ABDUL SAMAD ISMAIL

Abdul Samad Ismail was born on a Southeast Asian island that was in 1925 (the year of his birth) a cosmopolitan outpost of the British Empire. Modern Singapore had been founded in 1819 by Thomas Stamford Raffles, an official of the English East India Company whose ideas about free trade and British rule had resulted in a thriving commercial emporium on the island. Aside from a handful of Britons, Singapore was populated by enterprising migrants from China, who formed the majority, as well as by smaller numbers from India and neighboring territories in Southeast Asia.

Samad Ismail's forebears arrived in the colony in the nineteenth century from Java and established themselves as leaders in Singapore's small but diverse Malayo-Muslim community, which included Malay migrant settlers from Sumatra, Borneo, Bawean, and Madura as well as from Java and nearby Malaya. His maternal grandfather, Haji Abdul Majid, was a well-to-do diamond merchant. By family lore, he was the first Singapore Malay to possess a proper horse-and-carriage and was a man of many children by many wives. (Under Islamic law, he was permitted four at any one time.) Samad Ismail's paternal grandfather, Haji Shairazi, led members of his central Java family to Singapore and became a pilgrim broker, that is, someone who recruits pilgrims for the Muslim haj to Mecca and who arranges their papers, passage, accommodations, and religious instruction—a business that connected him intimately to local Muslim families of wealth and high status. Although he had only one wife and one natural son and daughter, Haji Shairazi adopted several other children. As a result, says Samad, speaking of the legacy of both his Javanese grandfathers (and in his characteristically blunt English), "I've got relatives all over the damn place."

In the family, the traditions of Java and Islam were strong. Ismail bin Shairazi, Samad's father, was steeped in Muslim learning. He studied for five years in Mecca and was attracted to mystic schools of Islam as practiced in Java, where he also studied. Samad describes him as a "staunch Muslim" and a linguist who was fluent in Arabic, Malay, and Javanese and who also knew Sanskrit. Samad's mother, Aida, was technically illiterate but he describes her as a fount of stories from the epic story cycles of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* the bases of Javanese literary and folk culture and of the ideals of Javanese civilization. Although the ambient language of Samad's boyhood Singaporean neighborhood of Kampung Melayu was Malay, at home the family spoke Javanese.

After years of travel and religious study in Arabia and Java, Samad's father, Haji Ismail, settled into a life of teaching at a local Malay school in Singapore. Eventually he became headmaster. He was a writer, too, contributing articles in Malay to local newspapers. And he was esteemed for his knowledge of Arabic and Islam. Haji Ismail and his wife Aida occupied positions of prominence in the local community. Colonialism was at its height and, among Muslims in Singapore and the world at large, much was astir. Leading figures of the Singaporean Muslim community gathered regularly at Haji Ismail's house to discuss and argue about the current fate and future of the Malays, as young Samad listened in. Haji Ismail himself was a pioneer in the proto-nationalist Kesatuan Melayu (Malay Union), an organization that aspired to foster the interests of Malays within the British-held territories.

Samad was the eighth of Haji Ismail and Aida's sixteen children. But such were the inadequate health conditions in the colony that all of Samad's older brothers died as children. (Three older sisters survived.) "I was the oldest surviving son," he says. Because of this, Haji Ismail placed much hope in his advancement. Like other boys in Kampung Melayu, Samad began his education in the local Malay-language school run by his father, Rochore School, which offered only five years of schooling. When Samad was in standard four, he began attending an "afternoon school" run by Singapore's prestigious Victoria School, to learn English. The next year, he entered the English-medium Victoria School directly. At the time, Victoria School offered special classes for boys shifting from Malay- to English-language education. Samad excelled as a student and moved rapidly through the upper standards, skipping two grades and achieving his Senior Cambridge Certificate in 1941. His studies at Victoria were supported by a scholarship from Kesatuan Melayu, whose leaders had spotted Samad as a youth with potential. "At that time," Samad wrote many years later, "among my circle of [boyhood] friends, only three people (including me) remained in school through the Senior Cambridge and passed."

As Samad moved upward through his Malay- and English-language schooling, he discovered the joys of reading. By walking to school, he saved the money his parents gave him for tram fare and used it to buy magazines such as *Detective Weekly* and *Thriller* and secondhand books of all kinds. To read the English newspapers, he would wait for the family neighbor, Pak Hamid, to fall into his afternoon siesta in his long chair and then quickly borrow the *Malaya Tribune* from the table in his front room. For the Malay-language news, he (and his father) relied on his older sister's husband, a subscriber to *Utusan Melayu* (Malay Messenger), a prominent prewar newspaper. At Victoria School, he haunted the library and savored the free books and magazines there. At home, he read Malay short stories and news items from around the world to his mother, who could not read them herself.

During his early teen years, Samad also became an avid musician and played the guitar and ukulele in a neighborhood *keroncong* group—

a hobby his family nipped in the bud when he entered the senior grades. As Samad approached graduation, his father and friends pondered his future. Samad himself aspired to become a government or private office clerk, a position potentially open to him because of his English-language education. Such jobs paid the princely wage of thirty Singapore ringgits a month. But Samad's father had other hopes for him.

One option was to send him to Sultan Idris Training College in the neighboring British Malay States, where he could be trained as a teacher and, it was hoped, return to Singapore as the colony's first Singapore-born assistant inspector of Malay schools. Such positions, at the time, were dominated by Malays from the British enclave in nearby Malacca, another of Britain's three Straits Settlements, which comprised Singapore, Malacca, and Penang. Another option, however, was to apprentice him to Abdul Rahim Kajai, editor of *Utusan Melayu*, with the hope that he might become the first Singapore-born Malay journalist and newspaper editor. Kajai himself and other prominent journalists of the time were all from the other Straits Settlements or the Malay Peninsula. After exploring this option with Kajai, Samad was accepted as a trainee without pay at the newspaper. He began as soon as he completed his Senior Cambridge in 1941; thus, at the age of sixteen, he became a cub reporter.

Utusan Melayu was a new newspaper and an upstart. It had been founded in 1939 by Singaporean leaders of Kesatuan Melayu, including Samad's father, as a local organ for the expression of Malay aspirations and culture and in competition with the older Malay-language *Warta Malaya* (owned by Sayyid Hussein Alsagoff and viewed by the local Malays as an "Arab" paper). Kajai had worked at *Warta Malaya* before agreeing to become editor of the new paper. He was an intensely hardworking editor who, as Samad remembers him, worked from dawn till dusk in *Utusan Melayu*'s cramped office wearing only a singlet—it was so hot. Kajai was a pioneering Malay-language journalist and also a literary man who could recite Arabic and English poetry.

