

Malaysian Diplomats: Our Stories



Volume 1

MALAYSIAN DIPLOMATS: *Our Stories*

Volume 1

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing-In-Publication Data

Malaysian diplomats : our stories. Volume 1

ISBN 978-983-2220-31-2

1. Diplomatic and consular service, Malaysia.
2. Ambassadors—Malaysia.
3. Diplomats—Malaysia.

351.0922595

Published by

Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

Jalan Wisma Putra

50460 Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia

Visit us at www.idfr.gov.my

E-mail us at info@idfr.gov.my

Copyright © 2011 Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

CONTENTS

<i>Message</i>	v
<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
The Art of 'Fried Banana Diplomacy' <i>Abdul Samad Othman</i>	11
Lessons We Learn Along the Way <i>Hamidon Ali</i>	19
In the Land of <i>Terangga</i> <i>Jamaiyah M. Yusof</i>	27
My Days with the Tunku <i>Khor Eng Hee</i>	37
The Chinks in the Iron Curtain <i>Lily Zachariah</i>	51
An Adventurer's Tales of Laos <i>Md. Daud M. Yusoff</i>	61
Oxford Days – An Early Beginning of a Diplomat <i>Mohd. Yusof Ahmad</i>	77
Assignment Iraq <i>K.N. Nadarajah</i>	87
The 'People Power' Revolution <i>Tengku Idriss Ibrahim</i>	97
Some Linguistic and Other Hazards of a Diplomat's Life <i>Ting Wen Lian</i>	111

Message

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

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

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

These are... their stories.

Dato' Sri Anifah Aman

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

Dato' Ku Jaafar Ku Shaari

Director General

Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Malaysia

Acknowledgements

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

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

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

Thank you.

Rahimah Yeop
Editor

The Art of 'Fried Banana Diplomacy'

Abdul Samad Othman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

whispered, "*TYT, ini tugas sangat susah*" ("Your Excellency, this is a difficult task"). He speaks Malay quite well.

At 4.00 p.m., we sent Pak Lah and his entourage off at Sayoun Airport, Hadramout for his return trip to Malaysia on the executive jet. Again, he reminded me about the fried bananas for the President and I could only say, "*Insyallah Dato' Seri*" ("God Willing Dato' Seri"). A few days later, while we were busy dealing with the post-visit follow-up, I asked my then Personal Assistant, Daud, who would be going to Jeddah for monthly courier duty, to buy *pisang tanduk* (a type of banana similar to plantains) to be served to President Saleh. He bought a bunch of *pisang abu* (a smaller type of banana) instead.

Then, at around 6.30 p.m. on 27 March 2007 Yemeni time, I received a phone call from Ms. Ho May Yong, the Prime Minister's Special Officer from Kuala Lumpur. I was shocked to hear her voice asking me to immediately call Dato' Thajuddeen, who was in Riyadh for the Arab Summit, as the Prime Minister wanted to talk to me urgently. Dato' Thajuddeen did not even say a word to me when I called him; instead, he passed the phone directly to Pak Lah. "Ambassador, I just want to tell you that I am disappointed that you have not sent *pisang goreng* to the President as yet. President Saleh has just told me today here in Riyadh." What a shock to receive a complaint right from the Prime Minister himself, while in the background, I could hear Dato' Seri Syed Hamid laughing.

After listening to my explanation, Pak Lah then asked me whether I had presented my Letter of Credence, which unfortunately by that time I had not yet done so. "*Susah Arab ni*," he remarked. But he still insisted that I send the *pisang goreng* at the earliest possible time. My son Asyraf was shocked when I told him that I had just spoken to the Prime Minister who asked me about *pisang goreng*.

“What? You called the Prime Minister all the way just to talk about *pisang goreng*, Pa? You guys must be crazy. As if you have nothing else to talk about!” “Yes,” I said, “I am almost crazy trying to get this difficult task done, simply because it is impossible to get an appointment to send *pisang goreng* to the Presidential Palace!”

Weeks passed before I finally presented my Letter of Credence to President Ali Abdullah Saleh on 8 April 2007, but with only five minutes allotted to each of us – the nine newly accredited ambassadors – it was impossible for me to ask about sending the *pisang goreng* and I missed the golden opportunity. Unlike in other parts of the world, foreign ambassadors in Yemen are very seldom able to meet the President.

After a trip to Jeddah in May 2007, I was taken ill and was resting at home when I received a phone call from Mr. Fadel Abdul Khaliq, the Chief of Protocol of the Presidential Palace. He asked me to come to his office immediately to discuss something important. Without thinking twice, I went right away to his office together with my deputy, Edi Irwan. At his office, Mr. Khaliq told me that he wanted to discuss the arrangement of preparing *pisang goreng* for the President. He then asked me for the *pisang goreng* recipe. Acting as if I was the famous Chef Wan, I gave him the recipe. Realising that it was quite simple to prepare, the Chief of Protocol then suggested that the Chef at the Sheraton Hotel who always cooked for the President would be asked to try it out. Both of us would then go over to the Sheraton for a tasting session first the following week, before giving it to the President. I agreed and was happy to think that my mission would soon be accomplished.

