A UN CHRONICLE

1988–1998

RAZALI ISMAIL
with
Sharifah Shifa al-Attas

A UN CHRONICLE

1988–1998

A UN CHRONICLE

1988–1998

RAZALI ISMAIL

with

Sharifah Shifa al-Attas

Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)
Kuala Lumpur, 2014

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Razali Ismail, Tan Sri, 1939-
A UN CHRONICLE (1988-1998) / RAZALI ISMAIL with Sharifah Shifa al-Attas.
ISBN 978-983-2220-32-9
1. United Nations--Officials and employees.
2. United Nations. General Assembly. 3. Diplomats--Malaysia--Biography.
4. Ambassadors--Malaysia--Biography. 5. Diplomatic and consular service, Malaysian. 6. Malaysia--Foreign relations. I. Al-Attas, Sharifah Shifa.
II. Institut Diplomasi dan Hubungan Luar Negeri Malaysia.
III. United Nations. IV. Title.
923.2595

Published by
Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Jalan Wisma Putra
50460 Kuala Lumpur
MALAYSIA

Visit us at www.idfr.gov.my

© Razali Ismail, Sharifah Shifa al-Attas

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in Malaysia

Although our material wealth and our standard of living compare very favourably with those of many nations in the world today, as a small nation, our basic strength lies not in these material things, but in the moral character and purposes of our people....We suggest that, to a small nation such as ours, as to all small nations, it is in the moral strength of our people that we shall find the inspiration to shoulder the responsibility which membership in the United Nations bestows upon us."

Excerpt from inaugural speech of
Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman
at the UNGA, New York, 17 September 1957

CONTENTS

1 An Introduction Of Sorts 1

2 The Security Council: Getting In 13

3 Presiding The General Assembly 29

4 Un-making A Secretary-General 45

5 Searching For A New Paradigm 61

6 Reform 95

7 Helping Palestine: Attempts In The Security Council (1989-1990) 125

8 Palestine: A Permanent Responsibility 169

9 The Gulf War 217

10 Bosnia 265

11 Remembering Rio 305

12 Myanmar 327

13 Last Words—Of A Sort 349

Index 369

1

AN INTRODUCTION OF SORTS

I like words. Many times I've been overawed by the imagery and symbolism of words. Words can disturb you. Words have power, force. Before digitalization and television, all of us depended on the mental eye that could shape words into unforgettable scenes in our minds, deep as well as lurid.

Some years ago after my retirement from the foreign ministry, I thought I had lost the ability to effectively string words together, and that realization scared me deeply. It seemed like an atrophy of the mind, like a kind of death. This is one of the reasons I have begun this chronicle, to keep the words alive in me.

It is possible that I chose a career in the foreign ministry because I believed that it dealt with words and ideas that can be powerful. But the foreign ministry, I found out later, could not get away from being also a place for the protocol-minded and the specious—a caricaturization that isn't all true but which nevertheless affected the serious intent of powerful words and ideas.

At university, I revelled over Wordsworth, Yeats and the metaphysical poets—Donne and Marvell, with sophistry of words, usually directed at a woman. If you're going to write great poetry, the choice is either ecclesiastical love or profane love, I suppose. I am still riveted by Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', how he would take a hundred years to bed his mistress "*had we but world enough, and time*". The dependence on words to stir up potent imageries has stayed with me through the years so that even if I were not competent enough to write a book or a novel,

lacking courage or purpose, yet the sheer power of words in some of the great novels and books that I have read continue to reverberate.

The United Nations is a veritable world of words—torrents of them; you could get lost in them, persuaded by speeches that reverberate, or turned off by boring ones, stymied by the voluminous documents. But like pilgrims we sit, as it were, at the altar of the UN and words, like mantras, suffuse us. Archibald MacLeish's words[1] from the preamble he wrote for the UN Charter, though, remain eloquent with the promise that the UN should "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". What imageries, what horrors of war inspired MacLeish to pen those eternal words? And yet the story of the UN is a story of how it has actually tried and failed, many times over, to do this.

Words can get out of hand; you go deeper and deeper into your psyche with them, like demons tunneling inside you. It is quite scary. Meditation, mysticism, exorcism, séances—the human soul has grappled with these afflictions. You cannot run away from words; they dig deeper and deeper until you are forced to deal with them. No wonder Truman Capote said that finishing a book is just like you took a child out in the back yard and shot it. Capote had his demons! Such is the power of words. In my ten years at the UN, what percentage of frivolous words did I utter, like a dilettante, and what words of serious intent did I commit to as an honourable representative of my country, I wonder. Cervantes said that the pen is the tongue of the mind. How many times has the UN 'mind' contributed to serving the truth and no other, speaking loudest and clearest?

