing there, forlorn and obviously lost. Without wasting time questioning her, the stranger scooped her up in one arm and dashed out of the amusement park with her. There, outside the gates, were her anxious parents holding tight Tajul's hand, while craning their heads for sight of their daughter.

Next, it would be a taste of life in the north-eastern state of Kelantan during the Emergency. Rafidah would attend a secondary school in the state capital Kota Baru for three years, from Form I to Form III. (This would be followed by two years in the southern Johor state.) By then, her father was an information officer. It was his responsibility to keep the public 'informed' and correct any 'misinformation' spread by the underground and subversive elements of society. He was issued with a pistol and instructed to carry it with him at all times. Presumably, he had also been taught how to use it. On his part, he had sternly warned his children in no uncertain terms that they should never touch the pistol. His children knew better than to defy him, no matter how curious or tempted they might be.

Those were the days when ordinary folks avoided venturing out of their homes at night or travelling long distances. Their fear of ambush, or being caught between the deadly fire of the armed forces and the guerillas — or terrorists, or communists: the descriptions were used as synonymous — was very real. Those were the days when the safest mode of such travel would be in armoured vehicles and armoured trains. The British had identified various 'black' pockets where the terrorists' sway was particularly tenacious. It was a test of the might and single-mindedness of Sir Gerald's methods to wipe the 'black' pockets clean and turn these pockets 'white'. Kelantan was one of the most guerilla-infested of the states; there in Kelantan was one of the most notorious of the black pockets, Gua Musang (Cave of the Civet Cat). Life in Kelantan was tense. There was incessant reminders that it was not safe out there. There was not a day when the page one lead story of the newspapers and top item during radio broadcasts would not have something

to do with the latest development on the relentless and often bloody skirmishes between the determined authorities and the wily guerillas, with reports alternating between promising successes and dismal failures.

The pervasive anxiety of the masses was particularly tense for those identified as government men, as Rafidah's father was, since he worked for the government. While there were no major mishaps during the family's three years in the state of Kelantan, Rafidah carries with her a life-long phobia of weaponry.



## CHAPTER III

### *Life As A 'Have-Not'*

OVERALL, etched on Rafidah's memory of childhood was the poverty. "We were looked down upon," recalls the adult Rafidah matter-of-factly. As a child, Rafidah was precocious and wise beyond her years. While other girls were playing with dolls and indulging in make-believe, she was already analytically assessing the world around her, noticing the differences between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. She could see very clearly that her family belonged to those who did not have.

Was it envy that she felt? Did she covet or crave for material things which others had, be they big houses, fancy motorcars, beautiful clothes and many many more wonderful things she could not even name yet? Perhaps there was indeed a tinge of envy for she could not but notice what others had that she, her family and most people who lived in the same neighbourhood did not have. (Where the Azizes lived, it was considered as one of the poor pockets of Kuala Lumpur.) She wanted to figure out what the 'haves' had that gave them all that they had in seeming abundance. Her young but super-active mind was engaged in induction and deduction, as she sought answers; following which, solutions. She would soon nail it down as: education. But not just any kind of learning. She noted that a special type of education seemed to give certain people an advantage over others: an education in English. Without parental coaxing or peer pressure, she went after it with determination, objectivity and tenacity that belied her tender years.

It wasn't that her parents were so overwhelmed by penury that they would deprive Rafidah of literacy. It wasn't because Rafidah was a girl and therefore it wasn't so important to get her educated. Rafidah would be the first to deny any discrimination in her parents' treatment of daughters and sons. But what her father had in mind was for his children to get educated the way he had been educated and his father before him: by attending Malay-medium schools

which would also see to Islamic religious studies. As Rafidah sees it in later years, Malay parents of her parents' generation and the generations before tended to dismiss education as an effective tool in equipping their children for a productive and rewarding adulthood.

Rafidah's father had himself gone through the seven-year schooling in the Malay stream. He apparently was a bright student (as well as a good sportsman) and was offered the chance of a lifetime to further his education in England. But to his parents (that is, Rafidah's paternal grandparents — the grandfather was self-employed; remembered as a rather religious person), having their only child by their side far outweighed any other consideration. Thus, Abdul Aziz the filial son had to forego that golden opportunity which might well have opened career doors to him. When it came to Rafidah's generation, her parents too — "liberal but still traditional" — wanted her to go through the formal Malay stream education. At the age of five, she was duly enrolled to start her schooling in a Malay school. At seven years old, Abdul Aziz's first-born child unilaterally declared her independence, not so much by word as by deed.

The child was dissatisfied with what the Malay school was teaching her. She wanted to be literate and fluent in the English language. Everyone looked up to the doctors; all doctors spoke English, she noted. All those people who had prestigious jobs, who rode in fancy and flashy cars driven by chauffeurs and lived in imposing mansions with manicured lawns lined with luxuriant and neatly-trimmed bushes and beautiful potted flowering plants, spoke English. A well-known characteristic of hers surfaced early in life: impatience. She was not going to go through the formalities of receiving an education the traditional way through the Malay stream before switching to a school where English would be the medium of instruction. She wanted her education in English there and then.

By then, 'home' was Kuala Lumpur's Kampung Baru district. Rafidah the child found her way to the Bukit Nanas Convent<sup>1</sup> to enrol herself in its primary school. Her parents were unaware of what their eldest child was up to until she told them. She had to tell them because she needed to be dressed in the school's uniform to attend classes. Getting herself properly outfitted for the

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<sup>1</sup>One of several Catholic mission schools in the country which were privately-run, now under the 'government-aided' category.

school was beyond the seven-year old, no matter how resourceful. Her astonished parents gave in to their precocious little girl. And so Rafidah happily went to a school which used the English language.

To the energetic and focused youngster, the journey by foot of more than three kilometres each way was no hardship, rain or shine. But she soon found that there were other obstacles in her way: she could not speak the English language as her classmates did; nor did she have as many books as the other girls in class. But she soon figured out how she could first narrow, then erase, the literacy and fluency gap between her classmates and herself. To speed up her command of the English language, verbally and in writing, the child enrolled herself in adult education, at a commercial school — the Goon's Institute.

The furniture in the classroom was made to adult size: "My teachers and classmates had to lift me and put me in the chair." The tuition came free as at that point of time, her father was making a living teaching the Malay language at this institution. (Demand for *munsyi*, language teachers, would increase as more and more non-Malay speakers sought literacy in that language, especially in post-independent Malaya/Malaysia. For Abdul Aziz, teaching the language would be a primary source of income for some years; at one stage, he also operated a school canteen and Rafidah would help out after school.) For Rafidah, her education came free throughout her schooling days as bright students from poor families were exempted from paying fees. Later, again it was a scholarship which took care of the cost of the Azizes' eldest child's tertiary education.

\*

Childhood, as Rafidah vividly recalls, was "very full" and "happy, in a way". Retrospectively, it was not a conventional childhood. She took upon herself many adult responsibilities. As a child, she did not know that other girls of her age would not be shouldering the chores she did. She thought it only natural that she should prepare breakfast in the morning when her mother was not up yet. Just as she did not see it as an unusual chore for a child to help cook the family meals after school, or to do the laundry and ironing, or to walk to Chow Kit Road to do marketing and buy groceries for her mother. She is pleased to recall that she was never cheated, not once: "I calculated very carefully." There were no trivialities for her as a child, as much by choice as by circumstances.

Thinking back, Rafidah's siblings — especially the two born in the 1950s — probably had an easier time growing up than she did. During her early childhood, family finances were rather straitened; every cent mattered. But family circumstances had a positive impact on the child: it kept her totally focused, that she had to excel in school. By her teens, life had become better for the family. Thus, in retrospect, that might explain why her siblings did not share her drive to do their best in school, to excel. To Rafidah, her siblings seemed somewhat pampered and spoilt by their parents. But that in turn exacted a price on the children for they would prefer to enjoy themselves playing than to spend their time away from school studying. That, of course, is conjecture but what was clear was the fact that there was no parental pressure on them to match big sister Rafidah's term report cards.

By choice, Rafidah as a young child did not like playing with girls, least of all with dolls. "I hated dolls, I just couldn't stand playing with them and *masak masak*," grimaces Rafidah. *Masak masak* has always been a favourite game of girls who would make-believe and pretend to cook and keep house. But Rafidah was not a typical girl. If she had to play with girls, she insisted on playing the role of the teacher and be in charge. But mostly, she would rather play with the boys; not just with her brothers but with any boy who did not mind playing with a girl. She went for games with gusto. With her mop of thick curly black hair neatly plaited, she wanted to play the games the boys played. Often, she would beat the boys at the games, be it kite-flying or top-spinning. When she was older, there was also arm-wrestling: "Oh yah, I was a good arm-wrestler. I was arm-wrestling right up to Form VI. Not many boys could beat me."

Her arm-wrestling feats are well-remembered by former classmates. Toronto-resident Siew Chak Yun, for one, who was Rafidah's Form VI (the two pre-university years) classmate at the Victoria Institute and later, the University of Malaya, recalls very clearly her insistence in joining the boys in arm-wrestling. He was one of the boys who took her on. (Perhaps the fact that he had three sisters at home made him more at ease with female classmates.) Understandably, some boys refused to arm-wrestle with Rafidah. For sure none of them were prescient, that they were being asked to get rough and physical with a future national leader. More likely, they were just being male chauvinistic, not wishing to engage a girl in such 'macho' activity. Siew Chak Yun remembers Rafidah the classmate was "a very friendly person who mixed extremely well with her classmates, irrespective of race or religion". Rafidah would always invite her classmates to partake of the *Hari Raya Puasa*

celebration — the first day of the tenth month of the Islamic calendar, to mark the completion of a month of fasting, the month of *Ramadan* — every year at her parents' home. By then, home was just off Jalan Anak Gasing in Petaling Jaya, Selangor state.

While she enjoyed the company of boys and at times behaved very much like a tomboy, she denies ever wishing to have been born a boy instead or ever resenting being a girl. Even as a child, she seemed to be very precise regarding the various roles she should play: as a dutiful daughter, as a responsible big sister, as a studious pupil and as a sporting playmate. Her self-discipline showed even then: she divided her time equitably, at least as fairly as a child could determine. But she was not infallible. Once in a while (not too often) she slipped. Her parents were not about to let her off just because she was a girl. She was whacked, just as her siblings were, as and when their parents deemed corporal punishment necessary to enforce discipline and obedience. She obviously does not harbour any resentment over the punishment she received as a child.

As an adult, she is all for a bit of smacking as an efficacious means of drilling discipline into unruly children. Typically, she would say what she believes. Unfortunately, these days, to advocate corporal punishment is not quite politically correct, not even in the developing world. When she aired her views on the matter publicly in 1994, critical response came swift and fast, from educationists and other interested or concerned parties. But one doubts if their displeasure and censure would change her opinion on the matter.

Her parents, in their passive way, must have realised early on that their bright-eyed chubby-cheeked chatterbox daughter was rather exceptional. There was little sibling rivalry when the three younger children joined the Aziz household. Tajul was of course closest to Rafidah in age, having been born just a year after Rafidah. The other two younger ones came after a big gap of many years. (The Azizes' third child was born twelve years after Tajul, their second child.) In Tajul's memory, he took on the bully role for a while as he was the first son. But not for long. Tajul puts it simply: "My parents just knew Rafidah was good from early age." Her siblings were not in any way jealous or resentful of her. And she was surely far too senior in age to be a playmate to her third and fourth siblings.

Perhaps her siblings, especially the two 'babies' of the family, were more than a little awed by their big sister. She was 'extra' in just about every way.



She was very active — super-charged — at home and outside of the home; always cheerful and very talkative; and she was a super-fast learner. When she was older, Rafidah was ever ready to be involved in volunteer work, in organising functions. And she was very competitive. The last characteristic was most apparent away from home.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Route To A Better Tomorrow*

**I**T WAS the school environment that provided her with the challenge, moulding her character and nurturing her spirit of competitiveness. Her precocious determination to have an education of her own choice was early proof of an innate ability to identify her goal and to go after it single-mindedly. The young child also instinctively knew that securing a place in a school that taught in English would not be the end of her quest; it would merely give her the opportunity to acquire the education she was after. She was ready for just about anything, so long as it led to the education she wanted — although what exactly that education would mean to her she really could not quite envision yet.

Not having as much money as many of the other girls in class hardly dampened her enthusiasm for learning. "Others had all the facilities to assist them; they could afford to buy books. I couldn't. But it didn't stop me from wanting to do well," recalls the adult Rafidah of those days. There was no pressure from her parents to excel. "I put it upon myself to do well," she emphasises. "I looked around me and saw that unless you did well in school and had a good education, you can't venture into life; you can't go very far." How far would be far enough? If she closed her eyes and concentrated real hard, she could see herself in a starched white coat, stethoscope casually hanging round her neck, nurses in tow, making her rounds of wards — as a doctor! That would be far enough for her.

The child had a voracious appetite for knowledge as well as for social participation. If she could not afford to buy non-textbooks to read, she borrowed from the school library. There were also classmates who had books aplenty at home and were generous in sharing them with her. But she was no book-worm. She was all for physical sports and game for just about every sport the school had to offer the girls. That was not all. She eagerly took

part in just about every extracurriculum activity there was. She was a Ranger, later also in the Red Cross. She was thrilled to perform: in Malay cultural dances as well as in Western folk dancing.

It did not take long for her to speak English as fluently as the best in class. Even as a primary schoolchild, Rafidah was loquacious. That was not a peculiarity of hers alone. It appeared that practically all the top students in her class had lots to say. (As that cohort of girls matured, not only would they prove themselves academically brilliant, they would also show great promise as debaters.) Meanwhile, Rafidah the child was ever ready to pit her elocution prowess against others. "I won every time," the adult Rafidah merrily recalls.

Rafidah did not shy away from classmates who did better than her in tests. In fact, she chose to keep their company. Perhaps they served as yardstick to measure herself against. She certainly showed no racist tendencies; practically all the girls in class she chose to befriend and spend time with were Chinese. But she stood out, because she was Malay. The child was blissfully ignorant of the prevalent racial stereotyping. Some of the parents of her classmates found Rafidah incredible: "How could she be Malay?!" Their ingrained prejudices, rooted more in ignorance than illwill, made it almost impossible for them to accept that such a lively and pretty — but above all, intelligent and industrious — girl could be Malay. Their prejudices led them to see what was clearly not there: they saw Rafidah, who came to the world with rather tanned complexion and a crop of hair which has remained decidedly wavy and curly, as having a Chinese face!

While Rafidah was spared knowledge of racial prejudices, she found that there were other lessons to pick up from school; lessons which did not come from textbooks. Such as how to cope and co-exist with other human beings, especially the not-so-nice ones. A few seemingly minor incidents in school have left an indelible impression on her. In each case, she was the victim of finger-pointing: "She did it ..." — when she hadn't done 'it'. On one such occasion, she was singled out for reprimand by her teacher, a nun. (Most of the teachers at the Convent were nuns then.) Rafidah was distraught but unable to explain her innocence. She had merely responded to a classmate's persistent teasing when the teacher happened to look her way. The wronged child fumed in silence and for a long long time after the incident, she refused to speak to the classmate who had falsely pointed her finger at her. Having felt the hurt and indignation as the victim of an unfounded accusation, Rafidah

learnt a lesson from the experience, that she would not subject anyone to the same unjust and nasty experience. "I learnt not to be selfish, not to blame others but to take responsibility for my own action."

But it did not mean that she was Miss Prim-and-Proper personified. Far from it. Scoring good grades was all very satisfying but the fun part came from being naughty, doing it and hoping not to get caught at it. Teachers were favourite targets of her childish mischief — like reflecting sunlight onto the teacher's face with a mirror. The girls also victimised each other with harmless tricks, such as sticking bits of paper with cheeky messages written on them on others' backs. Among the girls who did it was Rafidah. She was not swift enough not to be caught red-handed once in a while. When that happened, good grades did not spare a student the punishment due. But so long as Rafidah knew she was indeed guilty of the 'crime', she took any punishment meted out — mostly detention after school — in her cheerful stride.

In retrospect, the six years she spent at the Bukit Nanas Convent were her happiest times as a schoolgirl. At the same time, this school more than the others she attended later nurtured and moulded the child to face life and its challenges with wholesome zest. The well-known strict discipline of mission schools was very much intact when Rafidah was a student. As an adult, Rafidah appreciates the discipline drilled into her; more importantly, she understands the meaning of discipline, what it could do in character and fortitude building. It was also the Convent environment which nurtured her spirit of competitiveness. This spirit would remain with her and sustain her long after she had bade farewell to the Convent in Bukit Nanas.

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If she had a deprived childhood — as some are wont to perceive — Rafidah does not seem any the worse for having lived it. If anything, it strengthened the resolve in her which she so remarkably demonstrated at a very young age, to not only do well but to excel. Where her parents were concerned, adult Rafidah has been unstinting in her appreciation of what they had gone through to bring her and her siblings up. When she was young, she was not aware that she was under-privileged. When she grew older, she realised how much her mother must have sacrificed for her children. "I value what my mother had done for us a lot; the sacrifices she must have made to bring us up," says Rafidah. However, in retrospect, of her two parents, she believes

her father had a greater influence on her. "He always wanted to get things done; he was always impatient," reminisces Rafidah. "I got that from him."

In his relationship with his wife and children, Abdul Aziz was rather Westernised. While he could be quite a disciplinarian, he did not keep his distance from his family nor maintain the aloofness common among Asian parents, especially fathers. And while there was no pressure from him on his children to do well in school, he showed in no uncertain manner how pleased he was with good grades. Rafidah recalls fondly of the little presents he would go out of his way to give his children — "when he could afford it". When Rafidah did exceptionally well, like topping the class, it would be something special. "He would always buy a box of chocolates for me; he would find the best box, costing maybe four to five dollars and I would keep the box for a long long time..." Because she remembers how much joy her father's gestures had meant to her when she was a child, in time, she would make it a point of showing her own children her pride in them with similar gestures when they did well in their studies.

Rafidah would be the only one of the four Aziz children to reach the tertiary level of education. To the University of Malaya (the only tertiary institute conferring degrees in the country then) and the Malay community in particular, Rafidah was a rare gem. At that time, enrolment of Malay undergraduates was considered far too low. Where Malay women were concerned, the percentage was even lower. In terms of disciplines, Economics was not a hot favourite with Malay undergraduates; even less so with Malay women. As lecturers, Malays were in the minority and Malay women were a rarity indeed. Rafidah Aziz the undergraduate who signed up for Economics would stay on to teach the subject.

With independence came the new language policy. National policy decreed a deliberate programmed switch from the use of English to Malay, officially named *Bahasa Malaysia*, the national language of Malaysia. (However, the official language is in Romanised Malay, instead of that using the Jawi script.) Policy-makers spelt out a staggered replacement of English with *Bahasa Malaysia* in educational facilities, with English relegated to second language status, starting with the phasing in of *Bahasa Malaysia* at the primary school level. The government had set 1983 as its target year, when *Bahasa Malaysia* would be the main medium of instruction at all levels of education: that is, inclusive of tertiary institutes. Meanwhile, the switch to *Bahasa Malaysia* was activated in the public sector. It was a traumatic experience for many non-

Malay speaking adults, especially those in the civil service (particularly so for those in the teaching service) to return to the classroom to learn the newly designated national language and to put it to use right away.

It was most fortuitous that when children from Malay families enrolled to study in English-medium schools, their own mother tongue would not be forgotten. Not only would Malay be spoken at home, this would be further strengthened through their religious studies. The fact that Romanised Malay is used would make it easier for everyone, including the Malays, to read and write in it. It would be rare indeed to find a Malay who could not understand Malay. In contrast, it would not be uncommon to find English-educated members of the ethnic Chinese community quite incapable of speaking their own Chinese language, be it dialect or Mandarin, far less write in Chinese. (*Hanyu Pinyin* certainly has not helped to boost literacy in Chinese.) Thus, in the case of Rafidah, although she had deliberately sought an English-medium education for herself, she remained effectively bilingual and fluent in her native tongue, now known as *Bahasa Malaysia*.

Around the early 1970s, her voice would also be regularly heard nation-wide over radio as she delivered a series of lectures on Economics in Malay. The country — on 16 September 1963, it became the Federation of Malaysia — was politically independent but economically yet to be weaned from its over-dependence on the twin pillars of tin and rubber. Much hard thinking and work would be needed to transform political independence into economic well-being for the people at large. The First Malaysia Plan of 1966 to 1970 was but the first blueprint of what the government intended to do to reduce poverty and to spread wealth more equitably among the people. Meanwhile, there was much explaining to be done to the masses.

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It seemed inevitable that Rafidah would move into politics. She responded enthusiastically to the women's wing of the country's dominant political party, the United Malay National Organisation, UMNO, launched in 1946 to seek political independence for the States of Malaya and to specially look after the interests and rights of the Malays of the land. From the first legislative election in 1957, UMNO has been the country's dominant political party, governing the country as the senior partner in a coalition. (The multi-party National Front of today evolved from the Alliance of yore, when it was a 'trinity of three': UMNO to look after Malay interests, MCA (Malayan Chinese

Association) the ethnic Chinese and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) the ethnic Indian.) To the women's wing, Wanita UMNO, Malay women with Rafidah's attributes were all too rare. Rafidah not only came armed with tertiary qualification, she was voluble and eloquent, a natural at public speaking. At the same time, despite her English education, she was very much a Malay woman, in her respect for traditional values (such as of the family), as well as in appearance — in attire and in mannerism.

In 1974, she was appointed a senator. (Independent Malaysia's Constitution provides for a bicameral legislature at the Federal level; members of the Parliament's lower house (*Dewan Rakyat* — House of Representatives) are democratically elected; members of the upper house, the Senate, are appointed.) Higher political office was heading her way. The same year, she was appointed a member of the UMNO Supreme Council, the decision-making body of the party. To learn of his daughter's appointment to UMNO's Supreme Council must have been singularly pleasing to her father. He himself had been a founder-member of Pemuda UMNO, the youth wing of UMNO. In 1984, Rafidah was elected president of Wanita UMNO. By then, Abdul Aziz's daughter had left the academic world. Four years earlier, in 1980, she was appointed a full Cabinet minister, preceded by a stint in a junior ministerial post.

No way could her parents have imagined how far — and fast — their eldest child would go in life. Her father's irascibility might have been a reflection of his frustration with his own life. Perhaps he was gnawed by a lifelong regret for not having accepted the scholarship offered him once upon a time. There would be no second chance for him. To him, Rafidah's career must have been an immense source of comfort, joy and pride. And indeed it was. As Rafidah's career advances went from one high to another, her adoring father could no longer live up to Asian modesty. He was openly proud of his daughter; he wanted to share his joy with everyone. His daughter was no longer just plain 'Cik' or 'Puan' (Miss or Madam) but 'Yang Berhormat' (Her Excellency or The Right Honourable). He glowed with pride each time he heard her addressed or referred to as *Yang Berhormat*. When people spoke in praise of the "young and clever" Rafidah, he could feel his chest swell as he basked in his child's public image. Oftentimes, he still found it hard to believe that it wasn't just a dream or a figment of his daydreaming. But of course it wasn't.