Weeks passed and I decided to call Mr. Khaliq only to be told that we need not worry about it anymore since the President had already tasted *pisang goreng* and he apologised for not informing me about it earlier. Mr. Khaliq said that the Chef at the Sheraton

knew *pisang goreng* very well and they had decided to cook it for the President. When I met the Chief at Protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs two days later, he too confirmed that President Saleh had tried the fried bananas. One fine morning, I received a phone call from Ambassador Abdelnasser Munibari in Kuala Lumpur and he too confirmed that the President had indeed tasted the *pisang goreng* prepared by the Sheraton's chef. Abdelnasser jokingly told me that I could sleep well now as the most difficult task given by the Prime Minister had successfully been accomplished. I thanked him half-heartedly as I could not be really sure of the truth.

Ambassador Munibari finally returned home for good in early September 2007 after finishing his tour of duty as the Yemeni Ambassador in Malaysia. As is the usual practice, he had paid a farewell call on Prime Minister Abdullah before he left Kuala Lumpur. He was happy to brief Pak Lah that his President had tasted the *pisang goreng* that Pak Lah had asked the Malaysian Ambassador in Yemen to send him. The Prime Minister was very happy when he heard that President Saleh was finally able to taste *pisang goreng* with the Yemeni honey.

One cannot imagine how the 'fried banana diplomacy' will be recorded in Malaysia-Yemen bilateral relations. It took much effort and I was mentally exhausted going through the whole episode. One must realise that not only good management skills and perfect coordination are very important for an ambassador, but he must also have the flexibility in carrying out duties entrusted to him. An ambassador must be able to adjust to any possibilities and conditions. Sometimes, he or she would need to do something that, to an ordinary person, no ambassador would be asked to do. My '*pisang goreng* mission' was just a unique example of how an ambassador could even be given a very strange task and responsibility and yet be able to deliver under any circumstances.

From then on, I would always smile every time I saw bananas at any store around Sana'a throughout my tour of duty in this beautiful and interesting Land of the Queen of Sheba.

Ambassador Abdul Samad Othman's last posting was as Ambassador of Malaysia to the Republic of Yemen. Prior to that, he worked at Malaysian Missions in China, Indonesia, Chile, Venezuela and Switzerland at various capacities. He was appointed as Advisor to SIRIM's technical team to prepare the Framework of the Industrial Development Strategy for Yemen which was funded by the Government of Malaysia. He is now the Undersecretary of the Africa Division at the Ministry.

Lessons We Learned Along the Way

Hamidon Ali

AS ONE JOURNEYS through life, one not only acquires experience but learns many new things as well. Such was my experience as a diplomat. When I started my career at Wisma Putra in 1974, there was no such thing as a course in the Malaysian Civil Service that prepared diplomats for the journey that they were about to embark upon. There was no proper guidance on how a diplomat had to conduct his life abroad. I recalled vividly the Public Service Commission (PSC) interviewer asking me whether I would want to remain and continue to work at Wisma Putra. I had, by the time of the interview, spent several months on attachment at Wisma Putra and I answered in the affirmative, so that I was duly confirmed in the post by PSC. I also recalled clearly the day when I first reported to the Public Service Department (PSD) upon returning to Malaysia after completing my studies in Australia. I was told that there existed many vacant posts in Wisma Putra and that I ought to try the Foreign Service. I had said yes to this too, and all without knowing what the job really entailed. From the little I had seen after brief encounters with Malaysian High Commission officials when

they visited us students in Melbourne or when we, the students, visited Canberra, I was not certain whether that was the kind of job that I would want to do.

I was trained in Social Anthropology and I was well prepared to work with the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people) or any other ethnic groups in Malaysia. With this background, I was not the least surprised when I was assigned to the Supply and Finance Division as a debutant Assistant Secretary. My first duty was to reply letters or to forward requests from our Missions abroad to the Treasury; and the way to perform this task was simply to follow the many examples in the various files. When I had some doubts, I had to consult the more senior colleagues like Hsu King Bee or Mohd Yusof Zain, both of whom were housed in the same office room. Frankly, I did not learn very much then, such as the many things one needed to know and be equipped in order to be a good diplomat.

My first break was a three-month assignment as a delegate to the 30th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). I was assigned to cover the Sixth Committee (the committee in charge of legal matters) and the learning process was still short of my expectations. I was, however, made to understand more on how multilateral work was conducted. I learned from my peers how to use the Department of Public Information's press releases to supplement the daily reports that I had to file at the Mission at the end of the day, as well as what to say during the 'morning prayers' the next morning.

My first real assignment was Paris in early 1978. It was not by chance that I was posted there. I had, during those formative years as a diplomat, gone to the *Alliance Française* after office hours to study French twice a week. It was a worthwhile way to fully use my time to avoid the traffic jams along the Federal Highway and