Under Kajai's direction, Samad learned the rudiments of journalism. Each day, he made the rounds of the courtrooms, the hospitals, and the police stations and returned to the office to write up his stories, which were invariably rejected, he says. *Utusan Melayu* was a Malay-language newspaper but "newspaper Malay," as Kajai was then developing it, was a livelier and brisker form of the language than the formal literary one Samad had learned in school. "I had to shed off my schoolboyish sort of Malay," he says, and "learn a new kind of Malay." He also had to learn a new, more colloquial form of English in order to interview British officers and other Singaporean officials, among whom English was the lingua franca. Kajai also put Samad to work translating wire-service news dispatches from English into Malay, forcing him to sharpen his skills in both languages. After three months, Kajai began paying Samad ten ringgits a month, eight of which he invested in night

school to improve his typing and to learn shorthand, a necessity for court reporters. A fast learner and indefatigable, young Samad was soon indispensable. His stories improved and they began to appear in print.

Meanwhile, the political balance of power in Asia was changing rapidly. By July 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army had entered French Indochina (with the acquiescence of French colonial officials) and from there began its conquest of the rest of Southeast Asia. Britain's colonies fell quickly, as Japan's forces advanced through the region after 7 December 1941. Singapore was thought to have been impregnable, but Britain surrendered it to Japan on 15 February 1942. Suddenly, Singapore had new masters.

As a cub reporter at *Utusan Melayu*, Samad still lived at home with his family in Kampung Melayu. The neighborhood lay athwart the route of Japan's advance into the city and fighting raged in the vicinity for three days. Samad's family huddled in trenches during the fighting; their house was damaged. Soon afterwards, a trusted messenger arrived from *Utusan Melayu* with an official letter from the Japanese Imperial Army summoning Samad to work. He was given a white armband with an inscription in Japanese, so that he could walk safely to the office. As he did so, he saw the dead bodies of British and Indian soldiers and common people strewn about the streets and thousands of British soldiers waiting aimlessly to be processed as prisoners of war. He witnessed Chinese men, women, and children bound with barbed wire, being led away by Japanese soldiers. He saw, mounted on Kallang Bridge, the severed heads of Malay youths said to have killed a Japanese soldier. At the newspaper office, he helped locate the men who could operate the printing presses and assisted in publishing the first public announcements of the Japanese Occupation in Malay: "Be calm. Do not loot or steal. Give your full cooperation to the Empire of Japan."

Samad was prepared to cooperate. He had not suffered personally under the British, he says. He had not even experienced racial discrimination. His father, as a school headmaster, was an employee of the colonial government and, moreover, Kesatuan Melayu, the organization with which he was affiliated, was not overtly anti-British. Nevertheless, Samad and his family circle were acutely aware that the British were foreign occupiers—foreign masters. When the British were driven out in 1942, he remembers thinking, "OK, they're gone and we have got new masters. We'll try our best to survive."

Singapore's prewar newspapers were now reorganized to meet Japanese needs. In 1943, *Utusan Melayu* and *Warta Malaya* were amalgamated into *Berita Malai* (Malay News) and moved to share offices with the island's new English-language newspaper, *Syonam Shimbun,* which replaced the prewar *Straits Times*. For Samad and the staff of *Berita Malai*, this meant using modern Linotype machines for the first time and converting from the Arabic to the Roman alphabet. This dramatic shift brought Singapore's Malay-language press in line with the larger press

of the Dutch East Indies, which had long since adopted Roman letters. The Indies, soon to be Indonesia, was also part of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and Singapore was ruled as part of a unit that included both Malaya and Sumatra. This fact drew many Indonesians to the island during the war and quite a few of them found work at *Berita Malai*—where young Samad found them very good company.

The two dominating figures at *Berita Malai* during the early war years were Kajai and his assistant, Haji Muhammad Ishak. But Kajai's health soon failed and he died in 1943. Ishak abandoned the paper to participate in a Japanese-sponsored development scheme. In their absence, Samad rose to become de facto managing editor, supervising the entire process of putting the daily paper together, from keeping the presses working to writing editorials. The entire operation was under strict Japanese censorship, however, and many conventional newspaper "beats," such as the courts and crime, were off limits. Official news came directly from the Japanese. His hands tied, Samad used the opportunity to master the mechanics of publishing and to promote and publish the one kind of writing that was curiously safe, namely, literature. He filled the pages of *Berita Malai* with Malay poems and stories and also wrote his own first short stories depicting Singaporean life under the Japanese—positively, of course, but with subtle satirical undertones. In one of them, "Ubi Kayu" (Tapioca), as David Banks has written in *From Class to Culture: Social Conscience in Malay Novels since Independence*, Samad "carries the spirit of loyalty to the war effort...to a point that readers must have identified as excessive." At the same time, Samad worked to rectify and standardize the Indonesian and Malayan romanized spelling systems and vocabularies, which reflected orthographies and loan words from two different imperial powers. For example, the Malay word meaning secretary, *jurutulis*—as written in British-colonized Singapore and Malaya—was rendered *djoeroetoelis* in the nearby Dutch East Indies.

As a newspaperman and someone associated daily with influential Malay organizations through his father and mentors, Samad was naturally attuned to the shifting political sentiments of the times, including those of the neighboring Indies. There, anticolonial nationalist aspirations and organizations were far in advance of anything in Singapore and Malaya. One Malay journalist who harkened to these developments was Ibrahim Yaacob (Ibrahim bin Haji Yaacob), who formed Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union) in 1938. Ibrahim's Young Turk group was overtly nationalist. Advocating independence, it was the first politically radical organization among Peninsular or Singapore Malays. This led the British to arrest Ibrahim for subversion shortly before the fall of Singapore to Japan. "During the Japanese Occupation," says Samad, "I came into contact with Ibrahim Yaacob. He set up a movement to prepare the Malays for independence." By Malays, Ibrahim meant virtually all ethnic Malays, to include a swath of territory stretching from south-

ern Thailand through Malaya and Singapore and embracing all the Indies and the Philippines as well as parts of Cambodia and Vietnam. It was a breathtaking political vision, made possible in part by Japan's shake-up of the former colonial landscape. The idea thrilled Samad and he joined Ibrahim's new organization, Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung, or KERIS (Union of the People of Peninsular Indonesia), which was dedicated to achieving this goal. In this connection, he began to make contact among Indonesian nationalist leaders who were active in Singapore during the war and also with the anti-Japanese Chinese underground.