Abdul Aziz, a long-suffering diabetic, died in 1984, aged sixty-four. He lived long enough to witness his eldest child convocate twice, first to receive her

Bachelor degree then later, a Master in Economics. Rafidah would stay on at the University of Malaya to teach Economics, to be followed by her induction into mainstream politics and before long, to opt for a career in politics. During Abdul Aziz's lifespan, he would witness his daughter's amazing ascendancy in the world of politics. At the same time, to him as a parent, it was most reassuring that she had not neglected her personal life. He could see that Rafidah had made the right choice in marriage; he was delighted with the three children born to her. He could also see for himself that his daughter remained level-headed. Her priorities were as they should be. Abdul Aziz was a happy and fulfilled man when he left this mortal world.

Rafidah's mother, the matriarch of the close-knit family, is now the contented great-grandmother of five. For some years now, her home is that of Tajul's second daughter Annie, mother of twin boys. Where the matriarch is, there the Aziz clan would gather, come each *Hari Raya Puasa*. But come election campaign time, almost every member of the Aziz extended family would be where Rafidah would be: in her constituency. Unfailingly, they would gather at least a few days before polling. It is not that Rafidah is ever short-handed; the family members just want to be right there to give her moral support, if nothing else.





## CHAPTER V

### *Opposites? Not So*

“IT WASN’T love at first sight,” says Rafidah of the man she married. The man: Mohamed Basir bin Ahmad. She rationalises that it would have been out of character for her to react so rashly as to be totally besotted with anyone at first sight. “I take time to develop any relationship with people.” And she adds, perhaps not quite accurately: “I’m a late bloomer.” She wasn’t quite twenty-three years of age yet when she married Basir.

Rafidah was a Form VI student of the Victoria Institute in Kuala Lumpur when they first met. Both remember seeing each other for the first time at a mutual friend’s birthday party. It was the eighth of June. “Someone pointed out Basir to me, saying that it was also his birthday,” recalls Rafidah. That was the first time she set eyes on the tall, dark and rather good-looking but perhaps too diffident to be dashing young man, five years her senior. Thereafter they went on outings, mostly in groups. The level-headed Rafidah had not forgotten her goal in life: to get educated, very well educated. She was not about to be distracted by affairs of the heart; no way would she allow her education to cease at the Cambridge Higher School Certificate level. (Today’s General Certificate of Education (GCE) ‘A’ level.)

Earlier, the bright and determined girl who had sailed through school examinations term after term, year after year, was badly shaken when she flunked her Chemistry examination. (She knew she had messed it up before she handed in her paper. By the time the official result came to confirm the worst, she was done with crying.) That dashed her childhood ambition to pursue studies in Science; hopefully, it would have led to a career in the medical field. It was probable that having to move her home-base repeatedly and thus change schools each round had taken a toll on her studies. The need to move was simple: the family went wherever Abdul Aziz had a job. All in, Rafidah would have attended five different schools before university.

When Rafidah sat for the fateful Chemistry examination, she was in Johor Baru, the capital of Johor state and was a pupil of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in that town. Fortunately, soon after that setback, the family was back in Kuala Lumpur. She switched to the Arts stream and did well, so well that she was offered a Colombo Plan scholarship<sup>1</sup> to study Economics in Australia. It was her wildest dream come true, to be able not only to obtain tertiary education without causing her family financial distress but to do so abroad!

But she never did get to leave for Australia, nor take up the scholarship. Instead, she accepted a Federal scholarship to study at the local University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>2</sup> By then, Rafidah and Basir had become 'steadies'. According to Basir, despite Rafidah's initial excitement at the prospect of an overseas education, they both agreed that there was no point in going to Australia to do a four-year course for a Bachelor degree when she could earn the same degree right there in Kuala Lumpur in just three years.

Rafidah's account is far more melodramatic and romantic than Basir's dry pragmatism. She was all packed and eager to leave when, just a week before her scheduled departure, Basir proposed. "He said he wanted to marry me." It would seem the dire prospect of Rafidah out of sight had finally given the reticent and shy man the courage to declare himself.

For love she gave up the Colombo Plan scholarship. But there were consequences to face. She was given a two-hour tongue-lashing by the

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<sup>1</sup>A spawn of the 1951 arrangement set up in Colombo, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to assist and finance developmental projects of South and South-east Asia.

<sup>2</sup>Then the only university in the country. It was a progeny of the Singapore-based Raffles College, founded in 1928, which evolved into the University of Malaya in 1949. Earlier plans were to have two campuses, one in Singapore and another in Kuala Lumpur. The Kuala Lumpur campus started with the transfer of the Faculty of Engineering in 1958 to new premises in Pantai Valley — where the University of Malaya is. In the following year, both campuses were given equal status as degree-conferring institutions but under a common vice-chancellor. However, this arrangement lasted just a couple of years, the two campuses became two separate universities. That in Kuala Lumpur retained the original name while that in Singapore was renamed the University of Singapore; in 1980, the latter became the National University of Singapore. The Federal scholarship was from the Malaysian government.

gentleman in charge of scholarships; he was justifiably irate, especially when there was no time for him to identify a replacement. Then there was her father's wrath to contend. Her father must surely have despaired at the terrible prospect of his first-born repeating what he once did, in not taking up the scholarship offered. But he was soon mollified when he learnt of the availability of a Federal scholarship. In the end, Rafidah rejected the Federal scholarship too and accepted a Bank Negara scholarship instead. By then, Bank Negara Malaysia, the central bank set up in 1958, would annually offer scholarships to Malay students for approved undergraduate courses at the University of Malaya. Rafidah's application won hands down. But why did she swap one local scholarship for another? It was not caprice but simple arithmetic. "The Bank Negara scholarship was worth \$2,500; the Federal was \$2,400. In those days, \$100 was a lot to me."<sup>1</sup>

Basir himself was by then an undergraduate of the University of Malaya. He too was studying Economics on a Bank Negara scholarship. He too had known first-hand what it was like to be poor. His self-effacing demeanour belied an inner resolve hidden from public view. With hardly any parental guidance or role model around, he too wanted more than anything else an education, a tertiary education. He had to go without formal pre-university education: the two years of Form VI. He knew that his father, a railway signalman, would not be able to provide him with the means to have the education he sought. Undaunted, he reckoned that he could work and save enough money to put himself through university. When the Malayan Railway (now corporatised as the Perkhidmatan KTM Berhad) transferred his father from Ipoh, Perak state, to Gemas, Johor state, Basir, the youngest of four children, chose to stay behind in Ipoh. He found a job in the Ipoh branch of the Chartered Bank after completing Form V. He worked in the bank full-time in the day. Night school enabled him to obtain the minimum units to qualify for university; at the same time, he passed the Part I of the British Institute of Bankers examination.

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<sup>1</sup>Tuition fees for Arts studies at the University of Malaya were \$150 per term; there were three terms to a year. A common currency had been in use in Malaya/Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. This continued to be so even after August 1965 when Singapore became an independent sovereign nation. When the three entities (Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei) issued their own currencies from the year 1967, the three currencies remained interchangeable at par until 1973. In June that year, Malaysia floated its currency, the ringgit. To date, the Singapore and Bruneian dollars remain interchangeable at par.

He was already in the first term of his first year at the university when Bank Negara launched its scholarships. The chance to obtain a scholarship was like a gift from heaven. To this day, Basir is very sure that it was that piece of paper awarded to him by the Institute of Bankers which had been critical in his reach for self-advancement through education: first in persuading the University of Malaya to accept him as an undergraduate when he came with just the bare minimum number of subjects in his Cambridge Higher School Certificate; later, in convincing Bank Negara of his seriousness, especially of his interest in the banking sector. Basir was one of the two recipients of the central bank's scholarships that inaugural year.

In retrospect, the two years he spent in Ipoh were pivotal to his life, in more than enabling him to realise his goal of obtaining tertiary education. He was not to know until much later that those two years also prepared him well for marriage, marriage to a woman whose career rocketed off, a wife who would often have to be elsewhere than home, leaving the husband to mind the nest. During those two years, Basir was left very much to fend for himself although one of his sisters did provide him with a roof over his head. That was about all that she could do for her *adek*. The young man saw to his own needs, from cooking to laundry. "Those years made me very independent," he recalls. If he ever had any chauvinistic hang-ups about which gender did what in the household, reality soon set him straight. By the time he became a husband, being hands-on involved in the running of the home came quite naturally to him. This extended to taking care of the children. "I didn't mind," says Basir. And he still doesn't.

Rafidah started her undergraduate life unofficially betrothed to Basir. "It's a gentlemen's agreement," she explains. "It's my character, my nature — you don't play the fool with emotion, you must be serious." The official engagement was held in her second year, when Basir had graduated and started work at Bank Negara Malaysia. (Where he would remain for twenty-eight years.) As soon as Rafidah graduated in 1966, they married and started their life together in a little rented house which cost them \$150 a month in what has long been dubbed the 'Old PJ' — the oldest section of Petaling Jaya. (Bustling Petaling Jaya is a residential and industrial satellite town to Kuala Lumpur. It was initially developed by the British administrators in the post-war 1950s as a squatter resettlement town.) Rafidah had the one-storey terrace house done up prettily, pink curtains and all.

Their first major financial joint-venture was made in the year before they got

married — the year they became officially engaged, when Basir had started his working life while Rafidah had yet to complete her studies. To cut down on travelling time, to be able to see a little more of each other, they decided to invest in a car. Their Toyota 700's road price was a princely \$3,500 and since they bought it on hire-and-purchase, the actual total cost added up to more, more like \$4,000. It was tiny and it probably looked flimsy but to the first-time car-owners, it was precious. Friends, perhaps just in jest, would tease endlessly about the car and ask: "How many sardine cans went into the making of this car?" To emphasise their point, they would repeatedly knock the car vigorously with their knuckles, sometimes pounding the bodywork with their full fists. "It was heart-breaking," Rafidah winces at the recollection. And then there were the payments — "traumatic".

Typically, she insisted on paying her share for use of the car. But she was still being supported by scholarship money. To earn her right to the car, she gave tuition on weekends. The going rate then was \$30 per subject and she taught four subjects. Out of the \$120 she earned, \$60 was handed over to Basir as her monthly contribution; of the balance, one-half was given to her mother and the balance she kept for herself.

It would be a two-income family right from the start of her married life. But Rafidah would remain frugal and careful with her expenditure to ensure that she and her husband not only lived within their means but saved for their future needs. However, she was also pragmatic in getting the most out of her hard-earned money. For example, she loved to dress and it was obvious that she could stretch her purchasing power further if she did not have to pay tailors to stitch her clothes. Solution: first, she invested in a sewing machine (*Butterfly*, made in China) and paid for it on instalments (\$10 a month); next, she signed up for sewing classes. She would diligently attend classes for several months until she could confidently tailor pants and suits all by herself. By then, what was cut and stitched by herself on her machine was no less professionally finished than those entrusted to home-tailors. She would continue to sew her own clothes until such time when the demands on her time made it impossible. By then, tailoring costs had become comfortably affordable.

To some casual observers, Rafidah and Basir make an odd couple. To others, the two are living proof of the maxim, that opposites attract. While Rafidah is impatient, outspoken and frank to the point of being blunt and curt at times, loquacious and voluble, jovial and fiery, outgoing and adventurous, who is

far from bothered by the high profile that comes with public life, Basir is patient — “sometimes too patient” says his wife — courteous, reticent and reserved, genial but whose shyness has made it difficult for him to be relaxed in the company of strangers and to make friends, and who, given the choice, would rather keep as low a profile as humanly possible.

Basir was so unobtrusive as an undergraduate and classmate that despite the small number of students per class those days, few contemporaries realise that Basir had attended lectures, seminars and tutorials with them. Siew Kwan Yin, who now resides in Singapore, is a typical example. She was unaware of Basir as a classmate until years later — in 1983, nineteen years after graduation — when perchance they both attended a central banking course in Kathmandu, Nepal. It was Basir who recognised her and remembered her as a classmate. Another example would be Fong Weng Pak, now a commercial banker in Malaysia. Not only were they classmates in the university, he and Basir were colleagues in Bank Negara Malaysia for years — by the time Fong Weng Pak left the central bank, he had chalked up some seventeen years’ of service — but Fong Weng Pak remained ignorant of their years together in the Pantai Valley campus until another classmate mentioned it.

Rafidah sees the contrast between herself and Basir thus: “We are only opposites superficially.” She underscores that where it mattered, the two of them are very much alike. “We share the same values, the same interests, we like the same fun things ... even in character we are alike. We complement each other. Where I’m intolerant, he’s very tolerant.” Basir quietly concurs. But Basir, the man behind the woman, is not just the silent all-adoring unquestioning supportive life-partner. He has his own views and makes them known in his own way. Rafidah confides that she often seeks his opinion to help clear her mind when doubts arise. She also makes sure that he knows how much she values his views. And she makes it succinctly clear to all who inquire — including nosy and curious journalists who just cannot resist asking about her ‘dual career’ — Basir’s importance to her.

Basir knows and understands her as no one else does. Over the years, she remains very much the same person with whom he became smitten after their first fateful encounter. To him, she is the same talkative, friendly, energetic, exuberant, outspoken and impatient person whose radiant smile sent his heart a-flutter more than thirty years ago. If she did mellow, it is imperceptible.

Instances and incidents of her famous (infamous?) impatience abound. Husband Basir shakes his head and points to her driving as an example:

“When you are driving, you should be cautious when approaching any traffic lights, just in case the lights change to red. But no, when Rafidah is driving, she accelerates when she approaches the traffic lights because she doesn’t want to miss the green light; it has nothing to do with being in a hurry or not.” Needless to say, it is a relief to all concerned that she does not get a chance to go behind the steering wheel often these days. Ever a stickler for punctuality, she spares no one if she were in danger of being late. No special concession for Basir either. “When we have a dinner appointment together, I make sure I am downstairs before her or else ...?” says the accommodating Basir, showing no sign of exasperation.

By now, there are doubtless countless non-family members who have had personal experience of Rafidah’s impatience. To name just one: her private secretary, Yasmin binte Abdullah. Sometimes, Yasmin would accompany her Minister on overseas trips. And of course, while abroad, there would be the shopping to squeeze in. On one occasion, Yasmin, on her first visit to New York, happily went with Rafidah to Macy. But the thrill of shopping in a world-famous store soon turned into panic when Yasmin realised that Rafidah was no where around. There was a repeat performance in Jakarta, Indonesia where Yasmin lost her boss in a bazaar. On each occasion, Yasmin had wandered off and when Rafidah was through with shopping and/or had run out of time, she just left. It was not so much as ‘punishing’ whoever that strayed from her (she would have assumed that any member of her staff would have enough common sense to find her way back) but that she has a rather limited store of patience for waiting, with the added genuine concern not to be late for her next appointment.

And of course, by now Rafidah the golfer is well known (or notorious) among members the golfing fraternity of Kuala Lumpur. Basir’s observation of her golfing style is echoed by others who have tee-ed off with her: she is always raring to go, so she hits without spending a little time assessing the terrain. The refrain often heard about her golf: “If only she had more patience ...”

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Perhaps it is inevitable that when one is a public figure involved in politics, there would be some back-biting around. The fact that in the case of Rafidah-



Basir, it is the woman who is in the limelight merely made the rumourmongers all the more vicious, and the rumours, more salacious. Rafidah rationalises that it is the unwholesome baggage that comes with life in politics and generally takes the philosophical stand, to just ignore what the grapevine has to hiss and whisper. But the couple admits that when the rumours first started to make the rounds in Kuala Lumpur, both of them felt quite upset and hurt. The rumourmongers obviously found Rafidah-Basir an irresistible target. The whispers started way back in the late 1970s, when Rafidah was appointed a Deputy Finance Minister. At that juncture, it had been mostly vague 'hints' that all was not what it seemed in the marriage.

The ludicrous hisses became more specific when the tales evolved to focus on Basir's extramarital 'love interest'. At that time, Basir would often be the one to provide the children with transport. Rohaiza, the first-born, was by the late-1970s and early 1980s a vivacious teenager. Her father would be the one to send and fetch her from her weekly swimming lessons. That was the beginning of the rumours, that Basir had gotten himself a 'girl friend'; this soon evolved into a 'mistress'. Rafidah and Basir steadfastly refused to react publicly to that daft rumour. It was so ludicrous that it was risible. Anyone with sight could not but notice the striking resemblance of Rohaiza to her mother. (Undaunted, some years later, Basir would drive their second daughter, Rohaila, around; sometimes in his sportscar with the hood down. Rafidah and Basir would not at all have been shocked if a new story went into circulation on Basir's 'latest'. It was almost a surprise that no such concoction was heard in the Federal Capital.)

Then came 1987. Those were unsettling times for UMNO when Dr Mahathir Mohamad's leadership of UMNO was being challenged by what became dubbed as the 'Team B', led by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam, a deputy president of UMNO and the then Minister of Trade and Industry, Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah, a vice-president of the party. A Malay language tabloid published in Singapore ran a front-page story with the heading: '*Rafidah Berceraai*' ('Rafidah Divorced'). To Rafidah, that was it: she instructed her lawyers to take legal action against the publisher. It so happened that she was scheduled to attend the nineteenth ASEAN Economic Ministers Conference in Singapore that year.

ASEAN — the Association of South-East Asian Nations — was formed in 1967. It replaced the Association of South-east Asia (ASA) which had been set up in 1960 by then Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand. The three

founding members of ASA were joined by Indonesia and Singapore to make it an ASEAN Five. In 1984, Brunei came on board as the sixth member of the association. In the 1990s and before the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Indochinese nations are all expected to become members, with Vietnam the first to have done so.

It was Rafidah's first official appearance as the newly-appointed Trade and Industry Minister. She turned up in Singapore with her spouse in tow. In typical Rafidah manner, she made it known to her doubtless startled Singapore hosts that a Singapore-based publication had printed lies about her and that she was not going to allow the libellous statements to go unchallenged. Why did she break her policy of silence? After all, it was just a variation of the same old and jaded rumours. Her explanation; until that tabloid published it, it had never been in print. And that to her was the limit.

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By now, Rafidah is familiar with the ebbs and flows of the Basir-centred rumours, or variations of these. The rumours would fade out for a while, then they would be resuscitated come election time. "Especially just before UMNO elections," notes Rafidah wryly. (Party elections take place every three years.) By now, Rafidah and Basir are no longer bothered by mean gossips targeted at them. The children too have heard it all and have learnt to make light of the rumours. Going by the rumours, Basir is supposed to have: separated, divorced, remarried — at least six to eight times by now. Then came a variation: the faceless wags assert that Rohaiza is actually Rafidah's child by an earlier marriage; therefore, Basir is Rohaiza's stepfather and not natural father. The mean and baseless rumour stayed around for years. Rohaiza's marriage in 1991 was reported by the local print media. The name of the bride's father as printed in one Malay-language newspaper was other than Basir's. There were profuse apologies from that newspaper. These days, it is surely no longer fashionable to blame every human 'slip' on the printer's devil?

When Rafidah first became the target of those faceless and nameless, vicious and malicious rumourmongers in the late 1970s, as a political novice, it had been a rude awakening to the unexpected baggage that came with the seeming glamour of public office. She was ill-prepared for such ugliness and had occasion to air her bewilderment over it to political veteran Musa Hitam. His reply to her had been: "Welcome to public life." Many years and numerous recycled rumours have come and gone since. By now, Rafidah and Basir have

either become immune or indifferent when they hear new twists or variations to the same maliciously salacious stories. These days, the twosome who celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary in 1996, would just laugh it off: "We are getting old, too old for all this."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Family First & Foremost*

‘MOHAMED Basir bin Ahmad must surely be the closest thing to the liberated woman’s ideal husband,’ commented the *Malaysian Business* monthly journal in its April 1979 issue, in a side-bar to an interview with Rafidah Aziz, then a Deputy Minister of Finance. (At that time, there were two deputies to the Finance Minister.) While Rafidah has always shunned and abhorred labelling — such as being ‘liberated’ — she has publicly, repeatedly and unstintingly acknowledged the invaluable and indispensable role played by Basir in her life, in making it possible for her to accept the opportunities and challenges that came her way in politics and in government. When her career took off at a dizzying pace, Basir remained steadfast and supportive while serving as an officer of Bank Negara Malaysia.

All too often, the male ego, whatever the race or religion, would get in the way of the marriage where the female partner seems to dominate the limelight. Some say Malay men tend to be “more dogmatic” — presumably, as compared to men of other races. Be that as it may, unassuming Basir seems to be truly one-of-a-kind. Although he knew he was marrying a woman who was not going to stay home, look after babies and wait on him, he could not have foreseen to what extent he would be tested as the modern enlightened husband, unquestioningly supportive of the woman in his life; even if in the process, he seems to be relegated to a secondary role in the partnership. But throughout the years of his wife’s political ascendancy, he has remained unfazed.

There was the time when he had to deliver a speech on Rafidah’s behalf at Bank Negara where he worked because she, then a Deputy Minister of Finance, was unable to do so. Then there were the occasions when she as a deputy minister (soon a full minister) attended Bank Negara functions as Basir’s wife, causing officials of the central bank to fret over protocol. Rafidah

would reassure Basir's colleagues that she was there as the wife of an officer of the bank and not as a member of the government with supervisory role over the central bank. Her assurances, no matter how sincere, probably did not dispel the anxiety of at least some of the central bank's officials.

In 1979, Rafidah was given an award by the Sultan of Selangor; this carried the title *Datin Paduka*. To date, equal rights have not evolved to the extent that a husband could share a wife's honour. (Wives of husbands awarded would of course automatically get to share the honour.) All too often, to Basir's discomfort, he would be addressed as *Datuk*. But he took it in his stride; he saw little point in trying to explain to whoever that got it wrong. That source of gaffe is now history; he has since been made a *Datuk* in his own right. But there is now another cause to perplex those who are not well-versed in Malaysian titles. Rafidah has since been given another title: *Datuk Seri*, or just *Datuk* for informal conversational use. So both wife and husband are *Datuks* now. Then there are those non-Malays and/or non-Malaysians who are still unfamiliar with Malay names and proper forms of address. On a family trip to Singapore in the 1980s (by then, Rafidah was already a member of the Malaysian Cabinet), rooms had been booked in an Orchard Road hotel in Rafidah's name. A hotel employee was overheard addressing Basir as "Mr Aziz".<sup>1</sup>

While she is the antithesis of mushiness, even in half jest, Rafidah's deep and abiding appreciation of her husband's role as the man behind the woman, as her pillar of strength is deeply sincere. In mock despair, she would refer to having to serve two prime ministers, one being her Cabinet boss, the other, the "prime minister at home". More seriously, she reiterates: "For me to have ventured so far in my political life, I would need peace at home, a home that provides the refuge whenever I have problems at work — and I have that. I could never have done it if I had to worry about family and children. My

<sup>1</sup>On a separate occasion during the late 1980s, Rafidah was in Singapore to attend an ASEAN meeting. Presumably, accommodation would have been arranged for her in the five-star hotel where the meeting would take place. The hotel staff's ignorance concerning names was amusing. Here is an account of what took place when the hotel's telephone operator was asked to connect the caller to Rafidah's room. Her name — Rafidah Aziz — was given to the operator. Hotel: "Family name please?" Caller: "She's Malay. No family name. Should be under 'R'." Hotel: "No such person." Caller: "Try 'A'." Hotel: "Sorry, no Aziz." Caller: "She has a title. She's a Datin. Try 'D'." Hotel: "No, we don't have her." Caller: "You must have her. Her full title is Datin Paduka. Try again." Hotel: "Why didn't you say so? Ah, got it. She's under 'P'."

heart would not be in my work." Nor would she have the peace of mind to travel, as she has to, if she had to worry about the children left unsupervised at home. But Basir has relieved her of such worries, freeing her to concentrate full-heartedly on her duties and responsibilities as a Cabinet minister.

