



### About the Author

Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad is a former member of parliament for Kok Lanas in Kelantan and a former deputy minister. He was political secretary to Tun Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister, from 1963 to 1974, the first appointment of its kind in the country. He was also a Malaysian Special Envoy to the United Nations (1996–2000) and editor-in-chief of the *New Straits Times* until he was removed by the government in 2003. He most recently compiled and authored the best-selling *Dr Mahathir's Letters to World Leaders*, Vols 1 and 2. Tan Sri Abdullah was educated in Malay College Kuala Kangsar and attended Cambridge and Harvard University. He lives in Kok Lanas, Kuala Lumpur and London with his wife, Puan Sri Fauzah Darus.

# CONVERSATIONS WITH TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

The small, newly independent multi-racial country of Malaya had defied pundits' predictions that it would go down in flames. The Tunku declared himself "the happiest prime minister in the world, leading the happiest people in the world". The gracious, popular and charming former playboy aristocrat had pulled it off: the post-colonial experiment, Malaya, was a success story for the world.

He would lead his country to defeat a communist insurgency, face down big neighbours Indonesia and the Philippines, and enlarge the country to include Singapore and the vast, resource-rich, former colonial states of British Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak.

Then, the bloody race riots of May 13, 1969—a palace coup gone awry?—erupted in Kuala Lumpur and forced the Tunku from power. Among its *dramatis personae* was Abdullah Ahmad, long-time aide and political secretary to the Tunku's successor, Tun Razak. Two others, the 'ultra' Malays Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Musa Hitam, became prime minister and deputy prime minister of Malaysia in 1981. And yet the Tunku granted the author privileged access to himself between 1982 and 1984, the honeymoon years of the vaunted Mahathir-Musa administration.

visit our website at:  
[www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

**mc** Marshall Cavendish  
Editions



Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad

CONVERSATIONS WITH TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

Marshall Cavendish  
Editions  
**mc**

TAN SRI ABDULLAH AHMAD



# CONVERSATIONS WITH TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

*"People can say anything about me but none will  
accuse me of ever having been a hypocrite."*

*(continued from back cover)*

That period was to prove the prelude to Malaysia's political climate change. In these free-flowing, frank and surprisingly revealing conversations, taped but never before published, the Tunku takes on the challenge of being interrogated by the author on Tun Razak, May 13, Lee Kuan Yew, Sukarno, the Malay sultans, and the myriad seekers of the throne in the country and region. He reveals the identity of the man he had really wanted to succeed him, but could not.

The sophistication of the Tunku's personable, cosmopolitan ways is apparent in how his prescient observations ring true today. Presented here as when it was first written, and judiciously updated, this book serves as a unique and invaluable guide to the ever-evolving social, cultural, political and economic forces buffeting the present and future country, and the region.

For Review only

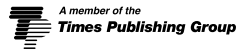
CONVERSATIONS WITH  
**TUNKU**  
ABDUL RAHMAN

TAN SRI ABDULLAH AHMAD

© 2016 Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited  
Reprinted 2017

Cover and design by Bernard Go Kwang Meng  
Cover photo and photos on pages 121–129: Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia

Published in 2016 by Marshall Cavendish Editions  
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



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, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300. E-mail: [genrefsales@sg.marshallcavendish.com](mailto:genrefsales@sg.marshallcavendish.com). Website: [www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices  
Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA  
• Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

## **National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Names: Abdullah Ahmad, Datuk.  
Title: Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman / Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad.  
Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2016]  
Identifiers: OCN 939856841 | ISBN 978-981-4634-14-4 (paperback)  
Subjects: LCSH: Abdul Rahman, Tunku, Putra Al-Haj, 1903-1990 Interviews. | Malaya--History--Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960. | Malaysia--Foreign relations--Singapore. | Singapore--Foreign relations--Malaysia. | Malaysia--Politics and government 1963-  
Classification: LCC DS597.2 | DDC 959.5051--dc23