Through contacts like these and from others who secretly listened to British and allied radio broadcasts during the war, Samad was aware that the Japanese news releases he was publishing in *Berita Malai* were often false. The Japanese empire was weaker than it seemed, and growing weaker. Even so, the war's end caught KERIS off guard. A congress convened to proclaim Malaya's independence in August 1945, at which Samad represented Singapore, aborted when Japan suddenly surrendered. Meanwhile, Indonesian nationalists seized the moment and on 17 August 1945 declared Indonesia independent. Among the many profound consequences of this was the end, for the time being at least, of Ibrahim's dream of a Southeast Asia-wide pan-Malay nation.

The Occupation years were also Samad's coming-of-age years. Amid an intense life of work and, increasingly, of political activity as well, Samad enjoyed the life of a young man on the loose. According to Melan Abdullah, an older friend and Samad's family-anointed chaperon, "he had a wild streak that was often hopelessly unmanageable." For a time, he took up residence in a shop house with some dance hostesses who worked at Singapore's popular and notorious New World amusement park—he became their self-appointed "bodyguard"—and sometimes fell into scrapes with the girls' Japanese officer clients. He loved to gamble and to gad about town and had friends high and low, including, says Melan Abdullah, "a string of girlfriends in his 'harem.'" Desperate to settle him down, Samad's family and friends maneuvered him into a tentative courtship-by-letter with Hamidah Hassan (Hamidah binte Hassan Lubis), a respectable young school teacher living in Penang. Hamidah's parents were both migrants from Dutch Sumatra and Hamidah's older sister was engaged to one of Samad's close friends. Samad was so offhand about his letters to Hamidah that he let his friends write them for him; he merely signed them. Hamidah always replied, also with ghostwritten letters. On an assignment for Ibrahim Yaacob, Samad finally met Hamidah personally and the two hit it off. She and her sister and her parents moved to Singapore where Hamidah soon worked at *Berita Malai*. Although Samad was an unorthodox suitor, the family circle urged the young couple forward and they were married in the spring of 1945. They were a good match, as the family had foreseen. Eventually, Samad and Hamidah had ten children together.

In Singapore, Japan's abrupt collapse led to a period of chaos involving bloody ethnic reprisals (as anti-Japanese Chinese struck out against collaborating Malays, for example) as well as common banditry—all this as Britain slowly reestablished its colonial authority. Amid the mayhem, KERIS and Samad worked with the Chinese underground of the communist-led Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to urge Malays and Chinese not to fight each other. These connections, as well as Samad's role during the Occupation with *Berita Malai,* attracted British attention. As Hamidah described it, "British army officers with Gurkha escorts armed with sten guns came almost daily to the house to 'interview' him or to take him away to their headquarters." He spent three months in a military prison and was finally tried and discharged, in part, evidently, because his defense counsel argued that twenty-year-old Samad had been too young to have written the seditious wartime articles of his own volition.

Yusof Ishak now revived *Utusan Melayu* and he recruited Samad to return as his Number Two. Ishak was a veteran journalist and a strong figure who later became president of Singapore. "But he was illiterate in Malay," says Samad. "So I had to run the paper on his behalf. There was no official designation. But everyone knew I was his assistant." With Samad at the editorial helm, *Utusan Melayu* became a force in the Malay struggle for independence in Malaya and Singapore (still British territories) and in the Indies, where Sukarno and other leaders of the newly proclaimed Republic of Indonesia were locked in a revolutionary struggle with the Dutch. The newspaper was openly anticolonial—"not so much anti-British or anti-Dutch," says Samad—and it weighed in in favor of local parties and social organizations dedicated to reform and independence, including Singapore's lively radical labor unions. It opposed decolonization plans offered by the British such as the Malayan Union Plan (announced in 1946), which would diminish the status and influence of Malays in any forthcoming postcolonial state. Samad recruited a far-flung network of volunteer reporters and informants throughout the Malay Peninsula and, through them, kept his finger on the pulse of political and social developments. Meanwhile, at the *Utusan Melayu* editorial offices, Samad entertained a string of visitors from the parties and social organizations, including many of the island's key political and intellectual actors—making the newspaper a kind of nerve center of the evolving political scene.

In the meantime, Samad had become a political actor himself. "I joined the left wing," he says. He became a founding member of the Malayan Nationalist Party, which, reprising the wartime idea of a Greater Indonesia, still envisioned independent Malaya as part of Indonesia. With other members of the left wing, he drafted the People's Constitution for Malaya and Singapore as an alternative to the one offered by Britain and supported by the more conservative Malays affiliated with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The People's Con-

stitution was in accord with UMNO on the issue of religion and language: Islam should be the national religion and Malay the national language. But it called for immediate self-government with a fully elected legislature within the British Commonwealth—moving much faster to independence than the conservative plan. And, as Samad explains, it promoted a radical idea for citizenship: "that all those who made Malaya their permanent home and the object of their undivided loyalty shall have the right to become citizens, and these citizens [meaning not only Malays but also people of Indian and Chinese descent] should be called Melayu (Malay), not Malayan." (The word Malayan generally describes a place, the Malay Peninsula, whereas Melayu/Malay connotes the Malay people and their culture.)

Some of Samad's own anticolonial radicalism grew from his early association with Ibrahim Yaacob and Kesatuan Melayu Muda and with the many Indonesians he met during the Occupation years. He identified closely with the revolution in Indonesia (where Ibrahim Yaacob was now a member of the revolutionary government) and, between 1946 and 1949, worked actively for the cause. In Singapore, Samad arranged for commodities shipped past Dutch blockades by Indonesian privateers (for example, rubber, charcoal, fish) to be bartered for arms and other needed items, such as socks and boots and typewriters. He secured funds and safe passage for representatives of the Indonesian revolutionary government to the United States, where the United Nations was meeting, and other destinations on the outside. He promoted the cause of Indonesian independence to political parties in Malaya and Singapore, including UMNO and its founder Dato' Onn bin Jaafar, "trying to persuade him to declare support for the Indonesian revolution in his speeches." Samad also became a part-time correspondent for Indonesia's Antara news agency, with its "offices" at *Utusan Melayu* where, in the spirit of solidarity, Samad and his cohorts called each other "Bung"—as in Bung Samad and Bung Kamal—mimicking the fashion in revolutionary Indonesia.