In response to press queries, she has repeatedly stressed that if she had to make a choice, unhesitatingly, the family would come first. There could be no compromise. She could not and would not hang on to her public office if she knew she could not give it her all. But having an understanding and supportive husband who dotes on the children does not at all mean that she has relinquished her role as the mother. Her three children would correct whoever that suggests that. So would Yasmin binte Abdullah, her private secretary since 1977. Yasmin recalls that in the early years of Rafidah's political career, when the children were still young, Rafidah would be constantly monitoring and checking on them from her office.

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The first-born, Rohaiza, came in the first year of marriage. By then Rafidah was a tutor at the University of Malaya while preparing her Master of Economics thesis. Rohaiza in conception gave her mother a hard time. Rafidah suffered terribly from morning sickness. Oddly, she became ultra-sensitive to colours and fragrance. She could not stand the smell of scent, nor anything in red, that included all shades of pink, the darker the shade, the worse the morning sickness. The very sight of anything red-pink made her awfully nauseated. So the dainty pink curtains in her rented nuptial house had to go; so too lipsticks — doubly offensive because of colour and scent.

Fortunately, her peculiar morning sickness did not recur with her next two pregnancies. "I didn't even know I was pregnant," as Rafidah mirthfully recalls of her subsequent pregnancies. There was a large gap between the first child and the next: all of seven years. It was not deliberate; it just happened that way. By then, life was getting rather hectic and it did not bother Rafidah that her procreation had stopped after the first one. Rohaiza the only child was already quite a handful.

Having her parents around was a great help to the working couple with a young child. It was just as well that Rafidah and Basir had rented a house just next door to her parents' place. Rafidah's mother was only too happy to take care of her granddaughter. Even when Rafidah and Basir moved house

in 1971, to a house they built on a piece of land they had bought in Section 16 of Petaling Jaya, the grandparents continued to provide the day-care that gave Rafidah and Basir peace of mind when they were away from Rohaiza. Rohaiza's younger brother and sister were born only after the move to the much more spacious and well-appointed double-storey house in Section 16. By then, the grandparents too had moved to another house, but still within driving distance of Rafidah and Basir. Basir emphasises that the children were brought home each evening and he and Rafidah would make sure that the children understood discipline: "Grandparents would always spoil their grandchildren; we had to counter-balance that."

Alfian, their son, was born in 1974. Next came Rohaila in 1975. Rohaiza, having been the apple of everyone's eye as an only child for seven years, was understandably upset when her baby brother arrived. But it did not take long for her to get over her jealousy and enjoy the company of "the kids" — for years, that was how she referred to her siblings. Rafidah and Basir insist that there has never been any favouritism in the family. Rafidah would reassure each child that she/he is "very special". The eldest is very special because she is the first-born; the second is very special because he is the only son; the youngest is very special because she is the baby of the family. Rafidah admits that she does *manja* (spoil and pamper) them at times. But not when it comes to studies. There is no room for compromise. She checks. She has always checked and when the children were younger, she would spend time with them, helping them with their lessons and homework.

The children are not likely to forget her constant reminders that they, each on her/his own, must do well in their studies. She reminds them ever so often that their present lifestyle is one provided by her. It is she, Rafidah Aziz, who is the minister, not they, the children. Their future lifestyles would depend on their own careers; she and their father could only do their best to prepare them as well as possible for their lives ahead as productive adults. The only way to face the future on their own would be to lay a solid foundation in education when young. If they did well in their studies, no one could take credit from them, no one could taunt them that they have succeeded because of their mother.

Rafidah and Basir are enlightened parents. While they urge the children to take their studies with the utmost seriousness, the children are free to choose the courses they would wish to pursue at the tertiary level; similarly, they would be left to decide for themselves the careers they would prefer to pursue

later. But that they should have local education is one of Rafidah's non-negotiable rules for her brood. Thus, in time, like their parents, the University of Malaya is the *alma mater* of all three children.

Once, Rafidah went so far as to send Rohaiza, the eldest, to a private school in Kuala Lumpur for her secondary schooling. Rohaiza had done her parents proud in primary school. Her Standard V results were so sparkling that she was allowed to skip the last year of primary school and join secondary school straightaway after the Standard V assessment examination. Rafidah wanted quality education for her child; she assumed that a private school, with small classes and well-trained teachers, would provide this. Initially, Rafidah was rather pleased. She found Rohaiza gaining self-confidence and her school grades were reassuring. But before long, she realised that there were other 'costs' to such an education.

Such schools, Rafidah soon noticed, instilled values in children that she disapproved of. The 'exclusivity' of these schools made the children believe they were special. Bluntly put, the system tended to nurture 'spoilt brats'. To counter such influence on Rohaiza, Rafidah and Basir would spend extra time talking to Rohaiza, explaining values to their daughter. Fortunately, Rohaiza was in the habit of confiding in her parents the goings-on in school, right down to who said what in school. Rafidah was glad and relieved to note that at times, Rohaiza revealed her good sense when she would question the beliefs and values of some of her classmates.

Rohaiza studied at the private school for five years. For her two years of pre-university studies, her parents enrolled her in St John's, a former mission school, now government-aided. Rohaiza, who later studied Law at the University of Malaya, recalls feeling rather lonely and left out for a while. (Practically all her private school classmates had left for overseas studies. Some would leave before completing secondary schooling; by the end of Form V, just about everyone would have made plans to further their studies abroad.) But the friendly and gregarious girl soon made friends in her new school. And before long, she was glad that she stayed. It was right there in Kuala Lumpur where she met her future husband, Fazrin Azwar bin Mohd Nor who would also take up Law at the university in Pantai Valley.

Rohaiza would be one of four Law undergraduates to represent Malaysia at the Jessup Moot Court held in the United States of America. Although Malaysia did not win, she was fascinated with student life in that country,



especially so with the Columbia University. Rohaiza enjoyed the ambience tremendously and longed to stay on for greater exposure to what the university there had to offer its students. But good sense prevailed and she returned to Kuala Lumpur to continue her Law studies at the University of Malaya.

The first-born vouches that none of the children ever felt neglected by their mother. For the children, they grew up having a working mother. It really made little difference what specific job Rafidah was doing. As the remarkably down-to-earth and level-headed threesome put it: "Practically all our friends' mothers are working; just the same as ours." Were they ever singled out and treated differently because their mother was such a high-profile person? Rohaiza does not recall any incidents. She was in Primary III when Rafidah was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Public Enterprises. "Someone asked me if the person in the newspapers was my Mum," recalls Rohaiza. For Alfian and Rohaila, there were just a few minor incidents which they brush aside as quite unimportant. Both of them recall occasions when people in the schools they attended became extra nice. Each time, it would inevitably be because those people wanted the children to ask their mother for donation and/or sponsorship of this and that.

"I wouldn't even bother to tell Mum; she's busy enough as it is," says Alfian (who has chosen Accountancy at the tertiary level) and Rohaila (it is Law for the baby of the family) nods in agreement. Rohaila, who also studied at the Convent her mother once attended, recalls an incident in her school canteen, when she was on duty as a school prefect. Her duty: to prevent unruliness among the girls during recess. She overheard a canteen food-seller, *ma'cik* (informal address in Malay of an older woman as 'aunt') — saying loudly to no one in particular that she could not believe that the daughter of a minister would have to do such chores.

Like parents all over the world, Rafidah too wanted to give her children things — non-necessities but life-enriching — which she had longed for as a child but could not have because of family circumstances. Education aside, Rafidah from young was drawn to the fine arts, music in particular. There were schoolmates who received private lessons in ballet and piano. She could only watch from afar; privately, she yearned to learn too and be a 'do-er' like the other girls but knew better than to even ask her parents for lessons in these. But as a parent, she made music accessible to all her children. All three children would start on the piano before branching to other instruments of their own choice.

Rafidah's interest in music had not been transient. It remained with her long after she left school. When she obtained a scholarship to attend university, she could no longer hold herself back. Using the scholarship fund, she had bought an old piano, paid for on instalment basis. But alas, her budget could not be stretched to pay for lessons as well, nor indeed could she find time to indulge herself making music on the keyboard. Still, the yearning to be able to do so did not fade over time. When Rohaiza was a month old, Rafidah bought another upright piano for herself. This time, she made sure it was money well spent and took lessons to play the instrument. To this day, when the mood strikes her, she would still tinkle the keyboard of that piano which now has a place of honour in her Damansara Heights home. No-nonsense Rafidah is deep down a sentimental person and she is keeping the old instrument with yellow ivory for just that: sentimental reasons. For her children, there is the gleaming baby grand which she bought for them.

No matter how busy, Rafidah would always find time to check on the children. At times, it would perhaps be a relief to the children if she had no time to check on some things, like the state of their rooms. When Rafidah and Basir built their present house in Damansara Heights — they moved in in the late 1980s — as the children were growing older, the understanding parents took care to provide each child with private quarters. But there is an inviolable condition to the privilege: each one must take care of her/his own turf. There are two live-in maids responsible for general housework but, the parents explain: "We don't want them (the children) to be too dependent on maids." To set a good example, the same rule applies to the parents. For Rafidah and Basir, whoever gets up later, gets to make the bed and tidy the room. Woebetide the occupant of any room found wanting by Rafidah. "Oh boy," says the expressive Rohaiza, laughing, "when Mummy goes on the rampage and checks the rooms ...!"

Basir is the cushion for all members of the family. The children would go to him for advice, comfort and company. Apart from the fact that he is more available, he is also more patient or as Rohaiza puts it, more rational. "Mum is more emotional," assesses Rohaiza. Of the three children, Rohaiza seems most like her mother in character, in appearance, speech, mannerism, so too personal likes and dislikes. But not to the extent of choice of career. Rohaiza has witnessed first-hand what it takes for her mother to be who she is — the amount of discipline and personal sacrifices involved. Neither Rohaiza nor

her younger siblings are persuaded that they too would want to pursue careers in politics. But they have obviously learnt early to keep their options open: "Maybe but ..."

Daughter Rohaiza shares her mother's interests, hobbies and pastimes, such as shopping. No matter how tight Rafidah's schedules are, there is always time for shopping. While she did not consciously resent taking on marketing chores as a young child, marketing is on adult Rafidah's 'hate' list. "I hate marketing; I really hate it." Shopping is of course something else altogether.

Although the children are practically all grown — physically, they long outgrew their parents, with Alfian at over 1.85 metres (shod in size twelve shoes) towering over everyone else — the family remains exceptionally close. Rafidah and Basir have always encouraged their children to bring their friends home. That goes for boy/girl friends. Thus, Rohaiza's husband was a familiar figure in the Rafidah-Basir home, long before Rohaiza and Fazrin went steady during their second year in the university. (Just as Basir was a familiar figure in the Azizes' home, well before Rafidah's official engagement to him.) These days, the family routine includes eating out on weekends. The kitchen literally closes down on Sundays when the maids would have their day off.

The family members continue to go on vacation together. For years, vacations were determined by school holidays, with year-end the most convenient for all. Since Rafidah, and Basir too, perhaps to a lesser extent, travel extensively in the course of their work, they would leave it to the children to pick their vacation destinations. The children tend to go for English-speaking countries where they would not be confronted by any language barrier. Pragmatic Rafidah and Basir have always practised a two-language policy at home, bringing up the children to be equally fluent in their mother tongue, the national language *Bahasa Malaysia* as well as in English, the international medium of communication.

When Rafidah is on the road without her family, she takes comfort in knowing that Basir is at home to make sure all is well. And thanks to modern communications, the family members are able to reassure her that she is very much on their minds, no matter where she actually is. Thus, when she lands at any destination, without fail, one of her children would be calling her to check if she had arrived safely. If she were on domestic travel and were expected home by a certain hour, there would always be calls on her car-phone to check if she would be able to get back on time. These little gestures

brighten her days immeasurably, making it possible for her to concentrate on her official duties without undue worries about the home-front. When the travelling is domestic — be it her weekly visit to her constituency in Perak state, or to officiate at the opening of a factory or a conference — she would curtail these to day-trips, so that she would be home in the evening.

When she is not travelling, she would already have spent some time in the wee hours of the morning at home reading up pertinent papers and other background materials before leaving for office. Unless there is an early morning appointment elsewhere, she would be in her office by eight in the morning, usually without bothering to have breakfast. (Office has been that on the 15th floor of Block 10 of the Government Office Complex in Jalan Duta, Kuala Lumpur since 1987.) Sometimes, her private secretary Yasmin would find her boss in the office before her. "Not because I'm late but because *Menteri* (Minister) came early," Yasmin would add. Rafidah is not in the habit of going home during the lunchbreak, although home is just a stone's throw from office. There would be no difference to her routine during *Ramadan*; she would just work through the day. During other times, when there are no lunch engagements, Rafidah would work through the break, with or without a bite of whatever food Yasmin buys for her from a canteen nearby. (At one stage, her mid-day sustenance came from instant noodles.) If there were no late afternoon functions, Rafidah's day at the office would end between 5.30 and 6.00 in the evening.<sup>1</sup> On a typical day, dinner is likely to be her one and only proper meal.

Understandably, she does not appreciate it when people encroach on her privacy and come a-calling at her home. She has pointed out to such callers the obvious; that they would be wasting their time (without saying that they would be wasting her time too) visiting her at home as all the relevant files would be in the office. But there would still be those who would try their luck. She has learnt to accept such seeming acts of discourtesy as part of being in public life. Of course, as the *Wakil Rakyat* (Member of Parliament) of her constituency, she makes her Kuala Kangsar constituents welcome at the right time of the year, when celebrating the *Hari Raya Puasa*. For some years, the *cul-de-sac* where she lives would be chock-a-block with her constituents who would come by the bus-loads to pay their respects and

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<sup>1</sup>Government office hours: Mondays to Thursdays 8.00 am to 12.45 pm, 2.00 pm to 4.15 pm; Fridays 8.00 am to 12.45 pm, 2.45 pm to 4.15 pm. Saturdays 8.00 am to 12.45 pm.

convey their felicitations. (Year in and year, it would always be a nigh impossible task trying to estimate the number of visitors to cater for; but they would usually number in the thousands.) In more recent years, 'open house' would be decentralised: at home, at her Kuala Lumpur office and at her constituency, Kuala Kangsar — sometimes at all three places (but not simultaneously of course) or at least at two of the three locations.

On the home-front, daughter Rohaiza married Fazrin on 27 August 1991: her parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. What would have pleased Rafidah no ends would be to have a baby around, one who would call her *nenek* (grandmother). Everyone in the family has been aware that she has been "dying" to be a grandmother. But Rohaiza is a modern woman who has a mind of her own and has decided on the right order of things. Since her marriage, she and her husband had stayed in her parents' guest-house while eagerly awaiting the completion of their own home. Rohaiza had made it clear that as and when she had her own nest, then only would she look into parenthood and let her mother realise her wish. "Not before," the first-born child had declared firmly. And she has kept her word.

The year 1996 drew to a dream-like close for Rafidah. Her long wait was over as she beamed beautifully, holding tenderly in her arms her first grandchild, Raihana.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Zestfully She Does It*

SHE CATEGORICALLY hates marketing but shopping? Ah, that's quite something else altogether.

Perhaps again it is a reflection of her childhood. Shopping — the sheer pleasure and joy of looking at things and acquiring those items that attract her, even if she had no specific need or use for them — it was an indulgence and luxury she never had as a child. And now she has an insatiable appetite for it and does it with gusto. She does not seem particularly picky or fastidious, other than with jewellery. Things which have attracted her as a consumer cover a whole spectrum of eclectic collectibles: from little pieces of handicraft and knick-knacks (such as egg-shaped marble pieces, colourful Mandarin ducks of assorted sizes) to rather large and bulky items (such as elaborately-carved sandalwood screens, heavy ornate furniture).

"Pity any maid who has to dust her things," comments one who has had first-hand sight of Rafidah's spread of souvenirs *et cetera* in what should otherwise have been a spacious living room. There is little space left now. That, however, is not likely to dissuade the mistress of the house from yet more shopping.

Investment-worthy jewellery and cute collectibles aside, Rafidah restocks her wardrobe with undiminished zest. There is no such limitation as wardrobe space to constrain her. Of course, as a public figure, how she packages herself reflects on her office and her country. And she certainly packages herself immaculately, perhaps lavishly as well. (But not necessarily to some self-appointed fashion critics' taste — but then she dresses first and foremost to please herself.) How she goes about it is illustrative of her pragmatism, indulgence, thrift and vanity. Anyone who recognises her would have noticed that she would invariably be seen neatly clothed in the modern adaptation of

the loose *baju kurung* and *sarung*. Instead of the traditional *batik* material for *sarung*, her outfits are tailored and cut of the same material — usually of silk, georgette or polyester — for both the top and the bottom.

To be so clothed is most unlikely to be a gender statement. Malay women of Malaysia are, by and large, rather conservative in their dressing. Thus, the majority of adult Malay women seem to opt for the modernised version of their traditional wear. (Just take a look at any government department.) As a public figure, it is all the more appropriate that Rafidah should be seen in her national costume, albeit modernised, and not fall victim to Western fads and fashions.

Rafidah shows an obvious preference for vibrant colours and bold designs in soft materials. Her vanity dictates that she should not be seen wearing the same items repeatedly. Hence, the incessant replenishment, these days by the tens. (On one trip to China, she purchased thirty pieces of silk at one go: "They were so cheap.") But it is still the same home-tailor who transforms textiles into garments. Although the tailor's eyesight is no longer what it was, she would not turn away her loyal customer of many years standing. Instead, she subcontracts to trusted seamstresses to complete the sewing, after she has personally attended to the cutting. Over the last score years or more, her tailoring charge has risen from twenty ringgit to twice that amount. By today's standards, this tailor's charges are far from exorbitant; quite the contrary. For Rafidah, it is no longer possible to find good materials costing just two-and-a-half ringgit a yard or metre, as she was wont to do as a lecturer, nor even at twice that price.

The packaging of Rafidah would not be complete without shoes, handbags and accessories. These days, she tends to give costume jewellery a miss and complement her dressing with the real thing, over and above the standard items worn daily, such as the rings on her fingers. (There's a finger with at least three rings, dominated by a white diamond solitaire her husband gave her as an anniversary present some years back.) It would be a rare sight indeed to see Rafidah in public minus earrings, necklaces and/or brooches, bracelets and of course rings, on any day. To her, they are not accessories; they are necessities to complete her dressing.

Where footwear and handbags are concerned, she has long moved beyond basic blacks, whites and browns. Her high-heel shoes and handbags are meticulously matched, the colour for the day would depend on the outfit of

the day. The colours can range from the palest lavender to the darkest royal purple, from powder blue to indigo, from pink to maroon, from canary yellow to the deepest saffron. This fastidious dresser would check each outfit before wearing it; no wrinkles or other unsightly creases must be seen. The same quality control applies when she is on the road. No matter how pressed for time, there is no excuse for slovenliness. If she did not have her travelling iron with her, she would just borrow one from the hotel's housekeeping department. Why doesn't she make use of the housekeeping department's ironing service? Her logic is simple: she could do it faster.

To the casual on-looker, Rafidah seems to have a liking for permed hair. In actual fact, nature has given her a crop of wavy and curly black hair. And to this day, she does not grace any hairdressing salon. Hairstylists are redundant to her. What is there to 'style'? When her hair gets a bit untidy with length, she gets hold of a pair of scissors and snips away in her bathroom, with her own hands, just the way she has always done, ever since she outgrew her schoolgirl's plaits. Vigorous brushing has never failed to put her hair in place and allow her to look groomed.



In more recent years, she has discovered golf. Perhaps not quite a passion, but it seems close to being one with Rafidah. Thus, one more item (or a group of products) is on her unwritten shopping list: golf-related items. Her range of golf-bags is mind-boggling. It is not so much the quality or price that would be the decisive factor in her purchase; it has much more to do with colour. (In her collection, there are several polka-dotted ones in psychedelic finish; there are those spotting pretty floral patterns; then there are the tartan ones ...) By now her collection — still growing — exceeds the colours of the rainbow multifold. Her husband who had just as deprived a childhood as she did, if not more so, does not seem to be similarly afflicted. In the midst of the dazzling array of golf bags stand two rather plain-looking (but sturdy) ones — Basir's. And he is content with his meagre possessions. However, where his wife is concerned, he is ever the tolerant and understanding spouse. He would merely smile and predict: "She'll never stop shopping." They will just have to find space for her purchases.

Despite the exacting demands on her time, Rafidah manages to find time for golf, one of the most time-consuming sports around. The availability of night-golfing is a boon to her. Her interest in the game encapsulates her personality.



One, her determination to learn. As so many have noted: "When Rafidah makes up her mind to do something, anything, you bet she'll be able to do it and do it well." And she did it. Two, her genderless policy: she practises what she preaches. She ignores the women's red box; she would tee off at exactly the same spot as the men. Three: her penchant for details are not confined to office work; it extends to dressing and not just dressing for the office. Her immaculate dressing (often in richly vibrant hues) for the office and work is extended to the golf club and course. She would not wish to be seen in public dressed in any other manner than not only suitably but impeccably — even when relaxing.

However, her attention to the minutest detail seems almost obsessive to some; but to others, it is just pure Rafidah. Apart from proper attire for the golf game, she would make sure everything else is colour coordinated. One occasional golfing partner gleefully reveals: "She even dresses us; she gives us T-shirts to match her colour of the day." Another fellow golfer quips: "Right down to the tee." Yet another throws in a bet: "The caddy — bet you she'll get round to dressing the caddy too." But one should hasten to add there is not a trace of malice when the golfers toss such light-hearted asides. Each one professes to be a sincere admirer of Rafidah the person, if not of her golf game.

And what of her golfing prowess? As Basir and others have noted, her impatience gets in the way. Just about everyone concurs that she tees magnificently and has the potential to take on any golfer, male or female: "If only ..." A senior civil servant and woman golfer tries to be diplomatic: "She performs better as a minister ..." But Basir should be allowed the last word: "Golf is her escape from work stress and politics."

Does that mean it therefore matters not how well she tees or how high or low her handicap is? But that would not be Rafidah. It does matter to her. "*Tak apa*" ("doesn't matter, anyhow will do") is not her way of doing anything, even if it were a mere game for relaxation. Those who know her well were very aware of her determination to bring down her novice's handicap of thirty-six. In February 1995, she had the last laugh — was she ecstatic! — when she hit a hole-in-one. By then, her handicap had been whittled down to a more respectable twenty-four. However, no one would expect her to be content with this. No one doubts her seriousness when she makes it known that she aims for a single-digit handicap. But she is showing exemplary and uncharacteristic patience in setting what she perceives as realistic goals. In:

1996, as she worked at it with due diligence — playing and/or practising at least twice a week, even during *Ramadan* (except when on holiday with the family) — she was rewarded with a handicap of twenty. The next year, she reckons she could pare it down to eighteen. And one day in the foreseeable future, a single-digit handicap. Any doubters out there?

A word of advice to anyone who believes that having her as a golfing partner would mean having her car. Nothing would annoy her more than for someone, anyone, to bring up office matters during a game of golf. The only response the haplessly misled person would get from her would be her angry and expressive glare.

