

Malaysia: Ahmad Boestamam - nationalist and 'people's tiger'

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Ahmad Boestamam - a staunch nationalist, a fiery politician, a respected journalist and a well-known novelist - has not been given due recognition and adequate coverage in our school history textbooks, most likely due to his anti-establishment and radical political views.

A little-known fact is that he was justifiably dubbed the "People's Tiger" (*Utusan Zaman*, March 12, 1967) as he ardently championed the interests of the "exploited common people" and the creation of a more egalitarian Malayan society, besides seeking Malaya's independence.

In a similar vein, Abdul Samad Ismail, a renowned Malaysian journalist, writer and editor, has described Boestamam as "a fighter and a leader of the Malays whose place in the history of the country was well and truly deserved." Hence, this article seeks to accord Boestamam his rightful place in our nation's history.

Boestamam was born Abdullah Thani (Sani) Raja Kechil into a family of Minangkabau descent on Nov 30, 1920 at Kampung Behrang Ulu, about 12km north of Tanjung Malim, Perak. He attended Anderson Secondary School in Ipoh in the 1930s. Boestamam, however, did not complete his secondary school education as he failed his Junior Cambridge examination which he sat for in 1937.

In 1939, Boestamam started work as an English to Malay translator and a sub-editor with the Penang based bi-weekly *Saudara*. Subsequently, he took up employment with several Malay newspapers, including the *Warta Kinta* in Ipoh, *Majlis* in Kuala Lumpur and the *Utusan Melayu* in Singapore.

Boestamam left *Utusan Melayu* in early 1941 after its management refused to increase his salary. Thereafter, he became a special correspondent with *Warta Malaya* which Ibrahim Yaacob, the founder president of Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), had purchased. Boestamam also became the assistant secretary of KMM which fought for the independence of Malaya through non-cooperation with the British.

As a journalist, attained fame as an "agitator" who championed the need for the Malay masses to unite and become a dominant force by transcending their ethnic origins and loyalty to their respective states, to protect their interests vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, and to demand for the immediate independence of Malaya.

Fearful that the KMM might collaborate with Britain's enemies, its leaders and followers, including Boestamam, were arrested by the British authorities in December 1941 and imprisoned in Singapore. Boestamam and the other members of KMM were released in February 1942 after the Japanese had captured Singapore.

Boestamam was a shrewd and pragmatic nationalist. To maintain cordial relations with the Japanese

authorities in Malaya, he formed in 1943 a semi-military force, Barisan Pemuda Melayu, which could act as volunteer soldiers for the Japanese. To placate the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, Boestamam secretly formed in 1944 a closely-knit anti-Japanese organisation, Gerakan Kiri Tanah Air.

For the record, as stated by Gordon P Means, a Western political scientist, Boestamam was highly unlikely to be a communist despite having close dealings with the Malayan Communist Party. Neither did he have any genuine desire for the communists to assume control in Malaya.

It is also worth mentioning that Boestamam adored the struggle and oratory skills of Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian revolutionary who endeavoured to liberate India from British rule during the Second World War. Just as his idol, Subash Chandra Bose, Boestamam was willing to work with any party to achieve his aims.

Struggle for independence

After the Second World War, Mokhtaruddin Lasso (one of MPAJA's leaders) and Boestamam established Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay Nationalist Party, or MNP) on Oct 17, 1945 in Ipoh.

During its formation, Boestamam was a member of the party's General Committee heading the youth section. In 1946, Boestamam became the secretary of MNP which championed immediate independence for Malaya through a merger with Indonesia and the creation of a republic.

To speed up the attainment of Malaya's independence, by force if necessary, Boestamam took the bold step of establishing Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API), a left-wing youth organisation, on Feb 17, 1946 in Ipoh. API was initially the youth section of MNP but later operated virtually as a separate entity. It provided paramilitary training for its members who adorned special uniforms and sang patriotic marching songs. API's membership was open to youths between the ages of 18 to 35.

Aimed at gaining support for his political struggle, Boestamam published a 26-page booklet, 'Testament Politik API', dated Dec 21, 1946, with its clarion call, 'Merdeka with Blood'. API advocated the formation of a democratic government, a classless society and a state-controlled economy for the benefit of the common people. API's influence spread quickly and its membership increased from 2,560 at the end of 1946 to about a sizeable 10,000 in mid-1947.

Due to API's radical nature and burgeoning influence, Boestamam was again arrested in April 1947 on a charge of sedition for urging the Malays to use violence to secure Malaya's independence. He was convicted of the charge, paid a fine of \$1,400 and resumed the leadership of API.

Subsequently, Boestamam was detained without trial on July 1, 1948 under the Emergency Regulations Ordinance 1948. API was banned by the British on July 17, 1947. After spending seven years in prison, Boestamam was released on June 28, 1955.

Upon his release from imprisonment, Boestamam formed Partai Rakyat Malaya (People's Party of Malaya) on Nov 11, 1955 with the support of API's former members. Its main aim was to secure full independence of Malaya through constitutional means.

Partai Rakyat Malaya formed a coalition with the Labour Party of Malaya led by another MNP veteran, Ishak Muhammad on Aug 31, 1957. This became known as the Malayan People's Socialist Front and was formally launched on Aug 31, 1957. Boestamam was elected as president with DS Ramanathan of the Labour Party as vice-president.

Subsequently in 1959, Boestamam was elected to the House of Representatives as a Socialist Front member after winning the Setapak parliamentary seat.

In February 1963, Boestamam was arrested under the Internal Security Act for allegedly supporting the Brunei Revolt which broke out on the night of Dec 7, 1962 and the Indonesian confrontation with Malaysia in 1963. Boestamam was released in January 1967.

In 1968, Boestamam formed Partai Marhaen Malaysia (Proletarian Party of Malaysia), a splinter organisation of Partai Rakyat Malaya. The party did not make much headway and Boestamam soon faded away from the political scene.

As a novelist under the pen name of Ruhi Hayat, Boestamam wrote at least 10 novels between 1956 and 1969, including 'Gelap Menjelang Terang' (1956), 'Kabus Pagi' (1958), 'Pacar Merah Malaya' (1959), 'Lorong Seribu Liku' (1964), 'Garis Hitam Membelah Langit' (1966), 'Konfrontasi' (1967), 'Sorong Makan Tarik Makan' (1967), 'Ali Sastro' (1968), 'Malam Tak Berbintang' (1968) and 'Rumah Kaca Digegar Gempa' (1969).

In 1970, Boestamam was appointed as editor-in-chief of *Utusan Sarawak*, the oldest and only Malay newspaper in Sarawak. In 1976, Boestamam was awarded the Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak medal which carries the title, "Datuk". He died on Jan 19, 1983 in Kuala Lumpur.

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