Through such activities Samad came to know several Indonesian leaders, including Adam Malik, Sutan Sjahrir, Haji Agus Salim, and A. K. Ghani. Samad's contribution to the cause was significant enough for Indonesia's President Sukarno to mention him publicly during a speech in Singapore four years later. But, typically, it seems, Samad's wife Hamidah knew nothing about these activities and was taken aback, many years later, when the Indonesian ambassador to Malaysia recalled how he and Samad had been gunrunners "smuggling arms from Singapore to Indonesia" during the revolution. Samad, wrote Hamidah in 1987, "preferred to keep me in blissful ignorance about his Indonesian friends."

By the late 1940s, Indonesian independence had been achieved. On Samad's side of the Straits, however, left-wing projects for immediate autonomy had been thwarted with the inauguration in 1948 of the Fed-

eration of Malaya plan, a more evolutionary and conservative approach to decolonization favoring elite Malays and their Chinese and Indian allies. Singapore was on a separate decolonization track. Residual elements of the communist-led (and largely Chinese) Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army now reformulated themselves as the Malayan Races Liberation Army and launched a guerilla war on the peninsula against the vestigial colonial state and its local allies. This was the so-called Malayan Emergency, which, rightly or wrongly, was construed by Britain and its Cold War allies as part of a worldwide communist conspiracy. Similar movements now challenged France's colonial claims in Vietnam and the newly independent United States-supported government of the Philippines. As a prominent anticolonialist and overtly left-wing activist, as well as someone who had worked openly and legally with communists in Singapore, Samad was now vulnerable. More than once in the years to come, he would be tarred by the Cold War brush.

As the political winds shifted in the late 1940s, Samad turned more of his creative energy to literature and, more particularly, to the potential of literature to raise and shape national consciousness. As Malaysian journalist Ahmad Sebi has written, "He was the one who saw clearly that literature and the arts could be used as a weapon in the struggle against colonialism." At *Utusan Melayu* and its affiliate publications, he drew around him some of the best Malay writers of the times, including Keris Mas (Kamaluddin Muhammad) and Usman Awang, who formed the core of a new group called Angkatan Sastrawan 50, or ASAS 50 (meaning the Literary Generation of 1950; the acronym ASAS means "basis"). The ASAS 50 writers consciously fostered Malay nationalism and, at the same time, promoted writing in Malay as an act of national expression. Moreover, says Samad, "they wrote about poor people, laborers, and peasants and the struggle against poverty, the inequities of landlordism. They wrote about people." The ASAS 50 writers worked to promote Malay as a national language and to advance formal education in Malay as an important component of the fast-evolving and soon-to-be independent national society. Samad was not a member of ASAS 50, formally speaking, but he was the group's acknowledged mentor (and sometimes its harsh critic). At *Utusan Melayu*, he fostered the talents and careers of its leading lights, filling the newspaper's pages with their stories, poems, and essays and contributing several of his own under various pen names.

By 1950, Samad, an avowed left-wing nationalist, was involved along several fronts in the independence movement. Both as a journalist and as a political actor behind the scenes, he maintained a vast array of contacts and these included members of the Communist Party of Malaya. Following the notorious Maria Hertogh case—in which a Eurasian girl who had been adopted and raised by a Muslim family was "restored" by the Singaporean authorities to a proper Christian home and in which

Utusan Melayu led in attacking the government—Samad was jailed as a subversive. As he recalls, "There were riots. After the riots, there was a mass arrest and then, after some time, I was arrested." According to the American writer James Michener, who interviewed Samad the day before his arrest, the following morning Singaporean newspapers carried a photograph of him identified as "one of the leaders of the communist party in Malaya."

Samad Ismail was not a pliant prisoner. He immediately went on a hunger strike to be removed from Singapore's infamous Changi Prison—resulting in his transfer to another detention center on Saint John's Island—and to be provided better food and freer access to radio and the news. Most of the prisoners at Saint John's, numbering in the thousands altogether, were Chinese workers and students. Samad learned Chinese and led them in agitating for improved camp conditions. He was, he says, "in continuous confrontation with the camp authorities for three and a half years." Samad also learned some Hindustani to communicate with camp wardens, many of whom were Sikhs and friendly to Samad because of his wartime sympathies for Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army, which had attempted to launch an Indian independence movement from Singapore. On Saint John's, Samad lived in a bungalow and enjoyed some freedoms such as doing his own marketing in the camp's bazaar, under guard, of course. He spent much of his time writing and managed to smuggle his stories and essays out, to be published under various pen names in *Utusan Melayu* and other publications.

Meanwhile, Samad's detention (along with that of other Singaporean political activists such as Samad's onetime schoolmate, Devan Nair), became something of a cause célèbre. Indonesia offered Samad political asylum. Among those who worked for his release was Lee Kuan Yew, who "became our legal counsel," says Samad. More importantly, the new leader of UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman, began making fiery speeches demanding the release of Samad and other political detainees. By 1953, the issue had reached the House of Commons and this, at last, says Samad, "rattled the British colonial government." Samad was released on condition that he remain at home between 6:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M. every day. He ignored the conditions and chased away the police who came to monitor him. This worked. To save face, Samad says, the British authorities simply "pretended the conditions didn't exist in the first place."

Back at the helm of *Utusan Melayu*, Samad again threw himself into developing the newspaper as a voice for independence. "The anticolonial wave had begun again," he says. "I sensed this, so we became more and more direct in our criticism of British rule and the paper prospered." Once again the *Utusan Melayu*'s offices became a hub for politicians, writers, and activists, as Samad carried on his open-ended seminars with one and all. Samad now extended his newspaper's reach

throughout the peninsula. "We were able to set up a network of reporters...all over the damn shop," he says. "It was sort of an intelligence network...my eyes and ears on the ground. I was better informed than the government." Many of Samad's eyes and ears were actually local police, postal workers, clerks, and teachers who wrote their stories for little or nothing—out of a sense of nationalism and the satisfaction and status of being a writer for *Utusan Melayu*. Samad corresponded directly with this far-flung team, reading their work carefully and sending it back with corrections. On holidays, he conducted workshops for his aspiring Malay reporters, teaching them "the business of journalism...how to write, the why, the how, the what." He gave frank criticism and was often sharp to the point of ridicule. But he took his aspiring writers seriously (telling one, who covered sports, "Don't waste your time!").