**PICTORIAL SECTION**  
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1989:

*(Top)  
From the Yang Dipertuan Agung:  
An award that conferred on  
Rafidah Aziz the title Datuk Seri.*

*(On left)  
One for the album  
with husband  
Mohamed Basir Ahmad.*

*(Courtesy of MITI)*



*At MITI: Trade Minister since 1987. (Above, 1994; below, 1997) (Zhou Mei)*

*Facing page:*

*Rafidah Aziz in Wanita UMNO colours with Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.  
(Courtesy of MITI)*







1994: Rafidah and Basir's threesome: Rohaiza (left) and the two 'kids', younger daughter Rohaila and son Alfian.  
(Zhou Mei)



*1994: Man behind the Woman: Over-shadowed by his high-profile wife?  
Husband Mohamed Basir Ahmad remains unfazed  
(Zhou Mei)*





*Golf: Almost a passion.*

*(Courtesy of YB Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz)*



*1997:  
The arrival of grandchild  
Raihanna in late-1996  
makes life complete.*

*Above:  
In the arms of nenek  
Rafidah.*

*On left:  
In the arms of Rohaiza,  
Rafidah's eldest child.*

*(Courtesy of YB Datuk Seri  
Rafidah Aziz)*





*Top: (Third row, in dark green) Rafidah attended the Bukit Nanas Convent of Kuala Lumpur for six years. Here, a gathering of 'old girls' of the school in 1993. (Courtesy of Magdalene Lum)*

*Below: (Second row, second from left) Rafidah was a student of Kuala Lumpur's Victoria Institute for the two-year pre-university schooling (Form VI Lower and Upper). (Courtesy of Siew Chak Yun)*



UPPER SIX ARTS TWO-VICTORIA INSTITUTION  
1962

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Breaking New Grounds*

**SHE SEEMS** to have had all the breaks. Despite having been born into poverty — relatively speaking: the Aziz family did not starve but had to do without many things which, retrospectively, could have made life that much more enjoyable — ‘luck’ has reduced that to irrelevance. Luck seems to have been singularly benevolent towards Rafidah for a long long time. Perhaps it is a case of being born at the right time, that it is her destiny?

There may well be some truth in all that. But to attribute Rafidah’s career success (for that matter, her enviably harmonious marriage and family) to just luck is to deny her her personal immense input in first, having taken full advantage of the educational opportunities available to her to equip herself for life, then in not allowing career opportunities to slip by and having grasped the opportunities which came her way, in doing her utmost to prove herself worthy. Should one attribute her scintillating track record, going right back to her school days, to the stars? After all, it is said that the Scorpio-born is capable of doing just about anything she chooses to go after. Be that as it may, as she strides out and takes destiny into her firm and eager hands, she has chalked up a whole series of ‘firsts’ for not just Malay women but for all Malaysian women.

Rafidah’s interest in politics came quite naturally. It was hard to remain politically ignorant or indifferent in the post-Japanese Occupation era, in the years when the people of the Federation of Malaya (this came into being in 1948) were restive for independence from their British colonial masters. Malay nationalism was particularly rife. In Rafidah’s family, her father was actively involved at the grassroot level. While she was far too young when the call for independence — the resounding *Merdeka* — was first heard, she grew up during the historical years when the multiracial people of the land unanimously reached for it and by the time the Federation expanded to become

Malaysia, she was quite grown, all of twenty years of age in 1963. In due course, it would be hard for Wanita UMNO not to notice Rafidah.

Wanita UMNO evolved from Kaum Ibu UMNO, the 'Mothers' Group' in its fledgling early days. Its members were the womenfolk of UMNO activists: the wives, mothers and sisters of the men. Reflecting on the sweet success of the 1955 election of members to the Legislative Council of the then Federation of Malaya, Malaysia's first prime minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, warmly and appreciatively recorded the support given by members of the Kaum Ibu: '... exceeded every expectation by going out at all hours of the day and night, regardless of weather or personal discomfort throughout the entire election campaign ...'<sup>1</sup>

Having successfully realised the political changes sought, the aspirations of the people understandably would change too. For UMNO's women's wing to remain relevant, it needed to redefine its role. It was time for the women-organisers to be leaders in their own rights, and not remain docile and devoted followers of male activists. In 1971, the group's name was changed to Pergerakan Wanita UMNO (UMNO Women's Movement), underscoring with this name change its new priorities, in stating among its objectives the active involvement of women in all fields of human endeavour and enterprise. It would of course take time to identify and build up a cohort of such women, Malay women, with the education and drive to take on the challenges political independence had made available. It was inevitable that someone like Rafidah would be noticed. She was a rarity. She was, and still is, the new Malay woman personified.

As she puts it, having grown up in a politically awakened environment, she had observed politics for a long while and appreciated what politics could do for the people. What she saw, 'sacrifices' and all, appealed to her. Of course, she would hasten to explain that the 'sacrifices' she had in mind had nothing to do with going to war and risking one's life — that would be histrionics. "I don't mean sacrificing my life but sharing and contributing to the country." So if Wanita UMNO needed her, as a source of advice on certain matters, perhaps to serve as a resource person, she was very willing to give what she could. But she did not deliberately seek to participate in politics actively. She was content to do her bit from the side, and remain in the background.

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<sup>1</sup>Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj: *Looking Back* (Pustaka Antara 1977)

Rafidah's record of 'firsts' started from the day when at the age of seven, she had the courage to walk to the Bukit Nanas Convent in Kuala Lumpur and had herself enrolled as a pupil. Thereafter, her school track record was inspiring, leading to being the first Malay girl to be offered the Colombo Plan scholarship — and the dubious distinction as the first to reject the scholarship. She was the first Malay girl to receive Bank Negara Malaysia's scholarship; this one she accepted and kept. She stayed on at the University of Malaya, to become the first Malay woman to be conferred the Master of Economics degree and then as the university's Faculty of Economics and Administration's first female Malay lecturer.

It was at this stage of her life when Wanita UMNO took an interest in her and Rafidah responded with characteristic enthusiasm when called upon to contribute. At that point of time, in addition to her university teaching, she had already begun a series of lectures in Malay over radio, explaining basic economics to listeners. Her talks were popular; she had the attention of not only students trying to get a grasp of elementary economics but also of housewives. Whether her audience fully understood her or not, the name Rafidah Aziz became a familiar one among radio listeners.

Rafidah the lecturer was refreshingly interesting. (Possibly, entertaining too to some cheeky undergraduates.) Unlike all too many lecturers whose drone could well send students into slumberland, nobody could possibly doze off when Rafidah was talking. Her oratory skills were already evident then. And the speed at which she delivered her lectures was quite something. 'Rapid fire' is how a former student describes it. To another, 'machine gun'; to yet another, 'spitfire'. Her amazing 'normal' speed (of nineteen to a dozen) was obviously not her maximum speed; she was capable of exceeding it. This could happen quite often; as and when the lecturer became 'fired' by the topic of the day, the speed of her delivery would accelerate, while her pitch would soar an octave or so.

Then there was her grand entrance. As one former student fondly recalls, the vivacious Rafidah — by then married and a young mother of one child — would never fail to make a striking entrance when stepping into the lecture venue at the University of Malaya. "The boys would make cat-calls, whistle, hurl paper aeroplanes in her direction. She would be ever so sporting and allow them their moment of fun. She would serenely take her place at the rostrum and smile ever so sweetly and ask: 'Are we ready? Shall we start?' Immediately, there would be dead silence because she would fire away without

further ado; everyone would be desperately trying to scribble down as many words as possible ..." Which was of course not ever possible. (Taping lectures was not allowed in those days and students tended to treat lectures as dictation sessions.) But that did not diminish the popularity of her lectures. Because of the large number of students who signed up for her rural economics course, the lectures had to be held in the Dewan Tunku Chancellor, the assembly hall, and not in one of the regular lecture theatres.

Her ascendancy in the UMNO party hierarchy was astonishing. In 1972, when she was still teaching in the university, she was drafted to sit on the Wanita UMNO executive committee (exco). The following year, she took her place on the economics bureau of UMNO. Her public service work earned her early public recognition: in 1973, at the age of thirty, she was a recipient of an award, conferred by the Malaysian King (*Yang Dipertuan Agung*). In 1974, she was appointed a senator. In the same year, she became a member of UMNO's highest decision-making body, its Supreme Council.

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The year 1976 marked her career switch, from the academia to politics. The transition was remarkably smooth. However, despite her increasingly active participation in non-academic work and her effectiveness in such involvement, despite her obvious enjoyment of such non-academic pursuit, some of her contemporaries were nevertheless surprised that she would opt for a full-time political career. Although she is extroverted and mixes well with people, they still harboured reservations, convinced that she would be temperamentally ill-suited for politics, with her gender an added handicap. How wrong she proved the doubters! Credit should be given to UMNO's strongmen of the day, for not only accepting the need to change society's perception of the role of women in politics and government, but to actually be seen doing something about it. More — until the advent of Rafidah Aziz, leaders of Wanita UMNO would always be assigned 'soft' portfolios, such as welfare. Not so with Rafidah.

That year, 1976, Rafidah was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Public Enterprises. She was thirty-three years of age, the youngest to occupy such a post and the first woman to be so appointed. Promotion came swiftly. In 1977, she was appointed a Deputy Minister of Finance, the first woman to be appointed to the post. Her fellow Deputy Minister of Finance was Dr Neo Yee Pan, then president of the Malaysian Chinese Association,

a component party in Malaysia's ruling coalition government. Like her, Dr Neo too hailed from the academia; in his case, physics was his field.

A journalist who visited their respective offices could not but be taken aback by the colour schemes. Thereafter the journalist just could not resist dubbing the two deputy ministers 'the blue-and-pink pair': the walls of Rafidah's office were painted a sweet pink, while over in her colleague's quarters on the same floor, powder blue! (The respective incumbents disclaimed having had anything to do with the choice of colours. Thus, the greater the suspicion that the unknown party responsible for the colours showed Western stereotyping, that it should be pink for girls and blue for boys?) In 1979, the Sultan of Selangor conferred on Rafidah an award that carried the title *Datin Paduka*, or just *Datin* for short. Dr Neo had his *Datukship* from another state earlier. The blue-and-pink pair became the *Datuk-Datin* team of the Ministry of Finance.

As a lecturer, Rafidah had countless hours of practice delivering what were basically monologues. She seems equally at ease speaking off-the-cuff before an audience of academics as she would addressing fellow parliamentarians or a gathering of her constituents or her peers at the annual ASEAN Economic Ministers meetings and other regional and international gatherings. She is also a natural at fielding questions. If the choice were hers, she would rather be engaged in a two-way exchange, be party to the cut-and-thrust of a dialogue, than to merely deliver a monologue.

The press (the non-partisan members) were captivated by her and remain so to this day. Some journalists have dubbed her 'Rapid Fire Rafidah' in reference as much to the speed articulate Rafidah would deliver her repartee to any question or provocation, as well as to the number of words she could rattle off per minute. To the press, obtaining quotable quotes from interviewees has always been something of a challenge, at times a torture. Often, whatever the talents and forte of politicians and other public figures, the press would find them wanting in eloquence and candour. ("No comment" is a negative response journalists have heard all too often. The veterans among them would also vouch that it is not rare for the 'no commentator' to add: "Don't quote me.") Thank heavens for the Rafidahs of this world! The voluble Malaysian minister would unfailingly oblige with refreshing forthrightness. And if the subject-matter under query does not warrant page-lead for the day, the press could at least count on her for a couple of quotable quotes to liven the write-up.



She has the knack of displaying disarming patience and tolerance in explaining policies to plying reporters. Some members of that fraternity would at times attend press conferences ill-prepared and inexcusably ignorant; some would ask inane and irrelevant questions. Even then she would keep her impatience on hold and show an unexpected and hence, all the more laudable, degree of sufferance. But there are of course limits to her self-control; there have been instances when her response would be sharp and snappy, to the considerable discomfort, if not embarrassment, of the recipients of her rebuttals and retorts.

While she is ever so patient in explaining for the umpteenth time her 'formula' in balancing career with family, someone might just have asked that once too often. Or she might have gotten invited to just one too many conferences delving into what she rates as a non-issue. Participants who attended a conference in Singapore in 1991 on the *Roles of Women in Society* (20 May 1991) were not likely to forget Rafidah's remarks at its launch. She tossed the audience a poser: "How is it that there has never been ... any forum, debate or discussion on the balancing of multiple roles of the career man?"

For good measure, and since the venue was Singapore, she challenged the media "to interview Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and ask him as pointedly as they would other leaders who happen to be women, how he manages to balance his role as PM and politician and as husband and father. Ask him the nitty gritty of his children's school report cards or his participation in the PTA at school. Ask him, as would be asked of other leaders who are women, how he manages to give the quality time every family needs."

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Just as she would relegate the relevance of gender in work performance, so too on race or racial traits as explanation for success or otherwise in the world of competitive business. In recent years, much has been made of networking; in particular, Chinese global or regional networking not only on ethnic lines but also based on clan or dialect groupings, as well as by surnames. This has obviously not gone unnoticed by the non-Chinese of South-east Asia. Non-Chinese observers have been heard to tentatively suggest that the region's 'indigenous' population should similarly develop ties and build networks among themselves, in emulation of the Chinese, and thereby become just as strong and successful.

When Rafidah was asked for her comments on the matter during an official

visit to Jakarta, Indonesia in January 1994, she debunked the contention that it was networking that made the Chinese strong or that the Chinese had networked as a matter of strategy. Instead, she urged her fellow 'sons of the soil' of Indonesia and Malaysia — the *pribumis* and *bumiputras* of South-east Asia — to focus on developing their entrepreneurial skills and spirit of competitiveness. These to her have been the ingredients to Chinese success, wherever they might be.

"They (the Chinese) make themselves strong first and then the sense of networking comes in. When you are strong, then networking is meaningful. When you are all weak, what's the point of having a weak network? We should learn from the Chinese community ... They were wherever they were as entrepreneurs ... they have succeeded in the most unlikely places because of their industriousness, their diligence and the need for survival. Now we the *pribumis* and *bumiputras* must emulate the so-called overseas Chinese mentality. Wherever we are, we should be strong and competitive."

A trait of hers became evident early in her public life: an abhorrence for, and therefore avoidance of, controversy and confrontation. At the same time, she has revealed her store of tact. All this no doubt surprised some who thought they know her fiery temperament well. They are puzzled at this seeming contradiction in her personality. But to her, she is merely being consistent in living by her own principles and rules. There have been occasions when she did meet controversy head on. She would explain: "I was provoked." There have also been incidents and instances aplenty when her utterances were condemned as impolite or downright rude. One suspects she would do so on purpose, for predictable effect.



## CHAPTER IX

### *People's Mandate*

**B**ACK IN 1978, it was time for Rafidah to seek the people's mandate. She contested in the general election, standing as an UMNO candidate in her home state, Perak. She won the Selayang seat and earned her rightful place in the lower house of the Malaysian Parliament, the *Dewan Rakyat*. Thereafter, she has contested in every general election and won. These came in 1982, 1986, 1990 and 1995. From the 1982 election on, her constituency has been Kuala Kangsar, also of Perak. Despite having hardly lived in the state of her birth other than during her infancy, Rafidah charms the local folks by communicating flawlessly in the patois spoken by the state's Malay villagers.

The general election of 1990 was of keen interest to Malaysian voters and foreign observers alike. It gave UMNO's breakaway faction under the banner *Semangat '46* (Spirit of '46) — led by Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Hitam — the long-awaited chance to seek the electorate's verdict. Rafidah's constituency was one of those challenged by candidates fielded by *Semangat '46*. It was a two-way contest in the Kuala Kangsar constituency, a constituency then of over 137,000 people, spread over one hundred and seventy-five villages. The outcome was most satisfying to Rafidah. She retained her seat with a handsome majority, cornering nearly two-thirds of the total valid votes cast.

By the time the next general election came round in 1995, *Semangat '46* was already a spent force. In Perak state, it would be back to facing traditional challengers from parties like the Democratic Action Party. In the past, the opposition has often done relatively well in Perak. Not only is Perak one of Malaysia's most populous states, it has a large ethnic Chinese electorate. In 1995, Perak, Selangor and Johor were the only states registering over one million voters each. But Perak has been the only state where numerically, the Malays and the Chinese have been very close. In 1995, the Chinese were

trailing behind the Malays in numbers by just three percentage points. Historical records indicate that the opposition has usually done well in the urban areas, where there is a larger concentration of the Chinese.

However, in the April 1995 general election, to the delight of the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*, the coalition with UMNO as the senior partner) and to the dismay of the opposition, the latter failed to recapture any of the four parliamentary seats in Perak it had won in the 1990 general election. This time round, all the twenty-three parliamentary seats allocated to this state went to the National Front. And Rafidah was once again returned to Parliament as the *Wakil Rakyat* for Kuala Kangsar.

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Two years after the 1978 general election, Rafidah returned to the Ministry of Public Enterprises where she had served briefly as parliamentary secretary in 1976 — followed by a stint as a junior minister in the Finance Ministry — this time as its minister. Not surprisingly, she was the ministry's first woman minister. Here she would stay for seven years and leave her indelible mark behind; in the process, she set yet another record, in longevity. With each appointment, Rafidah tackled what she identified as priorities with zeal and forthrightness.

Earlier in Finance, she succeeded in instituting a new tender system, tightening the valuation process. Over at Public Enterprises, she found commercial licences were dished out to all and sundry, mostly not on merit, more as largesse. That just would not do. She reminded her staff that the government promised the people that it would be *bersih, cekap dan amanah* (clean, competent and trustworthy). She wanted her ministry to deliver the goods. She is pleased that during her tenure, she succeeded in injecting transparency into the decision-making process of the agencies under the aegis of Public Enterprises. She is aware that in the process, she made quite a number of enemies. But stepping on some toes or upsetting the apple-carts of some self-serving individuals would not have bothered her in the least.

Meanwhile, on the party front, she was elected president of Wanita UMNO in 1984. Thereafter, come party election time, every three years, she would be returned. (Until the October 1996 election when, to the astonishment of just about every political observer, analyst and forecaster, she lost to her challenger.) Her assumption of the presidency signalled irreversible changes

in the place and status of women in Malaysian society and politics. (However, the portfolios assigned to her were clearly recognition of her personal ability and capability, quite unrelated to the presidency of Wanita UMNO: she was already a member of the Cabinet when she took over the presidency of Wanita UMNO.) When she became president of Wanita UMNO, she made another first: the first tertiary educated woman to take over the leadership of UMNO's women's wing.

Her basic non-confrontational approach is clearly reflected in her assumption of the presidency of Wanita UMNO. When Rafidah first became active in UMNO's women's wing, the president was Fatimah Hashim who had headed the movement since 1956 and had presided over the metamorphosis of the 'Mothers' Group' into Wanita UMNO. But civility remained very much intact in the transformation. Thus, in typical genteel fashion, when the time was right, Fatimah Hashim handed over the presidency to an already identified heir, Aishah Ghani. That was in 1972. When Rafidah became more and more actively involved, there were those who were eager for Wanita UMNO to be repackaged — or perhaps be rejuvenated and glamourised? — with someone like the well-educated, eloquent, likeable and resolute Rafidah at the helm. But Rafidah held fast to her stand: that she would not contest the presidency unless the incumbent chose to step down.

In time, Aishah Ghani made it known that Rafidah was her preferred heir. Only when Aishah Ghani had made a firm decision not to offer herself for the presidency again when party elections were due in 1984, only then did Rafidah consent to have her name nominated as a candidate for the post. With the presidency of Wanita UMNO comes a vice-presidency of UMNO. She of course has been a member of the UMNO Supreme Council since 1974 when the late Abdul Razak Hussein was the party president and Malaysia's second premier. By the 1990s, she and Dr Mahathir Mohamad would be the only two members of the then Supreme Council to remain members of that council.

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While reluctant to pass judgement on her former political bosses, Rafidah obviously had problems getting through to the two former premiers on issues of concern to Wanita UMNO. Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein was "a bit of a chauvinist" — but Rafidah rationalises that he belonged to an older and more conservative era. Publicly, he would say how much he valued women's contribution but in reality, it was exasperating and futile trying to

get his support on issues that mattered to Wanita UMNO; for that matter, to all Malaysian women. "We could not get through to him on so many things," recalls Rafidah. Foremost among these were women's request for proper recognition as equals in the labour force: equal pay for equal work and separate assessment for married women in the workforce when calculating the annual income tax returns.

The situation then was largely what the British had left behind, with women at a discount in the workforce: at least 20 per cent cheaper than men for the same work, even in white-collar jobs. The Cabinet had agreed in principle to put things right way back in 1964. But thereafter, no further action was taken. It was in 1969 when discriminatory policies and practices based on gender were formally dropped. More years went by before implementation saw dawn.

Where annual tax returns were concerned, a married woman did not exist in the files of the inland revenue department. She was a mere appendix in her husband's file. However, she must also declare her income yearly; her income would be added on to her husband's gross income for tax assessment. As the tax rates were (and still are) graduated, the tax system was clearly biased against working couples. If the wife and husband had been treated as two individuals, irrespective of marital status, the combined tax burden on the two taxpayers could be substantially less. The late Prime Minister would often let matters be and when pressed, would declare that it just wasn't the right time yet.

Hussein Onn took over the premiership in 1976. "He was more amenable" and the women managed to get something more concrete out of him. The present Prime Minister Dr Mahathir is, to Rafidah, "the most open-minded of all". "He really believes in the role of women." She agrees that she and Dr Mahathir are very much on the same wave length: "That's why I enjoy working so much," so says Rafidah, who is, to all too many civil servants who have had the privilege (or otherwise) of having served under her, an irredeemable workaholic.

"What has Mahathir to lose?" observes a non-Malaysian political scientist sardonically. "She's a good and dedicated worker; she gets things done for him and wins respect for the country. She has not given Mahathir cause to suspect that she has ulterior motives — like plotting to take over his number one slot in UMNO. With her, he can afford to be relaxed, appreciate the solid work she is doing and give her free rein to continue with her work." To this

observer. Rafidah is the rare technocrat in the Cabinet, a minister who has consistently performed laudably and who has delivered without allowing politics to get in the way.

Rafidah herself is not averse to being assessed as a technocrat. "I believe politics should be in the interest of the party and the government. One should not politicise decisions. Decisions should not be personal," she says. The only measurement in making decisions, she adds, is how the decisions would affect the government.





## CHAPTER X

### *Taking A Stand*

THE RARE instances when Rafidah made a stand and said her piece had to do with party politics: in-fighting in UMNO, such as the public display of disunity and dissent on the part of certain party members during the months leading to party elections scheduled to take place on 24 April 1987, when UMNO would hold its thirty-eighth general assembly. It was to be an unprecedented and traumatic experience for UMNO, its office-bearers and supporters.

In July 1981, Dr Mahathir Mohamad had taken over the premiership from Malaysia's third premier Hussein Onn who retired from political life. Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah whose political base was in his home state of Kelantan, then a vice-president of UMNO and the Minister of Trade and Industry in the government, decided to challenge Dr Mahathir's leadership in the April 1987 party elections. Musa Hitam whose constituency was in the southern Johor state, was then the deputy president of UMNO and the Deputy Prime Minister; he teamed up with Tunku Razaleigh. They and their supporters were soon dubbed by the media as 'Team B'.