That balmy summer afternoon of 1988 when I arrived in New York immediately put me into the New York state of mind. New York dazzled me, with its wide, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks and a virtual absence of colonial baggage and relics. No Nelson column here, no Arc de Triomphe, glorification of imperialistic conquests and the subjugation of people that one cannot avoid seeing in many cities of Europe. On that

[1] Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982) was Librarian of Congress from 1939 to 1944, assistant director of the Office of War Information in 1942, Assistant Secretary of State from 1944 to 1945, and chair of the U.S. delegation to the founding conference of UNESCO in 1945. See: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/macleish/life.htm

first morning when I entered the gates of the UN, with all those national flags fluttering like free spirits borne on the wind, I was of a mixed mind—here I was, a senior Malaysian official, with a huge responsibility to do the best for his country, but still, a neophyte with exalted expectations. All the years earlier I had been a bilateralist, never taking multilateralism all that seriously. I thought I did quite well as the Malaysian ambassador to India but providence delivered me to the UN tasked with an open-ended agenda of Malaysia's international activism. Little did I imagine that I would spend ten years at the United Nations.

And little did I imagine the amount of words those years would involve. All those statements, speeches, resolutions—revolutions, they were, revolutions of the mind for how the words were belabored over, analyzed, taken apart then reconstructed anew in such painstaking manner as to be beyond merely process—this was battle, a war of words, fought in the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Human Rights Council, Economic and Social Council, etc; sometimes reaching all the way up to the 38th floor, the Secretary-General's office. But the peripatetic delegates at the General Assembly raged on without missing a beat, outdoing each other with their words.

Some words were misnomers—like the word 'debate'. In the General Assembly the word debate is a *non sequitur*, as heads of state and government, kings and presidents, merely read from prepared texts; these are but national statements that are not questioned and certainly not debated. Some leaders made impact—the American President, being the second speaker at the beginning of every general debate, and having the political weightage of his country, was listened to raptly, even by the adversaries of the US. Lesser mortals performed at even keel at best, though there have been exceptions like Dr Mahathir, who utilized the 'tide in the affairs of men' to espouse virtually a doctrine of international activism, championing issues of the marginalized South. The General Assembly so-called debates at the plenary continue their course unchanged, bedeviling would-be reformists who dare to offer changes.

The Security Council is equally hobbled; perhaps even more so than the General Assembly, because we are dealing with a structure that is skewed towards the five permanent members who would fight to the death over any attempt to reduce their powers and privileges. These are the five

countries that have a scriptured influence on the 38th floor, the office of the Secretary-General. Their influence actually permeates every part of the United Nations, even in the contracts procurement sections.

I remember there were times when officials on the 38th floor would produce reports that never saw the light of day because the Americans or one of the P5 didn't want them to come out. Usually this was the case with reports on Israel and their occupation. China has every year successfully nipped in the bud any effort to consider the membership of Taiwan because nobody would want to incur the wrath and retaliation of China, barring a few small countries in the Pacific bribed by Taiwan. Each permanent member had baggage—Russia had Chechnya, China had Tibet, the US too, and these were holy grounds not to be violated.

Perhaps because of it's structure, the Security Council, more than the General Assembly, was the main arena for true battle. This happened mostly through the informal meetings—these were more convincingly called debates and indeed were the only meetings approximating debate, for the prize at the informals was a resolution—before any resolutions are passed, it has to go through the many, many meetings of the informal council. It is here that important decisions are actually made. Sometimes these debates, going until two or three in the morning, would end without any consensus on a draft resolution and the whole session would come to naught. Such is decision-making at the UN—it is a harried, inefficient and often undemocratic method of arriving at decisions because these must serve a consensus to become acceptable. This was a bane of governments, of bureaucracy, but in reality, at least at the UN and certainly in the Security Council, consensus decision-making is a tool by which powerful members block whatever decisions they dislike from gaining ground. It's almost as bad as the veto, in a way, or perhaps even worse in that consensus decision-making is a weapon that lurks behind the mask of a benign name whereas the veto identifies itself immediately for the villain that it is. Many a time I lamented in the Council that the rule of the majority was the true meaning of international consensus but this idea was crushed beneath the pressure for unanimity.