Samad opened *Utusan Melayu* to its readers by launching a Readers' Forum (Mimbar), a page full of letters. And he continued to foster the ASAS 50 writers and their agenda. A passionate issue was language. Many Western-trained intellectuals and the British themselves argued that English had supplanted other languages as the voice of modern civilization and progress. Malays and other Asians should therefore adopt it as their own language for education and for the high endeavors of science, technology, and even literature—and let their mother tongues recede to second-tier status for use in the neighborhood and home. Samad vehemently disagreed. Malay, he said, was the language of a great culture and "the lingua franca for seventy million people...in particular, it is the language of the homelands and strongholds of the Malay race." True, he said, "in scope of expression and breadth of consciousness, particularly the scientific consciousness of the modern world, Malay is backward when compared with languages like English and Chinese." But this merely reflected the current social and economic backwardness of the Malay people. As "the peoples of Malaya...inevitably progress toward modern forms of social, political, and economic organization...we can be certain that the Malay language will gain in richness, vitality and beauty, together with the emancipation and growth of Malay society." Writers, he said, have a special responsibility for bringing all this about.

The offices of *Utusan Melayu* in the 1950s were cramped and cluttered and the atmosphere was aggressively casual. Samad himself was a notoriously sloppy dresser and, according to Keris Mas, a colleague at *Utusan Melayu* and an ASAS 50 leader, "he was just as careless with the way he managed his time. The hours for lunch or dinner somehow were mixed with the hours for work." Samad loved to harass his staff with "his rich repertoire of dirty words," but all the while, writes Keris Mas, his "fingers would be ferociously knocking at his typewriter, putting into shape an editorial or a feature on the international scene. He would seldom sit properly in his chair. His favorite posture was to simply cross

his legs on his chair and work, sipping his coffee and chain smoking his cigarettes. The furious banging of his typewriter sounded like the staccato bursts of a machine gun. The fingers moved quickly and chaotically, the typing done without any apparent system or order."

Among those who frequently stopped by the *Utusan Melayu* offices was Lee Kuan Yew. Lee was Samad's lawyer as well as legal counsel to the newspaper and to several of Singapore's labor unions. Lee first met Samad on Saint John's Island and, after Samad's release, he brought Samad into his efforts to form a strong, multiracial, anticolonial political party in Singapore. Samad had close ties to all three Singaporean communities: the Malays, Indians, and Chinese (including radical workers and students from his prison days). He also had unparalleled anticolonial credentials. "Almost every week," says Samad, "I was in Lee's house, discussing. He needed Malay support and Chinese student and Chinese worker's support and it was through me that he got that. So we decided to form the People's Action Party." Samad thus became one of the original conveners of the left-wing PAP, along with Goh Keng Swee, Devan Nair, S. Rajaratnam, Lim Chin Siong, and others. Among other things, Samad helped draft the constitution and the party's manifesto and recruited influential Malays to join.

In time, however, as Lee Kuan Yew consolidated his power through the party amid the turbulent mid-1950s, Samad drifted away. "Harry [Lee] was using me as a sort of telephone operator to get in touch with the Chinese Left," he says. "But I wasn't in control of the Chinese Left; I could only pass messages." This led to misunderstandings. Moreover, Lee "started to change. He was overawed by British power" and feared "that at any time the British might clamp down." In 1957, Samad says, "I quietly left the PAP. There was no quarrel. I saw him [Lee] before I went to Indonesia. We talked nicely and I just left him like that. I never saw him again."

All of this occurred against the backdrop of intense political debates surrounding decolonization in Malaya and Singapore. What kind of state, exactly, will replace the colonial state? Whose interests will it reflect? And who will lead it? In these debates, Samad's voice remained a radical one. This led him to oppose, for example, the extension of Britain's Emergency Regulations in the soon-to-be self-governing territories as well as defense arrangements proposed by Britain, such as the Anglo-Malayan Defense Treaty, which would extend certain of its colonial powers well beyond independence.

In these opinions and others, he was often at odds with Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO's leader and, after 31 August 1957, prime minister of the newly independent Federation of Malaya. When Yusof Ishak, *Utusan Melayu*'s managing editor and editor-in-chief, moved the newspaper to the federation's new capital in Kuala Lumpur earlier that year, everyone assumed that Samad would be running the paper as usual. Instead, Ishak assigned Samad to be *Utusan*'s correspondent in Indonesia and

moved the newspaper to Kuala Lumpur without him. As *Utusan Melayu*'s then news editor, Said Zahari, wrote later, Samad Ismail "was surely missed but, strangely, no one ever asked or talked about him, even in private." Samad himself refused to discuss it at the time. He now says that Tunku himself "passed the word that he didn't like the idea of my going to Kuala Lumpur and editing the paper"—this, evidently, because of Samad's extensive influence among UMNO party leaders from the village up to Tunku's ruling circle, the result of his years of networking. According to Samad, Ishak told him, "I'm sorry, you can't go to Kuala Lumpur. If you go to Kuala Lumpur, Tunku will close down my paper." So, says Samad, "I went off quietly to Jakarta."

In Indonesia, Samad was warmly received by his old Indonesian comrades. Adam Malik arranged an office for him at Antara, the government news agency, and also a place to live. He introduced him to leading political figures. This "exile" gave Samad an opportunity to see independent Indonesia firsthand. He traveled extensively. And he was very disturbed. "I didn't expect Indonesia to be so badly off," he says. "The poverty! I was very disillusioned." To think, he says, "this is what I fought for."

Samad's Indonesian exile lasted eight months. He then returned to Singapore and, after twelve years with *Utusan Melayu*, accepted an offer at the *Straits Times*, its rival, and, moreover, a newspaper intimately identified with British colonial rule. The *Times* was Singapore's establishment newspaper and its newspaper of record. "Unless the *Straits Times* confirmed an article or news," says Samad, "people wouldn't believe it." It avoided causes—just as *Utusan Melayu* embraced them—and it was published in English. In 1957, however, the Straits Times Group launched a new Malay-language version of their flagship newspaper called *Berita Harian* (Daily News). In 1958, Samad became its de facto editor and moved to the newspaper's editorial office in Kuala Lumpur. This time, evidently, Tunku Abdul Rahman did not object. Unlike *Utusan Melayu*, the upshot *Berita Harian* was not influential. Moreover, says Samad, "he knew it was under the *Straits Times* and the *Straits Times* could manage me."