This episode in the annals of UMNO history witnessed Rafidah's rare public outburst and open declaration of her stand. Many political observers were taken aback; it seemed quite out of character for Rafidah who, by then, had a reputation as a non-partisan, apolitical politician. Till then, she had adroitly avoided having to take sides or get embroiled in unpleasant public dissension; she considered such participation demeaning. Of course, she has her explanation for coming out openly in support of the incumbent president of UMNO. She detests 'teams'; she considers them as divisive and they undermine party unity. In the 1987 episode, the 'other side' was spreading what she angrily condemned as blatant lies.

A year after the 1987 episode of intense and passionate contention between opposing factions of UMNO — on the one side, those loyal to its incumbent president (Dr Mahathir Mohamad) and on the other side, those in the so-called Team B (led by Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Hitam) — the UMNO as founded in 1946 was declared 'unlawful' over a technicality. It had come to light that several unregistered branches of UMNO had taken part in the selection of voting-delegates to the party assembly in 1987. UMNO was summarily deregistered. All UMNO assets were frozen. Dr Mahathir promptly named a new party the 'New UMNO'.

Tunku Razaleigh launched his faction under the 'Spirit of '46' banner. However, evoking the spirit of UMNO's founding in 1946 did little to boost the popularity of his breakaway faction. It would be trounced in the 1990 general election. In preparation for the next polls, Tunku Razaleigh's faction underwent a name change: to *Parti Melayu Semangat '46*. The emphasis was on 'Melayu' — Malay.

In August 1994, a Malaysian court gave the green light for the restoration of all assets (and liabilities) of the former UMNO to Dr Mahathir's New UMNO. (Long before then, 'New UMNO' was once again referred to by just about everyone as plain 'UMNO'.) The assets were estimated to be worth 1.3 billion Malaysian ringgit then. The official assignee's office had been holding the assets while awaiting settlement of ownership dispute as both the New UMNO and Tunku Razaleigh's faction had made claims to the assets. Ultimately, the official assignee was satisfied that more than one million of the 1.3 million members of the original UMNO had joined the New UMNO. This meant that it had met a provision of the Societies Act, that the assets would go to the claimant with more than one-half its old membership.

In 1996 — the original UMNO's fiftieth anniversary — less than a decade after the 1987 challenge and breakaway, the drama which had exploded on the Malaysian political arena with such ferocity and intensity fizzled out entirely, with Tunku Razaleigh and his followers rejoining UMNO *en masse*.

More recently, in the November 1993 party elections, Rafidah once again made a stand. This time, it was the deputy presidency of UMNO that was the focus of contention. (With that seat goes the deputy premiership.) Forty-six years old Anwar Ibrahim decided it was time to challenge the incumbent, veteran politician Abdul Ghafar Baba who had taken over the number two slot left vacant by Musa Hitam in 1987. It became a rather noisome affair, mostly

generated by Anwar's supporters. This riled Rafidah into saying her piece. Deliberately or inadvertently, her stand was interpreted by some as being anti-Anwar.

But Rafidah has consistently and repeatedly clarified that she has never been anti-Anwar. (Anwar was her student during her campus days. A former student activist, he was known for his anti-establishment stand during his leadership of ABIM (Ankatan Belia Islam Malaysia), an Islamic youth movement. He was closely identified with the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party or Parti Islam, perhaps better known by its acronym PAS. In a stunning move in 1982, Anwar Ibrahim joined UMNO.) She makes it clear that she was critical of some of his supporters; specifically, she objected to some of their references to and statements made about the incumbent number two in UMNO's hierarchy. She found their lack of respect for Abdul Ghafar distasteful.

To Rafidah, Abdul Ghafar was an elder (then sixty-eight years old) and a veteran whose contribution to UMNO could be traced to the pre-independence days under the leadership of the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj; as such, he should be treated with due respect. According to Rafidah, she had kept Anwar informed of her thoughts and her decision to speak up. Thus, she stresses, there could not possibly be any misunderstanding between Anwar and her on the matter, other than in the minds of the mischievous.

Once the leadership challenge of April 1987 was settled — with Dr Mahathir retaining his position in the party hierarchy by barely a hairline of a margin — there was a Cabinet reshuffle. Among the changes was the appointment of Rafidah to Tunku Razaleigh's former portfolio, that of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Not surprisingly, many observers read her transfer (from Public Enterprises) as a promotion, as reward for her loyalty to the UMNO president. But she dismisses such talk as unwarranted. To her, it is just another appointment with an added dimension, the need to take Malaysia overseas, to convince foreign investors that Malaysia is the ideal location for their industrial enterprises, to draw to Malaysia the industries identified by Malaysia as just right to propel Malaysia onto its next stage of economic development via industrialisation.



## CHAPTER XI

### *In Search Of New Frontiers*

AND TRAVEL she did, and still does, almost relentlessly. Domestically and abroad. The pace she keeps has left not a few civil servants working with her gasping for breath. There is hardly a month in the calendar free of overseas travel for her. In between, there is domestic travel. If it is not the opening of a factory, then it would be the launch of a conference. In the early 1990s, such domestic events would average around ten a month, excluding her weekly visits to her constituency.

According to Yasmin binte Abdullah who has been Rafidah's private secretary since 1977 — the year Rafidah Aziz was appointed one of two deputies to the Finance Ministry — her boss's workload was just as heavy and demanding in her earlier posts. The only difference is that she has become peripatetic. After a tearful goodbye at the Ministry of Public Enterprises in May 1987, Rafidah settled down in her new post at the Ministry of Trade and Industry and immediately tackled the tasks before her with characteristic fervour. She had taken over the portfolio at a critical time when the economy was painfully crawling out of the pits of recession.

In 1985, the economy had contracted by one per cent. In the following year, it managed to arrest this alarming trend to register a meek growth rate of one per cent. In 1987, sustaining the recovery was of paramount national importance. Recovery was indeed sustained. In the immediate years that followed, growth rates progressed from satisfactory to remarkable. In more recent years, the economy's galloping growth has exacted a price on the country's resources and infrastructure. Trade deficits aside, typical symptoms of resource constraints have surfaced to challenge the economic managers of the country. (Human resource, at practically all levels, is increasingly a factor of production in inadequate supply. Infrastructure such as power poses a daunting hurdle if not efficiently and firmly handled. The massive black-out

of 1992 was not supposed to ever happen again and yet it did, in August 1996. The outage on the afternoon of 3 August paralysed the whole peninsula; power did not return till the following day.) The manufacturing sector has been unfailingly in the vanguard of growth; first in recovery, then in ensuring an acceleration in the growth momentum, followed by the challenge of forging sustainable long-term growth.

The Malaysia poised for sustained growth as the twenty-first century dawns is worlds apart from the Federation of Malaya from which it evolved. It was as Malaya when, in the post-Second World War era, the country freed itself of the colonial yoke. For decades past, the country's economic well-being hinged on its then vaunted twin pillars — rubber and tin — which had enriched its distant colonial master, Britain. But economic planners had foreseen the day when the twins would no longer be able to sustain the economy or support its people. Since its independence, development has been charted by five-year plans. The manufacturing sector's role as the provider of growth and prosperity for the country is reiterated, re-emphasised and re-defined in each five-year plan.

Right from the start, this sector was projected to replace agriculture as the main contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP). However, to a country like Malaysia, agriculture would remain a significant contributor to the economy in the foreseeable future, not least as a source of livelihood for certain segments of the populace. Within this sector, emphasis has been on diversification of crops: such as the cultivation of oil palm, pepper and cocoa. In addition, while nature's benevolence — such as the fabulous supply of hardwood in the country's tropical forests — is harvested, emphasis is increasingly placed on afforestation, to replace the trees felled.

In 1970, agriculture still accounted for 30.8 per cent of GDP, manufacturing 13.4 per cent. Over the years, the gap steadily narrowed. By 1980, manufacturing's contribution was 20.5 per cent, that of agriculture 22.2 per cent. The goal of replacing agriculture (with manufacturing) as the main contributor to GDP was attained in 1987. In the 1990s, manufacturing's share has reached beyond 30 per cent while agriculture's share has been pared to about one-half that of manufacturing.

The earlier urgent need to coax the economy back onto the growth track has long since been replaced by the aspiration to sustain growth in the face of very real and mounting competition from several quarters, as the international

paradigms shifted dramatically in the late-1980s and the early-1990s. There is no room for complacency. Foreseeably, the shift will continue in the years ahead as previously centrally planned closed economies seek their place in the borderless world of trade and investment. New competitors for investment as well as suppliers of goods have emerged. Among them: members of the erstwhile socialist blocs of eastern Europe, as well as members of the former Soviet Union; then there is former world pariah — South Africa — now internationally embraced; there is also Central Asia and nearer home, there are the countries of Indochina, each eagerly seeking to be a participant in global trade and each keenly looking for foreign investments as catalyst to economic development and growth.

Then there is of course China. No trading nation in the world could possibly ignore China, a country offering 1.2 billion consumers, an economy galloping away almost uncontrollably as a growth leader of not only the Asia-Pacific basin but of the world. Joining the swelling group of newly liberalising economies is India, second only to China in the number of consumers it has to offer. Each and every country is a serious contender for investment funds and an enticing market for Malaysian goods as well as possible supplier of goods needed by Malaysia.

As the economy matures, Malaysia must necessarily become more selective in the investments that would best complement and further spur its growth. Malaysia has reached the stage when it underscores technology transfer with investments. Simultaneously, while it is still keenly competing for investors, it itself is busily looking beyond its shores for investment opportunities. In recent years, the pace of overseas ventures is giddy. Malaysian interests are not confined to 'safe' turfs, such as its immediate South-east Asian neighbours. It has boldly ventured far and wide, from China to West Asia, from Indochina to East Europe, from South Africa to South America. In absolute terms, the leading recipients of Malaysian ringgit investments are, understandably, still concentrated in more familiar territories: Hongkong and Singapore aside, South Asia is a top recipient of investments. Members of the very developed world are also among recipients of Malaysian investments, such as the United States of America, Britain, Australia and Germany.

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The workload on the ministry concerned is tremendous; the challenges almost limitless. It is most fortuitous for the country that no challenge is



insurmountable to its formidable minister, Rafidah Aziz. It is a ministry that is under constant scrutiny, its performance critically appraised by both the government and the private sector. Of the twenty-one ministries (excluding the Prime Minister's Department) in the Malaysian government, the Trade Ministry must surely be the one subject to Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's closest personal scrutiny.

Indeed, the indefatigable premier is very much hands-on in pursuit of both trade and investments, particularly with regard to foreign investments which could spur Malaysia on in the world of advanced technology, to enable the country to sustain its remarkable growth since the latter part of the 1980s well into the twenty-first century. The most ambitious project at hand is of course the proposed Multimedia Super Corridor, to be spread over some fifteen by fifty kilometres. As envisaged, the Corridor would encompass Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Twin Towers, on record as the world's tallest edifice at four hundred and fifty-two metres (with each tower standing at eighty-eight storeys, with a sky-piercing spire atop each lofty tower); it would extend southwards from the Federal Capital to include the new international airport at Sepang, Selangor state, some fifty kilometres away from Kuala Lumpur. Within the earmarked area would rise two cities: Putrajaya (an administrative centre about thirty-five kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur) and Cyberjaya (an intelligent city, to the west of Putrajaya).

To the visionary Malaysian Prime Minister whose sight is focused beyond basic manufacturing to sustain his country's future prosperity, to realise this megaproject — which would put Malaysia on the world map as a hub for cutting-edge information technology — is merely a logical step forward. It would be in line with the country's aspirations to reach the status of a fully-developed and industrialised nation by the year 2020, as embodied in his 'Vision 2020'. The super-charged premier thinks nothing of personally leading road-shows to promote this. Even during the month of *Ramadan* (early 1997), he was busily engaged in convincing (he is known to be a very convincing person) and enticing (with generous, almost irresistible, fiscal and other incentives) captains (barons? moguls?) of technology industries on both sides of the Pacific, from California to Japan. To Dr Mahathir, they are the 'smart partners' key to the success of this futuristic and bold project. The partners-to-be he has identified for wooing are of course not confined to those on the Pacific rim only. To him, all who share his vision and commitment would reap tremendous rewards in time to come. It is, as Dr Mahathir sees it, a 'win-win-win' scenario.

The solid foundation laid in the decades since Malaysia took charge of its own destiny has resulted in the matamorphosis of the country from a fledgling commodity-based export-oriented developing economy rife with racial tension into an economy with a diversified base, well on track for sustained growth. By the dawn of the 1990s, the political maturity is palpable with racial tension sidelined, with wealth generation the focus of all races, with each confident that the robustly growing economic pie is big enough for all to share. But there is no room for complacency, least of all over at the Trade Ministry: the manufacturing sector must remain the growth leader and catalyst of economic prosperity for the country. In the years ahead, the government and policy implementers need to perform with an ever vigilant eye on attaining new markers and goals, such as those spelt out in Malaysia's 'Vision 2020'.

It was on 28 February 1991, at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, when Dr Mahathir presented his vision of Malaysia as a fully-developed and industrialised nation by the year 2020, a thirty-year timeframe. As envisioned, development should no longer be measured solely in terms of economic growth. Instead, development should encompass all other fields: political, social, spiritual, psychological and cultural. It is of interest to note where numerical yardsticks are applicable, such as with projected per capita income (PPP — purchasing power parity adjusted), by the 2020s, Malaysia would have caught up with developed Britain, its former colonial master. As of the early 1990s, Britain's PPP-adjusted per capita income still stood at more than twice that of Malaysia's comparative figure.

'Vision 2020' is not the only reference point to guide civil servants and policy implementers. There are other blueprints, of shorter timeframe that they need to refer to. For the first half of the decade of the 1990s, there was the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) which, like the earlier five-year plans preceding it, spelt out the policies, strategies and programmes to be attained during the planned period. Then there is the Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2, 1991-2000). This embodies the aspirations of the National Development Plan (NDP), the successor to the twenty-year New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-1990). The NDP focuses on realising balanced development on all fronts, leading to a more 'united and just society' as spelt out by Dr Mahathir and as encapsulated in his Vision 2020. For officers of the Trade Ministry, there is yet another document of special relevance to the ministry, a ten-year Industrial Master Plan which straddles the last five years of the twentieth century, into the next century.

At the ministry level, to enable it to not only sustain its laudable performance but also to forge ahead and attain new goals before it, it was restructured and streamlined. The domestic trade division was hived off in 1991, to be launched as a ministry on its own. The ministry has been renamed the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). It is not the first time that it has acquired a new name. Indeed, the ministry is one of the oldest ministries in the country, with its roots in the pre-Malaysia era when it started as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry with Tan Siew Sin its first minister in the late 1950s. It was renamed the Ministry of Trade and Industry when Hussein Onn was its minister (August 1973 to September 1974). Rafidah Aziz is the ministry's tenth minister. She remains at its helm after the revamp, with the ministry focusing its resources on external trade and investment pursuit.

These days, Malaysia under Dr Mahathir has become far more assertive in the international arena and is prepared, when it perceives the need, to lead or to state its stand, even if it were an unpopular one. Malaysia's insistence on expressing its reservations over specific dates for freeing trade, as spelt out under the Bogor Declaration, following the November 1994 APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) meeting in Indonesia, is but one of numerous instances when Malaysia insisted on its views being heard and recorded. Or, as Dr Mahathir put it then: "Malaysia has stuck out its neck..." An obvious instance of Malaysia's readiness to lead is the Malaysian proposal to set up the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC).

The foot-dragging in bringing negotiations over the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to a successful completion, the mushrooming of what were seen as trade blocs and/or regionalism and protectionism (for example, the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area) — these daunting and worrisome realities prompted Malaysia to initiate a regional forum for East Asian countries. ('East Asia' in this context naturally extends to include South-east Asia.) Originally proposed as the East Asia Economic Grouping, it was renamed to remove any misperception that it was meant to be a trade bloc. Malaysia has explained again and again that all it has proposed is a 'loose consultative forum' for East Asian countries 'to discuss and resolve issues of common concern and interest'.

The greatest opposition to it came from outside of the region, with the United States of America its loudest opponent. Its hostility is reflected in Japan's initial indifference or diffidence towards the Malaysian proposal. Despite the completion of the Uruguay Round of negotiations and the birth of the World

Trade Organisation to replace GATT, Malaysia sees the continued relevance of a regional forum as proposed by it. It has painstakingly marketed the concept to all concerned parties, seeking acceptance first from fellow ASEAN members. At the twenty-sixth annual conference of ASEAN foreign ministers — known as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting — in Singapore in July 1993, there was consensus that the EAEC would be a caucus within APEC. The following year, at the twenty-sixth ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) conference hosted by Thailand, ASEAN economic ministers jointly agreed that the momentum of the process of forming the EAEC should be maintained. (A Thai suggestion that the EAEC should confine its discussions to non-trade matters was, not surprisingly, rejected by Malaysia.)



Ever since Rafidah took over the Trade Ministry, she is the minister who represents her country at the annual AEM conference. (Her maiden appearance was at the nineteenth AEM conference held in July 1987 in Singapore.) Since Malaysia first mooted the formation of the EAEC in 1990, EAEC had, more often than not, been brought up for clarification and elaboration in her speeches. As and when she was invited as a guest-speaker, she would more likely than not focus on not only trade issues in general, not only on the role of multilateral trade to shared prosperity but also specifically on the EAEC, explaining at length what it was meant to be and just as importantly and persuasively, what it was not ever meant to be: a trade bloc — this it was never meant to be, she would state loud and clear. It was obvious that Malaysia was not about to allow the EAEC a stillbirth merely because of initial lack of unanimous support for it. Patiently, Malaysian political leaders (the Minister of International Trade and Industry aside, the Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as the Prime Minister himself and later, the Deputy Prime Minister too had occasion to raise it) had been the tireless advocates, in attempting to convince detractors and doubters the merits of the caucus as mooted by Malaysia.

While politicians dither, Professor Lim Chong Yah of the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore has been singularly supportive of the concept since it was first introduced. "The rest of the region will one day thank Dr Mahathir for it," predicts the economist. Meanwhile, he regrets to see such a worthy proposal should be met with such stony resistance. The academic is however not alone in his support of the Malaysian proposal. Many an editorial (in regional publications) has been penned in clear support

of the caucus. Those in favour of an East Asian forum sees it as a source of strength, when its members would be reassured that their own interests have not only been taken into consideration but protected; in turn, the EAEC, as a forum within APEC, would be an effective vehicle to advance the goals of APEC. The latter mainly being, as agreed at the Bogor APEC summit of 1994, elimination of trade barriers among its members by an agreed to timeframe, ranging from 2010 to 2020.

It would appear that somewhere along the line, Malaysia's pragmatism came to the fore and there has been a noticeable change in tactics, if it could be so labelled. Since the mid-1990s, there has been hardly any mention of the EAEC by Malaysia's political leaders. Have they given up? The retort from Malaysia would perhaps be: "Has East Asia ceased to exist?"

"It is already happening even if it is not a forum *per se*. It is a fact that East Asian countries have been working together at various levels. That's what's important to us, even if the East Asian leaders don't work under a caucus," explains Rafidah. "We don't want to push any country to make a stand, black or white. Our objective is to have East Asian countries participate in meetings affecting East Asia. East Asia is a reality; no one can deny that. East Asia is internationally recognised as an entity. East Asia has its own status in the world. It is very logical to have an East Asian caucus. Eventually, one day, we will formalise our meetings with a declaration that we are now meeting as an East Asian caucus."

The Malaysian Minister of International Trade and Industry emphatically reiterates that Malaysia has not lost heart, far from it.

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Tenth Minister*

OVER AT the Trade Ministry, the sheer force of its tenth minister's personality has wrought irreversible changes in the ministry. Those who did not succumb to the temptation to run when Rafidah Aziz first arrived are glad that they did not. These are the ones who have adapted to her ways and are proud to be directly involved in a go-getting ministry, led by a high-profile minister who means business.

Civil servants have their own channels to check on their political bosses. Over at the Trade Ministry, the feedback is definitely positive. Locally, the business community respects her; she has proven to be one politician who delivers what she promises. Malaysia wants the private sector to be the engine of present and future growth. For this to be, private sector confidence is vital. The Minister makes sure that the private sector has access to her. In recent years, at least one channel has been instituted whereby the local investors are assured of having her undivided attention: the annual dialogues with the private sector, usually held during the first quarter of a year.

Private sector chambers of commerce and other related associations are invited to raise issues of concern to them for open discussion with not only MITI but also with the participation of other relevant ministries, departments and agencies. The private sector has certainly not allowed the invaluable opportunity to be heard and noted go to waste. Members of the private sector have been bringing up issues, literally by the scores, if not by the hundreds. The issues are wide-ranging; some of national relevance, others quite petty. They could be fiscal as well as non-fiscal, they could concern adequacy of essential infrastructure (such as utilities, electric power in particular) or disposal of toxic waste. Increasingly, in recent years, the supply and quality of labour is a pressing issue, of serious and worrying concern to practically all employers.

From the keen interest shown by members of the private sector and from feedback obtained after each dialogue, MITI officers are buoyed by the assurance that the dialogues are popular with the private sector, as effective channels giving members of the private sector the occasion to air their problems, to bring to the authorities' attention the obstacles and bottlenecks in their realisation of business goals. What is even more important to them is the reassurance that they can expect prompt follow-up to solve their problems, at least the pertinent ones identified as impedimental to private sector expansion and progress. The private sector has come to respect Rafidah's sincerity, as a minister who would do her level best to clear any obstructive bureaucracy.

It is her ministry's responsibility to work towards attaining national targets set for manufacturing and trade. Global competition has intensified; at the same time, new markets beckon. If Malaysia does not want to be left behind, then Malaysia has no choice but to not only pre-empt erosion of established markets and sources of investment flow, it needs also to forge new alliances, to find new niches for its exports. Much of the work must be done by the private sector itself, with a supportive government providing a conducive environment, competitive fiscal incentives and the indispensable infrastructure to service industries. The private sector is convinced that it can indeed count on MITI — on its Minister — for support.

The high regard for her locally is echoed further afield. Officers of MITI, officially or otherwise, are constantly monitoring. From Brussels to Beijing, there are praises aplenty over her professional competence, her grasp and understanding of global issues, in particular, those relevant to trade and investments; her persuasiveness in winning the doubters over to Malaysia's views and even more importantly, to appreciate Malaysia's strengths. Some Asians are however uncomfortable in her presence, mainly because of her forthrightness — "undiplomatic". But surprisingly, the Japanese seem quite charmed by her, despite Japanese notorious male chauvinism and traditional respect for age. "It's because of her intelligence and knowledge; the Japanese respect her," explains an MITI senior officer.

The Indonesians — the politicians and the bureaucrats — are in the minority group of detractors. MITI officers are aware that some Indonesians are quite put off by her. It seems that she has upset their ideas of propriety. They condemn her as *kurang ajar* (badly brought up with no manners). Is she going to mend her ways? Of course not. Her officers are convinced that as

and when she seems rude, it is most unlikely to be a diplomatic gaffe; more likely, it is done quite deliberately. "She can't stand them; they say 'yes' when they mean 'no'; they say 'maybe' when they mean 'yes'; they say anything but what they really mean," explains one MITI officer. "The Indonesians like to behave like a big brother, *abang*, treating Malaysia as a little brother, *adek* ... ugh, she just can't stand it." But the MITI officer is quick to add: "The business people in Indonesia like her straight talk."