Printed in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

*For the Tunku, still the Greatest Malaysian.*

## CONTENTS

Letter of Affirmation from National Archives of Malaysia	6	05 The Six Countries and the Neutralisation of Southeast Asia	106
A Note from the Author	7	PART TWO: The Peoples of Malaysia	131
Looking Back and Forward: Foreword by Dr Mahathir Mohamad	9	06 Elected Majesty, the Sultans and The Malays	132
Opening a Time Capsule—and Pandora's Box? by Ooi Kee Beng	13	07 The Communists	145
Gen Y and the Tunku by Khoo Kay Kim	17	08 Memories and Reflections	154
At the Crossroads of Nostalgia and Change by Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz	21	Epilogue: A Window on the Future	205
Preface	25	About The Author	211
PART ONE: The Foundation of Malaysia	29	Afterword	213
01 Introduction: Tunku, the Virtuoso	30	Acknowledgements	215
02 Brunei: Not the End of a Dream	46	Index	217
03 The Indonesian Confrontation: A Tale of Two Malays	53		
04 The British, Lee Kuan Yew and the Malaysia Split	76		

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



DIRECTOR GENERAL  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF MALAYSIA  
MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND CULTURE MALAYSIA  
JALAN TUANKU ABDUL HALIM  
50568 KUALA LUMPUR.



Tel : 603-6209 0600 saamb/ext.602  
Faks: 603-6201 3100  
Official Portal: www.arkib.gov.my

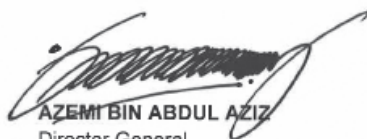
### LETTER OF AFFIRMATION

I am pleased that these abridged conversations between the nation's founding father, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, and Dato' Abdullah Ahmad (as he then was) have at last been published. Copies of the recordings were deposited with the National Archive in the early 1980s.

The conversations were originally recorded on tape, and have been transferred to computer discs. The original tapes are deposited with the archives of Trinity College, Cambridge University.

The book is a summary of the key moments, characters, events and issues during the Tunku's life and times, including his frank views on the towering figures of early Malaysian politics. When the full conversations are made public, a sharper and fuller portrait of the Tunku, his strengths and drawbacks, as well as that of his colleagues and contemporaries, will emerge.

I certify that the copies of the recordings made by the National Archives of the Tunku's conversations with Dato' Abdullah Ahmad are true and have always been in its possession. The complete recordings of their conversations will be made available after the demise of Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad.



AZEMI BIN ABDUL AZIZ  
Director General  
National Archives of Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur  
March 11, 2015

*Archives: The Essence Of Time*



I first met the Tunku in 1957, and indirectly worked for him in 1963 when I was appointed political secretary to his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein.

These conversations are excerpts from the many more hours we spent together, the recordings of which are now in the National Archives of Malaysia and will be made available to the public.

I enjoyed talking to the Tunku because he was a gracious, suave, generous and hospitable man. In short, he was always good company and a very nice person.

The Tunku died on December 6, 1990, aged 87. As I grow older, reflecting on these conversations now seems natural. At the least, reference to the founder of Malaya and Malaysia should serve to highlight how his leadership and policies have stood the test of time—and the path we, as a nation, have chosen for ourselves.

This book is published as it was written in 1985, with the aim of transporting the reader to as close as possible to the people, places and events spoken about, which have shaped and continue to resonate in our lives now.

Abdullah Ahmad  
Kuala Lumpur  
March 11, 2016



For Review only

## LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

FOREWORD BY DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

When I became prime minister in 1981, the first thing I did was to release twenty-one people who had been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for political reasons. One of them was Abdullah Ahmad, the former political secretary of Tun Razak when he was prime minister and deputy prime minister.

After his detention he was able to get a Master of Letters from Cambridge University. In 1985 he was made a fellow of Harvard University's Centre for International Affairs. It was during the latter period that he conducted his many conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

When he was done, he had written up the material with a view to publishing a book. I believe it is of importance to Malaysia's historical record. It is not often that the public gets to know the private thoughts of their leaders.

What follows are the Tunku's inner thoughts, experiences, trials and ordeals when he was Prime Minister of Malaya, and then Malaysia, from 1957 to 1970. They are candid glimpses of the man, and his unvarnished assessment of those with whom he worked, and had to work.