When Samad began to work at *Berita Harian,* it was little more than an assembly of *Straits Times* articles and editorials translated into Malay. His assignment was to raise the standard of the translations, standardize the spelling, and improve the content. Samad's staff counted only a handful of translators and junior editors. He gave them crash courses on copyediting and layouting and set about recruiting a team of reporters. As he had done before at *Utusan Melayu*, he solicited news items and articles from aspiring writers around the country, identifying those with potential and coaching them to improve their work. "I [would] read a story,...cut it down and send it [back] to them [saying], 'Please follow up,' telling them, 'I want this and this.'" He soon had a network of eager stringers placed throughout Malaya's villages, towns, and cities who supplied him with a steady stream of fresh material for the new daily.

In this way, he not only improved the content of *Berita Harian* but also began to shape it as a distinctively Malay newspaper.

Samad's responsibilities were not limited to *Berita Harian*, however. His assignment with the Straits Times Group also called for him to write editorials and feature articles in English for the flagship paper. To this he brought a unique perspective born of his own nationalist sensibilities and his knowledge of the Malay experience from the grassroots. "What I tried to do was to interpret Malay aspirations...to English-speaking readers," he says. "Urban people didn't understand what was happening in the rural areas. My job was to close this gap." In a series of articles in the early 1960s, for example, Samad examined in depth the lives and economic circumstances of Malaya's east coast states, where a conservative Muslim party had made inroads against the ruling UMNO, alarming the Malay establishment. "The core problem of Kelantan," he concluded, "is not that it is Islamic...but land hunger—poverty, in other words, expressed in religious symbols. This is what most writers at the time...failed to understand." The underlying issues were not religious but "poverty, backwardness, illiteracy—all these things."

Samad's insightful investigations into Malay life occurred during a period when the character and membership of the emerging Malayan nation remained hotly contested. In 1963, the already independent Federation of Malaya merged with the locally self-governing but not yet independent Singapore and two vestigial British colonies on nearby Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) to form Malaysia. This new and largely unanticipated entity altered the evolving political equation profoundly. The Borneo territories added new populations of indigenous non-Malay hill peoples, along with smaller numbers of Malays and Chinese. Singapore added its large numbers of Chinese subjects and its dynamic and ambitious leader, Lee Kuan Yew—who withdrew his ministate from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, but not before stirring things up considerably. Moreover, President Sukarno of neighboring Indonesia assailed the new Malaysian state as a neocolonial deception designed to extend British imperial power in the region indefinitely. Launching the so-called Confrontation, he vowed to destroy it.

Meanwhile, at *Berita Harian* and the *Straits Times*, Samad was fully engaged, working at his desk hours on end and carrying home piles of articles, short stories, and poems to read and correct at night. As his editor-in-chief Lee Siew Yee remembered some years later, "That paper was A. Samad Ismail's life." In Singapore, Samad had joined and indeed often led dozens of organizations: the Singapore Malay Journalists, Malay Chamber of Commerce, Malay Education Council, Red Crescent, National Union of Journalists, and so on. He had also been an active player in island politics and a founding member of its dominant political party. But in Kuala Lumpur, he says, "I was just a journalist." Even so, Samad was close to power, particularly to Tun Abdul Razak, the Tunku's deputy premier for many years and then prime minister in his

own right from 1970 until his death in 1976. Aside from his personal ties to Razak, several of Samad's protégés now served on Razak's staff or in other senior positions in the government. As a consequence, Samad was party to high-level dialogues and was sometimes called upon to assist the government or the ruling party. When Singapore joined Malaysia, for example, he helped Razak and UMNO meet the political challenge of Lee Kuan Yew, who busily established PAP branches on the peninsula and campaigned for a Malaysian Malaysia—meaning political equality for all citizens irrespective of their Chinese, Malay, or Indian ethnic identities. Samad argued that "you cannot have political equity without economic equity...otherwise, one side will be at a disadvantage." This became one of UMNO's driving themes and later, after 1969, the rationale for Malaysia's New Economic Policy.

Razak also called on Samad to assist with the Indonesia problem. Working outside official channels, Samad contacted leaders of several nonaligned countries—Sukarno's ostensible allies—and solicited their support for Malaysia. Through Adam Malik and other contacts in Indonesia, he also learned, and passed along to worried Malaysian leaders, that Sukarno lacked support for his assault on Malaysia among significant elements of the Indonesian power structure. (Indeed, when Sukarno was overthrown in 1965, Confrontation was immediately abandoned by Indonesia's new military rulers.)

As these crises passed, Samad weighed in on other nation-building issues. One of these was language. Samad had long been a champion of Malay as a foundation of Malay identity and culture and long worried that Malay would "only survive if the people...use it, develop it, and nurture it." He had helped to establish the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language and Literature Council) in 1957 and continued to participate in its congresses. He now supported those who argued that Malay should supercede English (and, in some cases, Chinese) as the primary language of instruction in Malaysia's schools. This was, he said, part of a process in which education was "revised and transformed as a means and instrument of unity." The idea was to advance Malay both as a language of learning and as a national lingua franca—a common tongue. ("But I never advocated Malay at the expense of Chinese...or Indian languages or even English," he says. "My stand has always been that you must be bilingual.") In the same spirit, Samad staunchly supported the creation of a national university. One measure of his authority on this issue was his appointment as deputy chair of the National University Sponsoring Committee, which brought the project to fruition in 1970 with the opening of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Malaysian National University) in Kuala Lumpur.

A matter of analogous concern was the absence in Malaysia of a truly national newspaper. The *Straits Times* and its sister publications, including *Berita Harian* (and its weekly magazine, *Berita Minggu*), were all owned and managed by a Singapore-based and still largely British-

owned company. Singapore was now a separate state with interests of its own, interests defined and driven by Lee Kuan Yew. A newspaper based there, Samad felt, could not adequately address Malaysia's needs or be an instrument in its development. In addition, whereas Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had cordial relations with the *Times* and its owners, this was not so for his successor, Tun Razak. In 1972, Samad was party to maneuvers within Razak's group involving Razaleigh Hamzah, UMNO's treasurer and Razak's finance minister, to force the *Straits Times* to sell its Kuala Lumpur-based operations to Malaysian owners. In this somewhat hostile takeover, Samad worked quietly behind the scenes to foster an industrial action by *Times* employees to weaken the Singapore company's position. The bitter strike dragged on and on and, says Samad, "They were losing money like hell. So, ultimately they gave up and agreed to the takeover." The result was a new corporation owned by interests linked closely to the Malaysian state and UMNO: the New Straits Times Press Malaysia, Berhad. Samad was managing editor. One *Straits Times* veteran, Ahmad Sebi, called the takeover "the biggest coup in the history of Malaysian journalism."