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Despite today's global communications networks, there is still no substitute for the personal touch. Malaysians must continue to go to sources of investments and/or where markets are, to sell Malaysia as a worthy investment recipient and/or as a source of goods. If having a minister to lead gives a promotion mission a higher profile and therefore better returns, so be it. Rafidah would lead, and do her best in marketing Malaysia. Each year, before a new calendar year commences, MITI would have finalised the following year's missions, missions which would have the Minister's participation. In the early 1990s, promotion was kept up at the feverish pace of the late 1980s. MITI would line up around nine trade and investment missions a year ahead. In addition, there would be the occasions when the Trade Minister would be required to join the Prime Minister on the latter's official trips abroad.

In the second half of the decade of the 1990s, the number of trade and investment missions has been somewhat reduced. This could be due to refocusing of strategies and/or to accommodate other competing demands on the Minister's time. The annual number of official trade and investment missions now stands at five, straddling literally the globe.

In calendar year 1997, the Minister kicks off the year when she heads for Canada in May, followed by Taiwan, South Korea and Japan in the same month. End-May would see her in Laos, followed by Cambodia in early-June. Mid-June would take her to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Then there would be a ten-day visit to South America (Brazil, Chile and Argentina) in July. Come October, it would be Europe's turn when over the span of a week, she would cover Britain, Germany and Italy. This schedule is comparable to that for 1996 when the five trade and investment missions took her to the United States of America, Australia, East Europe (Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), Hongkong and Japan, rounding off the year with Germany and Switzerland.



Then there are the Prime Minister's official overseas visits when the Minister of International Trade and Industry is required to accompany. For instance, of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's several official trips overseas in 1996, Rafidah was present in New Zealand (March), Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia (April) and the Netherlands (December). In between, there would be the one-day trips to deliver opening remarks, keynote addresses or speeches at assorted business pow-wows around the globe.

These days, APEC summits and conferences are ranked as fixtures in her appointment diary. When Dr Mahathir declined to attend the APEC heads of government summit in Seattle, Washington, United States of America in November 1993, Rafidah was the highest-ranking Malaysian official present at that meeting. For the sixth APEC heads of government gathering in Bogor, Indonesia in November 1994, it was preceded by a ministerial meeting, involving the Trade Minister and her counterpart in Foreign Affairs. The respective ministers were also needed to stay on during the heads of government meeting that followed.

The year 1996 raised MITI the ministry and Rafidah Aziz its minister to an all-time high profile abroad; more importantly, prestige. Towards the tail-end of the year, the main events in her diary took her to another APEC meeting (November), this time in Manila, the Philippines. Her Prime Minister was there as Malaysia's head of government but the trade ministers of the eighteen member-nations of APEC were also gathered, not just to give their respective heads of government back-up but they had the specific daunting task of hammering out differences and chipping away intransigencies as they perceived them, in advance of the inaugural World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting scheduled to take place shortly in Singapore in December. Malaysia's views and stand were, typically, firmly enunciated and duly put on record before the APEC summit ended.

Before heading to Singapore for the meeting, early December saw Rafidah in the Netherlands, as a member of her Prime Minister's official delegation. She returned to Kuala Lumpur with just enough time to switch luggage, discarding the winter clothes for Europe for normal tropical wear for Singapore.

Malaysia's growing international status and increasingly as a leading spokescountry of the developing world were already widely known in the global community before the official opening of the five-day WTO meeting starting 9 December 1996. By then, Malaysia's International Trade and

Industry Minister too had become an increasingly known and respected personality, especially in the trade arena and among her global peers. Both her name and visage had become easily recognisable away from Malaysia, by non-Malaysians. Interest in her had risen above mere curiosity because of her gender. Five days later, when the inaugural meeting came to a successful close, international respect and regard for Rafidah Aziz of Malaysia would have taken a quantum step up.



## CHAPTER XIII

### *Iron Lady In Action*

“WE ARE professionals,” the Malaysian Trade Minister protests. And what’s more, she regards Charlene Barshefsky as a friend.

But the media prefers to see them in a different light: as adversaries, on opposite sides. Both women have impressed observers as highly articulate and exceptionally forceful — as such, they are labelled as straight-talking and no-nonsense country representatives who, to get their way, would not shy from taking a combative stand. From that process of induction, the media concludes that the twosome could best be described as the ‘iron ladies of trade’. In fact, the media has identified three ‘iron ladies of trade’, the third being China’s Wu Yi. However, the Chinese minister (for Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation) was not at the WTO meeting in Singapore. As far as Rafidah is concerned, Madam Wu is definitely not an opponent or adversary of any kind. Indeed, she sees her Chinese counterpart very much as a friend, someone she likes and enjoys talking to, even though it is conducted through an interpreter.

The contentious issues before the one hundred and twenty-eight official trade delegations to the WTO inaugural meeting did seem very much akin to the familiar developed versus developing, West versus East, North versus South divide. Even before the official opening of the meeting on 9 December 1996, the reputation of Malaysia’s Minister of International Trade and Industry — by then a veteran, having held that portfolio since May 1987 — and the stand taken by her country, were well known to those who have followed trade and investment issues, last enunciated at the November 1996 APEC summit. Less of a veteran but as the leader of the United States of America trade delegation, Ms Barshefsky had been subject to scrutiny and rating and of course, her country’s views and stand had been loudly trumpeted to the rest of the world.

The setting was thus irresistible. In that sea of dark-suited men, there were these two colourfully dressed women, complete with heels. There was Rafidah Aziz, in tailored *baju kurung* of bold floral print and skirt of the same fabric touching her ankles, revealing feet shod in fashionable high-heel court shoes; and there was Charlene Barshefsky in her three-piece ensemble, never seen without a brightly-patterned silk scarf round her neck, with skirt not quite reaching her knees and with feet in elegant high (higher) heels. While the media saw the two vocal and voluble (strident too?) women as uncompromising and confrontational in presenting their respective country's views and stands, in reality, as said, it was not so. At least not to the leader of the Malaysian delegation.

Rafidah thinks well of her American counterpart whom she first met when Ms Barshefsky was deputy to then US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor. "She's a very nice person. We get along very well. No, she's never too pushy." Such kindly thoughts probably would not make as interesting a copy but the media had to concur, willingly or grudgingly, that the two women contributed more than colour contrast to the scene; they brought life and substance to the proceedings. At the same time, the media stubbornly clung to their perception of the two iron ladies unyieldingly slugging contentious issue after issue in the civility and comfort of the superbly appointed conference rooms of Suntec City of Singapore.

The issues were very real. The concerns of all parties were also very real. But as Rafidah explains, contrary to media speculation and comments, Malaysia had at no time changed its position or stand. Malaysia's alleged 'reservations' over the proposed Information Technology Agreement (ITA) pursued vigorously and single-mindedly by the United States of America were made known to Ms Barshefsky in Manila in November, when much of the groundwork had been hammered out behind the scene, while heads of government of APEC member-countries held court. Malaysia was never against such an agreement, stresses Rafidah; it would be foolish to oppose measures from which Malaysia itself would be a direct beneficiary in the long run.

What Malaysia objected to rather robustly was to be held to a firm deadline, that it should make a definite commitment, come the WTO meeting in Singapore. Malaysia sought, nay, demanded 'flexibility'. "I explained this to Charlene in Subic Bay (the Philippines) and she understood," says Rafidah. While some members of the media, inadvertently or otherwise, portrayed

Malaysia as fickle over its participation — Malaysia was one of those under the ‘intending to join’ category at the end of the WTO meeting — in reality, as its Trade Minister would emphatically stress, that was not so. The media got it right where Malaysia’s stand on the irrelevancy of labour standards and human rights to trade and investment was concerned. Malaysia’s firm rejection of any such linkage was shared by many — probably by all those developing and less-developed countries whose main attraction to foreign investors has always been their substantially cheaper (and abundant) labour. It was reassuring that some members of the industrialised and rich club — the OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development) — were openly supportive of the stand of the developing world over this issue, agreeing that labour matters should rightly belong to other international agencies, most appropriately the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In her official opening address at the WTO, the Malaysian Trade Minister stated: “For Malaysia, we reject any attempt to link labour standards and other social clauses to trade and trade action, and we also reject any move to discuss and deliberate labour standards and other social clauses in the WTO.” She urged members of WTO to “reaffirm the primacy of the multilateral trading system”. Rafidah concluded by reiterating that the WTO “should focus on trade and the promotion of world trade. The ensuing economic growth resulting from enhanced trade of WTO members would assist to alleviate the social and socio-economic problems, including contributing towards better working conditions for their work force.” Earlier in her statement (distributed to the press in the original — as handwritten by the Minister herself) she had noted that despite global trade expansion, trade for forty-eight of the ‘least developed countries’ had deteriorated and their interest marginalised. Unlike human rights and labour standards, this would be an example of issues which should be of concern and relevance to a world body entrusted with overseeing global trade: “Certainly the WTO has the responsibility to assist these countries and ensure that they eventually benefit from the work programme of the WTO.”



Right from the start, even before the official opening of the WTO meeting on 9 December 1996, it became clear that Malaysia’s Trade Minister was expected to assume a larger role than merely representing her own country. The choice of Malaysia as spokesperson for others seemed logical. There were no contenders for the ‘post’. By then, Malaysia’s outspoken and



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CENTRE

Dear Colleague,

May I share some thoughts with you on our efforts at these sessions of SMC on the labour standards?

- ① Our unshakable & no compromise positions are :-
- labour standards belong in ILO
  - We reject use of any form of trade measure ["goat in hat"] to dictate/enforce labour standards
  - We don't want anyone to question our competitive advantages (low wages)
- ② We must not have the subject ever to be linked to trade.
- ③ We don't want the subject to be discussed in the WTO - ever.

But we have to worried  
How to get our position/stand  
become officially endorsed by WTO

*It was this hand-written three-page letter by the Malaysian Trade Minister that finally persuaded the G-15, India in particular, to stay united on the issue of 'human rights' at the WTO inaugural meeting in Singapore.*

*(Second and third pages reproduced on pages 98 and 100 respectively.)*

*(Courtesy of YB Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz)*

intrepid Prime Minister has already won much respect and admiration internationally — especially among developing countries, those without political clout, are economically feeble and therefore ‘voiceless’ — as one who would dare to speak out against the West, as a champion of the underdog, as an emerging leader of the Islamic world.<sup>1</sup> At the WTO meeting, the developing world turned to Malaysia’s International Trade and Industry Minister; they needed her to air their shared views and make clear their unequivocal stand over thorny issues like labour standards and investment policies. They were particularly worried that the bulldozers from the West might push these issues into the WTO declaration expected at the end of the Singapore meeting.

On the eve of the official opening, ten developing countries had gathered to share their views and seek a common stand to resist moves and issues they considered detrimental to their national interests and irrelevant to trade *per se*. This gathering expanded to that of the Group of Fifteen (G-15) of developing countries. Unanimously, Rafidah’s male colleagues in the developing world turned to her, to chair the group’s meeting. It was charming to witness her male colleagues’ willingness to listen to a woman, to have her represent them.

Even a relatively developed and savvy developing economy like fellow ASEAN member Thailand found relief in having Malaysia around to speak, to serve as the mouthpiece in stating in no uncertain terms the developing world’s shared concern and reservation over positions taken by the developed world. The moment was captured on film when Thailand’s Amnuay Viravan saw Rafidah Aziz as his saviour, at least for that moment when he was confronted (cornered?) by the media seeking Thailand’s views on issues of contention. The greenhorn (he having been assigned the Finance portfolio as well as appointed the Deputy Prime Minister of the Thai coalition government led by Chavalit Yongchaiyudh only that very month; before that, he had served under the previous government of Banharn Silpa-archa, also as Deputy Prime Minister, concurrently, as Foreign Minister) spotted his Malaysian counterpart walking by and hastened towards her, caught up with her and without further ado, raised a somewhat taken aback and amused Rafidah’s arm before the cameras and journalists and declared: “She speaks on behalf of everyone.”

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<sup>1</sup>In early 1997, the Malaysian Prime Minister was the recipient of the King Faisal International Prize for Service to Islam and the Jawaharlal Nehru International Understanding Award.





SINGAPORE  
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CENTRE

We need 2 things.

- 1) The right text — we have one (almost!)
- 2) We need the right place of endorsement

My feeling is that:

- a) We want WTC to endorse our position officially
- b) We want everyone to accept our position officially
- c) We want it at the official record of WTC decisions.

Therefore we must have it in the Declaration — why?

- Because:
- a) We are the successful in making the WTC (which includes EU, US!) to accept our stance
  - b) It becomes the WTC's (ie. everybody's) official stance

But it was of course a matter of expediency and common sense to have Rafidah as their spokesperson. As Rafidah tactfully remarks: "Some of the countries needed to be moved forward. Some of them simply could not get vocal enough. Some of them have bilateral problems with the West and could not speak up. But we have no problems. When Malaysia has bilateral problems with any country, we solve them bilaterally ... we don't take them to the international level. So any problems we have are not tied to our stand on international issues at all." Rafidah strove to align a clear common united stand out of the divergent views and varying expectations of the motley group, ranging from India to Indonesia, Sri Lanka to Haiti, Egypt to Zaire, Pakistan to Bangladesh. The vigilant press noticed 'fault lines' in what was supposed to be a united bloc. Rafidah conceded on the second day of the WTO meeting that there existed "a divergence of views" but she underscored, "not opposing views".

The main point of contention had to do with the contents of the declaration being drafted; in particular, whether 'labour standards' should be mentioned. Some countries, notably India, were vehemently against having 'labour standards' mentioned at all in the final declaration; the words were anathema, unmentionable, untouchable. The chair — Rafidah Aziz — could not go along with that. To her, it was imperative that there should be mention of labour standards in the final declaration, if only to state categorically it — labour standards — had no business on any WTO agenda. She explained, argued and cajoled deep into the nights, to get the intransigent to see logic but to no avail. Until her 'famous letter'. In her bold, big and legible scrawl, she wrote to her 'Dear Colleague' (mainly to India but also to any others still in doubt over the correct and sensible stand to take) to convince the letter-recipient that good common sense would dictate that the G-15's stand should be officially endorsed by the WTO in the declaration. Thus she wrote:

*My feeling is that:*

- (a) *We want WTO to endorse our position officially,*
- (b) *We want everyone to accept our position officially,*
- (c) *We want it on the official record of WTO decisions.*

*Therefore we must have it in the declaration. Why?*

- (a) *We are then successful in making the WTO*  
*(which included the EU, US!) to accept our stand,*
- (b) *It becomes the WTO's (ie everybody's) official stand.*


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 CENTRE

(3)

Putting the text in the "Chairman's Statement" only means we are saying :-

- a) There is no official WTC endorsement of our stand
- b) It is not an official record of WTC that we reject labour standards in WTC & that ILO is the competent body.
- c) The subject will come back again & again & we still have to reject & reject!

But once we have Declared (via the official Declaration) that our position is such & such, then we put it away for good!

I hope we can seize this opportunity to once & for all, declare that labour standards belong in ILO.

Thanks, Rafidah (NAIA4-1A)

She reiterated on the third page:

*... once we have declared (via the official declaration) that our position is such and such, then we put it away for good!*

In conclusion, she scrawled:

*I hope we can seize this opportunity to, once and for all, declare that labour standards belong in ILO.*

That did it. The G-15 did seize the opportunity. In the final WTO declaration, where labour standards are concerned, it states:

*... the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the competent body to deal with these standards.*

As Rafidah sees it, that put to rest 'labour standards' within the framework of the WTO. Her views are shared and echoed by fellow ASEAN trade ministers. Trade ministers of the developing world in general were overwhelmingly relieved by the outcome of the inaugural meeting. Industrialised countries like Germany and Britain which had steadfastly shared the developing world's stand on labour issues *vis-a-vis* the WTO agenda were similarly relieved.<sup>1</sup> Host-country Singapore's then Trade Minister Yeo Cheow Tong who chaired the WTO meeting, commented in his summation that the WTO would not acquire legal competence to undertake further work in relation to trade and labour standards.

Fully realising the importance of the ITA to the US trade delegation, Malaysia's Trade Minister had been unstinting in praise of her US counterpart, of the latter's diligence and perseverance in steering it through. The acting US Trade Representative, while jubilantly celebrating her success in getting the ITA endorsed (by twenty-eight key trading nations which collectively account for some 85 per cent of global trade in information technology) did not seem quite

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<sup>1</sup>WTO Singapore Ministerial Declaration of 14 December 1996 on 'core labour standards': '... The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the competent body to set and deal with these standards, and we affirm our support for its work in promoting them ... We reject the use of labour standards for protectionist purposes, and agree that the comparative advantage of countries, particularly low-wage developing countries, must in no way be put into question.'

gracious over the declaration's wording on labour issues; at least as interpreted by Yeo Cheow Tong in his closing statement. According to her, he had merely expressed "his own view" and that "there was no consensus on this and there is no legal basis to it". Interpretation of the declaration's wording may well be a source of future contention. But meanwhile, Rafidah took satisfaction in having succeeded in her own mission, in asserting in no uncertain terms Malaysia's stand, shared by the G-15 and a couple of developed nations, that the WTO should not be distracted from its trade agenda.

Observers could not but be reminded once again the contrast — here, a cultural aspect — between the East and West. In this instance, as demonstrated in the flamboyance and self-congratulatory posturing of the West versus the subdued manner of the East. While Charlene Barshefsky clinked champagne glasses before media cameras to celebrate her 'victory', while her delegation could not wait to trumpet to the world — through press conferences — that the President of the United States of America had personally telephoned to congratulate Ms Barshefsky on her achievement in getting the ITA endorsed, not so with her Malaysian counterpart. Rafidah's work was done. She left for home on the last evening of the five-day meeting. The following week, at the regular weekly Wednesday morning Cabinet meeting, she submitted her report to her Prime Minister. That's that.

But to the staff of MITI, especially those who had accompanied her to Singapore, their Minister's commanding performance and her standing among her peers at the international gathering of trade ministers is mere confirmation of what they have long known, that she is Malaysia's '*Minister Extraordinaire*'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Rafidah. *A Winning Formula – Foreword by Asmat Kamaludin*. MITI 1993. (This is a collection of Rafidah Aziz's speeches from the year 1987, when she first took over the Trade portfolio, to 1993. The staff of MITI had it published to mark their Minister's fiftieth birthday in 1993.)

## CHAPTER XIV

### *The Terror ...*

SHE IS the terror and the pride of MITI. Rafidah Aziz has long outlasted her predecessors at the Trade Ministry. Before her, the longest serving was Mohamed Khir Johari who was the political boss of the ministry twice (November 1959 to October 1962; June 1969 to January 1973), chalking up a total of over six years.

The civil service has its own grapevine. Thus, not surprisingly, Rafidah's reputation had preceded her, before she set foot in the ministry. Since then, she has indeed lived up to her rather intimidating reputation — as extremely demanding and impatient; and a perfectionist. It appears after several years of exposure to her, some MITI staff are still struggling "to get used to her style". There were those who bailed out, seeking refuge elsewhere in the civil service by requesting for transfer. A number of them did so very early on; it appeared just hearsay was enough to fell the chicken-hearted. There was at least one case of a relatively young and otherwise healthy male officer who found the going so stressful that he was hospitalised. "He wasn't even in the direct line of fire," recalls an amused woman officer.

The Minister's name tag identifies her as just 'Rafidah'.<sup>1</sup> The suggested informality should not lull any civil servant in her ministry into jumping to the foolish assumption that 'informal' meant that the wearer is undemanding or easy-going. But even the frightfully naive would not, of course, be so bold and brash as to address the Minister as 'Rafidah'. Local culture — inclusive of the civil service — sets its own tacit but very clear-cut lines on propriety. She is usually referred to as the '*Menteri*' (Malay for Minister) or

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<sup>1</sup>*Name-tagging of everyone in the public sector, from the Prime Minister down, became mandatory since Dr Mohamad Mahathir took charge of the Malaysian government.*

as 'YB' (*Yang Berhormat* — the Right Honourable) or as 'Datuk' (short for *Datuk Seri*, a title conferred on her).

In truth, Rafidah the Minister strikes terror in the less than efficient, the less than committed civil servants who have the temerity to submit less than perfect work to her. Nothing irks her more than sloppiness, whether it is in spelling or statistics or in the presentation of facts. To the Minister, to send in typed copies with spelling mistakes or to submit data without proper research reflects an indifference towards work. And she certainly does not mince words in conveying her reaction to such work to the guilty party. Civil servants cringe at her outbursts, at times in the presence of other staff members of the ministry; sometimes with junior colleagues as witnesses to the Minister's verbal censure. There have also been occasions when her staff received a ticking off in the presence of outsiders — like journalists.

The Minister is fully aware of her own temperament and temper, of her spontaneous response to shoddy work. When the work submitted is substandard, she considers it her responsibility to point this out to her staff. As she sees it, the staff member concerned might not even be aware that what was submitted was not professionally done. The Minister would do so, no matter what post the individual staffer holds in the office. Rafidah reasons that it is far better that the unacceptability of such work be pointed out to the staffer within MITI; hopefully, the person would take heed and improve. It is possible that some of those who have been found wanting may one day head other government units or departments. They would not be setting a good example to their own junior staff then. In turn, such performance would reflect on the whole civil service — and on the efficiency of the government. "It is easy to be complacent and not bother," says Rafidah. "But I don't believe in sweeping dirt under the carpet. I want the dirt removed." A suggestion that her vigorous outbursts are not only stressful to her staff but would also be harmful to her own health was 'pooh-poohed'. "It's good for everybody, including myself because then it is out of my system. I don't keep it within me."

She stresses: "I have no problems with people. I only have problems with attitude, with inefficiency and with excuses made for not getting things done. I believe in hard work." Typically, she finds procrastination abominable and inexcusable: "I believe in getting things done today and not put it off to another day." This reflects a deep-rooted conviction that as far as her work is concerned, there should be no loose ends around. Should she not be able to

continue her work the next day for whatever reason, it would not pose a dilemma to whoever that takes over.

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MITI is presently served by over five hundred civil servants, with just under five hundred with the ministry in Malaysia while another two dozen officers are on overseas posting. The top bureaucrat of the ministry is Asmat Kamaludin. He — the ‘cushion’ or buffer between the Minister and civil servants in the ministry — has witnessed countless sessions when the Minister lashed out at his subordinates. “Leaving aside the manner in which the reprimand is delivered” — he believes in most cases (90 per cent, he estimates) the civil servants have brought upon themselves the Minister’s wrath and tongue-lashing. Asmat Kamaludin the secretary-general — a post abbreviated in the Malaysian civil service as the KSU (*Ketua Setia Usaha*) — often finds himself lost for words in defence of his staff for he knows that in all honesty, the staff members’ work performance and attitude were quite indefensible in those instances. Hence, leaving aside bruised egos, the bureaucrats are forced by the facts before them that they have indeed given their Minister cause. Rafidah is indisputably a tough minister but objectively, she is also unanimously rated as a very fair person.