The Malaysian delegation made the most of the informal meetings of the Security Council, to exert as much influence as possible. For a beginner we took to those meetings well. But first, permission had to

be gained from the P5 to hold the meeting in the first place. You cannot have any meeting of the Security Council, formal or informal, without the consent of the Permanent Five. Usually the US, UK and France, in that order, would prepare a draft and then hand it to Russia and China. Once the P5 had had their prior agreement only then would they come to the rest of us. But then we rallied utilizing the non-aligned caucus of the non-aligned countries who are members of the Security Council for a term, and this group then would work with the bigger non-aligned which operated on the sidelines of every important Security Council meeting. There was also the Arab League, which at any one time would only have one or two members in the Security Council, so they would normally align themselves with the non-aligned caucus. There was an Arab League discussion group also but this was not as influential as the non-aligned caucus.

During Malaysia's time in the Security Council and within the two stints I had presiding the Council—in January 1989 and then again in July 1990, special interest and possibly notoriety was injected into the deliberations of the Council by the ambassadors of Colombia, Cuba, Yemen[2], and Malaysia, noticeably coalescing views and positions, mostly in defiance of pressures from the P5. The four countries were labeled in the corridors of the UN as the Gang of Four, like the Gang of Four in China during the Cultural Revolution. It happened without planning but imperceptibly it became evident that important issues had to run the gauntlet to secure the support of the Gang of Four. The Americans called us 'The Recalcitrant Four' and the *New York Times* picked that up. I didn't mind the labeling; I enjoyed that notoriety and there was a buzz in the UN over our combined activities and converging positions.

If the Americans, when they put out a draft already cleared by the P5, thought that the draft would find easy passage, they were taken aback by the fierce scrutiny of the Gang of Four. We were not doctrinal obstructionists but we thought we were representing the many with the ready support of the non-aligned group. There were times when we managed to change certain substantive points. The most compelling moment was during the first Gulf War, when the US cajoled, pressured and promised, and then came the vote; Malaysia and Colombia voted for,

[2] They were, respectively, Enrique Penalosa, Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada, and Abdalla Saleh Al-Ashtal.

Cuba and Yemen abstained. Such are the travails of being a member of the Security Council.

I thought we each served our respective countries well, sometimes going beyond the brief but in furtherance of dexterity—these would be solutions requiring calculations beyond national positions. There was posture but there was content too. Alarcon, the Cuban ambassador, once walked into a meeting of the Council with *Alice in Wonderland* under his arm. Somehow he had found something apt from there to quote! He was spot on with the power of his words.

I thought The Gang put up a better show than the Chinese, a fact I used to point out to them. The Russians were still reeling from the breakup of the Soviet Union. I cajoled them for a stronger position on the issues to raise their profile. The Chinese sought recourse to being enigmatic, seemingly sympathetic to the non-aligned group and the aspirations of the developing world but bottom line would vote like a big power with others. Malaysia appeared brash; I gave the impression, falsely, that I had the ear of Dr Mahathir, leveraging on the adulation accorded to the latter in the South. Diplomacy is also about the illusory application of reach and influence in the UN world.

Inevitably, there are regrets and recriminatory, sleepless moments. Less than a month after Malaysia left the Security Council in 1991 I was on a trip to Malaysia and playing golf with an American who informed me that the US, under the UN-sanctioned decision that Malaysia, then a member of the Security Council, had voted for, had heavily bombed Iraq. I was horrified over the massive bombing and felt betrayed that US Secretary of State James Baker, barely two months previously, had assured me that the US wouldn't go overboard if we agreed to their resolution allowing for the use of force to get Iraq out of Kuwait. But that is precisely what they did. Had I expected the Americans to keep their word and apply restraint? I cannot be that naive. It's not only prime ministers but most people too have a public and a private persona. Sometimes you get all mixed up. I knew as a practitioner that all the Americans wanted was Malaysia's nod, and having got that, they would go all the way. But even hardened practitioners can get befuddled with mixed reasoning. After all, Saddam Hussein would not budge from Kuwait and he had committed aggression, however you spliced it. And Baker, our foreign minister, even

me, we slugged it out within our structures—cajoled, promised—but all that sophistry of words and grandstanding could not prevent the slaughter and the debacle because Saddam believed he could invade Kuwait and get away with it and the elder Bush was hell-bent on destroying Saddam.

At that private meeting[3] in a room at a hangar of the Los Angeles airport, the foreign minister, Redzuan[4] and I had listened to Baker say that if we supported the resolution[5] the US would bring about a solution to Palestine; he virtually said that the US would deliver Palestine. Baker was very good; he knew the Malaysians and our weakness for Palestine, an issue that had bedeviled the UN for decades and that must have the comprehensive intervention of the US. So he said it very convincingly and the foreign minister, Redzuan and I were all attracted to that promise. In essence, a hardened diplomat like me believed Baker. The foreign minister asked me to phone Dr Mahathir and I did, and the deed was done.