Intrigues like these and the almost limitless demands of his newspaper filled Samad's days. But for many years, beginning in the mid-1960s, Samad devoted his nights to a new literary project. He had written fiction since his teen years and excelled in the short story. He now explored the novel and with such gusto that, between 1966 and 1970, he completed nine of them, beginning with *Hud* in 1967 and ending with *Hussein Zet* in 1970. (Four of them were mysteries.) Samad's novels dwell on the themes most dear to him: Malay language and culture, nationalism and its permutations in recent Malay history, journalism and the writing life, and the everyday lives of ordinary Malays as they coped with the opportunities and the unfulfilled hopes of life in their new nation.

Samad's novels depict Malays in their full humanity: they quarrel and sin and intrigue against each other; they also act nobly and display love and loyalty. Likewise, he does not stigmatize Chinese and Indians but renders them also as people capable of good and bad. As David Banks has written, Samad's novels, "debunk the image of a stable multi-ethnic Malay rural society." There are interracial love affairs. Samad's stories are small stories and his characters are small people. In *Hussein Zet,* a former independence activist and partisan of the Indonesian revolution makes a living swindling his fellow Malays, in part by manipulating their nationalist ideals. In another, *Detik-detik Cemas* (Anxious Moments), a Chinese student researcher named Jenny assists a group of poor Malay squatters to gain secure possession of the land they had long occupied. In his stories, people attempt to rise in life against odds dictated by their social class and education. Not surprisingly, he uses his novels to make certain points: that so much of a person's outlook in life is dictated by economic circumstances; that people should not forever be labeled by their past associations, including political ones; and

that among Malays and Malaysians in general, tolerance must be embraced and practiced.

In typical fashion, Samad wrote his novels quickly, beating away at his typewriter into the early morning hours, with coffee and cigarettes at hand and passing along the rough copy to an assistant to clean up. This was often Usman Awang (whose pen name was Tongkat Warrant), who says, "A. Samad Ismail was habitually lazy when it came to reading his manuscripts.... He would simply throw them at me. I had to act as his subeditor, correcting his language, and also his proofreader, putting the commas and the full stops, the semi-colons, and the question marks. His spelling was appalling."

As managing editor of the New Straits Times Press, Samad was officially Number Two. "But I was in charge of the whole administration," he says. Aside from setting up the Group as a bilingual news operation in its own right, separate from Singapore, Samad had now to implement the Malaysian government's New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy of affirmative action had been launched after ethnic riots involving Malays and Chinese erupted in 1969. Its aim, through direct government intervention, was to redress the imbalance in Malaysia's economy in which opportunities in education and the professions and particularly in business were heavily weighted in favor of non-Malays, especially the ethnic Chinese. Under the NEP, such opportunities would be mandated by law. At the *New Straits Times*, Samad says, "I had a mandate from the prime minister to revamp the paper, to revamp the administration, and to sack and to promote and to recruit people in accordance with the NEP." At the time, many administrative posts in the organization were still occupied by expatriates. "I had to either cut short their contracts or sack them," says Samad. Meanwhile, the law now required that every department employ 30 percent Malays, or *bumiputra*s (indigenous persons). It was "a very big shake-up."

In his role at the New Straits Times Press and at *Berita Harian* and as a prolific writer of fiction and a public intellectual, Samad was playing a key role in the Malaysian national project. Singapore, which was now independent under Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP, had "taken on an alien look," wrote Samad's wife Hamidah. Abdul Samad Ismail was Malaysian now. And although he did not participate in politics in quite the same way that he had in the past, as a confidante of Prime Minister Tun Razak (and his sometime traveling companion and speechwriter), he was wholly engaged until Razak's death in January 1976. The following month, Malaysia's new prime minister, Hussein Onn, honored Samad with the country's highest literary award. He was named Pejuang Sastra (Literary Pioneer) for his role in promoting Malay as a national language. Just five weeks later, however, Samad's world came suddenly crashing down.

Samad's influential positions and his proximity to Razak, not to mention his own predilection for intrigue, inevitably drew him into po-

litical power struggles. Just as inevitably, these power struggles created enemies. In important elections, his newspaper backed certain UMNO candidates and opposed others. In the *New Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*, he railed against corruption in government and, for example, led a campaign against the UMNO Youth Wing (Pemuda UMNO) for exploiting its insider position to gain favored business contracts in connection with building the new national university. When the Razak government's Anti-Corruption Agency launched an investigation against Harun Idris, a rising star in UMNO, Samad refused to use his influence to conceal the investigation or rein it in. (Aside from his ties to Razak, one of Samad's in-laws was deputy director of the corruption agency.) Harun Idris was eventually convicted of corruption and jailed. He struck back by accusing Samad of being a communist. This was a charge that resonated with certain UMNO power seekers such as Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, the minister of home affairs and an ardent Cold Warrior and anticommunist.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew was cracking down on dissident voices in his now one-party state. In June 1976, he arrested Hussein Jahiddin, the editor of *Berita Harian* in Singapore and someone Samad had personally vouched for. Azmi Mahmud, a *Berita Harian* reporter with close family ties to Samad, was also arrested. Hussein and Azmi had been writing editorials critical of Singaporean policies, infuriating Lee. "But Harry thought these fellows wouldn't dare write these articles without my encouragement," says Samad. "He thought I was still in control in Singapore. So he had these fellows arrested. He made these fellows confess that I was behind it all."

Indeed, under investigation by the Lee authorities, Hussein and Azmi confessed to being party to a communist plot to undermine the governments of Singapore and Malaysia; they implicated Samad. A few days later, on 22 June 1976, at the recommendation of Home Affairs Minister Ghazalie, Prime Minister Hussein Onn approved the arrest of Samad under the country's Emergency-era Internal Security Act, under which a person may be detained indefinitely without charge or trial. Samad was then induced to read a televised confession that (as the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported it) "he had for years infiltrated and influenced the top leadership of the United Malays Nationalist [sic] Organization under the direction of a Jakarta communist." Samad says, now, "I didn't write that." But power was not on his side. Ghazalie Shafie had his way, and Samad spent the next four and a half years in jail.