In the case of Noraina Amenyah binte Yahaya Uddin, she was transferred to MITI. She hailed from the Treasury and the transfer came as a promotion post. She of course had been forewarned by other civil servants (well-meaning or perhaps by those envious of her promotion?) of the formidable and overbearing minister over at MITI. But, she explains, her apprehension was not enough to deter her from taking up her promotion job, as the ministry’s director of administration and finance. (Since then, her portfolio has expanded to include information technology.) That transfer was in 1990. It did not take her long to grasp the fact that the pace of work at MITI was not what she was used to in her preceding eighteen years in the civil service. But, as with other staff members, it is difficult to gripe when the punishing pace the Minister herself keeps is there for all to note — and to emulate? “She works very hard and she makes us work very hard.” The administrator sighs and adds: “I wish I had her energy; I can’t catch up.”

She has often wondered if the Minister has special wonder drugs to keep her on the go from morning to evening and yet with energy left at the end of the day. The administrator confesses: “When the Minister opens her handbag



when I'm around. I try to peep and see whether there are pill-boxes in there." So far, no luck. On the occasions when she met Rafidah's mother, she would quiz Madam Rahimah, wondering if it had to do with the food Rafidah had as a child that has resulted in the adult Rafidah having a built-in seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy. But no luck on this front too.

In truth, the outwardly indefatigable Rafidah Aziz has her share of human frailty. She had long been a migraine sufferer. Fortunately, exhaustive tests succeeded in pinpointing the causes — mainly dietary — which would trigger those tortuous attacks. Since then, careful avoidance of the sources of problem (caffeine for one) has rewarded her with pain-free days. Back in the late-1970s, when she was still in her thirties, she had paid a price for her restlessness, for ignoring medical advice to take it easy after a minor operation. Lack of proper rest after the operation led to far more serious surgery: hysterectomy. But the unrepentant woman cheerfully declared after the operation: "Factory *sudah tutup* (closed)." In more recent years, her spinal discs popped. In 1996, there were two recurrences. Fortunately, both times, she was at home when she collapsed from the sheer agony of discs out of alignment. But traction put her back on her feet again, without any cutback in official engagements.

The Minister is, in Noraina's estimation, at least two steps ahead of everyone in the ministry. She herself is content if she could hang on to being just two steps behind. More than that would be terrible, if not disastrous, says Noraina, perhaps not quite seriously. Once the initial shock was absorbed, it did not take the administrator long to join the long queue of admirers. One of the first revelations Noraina received when she took up her MITI appointment: the Minister is hands-on in the management of the ministry. After overcoming the surprise of dealing directly with the Minister, Noraina is gleefully pleased with the system. "If you get your directive from the person who wants things done, there is no communication lost in the process. That makes it that much easier for me," says Noraina. She enthuses: "This system is very good."

It helps when the Minister knows what she wants and, notes Noraina, most of Rafidah's demands are justifiable and when the Minister is displeased and criticises, "most of the time she's right too". To some who are unused to Rafidah's ways, the fact that she gets involved in the running of the office would smack of interference. Or, as another senior civil servant puts it: "intimidating and stifling". This officer would also note that the Minister's hands-on approach tends to undermine the KSU's authority over the

ministry's civil servants. But to Noraina, Rafidah is the Minister and she can surely do as she pleases. "I'm rather taken in by Rafidah's style; this woman has the energy to get into everything ..."

'Everything' includes what one would expect of a minister as well as what no bureaucrat would have expected of a minister. MITI officers awakened to the unnerving fact that nothing escapes their Minister. The Minister who occupies the fifteenth floor of Block 10 in the Government Office Complex of Jalan Duta (with the ministry's Deputy Minister, KSU and two other secretaries (parliamentary and political) and their respective support staff sharing the floor space) makes sure that everyone and everything in the ministry are in tip-top condition, fit for inspection on any day, at any time, by anyone. "She even checks the *tandas* (lavatories) personally! From the fourteenth floor down; every single floor." It certainly made a difference. These days, the frightening prospect of the *Menteri* walking down the stairs and opening toilet doors, to both the *Lelaki* (Gents) and the *Perempuan* (Ladies), is more than enough to result in inspection-worthy *tandas* all year round in Block 10.

But Rafidah is neither an autocrat nor a dictator. The officers agree that she does listen; sometimes more willingly and patiently than at other times. Inevitably, there would be those who seek to convey their feelings and opinions through her private secretary. Often, these would be the hapless staffers who have been ticked off and felt they have been unjustly dealt with by the Minister. Yasmin admits to being approached now and then by unhappy and/or aggrieved staffers. Whether Yasmin makes an effective conduit or otherwise, she does have the advantage of proximity and access to the Minister; even more pertinent is of course her ability to read her boss's moods.

"Never bring up a subject when she (the Minister) is still angry with the person; wait for her to cool down. Maybe bring up the subject on another day," says the soft-spoken and mild-mannered private secretary who claims that Rafidah has never upset her in all her years as the Minister's private secretary. "Why would I get angry? She's my boss. I do what she wants done and when I don't know how to do something, she teaches me. I learn a lot from *Menteri*."

At MITI, there is an annual brain-storming session during which the Minister is literally all ears. The sessions are meant to give the floor to divisional and agency officers for a free flow of ideas and opinions on issues relating to

trade, industrial development and productivity before they become policies and work programmes. Junior officers are encouraged to have their say. Work programmes may well result from the views and suggestions aired at such sessions. As and when merit is perceived, follow-up action on such ideas is likely. On a different level, once a month, the Minister makes herself visible to and heard by all MITI staff. At this monthly assembly, she would speak to the staff. One senior officer notes: "She really can bring herself down to any level. She would use simple words and talk about everyday subjects, like why it is important to keep our environment clean and how to do that."

The consensus among MITI staff seems to be: you just can't be neutral or indifferent where their Minister is concerned — you react. You don't have to like her to respect and admire her; and all are agreed on her competence — "very competent". To those who have had exposure to other ministries and/or ministers before, they take obvious pride in working with Rafidah, in being identified with MITI. Repeatedly, it is said that she is "the best", that she could measure up against any standard, against any man or woman. Those who have had exposure to politicians and ministers of other countries are sincere in their opinion that she is on par with the best of any country. There is no shortage of people outside of MITI who seem to share the staff's assessment of their Minister. Even politicians outside of the National Front fold find her work attitude and capability hard to fault.

Lee Lam Thye, for years a Member of Parliament (1974 to 1990) representing the Democratic Action Party, a leading opposition party, acknowledges her competence. He observes objectively: "She knows her job and her abilities are indisputable. She is a capable Cabinet member and has made very positive contributions to her ministry and the country."



To Asmat Kamaludin (MITI's KSU since 1 May 1992), the Trade Ministry has been his one and only turf since he joined the civil service in 1966. To date, Rafidah, who was his classmate in the university, is his ninth minister. Does that make it difficult for him, that his political boss was his classmate during their Pantai Valley days, and a woman at that? He denies that it ever bothered him that his ninth minister would turn out to be a woman — "my wife is also a career woman". He adds that the fact that he already knew her had made it easier to develop the needed rapport for an effective work relationship. On campus as undergraduates attending the same course, it was

just not possible not to know each other. There was then a mere handful of them doing rural economics. However, everyone knew that Rafidah had already 'gone steady' and had a boy friend. But Rafidah would always sportingly join her classmates for a drink or a chat. Asmat remembers her as a very active undergraduate. Apart from being very hard-working in her studies, she was always willing to do volunteer work and was helping to run the university's co-operative store.

Rafidah the Cabinet minister remains very much that same ebullient classmate. He recalls that he was initially rather surprised when she opted for politics; he did not think she would care for politics — and politicking. But he has since changed his mind. He reckons that she has proven herself to be one of those in politics who are able to do what they want done without abandoning their principles or having to resort to political expediency.

When Asmat started working in the Trade Ministry, his first appointment was as an assistant controller of the then trade division.<sup>1</sup> At that level, he was too junior to have direct dealings with the incumbent minister. As he went up the civil service ladder, his exposure to the ministry's political boss of the day came. Much of the colonial style of ministerial aloofness lingered on in post-independent Malaysia, with the minister accepting 'advice' as tendered by the top civil servant of the ministry. Asmat is full of tact in his recall of the ministers he has served. They were all "nice"; a few "very nice"; an early one was "nice but very fierce". Diplomatically, he adds: "All of them were hard-working; Rafidah is **very** hard-working."

Of Rafidah's predecessors, Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Trade Minister left a strong impression on the ministry and on Asmat the civil servant. Asmat recalls that at first, he and his colleagues at the ministry were rather apprehensive when they learnt that in the wake of the global oil crisis, Dr Mahathir, who was then the Deputy Prime Minister, would take over the Trade and Industry portfolio from Hamzah Abu Samah. They were worried that he would be preoccupied trumpeting the rights of the *bumiputras*. But he turned out to be a down-to-earth and pragmatic person who made it clear that he wanted business to succeed. To the relief of the bureaucrats, they also found him a very fair person.

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<sup>1</sup>At that time, there were just three divisions in the ministry; the other two being industries and export commodities. The last was by far the most important. Later, the export commodities division would become the Ministry of Primary Industries.

As Asmat recalls, Dr Mahathir<sup>1</sup> was a man of strong conviction; he was very well informed, very well read, very fast and very impatient. While he was prepared to hear the other person out, unless there were very compelling reasons, it would be nigh impossible to persuade him to change his mind. More likely than not, he would convince the wavering instead: "He's utterly convincing, very persuasive with his reasons." But he was ever so impatient. Asmat remembers clearly the tense sessions the civil servants had with their Minister those days: petroleum prices were volatile and the ministry had to come up with policy papers. "Just two or three days after a meeting, Dr Mahathir would expect the papers to be ready for his approval!" To the bureaucrats, that sort of timeframe was preposterous. But doubtless no one would have had the temerity to tell the Minister that.

Rafidah seems to have identical traits with Dr Mahathir who steered the ministry for three-and-half years (January 1978 to July 1981). Asmat concurs. Rafidah's single-mindedness is very much like Dr Mahathir. Like Dr Mahathir (Prime Minister since July 1981), Rafidah is seen as totally committed and focused. She is also down-to-earth. Her approach to work: no nonsense and pragmatic. A classic example is the use of English.

Dr Mahathir has in recent years publicly acknowledged that the standard of English among Malaysians has eroded as a result of Malaysia's deliberate language policy. The various five-year development plans since independence would reiterate the national policy of implementing *Bahasa Malaysia*, the Malay language, as the main medium of instruction in schools as well as at the tertiary level; the use of English would be 'extended as a strong second language'. The phasing out of English as the main medium of instruction has been largely completed. With English relegated to the status of a second language, it is perhaps inevitable that the average young educated Malaysian's command of the English language is no longer on par with the earlier generations. But English is an international language of

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1969 general election, Dr Mahathir Mohamad lost his Kedah state seat, his criticism of his party superiors led to his expulsion by UMNO. In the aftermath of the 13 May 1969 racial riots and carnage — triggered, it seemed, by the victory parade of the Democratic Action Party in Kuala Lumpur, resulting in an official death count of one hundred and ninety-six — Dr Mahathir wrote 'The Malay Dilemma' in which he diagnosed the wrongs inflicted upon the Malays of the land; he also penned his prescription of the means to right the wrongs. For years, the book was not available in Malaysia.

communication, not least in diplomacy, commerce and trade. It just is not the same when one has to explain policies or give advice or present data through interpreters and translators.

MITI certainly cannot afford to wait for a crop of future graduates armed with an appropriate command and fluency of the English language to help market Malaysia and realise national goals. So it is a matter of making do with what there is. Everyone would agree that practice makes perfect. So does Rafidah. Her 'making the best of the resources at hand' attitude became in-house policy, quite a while before critical comments concerning the standard of English in the Malaysian civil service were aired publicly. At MITI, to make sure MITI staff can communicate effectively with non-Malaysians, the Minister decreed some years back that MITI is a speak-English, write-English ministry. The directive addresses all officers and covers verbal communication within the ministry and among colleagues; it also includes in-house written documents, be these memoranda or policy papers. As the policy is not meant to show up anyone's inadequacy, help is there: English classes are conducted in-house.



## CHAPTER XV

### ... & *The Pride*

IT CAME as marvellous news and a great relief to officers of the Trade Ministry to learn that Rafidah Aziz is one minister who writes her own speeches, be these in English or Malay. Quite often, armed with notes, she would just speak off-the-cuff. All she expects of her officers are 'talking points' and/or relevant statistics. Therein lies the catch.

The *Menteri* expects **new** data. But how to come up with fresh angles, statistics and indices when the Minister makes so many speeches a month? To illustrate her exasperation, Kalsom binte Abdul Rahman (formerly director of MITI's industrial development division, now chief executive officer of the Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation) points to factory openings. Several openings a month, mostly operations in electronics. "How to come up with interesting and fresh points? The statistics would be the same; at the most, merely an update of the previous month's. There would be no new trends to highlight." Repackaging stale facts and figures won't work. "She's too sharp. She'll catch you. It's a no-win situation."

Nevertheless, Kalsom's appreciation of Rafidah's virtues and strengths far outweighs the pressure and tension brought about by such a demanding boss. As an undergraduate studying rural economics at the University of Malaya, Rafidah Aziz the lecturer had already left a lasting impression on her. Kalsom sees Rafidah as very much the same person — "now more authoritative". The positive feedback from the private sector, both at home and abroad, is uplifting and reassuring to officers like Kalsom. Such feedback more than offsets the despair and desperation triggered by Rafidah's relentless and exacting demands.

Like Kalsom, Sidek bin Hasan's first exposure to Rafidah was as a student at the University of Malaya. As a civil servant, he too has had first-hand



experience preparing 'speech points' for Rafidah the Minister. Repeatedly, as he recalls his stints — fraught with anxiety and cold sweat — preparing those points for his Minister, he would say, rather theatrically: "I've the sinking feeling that the Minister would be better off without the notes from us." He airs the same feeling of haplessness and helplessness in the face of an alert and well read boss who no one in his/her right sense would try to fool. But he too is an admirer. "Difficult to find someone to match her," says the former deputy director of the international trade division, now posted to Washington DC, United States of America, as a minister-counsellor. Sidek agrees that the Minister is demanding but he adds, objectively: "She's objective."

As for Kalsom, despite the greatly increased work pressure and stress — "greatest now" — she seems to be enjoying the challenging work environment of the ministry and having a demanding minister. And she too exercises her objectivity by pointing out that it really would not be fair to blame overwork or greater pressure on the Minister: "Things are very different today from before; the expectations are vastly different and so the pace of work is very different now." It has been a perennial grouse among officers that there just are not enough staff members to share the workload, thus aggravating the tension and stress of meeting the Minister's deadlines. But by now they are also fully aware that the Minister would dismiss inadequate staff strength as an explanation or excuse for any delay in work completion or for shoddy work done.

To the staff of MITI, there is not an iota of doubt that Rafidah is a workaholic and a work-horse, a frightening one to many. Her long hours in the office when she is not abroad or out-station are notoriously well known; so too her disregard for the clock or official government office hours when there is urgent work to be done. She expects her staff to be flexible and adaptable. Staff members have on occasions been summoned for meetings starting at 7.30 in the morning. And of course, on Wednesdays when the Cabinet meets, senior staff members can forget about making plans or appointments for lunch or for the afternoon. As soon as she is back from the Cabinet meeting held at the Prime Minister's Office in Jalan Dato' Onn, it would be 'MITI Cabinet' meeting at the ministry. She would promptly brief her senior staff members of matters discussed in the Cabinet relevant to MITI, especially where follow-up action is required. This practice is appreciated by her staff: to be in the know with minimal time lapse. This perhaps compensates for having to forego their lunchbreak.

Officers who have accompanied her on overseas trips have learnt that as far as their Minister is concerned, there is no such luxury or entitlement as having a day off upon one's return from an overseas working trip. It is not by decree that one skips the day off but by example. The Minister would be in the office the very next morning, fresh as a daisy. A common refrain in MITI: "She doesn't have jet-lag! How to take the day off when you know your Minister is back at work?!" Thus, even though civil servants are entitled to a day off should they travel beyond a certain distance, MITI officers tend to forego that right.

It did not take the staff long to notice the softer side of her, as a caring and concerned boss, sometimes downright motherly. Noraina says that Rafidah is also the staff's counsellor. When the occasion arises, there would be advice and tips aplenty from the Minister on how to pursue a balanced lifestyle. She would at times go out of her way to look after her staff. Over the years, Sidek has accompanied his Minister on several promotion missions overseas; his exposure to and understanding of his Minister are primarily derived from such trips. She is no less demanding and exacting on such trips, possibly even more so. Officers who accompany her on missions are often on tenterhooks. Needless to say, the trips are anything but relaxing, nor, of course, are they meant to be. However, exposure to her on such trips would often open MITI officers' eyes to other facets of Rafidah, giving them a more rounded appreciation of her nature. In the process, it has converted the disgruntled and overworked officers into ardent and devoted fans of the Minister.

Sidek relates as illustration an incident on her China-Japan-Korea-Hongkong swing in July 1994. There was the day in Beijing when rescheduling of some meetings left the Malaysian delegation with an unexpected free afternoon. Rafidah asked Sidek if he had seen the Great Wall. Sidek hadn't, that being his first visit to China. The Minister offered to take him there, along with whoever else in the delegation who might be interested. Once the Minister expressed an interest to go on excursion, albeit unscheduled, the obliging hosts were more than pleased to arrange transport and provide security. The Minister had come unprepared for such field trips and did not have the proper attire and footwear with her. That of course was no deterrent. She dashed into the nearest shops and promptly outfitted herself with jeans and walking shoes. More — she also picked up a disposable camera to take photographs of her staff. Sidek's memory bank has various heart-warming incidents on other missions with the Minister to explain his high regard for his Minister.

Sidek mocks the assumption that civil servants are supposed to look after their political boss. "It is not the officers taking care of the Minister; it is the Minister who takes care of them," he says. Cryptically, he adds: "Officers fall ill; she doesn't." That of course is not quite true. For instance, no one could have failed to notice that the leader of the Malaysian business delegation — none other than the Minister herself — on an ASEAN tour in January-February 1994 was not quite her usual voluble self. She had in fact lost her voice before leaving Kuala Lumpur but she refused to be excused from the mission, despite having to 'croak' her way through the tour, including delivering a keynote address in Singapore. She just would not allow a few germs or bacteria to have the better of her and sabotage her commitments. Such dedication to duty is not lost on her staff.

There are numerous little incidents at home and abroad to either endear her to her staff or to enhance their respect for her, to take pride in their Minister as she goes about with exemplary but unassuming aplomb, holding high her country's flag. There is, for instance, the little incident in Chiangmai, Thailand, venue of the twenty-sixth ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) annual conference. Among the non-ASEAN political leaders (representing ASEAN's 'dialogue partners') who had gone to the AEM for discussion was Japan's then Minister of International Trade and Industry, Ryutaro Hashimoto. Following the conference, there was a meet-the-press session (on 24 September 1994) where both Rafidah Aziz and her Japanese counterpart were present. It started with an oft-heard question that had become practically obligatory at such conferences — the question was on the EAEC (East Asia Economic Caucus) — whether Japan supported the caucus as mooted and promoted by Malaysia. It was directed at the Japanese minister, who was seated on the Malaysian minister's left. Next day, Thai English press reported:

*Mr Hashimoto looked to his right at the fiery lady in bright orange. "That's the most frightening question, with this person sitting next to me," he said. "Are you trying to endanger my life?" Grinning broadly amid the laughter, Datuk Seri Rafidah pointed peremptorily at the microphone, insisting that Mr Hashimoto reply. (Bangkok Post: 25 September 1994)*

It was also reported that journalists sought out Malaysian officials accompanying the Malaysian minister, asking if it was the first time Malaysia had frightened Japan. Tongue-in-cheek, a Malaysian official replied that the Japanese "have always been afraid of us."

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Minister First. Lady Second*

NO ONE would dispute, certainly not in MITI, that gender is irrelevant to performance. The ministry has, of course, its share of male chauvinists; perhaps by now they are hiding in the closets or at least learnt to keep their opinion to themselves. Kalsom binte Abdul Rahman, the ministry's first female officer when she joined the civil service back in 1972, recalls remarks made by some male colleagues when news reached them some time in 1987 that a woman minister was headed their way. The male colleagues smirked: "You must be happy that a lady minister is coming ...". As far as Kalsom was concerned, she was neither excited nor agitated. She was familiar with Rafidah Aziz as a lecturer and she harboured no apprehension about Rafidah Aziz as a minister, despite Rafidah's already widely known formidable reputation.

Those who expected Rafidah — who, by 1987, had been leader of Wanita UMNO for three years — to trumpet women's rights, equal rights, proportional representation *et cetera* were in for disappointment. She makes it plainly clear that she does not believe in tokenism. She would not want a woman to be appointed to any post just to balance the sex ratio. She is not at all perturbed that there are far more male officers in her ministry than female. At last count, out of eleven senior officers (one secretary-general, two deputies secretary-general, seven directors and one administrator) only two are women. (Overall, female staff would account for less than a quarter of total staff.) But as more women attain tertiary qualification and join the officer ranks in the civil service, so too would the number of female officers in MITI go up. As for Kalsom, it certainly was not by design that when she was director of industrial development, one-half of the six officers supervised by her then were women.

However, much as the Minister decries the relevance of gender, it is nigh impossible for her to overcome deeply ingrained chauvinism and double

standards. The fair-minded staff members of MITI note that Rafidah evokes strong feelings among the staff, especially those — be they men or women — who had experienced embarrassment or humiliation when they were at the receiving end of her reprimand, no matter how warranted the censure had been. In all likelihood, to those reprimanded (and their sympathisers), the Minister's fiery style of expression would have been more easily accepted had she been a man.

So far, the ministry has always been assigned a male deputy minister. There was Chua Jui Meng (of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the National Front); after the 1995 general election, he was promoted to full minister (of Health) in the Cabinet. His replacement at MITI is Kerk Choo Ting (of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (PGRM), a junior partner of the coalition government). If there were any problems between the Minister and her deputy, they do not arise from gender. The Minister disclaims having problems with whosoever that occupies the deputy seat and the incumbent deputy echoes her assessment of their working relationship. They work well as a team, says the Johor-born Deputy Minister who obtained his Law degree in Singapore in 1972 and practised law in Malaysia from 1973 till 1990. Deputy national president of the PGRM since 1989, Kerk had held the deputy post over at the Ministry of Works from 1990 till his reassignment to MITI in 1995. To the Deputy Minister, a marked feature of the work at MITI is the diversity of issues which comes under its purview.

There is a clear-cut division of labour to ensure there is no duplication of effort. For example, the Deputy takes care of issues like shipping, matters pertaining to imports, some areas of international trading and public complaints are handled by him. UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) issues too come under the Deputy's direct supervision. The Deputy does his share of official travel, either to lead trade delegations or to accompany the Prime Minister. There is a standing rule that as far as practical, the Minister and her Deputy should not be away from Kuala Lumpur at the same time.

Right from the start, Rafidah has made it crystal clear that she is first and foremost a minister; it so happens that this minister is a woman. She does not care to be addressed or referred to as 'Lady Minister'. (The English language has spared users of the language a feminine version of the word 'minister' — a 'ministress'?) To date, women political leaders at the Cabinet level are still a rarity, at home and abroad. In Malaysia, since the 1980s, there

are two women in the Cabinet: barely a tenth of the total number of Cabinet posts. (But that number is in itself a record. There were never more than that at any time in the past. There are also two junior ministers. All the women are of Wanita UMNO.) Overseas, even in the developed first world, female ministers remain very much in the minority. Wherever Rafidah goes, she stands out. Her ease in the company of the male specie was very much evident when she was a child. As an adult, she remains as unaffected by the gender of her company. If her gender bothers the company she is in — well, it's hardly her worry.