Not good enough! People have demanded of me, afterward, you actually *believed* Baker and all that he promised? But diplomacy isn't all about belief! It's about sensing an opportunity that something like this can happen on an issue that you are so close to, and for us it was Palestine.[6]

Is diplomacy opportunism then, you ask? No, not in a negative sense. It is the opportunity to unravel something, and quite often requiring the right words and timing. You can do a whole lot of things with the right words in the right places, though not in the superficial sense. The whole battle that the Malaysian delegation had on Palestine particularly had to deal with words that would make small incremental gains for Palestine but certainly, among the practitioners of diplomacy, these gains were recognized as significant.

For a while after that I hesitated to fly on our national carrier MAS because I got queried often from people demanding to know why Malaysia had to agree to resolution 678 authorizing the use of force to get Iraq out

---

[3] The meeting took place on 24 November 1990. I elaborate more on this in the chapter on the Gulf War.
[4] Foreign Minister Abu Hassan Omar; my deputy in New York, Redzuan Kushairi.
[5] Resolution 678 authorizing the use of force to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait.
[6] Since the issue of Palestine existed throughout my years at the UN, I have dealt with it in this book in two chapters, in order to truly capture all that Malaysia was doing with regard to finding solutions to it.

of Kuwait. But the truth is that Baker was a good diplomat who effectively negotiated that resolution for his country, and we wanted to believe that we could seize the opportunity to turn the corner on Palestine.

When I was sent to New York, it was only supposed to be brief—two or three years is what I had assumed. I was in line to be Secretary-General of our foreign ministry, but New York ended up being ten years. Much of those ten years was spent trying to find, as it were, consensus, and I discovered that this was a fascinating process. I enjoyed that whole process of trying to find out what worked, searching for that consensus, that moment when someone finally says, Okay, I'll stick with you because it's you, Raz. The search for that moment of 'capitulation' is a thrilling challenge, an adventure I thoroughly enjoyed in an almost predatory kind of way. And when it ended with those words, Okay, I'll stick with you, I found, amazingly, that they always did. They stuck to their word. Finding consensus at the UN is really a fascinating subject to ponder.

Back to the present—I was in Patna, Bihar, recently, listening to someone describing, enraptured, temples with all their complex configurations and etchings—one small part of me was bored but another part of me was mesmerized by the idea of how you can spend the rest of your life looking at the small picture and celebrating the infinite details that were special for you, without which your reason for being would be lost. I remembered my United Nations involvement, how we worked feverishly, not losing sight of detail and complexity. We are no different in Malaysia—we may be dynamic with a broad-sweep view of things but there must be a group that can calibrate details and intricacies, like the Swiss with watches, or in engineering or enmassing wealth. And that means having depth, delving deeper, welcoming those demons tunneling further and further into our psyche to discover the intricacies embedded in us. But in the pell-mell flight to modernization many countries, including ours, may not want to go back into that. Malaysia has this choice. If we don't do it, if we are satisfied simply with mass-production, including the mass-production of ideas, where we feed the minds of our young with ideas without depth, then we will hardly advance. Wisma Putra would need to ponder over this.

Recently I had reason to be concerned about this all over again when a Harvard professor informed me that my country does not allow

archaeological excavations of pre-Islamic sites here. He must be mistaken, was all I could think. If we do indeed discourage archaeological research in sites that date before Islam, I can only conclude that such a misguided position could only have been fueled by fear—fear of that depth, those demons again, that detail and color that so truly characterize our rich and diverse nation. We must be adroit enough to be able to deal both with change and with the effects of change, whatever these may be, and still accept into mainstream all the legacies of our diverse past.

We must strive to improve the caliber of our officers at Wisma Putra, the quality of which has declined over the years. A proper education is a big part of this, and by education I don't simply mean training because training is something we do to animals, trained to perform a task well. I'm talking about education in the sense of instilling the proper values and virtues into a human being that makes them think and act rationally and ethically and that causes them to accept responsibility and accountability for the things that they do, both good as well as bad.[7]

Today, confronting some of the words I've generated, what I have had to do in coming up with this book, I am taken aback at them. In fact, I am actually quite astonished that I was thinking all that. I am someone who lives in real time; I'm not sentimental that way so after a while I would have deadened feelings about things that have happened, although revisiting all those words has forced me to face some things, deal with them in a way I may not have done before. I even think, looking at some of the things I said and wrote, that they were pretty good!