For some eight months, Samad was held in a solitary cell, after which he was transferred to a house and then back to a cell again. The switching went on throughout his incarceration without any particular rhyme or reason. "They just want to disorient you," he says. "You enjoy living in a bungalow for a few months, then you go back to a cell, in solitary—just to break you down mentally." Meanwhile, the family's bungalow in Kuala Lumpur grew quiet. As Hamidah noted to Samad's longtime friend and

collaborator, Usman Awang, "We have very few guests." Most of Samad and Hamidah's ten children were grown or nearly grown. But the youngest daughter, Nur Azrina, was still in grade school, where children taunted her as a child of a 'communist.'"

By 1981, the political winds had shifted again and onetime UMNO outcaste, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, had gained control of the party and become prime minister. "It was Mahathir who insisted that I should be released," says Samad. Samad was required to make a second televised confession admitting to having been led astray by communists and to having now seen the light. Home Affairs Minister Ghazalie Shafie pronounced, "Samad Ismail has responded satisfactorily to rehabilitation and has turned over a new leaf." And suddenly Samad was free again.

Almost immediately, Samad was received back into Malaysia's media world. For eight months, he served as consultant to the *Star* newspaper group and then rejoined the New Straits Times Group as editorial adviser, a position he held until his formal retirement in 1987. His new post gave him a high profile but little authority. "My function was to improve the quality of the paper," he says. "But I didn't have direct dealings with the staff." The company had grown larger and more complex and impersonal in his absence. The office politics troubled him. "I was quite disappointed." Nevertheless, he threw himself into his work like a demon. Ahmad Sebi, who was a senior editor at *Berita Harian* at the time, wrote, "His colleagues can testify to the fact that he works seven days a week...he is still at it. He is in the newspaper office all day and seems to be everywhere at the same time, yet he gets his work done." In the midst of his work for the New Straits Times Group in 1984, Samad also planned the news division for Malaysia's first private television station, TV Three.

Improbably, given his recent vilification and incarceration, Samad now assumed a new public role—that of paterfamilias of Malay journalism. In 1987, the national university he had helped to establish named him an honorary doctor of letters. The university's citation lauded him as a giant in the field of Malaysian journalism and literature, a "champion of the Malay language, and a political activist and genuine nationalist." His post-detention position at the *New Straits Times*, it said, "cleared all accusations made against him during his detention." In 1992, he was knighted and given the title Tan Sri by the king of Malaysia himself, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Samad quipped to reporters: "Now I don't have to look over my shoulder to see if I am being followed."

After retirement, Samad continued to write prolifically, producing a continuous stream of articles on public issues in both English and Malay and two regular columns in Malay—one for *Berita Harian* and the other for *Nusantara*. He lectured widely on language and journalism and expressed himself vividly on matters that troubled him, such as corruption in government, the spoliation of Malaysia's forests and rivers and other examples of opportunistic materialism, and the need to enhance

and protect the rights of Muslim women. So fast and dramatically have political events reshaped the region of Samad's youth that some of his onetime dreams—such as Nusantara or a Greater Indonesia—now seem implausible at best. But Samad seems to have accepted the alternative outcome. "Now," he says, "you find a different Nusantara." It is found in economic ties and in cultural affiliations that transcend states and religions. "You can recognize in a Filipino or a Malay or in an Indonesian a commonness...the way you talk, the way you dress—in cultural norms and values."

At the same time, Malaysia has become Samad's nation. He has embraced it. And much that is on his mind these days has to do with Malaysia and with the place of journalism and the press within it. In his younger days—not so long ago—journalists acted at the center of community life; they played a key role in shaping the destiny of their still-colonized societies, "exhorting the people to change their traditional ways and their thinking, urging them on to accept progress and modernism." As Samad said in accepting his honorary degree in 1987, "my contemporaries in journalism had to assume...the twin roles of elite and political agitator." In this, he says, journalists and politicians worked hand-in-hand; under colonial rule, both were equally powerless. Now things have changed. "The journalist naturally has to persevere in his role as the champion of causes," he says. "The politician now has power firmly in his hands." This creates tension.

At the same time, journalism itself has been transformed. In his lifetime, newspapers moved from handset type to the Linotype machine to computers. And newspaper organizations have grown from small cash-strapped enterprises to large media conglomerates. In his youth, Samad and his fellow reporters made little money and lived lives akin to those of the community in general. Now, he says, journalists are "middle class" and lead lives that are "alien to the mass of urban workers and rural peasantry." Journalism has become less of a vocation and more of an occupation defined by certificates and diplomas. "At best," he says, "journalism is increasingly seen as a craft that places emphasis on professional skill; at worst, it is alarmingly becoming only a nine-to-five job."

Furthermore, in his early newspapering days, it was easier than now to say who, exactly, a newspaper was speaking to, and for. *Utusan Melayu* was unselfconsciously a voice for Malays and for Malay aspirations. But newspapers of national stature today, such as the *New Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*, cannot speak for one constituency alone. Indeed, Malaysia has a multiplicity of voices, says Samad, "that of the urban elite, the liberal, the Western-oriented, of the locally educated, of those educated in the vernacular languages, or the rural rich and poor." What is needed is "a sense of judgment that is balanced and fair to the interests of every sector of the readership." Finding that "sense of judgment" is the responsibility of the press.

Samad believes the press should be as free as possible but he is not a libertarian. The nation itself is too vulnerable, and too valuable. The right to freedom of expression (as with other rights) should be exercised "responsibly and judiciously." So even as he campaigns for greater media freedom, Samad argues that "our nation's survival as an independent and sovereign entity should be our supreme and overriding concern as citizens. Whatever our professional interests," he says, "the nation's need must prevail."

Samad's wife Hamidah, who became a renowned writer in her own right, died in 1991. He dedicated the first installment of his memoirs to her. Their ten children, all grown, are settled in Malaysia and Singapore (which Samad can now visit again after being banned for fifteen years). In 1993, Samad married Habibah binte Abdul Hamid. As an elder statesman of Malaysian journalism and an astute political and social observer, Samad keeps his sensitive fingers close to the pulse of Malaysia. He has much to say about the health of the nation. But, if asked, he is just as likely to be terse and say, characteristically, "So far, so good."

James R. Rush

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