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As and when she is invited to speak on the topic of women, she would drive home her conviction that gender is not an issue, that being female should not be considered a handicap by the employer nor by the woman concerned. She dismisses as a myth, the belief — a fixation — that the woman is the weaker sex, hence there are many things she could not possibly do or manage. In an address delivered in Singapore to launch a conference on *Roles of Women and Society* (20 May 1991) she asserted: "Show me a weak woman and I will tell you she is merely a weak human who happens to be a woman." Continuing, she charged: "She is not representative of her species. Any woman ... who says that women are of the weaker sex can just speak for herself. She has no right to embellish the rest of us."

On balancing careers, she identified the bone of contention, that society is not completely ready to see men take on their share of duties on the home-front. It is society's preconceived notions of the place of women that has led to career women having guilt feelings when they pursue productive activities outside of the home. Rafidah contended that the guilt would deepen when society is of the conclusion that, among other things: the working mother breeds a broken family and home and the working mother cannot give quality time to the children. "In short, there are those in society who attribute much of the undoing of the human race to the working woman."

Lest she be misunderstood, she underscored the paramount importance of the family. A career, to be meaningful and enriching, should not be pursued without due consideration of a married woman's family: "The success a woman achieves in her career must be a success that her family can share. That success can thus reinforce the family."

She suggested, quite seriously, that there be a survey of male chief executive officers of the private sector, to gauge how the families fared when such men reached the top without reference to family and home but merely to satisfy the men's need to succeed *per se*. It should surprise no one when she refuted the traditional view, that the male is the head of the household. That to her is just yet another myth. But she clarified: "Pursuing a career does not make the woman more important in the home or marriage, nor does it diminish the man's role, provided of course the woman does not let her career and status get the better of her." Using herself as an example, she asked rhetorically: "Can you imagine what my family life would be if I allowed myself to be treated like a minister at home and in the family? And if I were crazy enough to demand such treatment?"

To a gathering in Kuala Lumpur discussing women in banking,<sup>1</sup> she remarked: "In today's world, economic opportunities do not fall into stereotype gender categorisations. It is the era of survival of the fittest, of the matching of competitive skills and capabilities. It is the age of the innovative and efficient entrepreneur, regardless of gender, where the right kind of investment at the right time can give rise to a new venture with promise of profit. Thus, any form of discrimination, whether direct or implied, against women, in their pursuit of profitable economic endeavour is totally unacceptable and is out of sync with the needs of changing times and situations."

To a conference delving into the role of Muslim women in national development,<sup>2</sup> she drew upon the 'Laws of Allah' to drive home the point that women are equal to men. She saw little purpose in meeting after meeting deliberating and agonising over the constraints that are supposed to hinder women's full integration in society and in the mainstream of a nation's development. If there were obstacles, these are man-made, aggravated by negative attitudes and perceptions of women themselves, that they are second-rate. She would not put the entire blame on men. She believed women themselves should share the blame for nurturing the young under their charge into perpetuating the misconception that women are "not only weaker and less capable but also not to be taken as equals". It is primarily ignorance that has led women into accepting a passive role in society: "Thus, women may lose out simply because of ignorance of what Islam enables them to do."

<sup>1</sup>8 June 1990: *Regional Meeting of Women's World Banking, Asia and Pacific*

<sup>2</sup>8 January 1990: *Muslim Women in National Development — Progress and Prospects*

It can hardly escape notice and comment that among the handful of countries in the world where women have attained the apex of political leadership are Muslim nations. This seems to contradict popular perception that Islamic countries are generally more 'conservative', where male chauvinism is still well entrenched, where women have yet to enjoy 'equal rights'. And yet, in Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto became the country's first woman premier in 1988. (She would be ousted in 1990, then be re-elected to power in 1993 to serve as prime minister for a second time but in November 1996, once again, she would be ousted.) Over in Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia made history to become the country's first woman premier in 1991. (In 1996, she lost the post to another woman, Sheikh Hasina Wajed.)

Would Malaysia accept a woman premier? It is hardly surprising that Rafidah's response is an unhesitant "yes". She underscores once again that gender is really immaterial, so long as the person is capable and able. "The majority of Malaysians should be mature enough to accept that, if the person has the calibre." But she is against any woman coming into power by default, through political connections, through politically active male family members, and perhaps as a consequence of tragic ends to the politically active male family members. That would of course disqualify just about every present and past female political leader — of whatever religious faith or order — in South and South-east Asia.

To date, it is a non-issue in Malaysia. But the composition of the Cabinet — specifically, its gender ratio — has been made an 'issue' of every now and then, though not stridently. (Perhaps more of a talking point than a serious issue.) Ever so often, some Wanita UMNO members (and sometimes others too) would refer to UMNO membership as a reference point. For long, about one-half of UMNO's total membership (presently given as 2.4 million) would be women. The obvious contention would be: the same proportion of Cabinet portfolios held by the National Front's dominant political party, UMNO, of more than a dozen Cabinet posts, should be 'manned' by Wanita UMNO women. This line of (specious?) logic has been aired off and on for years but so far, it does not seem to have serious advocates. Perhaps Malaysian women in general and Wanita UMNO in particular, are basically pragmatic and realistic.

Turning to the role played by Wanita UMNO, some detractors have been critical that Wanita UMNO has remained 'passive'. (Perhaps they see Wanita UMNO, ideally, as the counterpart of Pemuda UMNO?) They urge a more effective role for the women's wing of UMNO; they believe Wanita UMNO



should flex its muscles, more as a lobbying group than merely serve as a 'stabiliser'. These are but oft-heard grouses and observations. How strongly such detractors feel about these matters and how much sympathy and support they could garner would be hard to assess. Clearly, they have been unable to convince Wanita's sixth chief (since the women's wing's founding), Rafidah Aziz, the urgency and validity of such concerns, or the need to delve into them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Wanita UMNO's roots go back to the post-Japanese Occupation 1940s, soon after the founding of UMNO in 1946. It was then known as Jabatan Kaum Ibu; this evolved into Pergerakan Kaum Ibu UMNO and later, Pergerakan Wanita UMNO (popularly referred to as Wanita UMNO). The group's leaders before Rafidah Aziz were: Putih Mariah Ibrahim Rashid (1946 to 1950); Zainun Sulaiman (1950 to 1953); Khadijah Sidek (1954 to 1956); Fatimah Hashim (1956 to 1972); and Aishah Ghani (1972 to 1984).

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Setback Or Respite?*

**N**OBODY, no political analysts at home or abroad, no media commentators, not even her severest detractors and critics, had expected Rafidah Aziz to lose the presidency of Wanita UMNO in the October 1996 party elections.

By then she had held the post for twelve years, ever since Aishah Ghani decided to step aside for the younger Rafidah Aziz to steer the women's movement in 1984. All through the years, from the founding and fledgling days of Wanita — then as Kaum Ibu — the women were exemplarily genteel and patient, where quiet consensus and decorum prevailed, when the leadership of the movement passed from one generation to the next without a murmur of dissent from the ground.

Then came 1996 and the challenge. As said, the top post of Wanita had never been contested although three years earlier, a divisional head (Azizah Samad of Seputeh) had made an attempt to do so. Some said she was not serious. In any case, she withdrew her challenge. Three years later, although it had been the decision of Wanita UMNO's executive committee (exco) that the top two posts of Wanita should not be contested, and although Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman (six years younger than Rafidah, she holds a doctorate from the United States of America in sociology) was herself an exco member (since 1986), she chose to ignore that injunction and offered herself as a 'choice'. After registering herself as a candidate at the end of April 1996, Dr Siti Zaharah was quoted by the press as saying: "I believe it is time the Wanita leadership struggles are based on leadership characteristics pioneered by UMNO leaders in efforts to achieve Vision 2020." Barring misquotation, her statement served to confuse and befuddle, rather than enlighten.

Not surprisingly, there was much speculation over the motives behind Dr Siti Zaharah's confrontational approach. Some saw personal vendetta as an

obvious reason. Earlier, Rafidah as Wanita president had decided to 'democratise' the movement's appointments. Thus, instead of the president (herself) personally selecting Wanita heads for each state, she introduced election in each state. She had rationalised that to allow each state to elect its own head, the popularly chosen head would command greater support of divisional leaders as well as at the grassroot level. Dr Siti Zaharah had held the post of head of Pahang state since 1986. But when the post was made an elective one, she lost it. Hence, the suggested vendetta.

On a non-personal level, there was talk of Rafidah neglecting the women who looked up to her for leadership. There were vague references to either her lack of an agenda or her tardiness in delivering the agenda. What exactly was on this agenda or what agenda was sought was never quite clear to the impartial bemused observers. References to 'unresolved issues' and 'pressing concerns' gave no clearer indication as to how Rafidah had failed the women. However, there were other more specific complaints reported that she as Wanita chief had been expected to see to greater representation of women in the political arena as well as more women at higher decision-making levels. (Translated as: More Cabinet posts for Wanita UMNO and more women in the upper ranks of the civil service?) It was also mentioned that as Wanita chief, she was perceived as having 'marginalised' issues like domestic violence, the injustices faced by women in the *Syariah* courts (Islamic religious courts) and prostitution. (Of course, the critics could not but be aware that Wanita UMNO's second Cabinet post, held by Zaleha Ismail, was (and is) that of National Unity and Social Development.)

Did she alienate herself from the ground? In a country with a substantial non-urban population, when the typical profile of a Wanita UMNO member is still that of a not too highly educated housewife whose greatest concern is likely to be wholly family oriented such as on balancing the household budget, in getting the children to school and pass term examinations, in ensuring her marriage stays intact — Rafidah's world would be totally out of the world to such a woman. Rafidah's delivery and performance as the country's Minister of International Trade and Industry, no matter how laudable and praise-worthy, is perhaps of only cursory interest, if at all, to the grassroots, whose feelings have been more than peeved by perceived neglect, for dismissing their concerns as *remeh-temeh* (trivial). Or so some have rationalised as the cause of Rafidah's loss of ground support. Perhaps there was some pertinence in this line of analysis. Rafidah's

infamous impatience could well be misinterpreted by those who do not know her well as indifference or even arrogance. But was it enough to cost her her post?

At the political level, the grapevine was rife on Rafidah having brought the challenge (then the downfall) on herself for being too much of a maverick. Rafidah's attitude towards work has not changed since she took up her political career. She remains steadfast that a job is a job; with the job comes her specific assignment. Her 'boss' is the Prime Minister; he delegates to her her assignment and she would do her utmost to execute the task before her, to the best of her ability. In turn, she is answerable to the Prime Minister. She would not be distracted from her focus. She has always abhorred factionalism or anything that causes divisiveness. Thus, except for the rare occasions, she would conscientiously refrain from identifying herself with anyone's camp or side or team.

To some observers, she is a marked person because of her resilience and insulation from internal party politics. To compound her 'failing' would be her retention of a senior Cabinet post and the Prime Minister's trust. (Or because Dr Mahathir Mohamad's faith in her seems undiminished over the years, her Cabinet post has remained securely hers.) Those who vie in vain for attention and promotion would find her a thorn, a source of pain and distress that would not go away. They — and some of them are said to be mighty powerful and/or have influential behind-the-scene manoeuvrers — would very much want to diminish her stature, particularly at home. Politics is hardly the arena to find altruism at work. Malaysia is obviously no exception.

Insiders are certain that the 'money politics' which caused Dr Mahathir tears of despair in public has also tainted Wanita UMNO. Indeed, before the October 1996 balloting, Rafidah had gone public that there was evidence of such malpractice ahead of the scheduled Wanita UMNO elections. If so, it is anybody's guess as to what extent the outcome of voting had been swayed by money.

With the wisdom of hindsight, all too many observers of the Malaysian political scene came forth to 'predict' — after the event — that Rafidah had it coming, that the writing was on the wall. However, none has come forward to explain why on the evening when the votes were counted, why it had taken such an inordinately long while for officials to tally the ballots.

There were after all just a few hundred votes to count. "A primary schoolchild could have done that manually in far less time," comments a non-UMNO observer. (But that evening, it had taken so long that representatives of several states reportedly lodged their protests.) When the final tally was announced, Rafidah heard that she had lost to her challenger by just twenty-seven votes, having, it appeared, garnered two hundred and forty-four votes against Dr Siti Zaharah's two hundred and seventy-one votes.

Rafidah would be less than truthful if she were to dismiss the outcome as a non-event, if she denied disappointment. Although not quite devastated, she was indeed upset. She felt hurt and let down. But ever the pragmatist and fatalist — a guiding maxim of her life: 'let tomorrow take care of itself'; a variation of it being 'tomorrow may never come' — she soon put that aside and was back in her office the very next day. It was work as usual. However, some people were quick to taunt and sneer for they believed that Rafidah's days were numbered and that she would soon be out of a job. But they soon found that the last laugh did not belong to them.

With the presidency of Wanita UMNO comes an UMNO vice-presidency. (Similarly with Pemuda UMNO.) This post would naturally go to the new Wanita president. But the president of UMNO, Dr Mahathir, has the prerogative of appointing a certain number people to the party's twenty-five-strong Supreme Council, of which Rafidah had been a member since 1974. This time round, Dr Mahathir demonstrated his faith in her by reappointing her to it.

Up till then, Dr Siti Zaharah was a junior minister (Deputy Minister of Health). Her supporters were impatiently waiting for a Cabinet reshuffle by Dr Mahathir, as the Prime Minister would sometimes do after party elections. There was expectation in some quarters that the new president of Wanita UMNO would be given a promotion, from deputy minister to full minister. (All past incumbent presidents held Cabinet posts. However, it is not a stated right or entitlement. With Rafidah, she was already a Cabinet minister (Public Enterprises) when she took over the presidency of Wanita back in 1984.) Indeed, some spoke confidently of Dr Siti Zaharah taking over the Trade Ministry from Rafidah. If Dr Siti Zaharah herself held such expectations, then she would be sorely disappointed. Rafidah remains entrenched, at least for now, in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet. The future can take care of itself.

The immediate future soon came up with an ironic twist, underscoring the fickleness of 'public opinion'. Before eventful 1996 had become history, the grapevine was once again abuzz with the latest hot rumours, that Rafidah would soon be out of Trade. But the twist was: she would lose her Trade portfolio not because she had failed to deliver professionally or had let her Prime Minister (and her country) down badly, but because she was due for 'promotion' — as just reward for her excellent performance as International Trade and Industry Minister! (Her 'promotion' would elevate her to Finance, so it was widely and loudly whispered.) The 'know-alls' of Kuala Lumpur were certain that the Prime Minister would make an announcement after *Ramadan*. Well, that *Ramadan* ended on 8 February 1997.

Typically, Rafidah refuses to respond to 'rumours'. (The Trade Ministry receives its fair share of junk mail, mostly unsigned circulars — 'flying letters' — offering 'the latest and the hottest' on personalities, mainly political but not exclusively so. Rafidah's standing instruction to her private secretary is to sieve out all such mail. The Minister has made it very clear that she has no wish to sight such trash, no matter how 'authoritative' and/or titillating.) As far as she is concerned, with the yoke of grassroot nitty-gritties off her, she felt recharged, that she could now focus on the demands of her ministerial work. There is so much more to be done.

## POSTSCRIPT

The new president of Wanita UMNO, Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, reclaimed the right to personally select and appoint each state's Wanita UMNO head. Rafidah Aziz, who had been head of Perak state (while holding office as president of Wanita UMNO), was replaced by someone else. Observers note that other Wanita UMNO activists known to have been Rafidah's supporters were all removed from office.

Six months after the October 1996 election, observers are kept waiting to see proof of the new president's new directions and leadership prowess. Meanwhile, the seemingly rudderless movement appears to have had an adverse impact on the outcome of a January 1997 by-election in Kelantan, an opposition-held state.

Queries concerning Wanita UMNO funds are publicly aired. UMNO's party treasurer, Daim Zainuddin, has been asked to investigate insinuations concerning the withdrawal and/or closure of a 1.8 million ringgit account. When asked, Rafidah states that she welcomes the investigation as she too would like to get to the bottom of this 'mystery'!

Observers wonder whether queries concerning the movement's funds and complaints of lack of cooperation from the 'old guards' of Wanita UMNO are mere tactics to distract critics from the to date lackadaisical performance of the new Wanita UMNO chief.

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*In early June 1997, Anwar Ibrahim, as Acting Prime Minister, announced that two Wanita UMNO members had unlawfully transferred the money out of a Wanita UMNO account without Rafidah's knowledge. The two were identified as Siti Zainab Abu Bakar and Habshah Osman, officials of Wanita UMNO exco under Rafidah's presidency. Siti Zainab, Deputy Minister of Primary Industries, was sacked but would remain as Wakil Rakyat (for Tebrau), Habshah, a senator, retained her Senate seat. Both were suspended from UMNO.*

## EPILOGUE

### *Sans Malice*

“I’M WITHOUT malice,” says Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz disarmingly.

There is consensus over that disclaimer. Her infamous impatience is notoriously well known. That is often reflected in her verbal outbursts. She can be curt, snappy, critical, biting; even sardonic and sarcastic — it all depends on the specific provocation. If she seems merciless in her tongue-lashing, there would unfailingly be reason behind it. As civil servants who have worked with her could verify, she would never do so without cause. No matter how strongly worded her reprimand or rebuke, it is neither capricious nor ever malicious. Once the trigger of her temper explosion has been set right or removed, she would be back to her jovial genial self. She harbours no illwill.

But when she is on the receiving end of malice, she is unapologetically unforgiving: “I can’t forgive a person who does it on purpose; never.”

Since its independence, Malaysia has had its share of political scandals; in particular, politicians whose integrity failed to measure up under scrutiny. But ever since Rafidah took political office more than a score years ago, she had maintained a meticulously scrubbed and clean image. Even her severest critics could not fault her where honesty and integrity were concerned. Then came the unexpected ‘revelations’ during the trial of a former civil servant of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.

One of the measures introduced under the New Economic Policy (officially launched in 1971, in the wake of 13 May 1969 racial riots) has been designed to enable the country’s *bumiputras* (indigenous people, mainly ethnic Malay) access to a bigger share of the equity pie so as to reflect more equitably the group’s political weight. Till then, although the *bumiputras* accounted for about one-half of the total population, the group owned about four per cent of the total corporate equity. To correct the then prevailing imbalance in equity ownership, reservation of a portion of shares (usually not less than 30 per cent) of companies going public or when public companies expand their capital base, for distribution among approved



*bumiputras* became mandatory. 'Bumiputras' include institutions (trusts, foundations, co-operatives, companies) as well as individuals (such as company directors and legal advisers who have had dealings with the company going public or expanding). It is said that the guidelines to share allocations are "very detailed". Such allocations are highly popular and eagerly taken up as the shares would mostly, if not always, be priced at a substantial discount to their market value.

For some years now, MITI has been the main administrator and distributor of such reserved shares. Other than shares of organisations in the financial sector (banks and insurance firms) and privatised corporations, the ministry would be the one to allocate the shares, mainly of companies in the industrial sector. The ex-MITI officer (his MITI appointment had been that of an 'assistant director') on trial had been directly in charge of processing applications for shares handled by MITI. There existed (still does) a committee chaired by the Minister herself which would give the applications approval or otherwise.

The ex-officer's alleged dishonesty came to light by chance for it was perchance when a new officer of the ministry spotted a name she recognised as someone who had been allocated a certain number of shares of a company in 1993. An innocent remark by her to the family of the supposed recipient of the shares led to a thorough investigation: for the person who, in MITI's files, had been allocated shares had, in fact, had his application officially rejected. In-house investigation unearthed evidence against the officer who had been directly in charge of processing such applications. He was sacked and charged for cheating the government. Some time in 1994, his trial commenced.

It raised no eyebrows when the Minister was called as a witness. After all, her ministry was directly responsible for the share allocations and she personally chaired the committee in charge of such allocations. However, what the defence had in mind was certainly not what the Minister had expected; presumably, the prosecution too was caught off guard. It was "out of the blue" that the defence's line of questioning switched to the allocation of shares in 1993 of an unrelated company: when, among the recipients of shares allocated was the Minister's son-in-law, one of the lawyers involved in assisting that company to go public. (There would be yet another company named under similar circumstances.) If the defence tactics were meant to divert attention from the accused, it certainly worked.

The trial of an ex-civil servant, whose name few would recognise or bother to remember took on a totally different dimension when focus was shifted to a minister known to one and all.

Overnight, Rafidah's integrity came under a dark cloud. For the media, local and regional, it provided sensational copies and generated considerable editorial acreage. For the Malaysian opposition, it would naturally and understandably exact political capital out of it. But there have been all too many others, possibly members of UMNO among them, who have been quick to condemn and write Rafidah off. When the Prime Minister named his new Cabinet in May 1995 — the Anti-Corruption Agency's investigation of Rafidah's handling of share allocations was still on-going then — he did not see cause to replace her, doubtless to the disappointment of not a few.

While 'rivals' for Cabinet posting (perhaps among them, there were those particularly keen on the Trade portfolio) found it politic to keep their counsel private, others were not so reticent. There was, for example, an academic who seemed ready to not only air his views but pass judgement. His bias was clearly evident in remarks attributed to him (*Asiaweek*: 19 May 1995 issue). Not only did he express disappointment over then fifty-one year old Rafidah's retention of the Trade portfolio, he went on to say: "She's an old work-horse who has had her day." More — he had apparently also decided who should have been given her post (a former *Menteri Besar* of Johor) and where her retirement pasture should be (South Africa, as ambassador). Whatever his political bend, it is regrettable that a person identified as an 'academic' should be so judgemental.

Since then, the Anti-Corruption Agency has completed its investigation. In July 1996, the Malaysian Prime Minister told Parliament that Rafidah Aziz, Minister of International Trade and Industry, has been cleared of any wrongdoing in the matter of share allocations to her son-in-law. That is that. But it would be naive indeed to believe it would be as easy to restore Rafidah's whiter-than-white image.

While Rafidah is doubtless relieved that the episode is fading into history, her anger has not quite subsided. The whole ugly experience does not seem to have cowered her or rendered her less fiery. She certainly does not mince her words in reaction to insinuations concerning her integrity. She emphatically reiterates that she has always been clean and she has never abused her powers as a minister: "Never." She has consistently sought

'transparency' in whatever she does; as far as possible, she would seek to remove 'discretion'. It was so earlier at Finance, then at Public Enterprises. And so it has been with Trade.

The redoubtable UMNO veteran points out wryly: "There was no committee before. It was I who instituted a committee to look into applications for shares. I wanted transparency. If I were corrupt, I wouldn't need to do it in front of a committee."





### AUTHOR

IN THE 1960s, Singapore-born ZHOU MEI and Perak-born RAFIDAH AZIZ were colleagues, as Tutors in Economics at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. In the 1970s, Rafidah Aziz opted for a political career. By then, Zhou Mei had gone into journalism. As a journalist, she kept track of her former colleague's career and had on several occasions featured Rafidah Aziz in the print media; the very first interview appeared as a cover story in the April 1979 issue of *Malaysian Business* when Rafidah Aziz was a Deputy Minister of Finance and when the Author was Editor of the monthly journal.

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