I've styled this book as a chronicle partly because I wanted, for the most part, to follow the natural order of the events as they happened so as to allow both for easier reading and for a better understanding of the

[7] It was recently pointed out to me that education should be understood as involving an ethical-moral-spiritual dimension that is developed in the intellect, and not simply involving 'training' only, which in modern Arabic has a more limited meaning of 'to nurture, rear or cause to mature or grow up'. The former is thus restricted to the education of man alone whereas the latter can extend to other species. In Islamic education, true education was traditionally more correctly meant to involve the nurturing of *adab* and not just the rearing of man or *tarbiyah*, which is in modern times wrongly used to refer to education today. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, ISTAC, 1993), especially pages 151–52 and Note 123.

issues, although not in too strict a fashion. I found, having unearthed a wealth of documents, letters, files—words, thousands of them, buried so deep in time—that to release them all might prompt the reader either to say the book is, like Shakespeare wrote in one of his sonnets, simply a "chronicle of wasted time" or become drowned in them altogether. The scissors are a writer's best tool and so I have cut and snipped as much as I felt was possible in order to have what remains still useful material for the reader. Nevertheless, I have preferred the chronicle over other perhaps more personal narrative styles because what I genuinely wish to leave behind is a record and history of sorts that can be read and appreciated now as well as in the future. While my chronicle isn't meant to represent exhaustive and academic research on the issues I have dealt with, I have tried to write the chapters with lucidity, offering my interpretations in chronicling the events and issues as I lived them. In this sense, although there may well indeed be lapses of fact, offering as I do my opinion on the themes I tackle, yet what I have set down is indeed a first-person account—my own—corroborated by numerous documentation both personal as well as official, and thus I hope to offer a valuable reference source—there is detailed material I have chronicled and original documents and sources hitherto not examined. Shifa and I have delved a great deal into the archives at Wisma Putra—something that has not been looked into before—and have referred as well to the many files and documents I kept myself of my time at the UN, including two notebooks I kept during my presidencies of the Security Council and the General Assembly.

What I hope my chronicle will reveal isn't just the story of my ten years at the UN but Malaysia's foray in the world of multilateral diplomacy, how we struggled to find form and substance following the end of the Cold War era. There are many high points, not only in my own career but in the evolution of diplomacy and international relations themselves. The book spans the era of the Gulf War, Bosnia, Palestine and the Myanmar assignment, all significant historical events in themselves, describing how Malaysia handled all these issues and fought its diplomatic battles in defense of what we believe to be universal principles. There are revelations into the goings-on at the UN, like the story of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's undoing as Secretary-General, as well as descriptions in some detail of certain aspects of leadership at the UN. My aim in sharing all of this is to reveal both the role played by Malaysia on a number of key issues that emerged at the time as well as that of the superpowers and

how a developing country and its officials deal with an entity like the UN, with all the disadvantages stacked against them. Thus I hope my effort will not be taken simply to be a personal account of diplomatic history but of history as I actually lived and experienced it and possibly a reference source on Malaysian foreign policy as well as a commentary on some key events in international relations.

And threading all these words together throughout the book is one issue: UN reform. It's something that has been on the UN agenda for decades but until today it has yet to be brought to fruition. I hope my own personal experience of multilateral diplomacy at the highest level, at the UN, as I have set down in this chronicle, can serve to continue the dialogue forward, bringing the discussion on reform, change and with that, hope, into the present day and the future.

Razali Ismail
Kuala Lumpur, February 2014

Tuesday 10th

Frantic desperate preparation – need to have informal meeting of the whole – need to prepare script – fear of what will happen if a PLO issue ~~was~~ in the informal meeting.
Fear of being caught and seen as helpless. Reaching deep down to overcome my instincts to ~~find~~ stabilise myself. Telling myself that I CAN do it.
How to apply judgement – on only sense or instinct & developed sixth sense as there is no experience of S.C. to fall back on.

Attempted compromise – idea of letter from Algeria. US interested.
Negotiated bet. US & PLO. Nearly ~~pt the~~ clinched it but failed.
Euphoria came too early.
Elation turned to ~~depress~~ dejection.
Realized that one should be careful to study all aspects before attempting negotiation bet. 2 sides.
Ended day (late evening) [illegible] totally [illegible].

ISBN 978-983-2220-32-9

From Razali's notebook (inside, page 136) dated Tuesday 10 January 1989, during Malaysia's SC presidency.