Now, nearly forty years after it was first written and twenty-six after the Tunku's passing, the book's publication seems natural, and without doubt timely, given the uncertainties besieging Malaysia's leadership and

# For Review only

the rudderless state we are in. From what I gather Tan Sri Abdullah had painstakingly revisited and re-verified the material despite his medical condition and regular treatments he had been undergoing.

I am glad this book has finally seen light of day. The conversations here address, among other things, the makings of a good leader and an inclusive, efficient and uncorrupt government. There is no reference to the Western canonical political thinkers of the age, and for most part it refers only to 'native wisdom' through Tunku's personal recollections, common sense, intuition, and what he thought would work at the time he helmed Malaya and Malaysia. His experiences are tangible and time-tested.

The conversations are an extraordinary read as they highlight the initial ground rules of Malaysian politics in a persuasive way. These are the assumptions and ideas that now seem unfashionable—but fashion, as everyone knows, is a passing fancy. The issues in Malaysian politics, its problems and its joys, are perennial. Only its players and their responses change.

I have also advised Tan Sri Abdullah to write about his time with Tun Razak from the years 1962 to 1976, with whom he started as the latter's first political secretary. With our nation at a crossroads, there is an urgent need to reappraise the course the country has been pointed towards. These conversations with Tunku could help in resetting the country back on an even keel.

The conversations with Tun Razak, which he should write quickly, will bring back happy memories of Malaysians living in harmony when the government was stable and efficient, when corruption and kleptocracy were not yet the culture.

Such a book should expose to the Malaysian electorate the alternative trajectories in the next general election, a crucial one which, if held, will surely be a turning point in Malaysian history.

Tan Sri Abdullah should be able to write with authority on the Tunku, and on Tun Razak especially, given his closeness to them and that he walked the same corridors of power then.

Malaysians generally are reluctant to publicly talk of their experience and knowledge of their leaders. Therefore in writing these books, Tan Sri Abdullah has done the nation a great service.



Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad  
Putrajaya  
March 11, 2016

---

Tun Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad was the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003. His career spanned almost 40 years and he remains an active political figure after his retirement.

For Review only

## OPENING A TIME CAPSULE— AND PANDORA'S BOX?

OOI KEE BENG

This book is a time capsule. And like all time capsules, it contains not only reminders of things forgotten and of things some may wish to forget, but also revelations.

In general, Politics is a forward-looking project, while History considers what has been. One tries to decide the future while the other tries to define the past. In the case of this surprising book by Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, although it is built on interviews with a key historical figure who was past his political prime, it is a document that, if it had been published in 1985 as originally intended, would almost certainly have had political repercussions greater than the author might have wished for.

As things worked out, the book did not see the light of day—until now, thirty years later.

Yet strangely, this allows it to assume a position that books published soon after being written cannot do. Like Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's autobiography, *Drifting into Politics* (ISEAS, 2015), published recently forty-two years after his demise, this present book will interest more than just historians. In fact, it should fixate the attention of anyone interested in Malaysia because such books are rare, and therefore intriguing in their revelations. They provide information from the misty spaces of political history, and force us to rethink lazy assumptions about the past.



# For Review only

The fact that the much younger interviewer was a significant actor in the corridors of power during the last years of the aged interviewee's political career and after, adds depth to the dialogue.

"Dollah" Ahmad has always been a thespian figure on the Malaysian stage, as the reader will surely glimpse, not only in the queries he puts to the Tunku, but also in the narrative he provides to contextualise the subjects discussed. Not one to shy away from a prickly issue, he pushes the retired Bapa Malaysia with sensitive questions, as one would expect of an accomplished journalist. To me, the narrations he embeds the interviews in, are of special interest, both for insight into how a top Malay journalist of that era, like him, thought; and for a glimpse into the labyrinthine world the Tunku often had to manage.

I shall not play the spoiler here and reveal matters that are best read in context. God knows I can hardly restrain myself. But as a teaser, I will pick two of many points which I learned from reading the manuscript, and which I find to be of abiding interest. One is the claim that President Sukarno of Indonesia initiated the confrontation against Malaysia at its founding, not merely because he wished for Sabah and Sarawak to be part of Indonesia, but more importantly, because he feared—reasonably or not is not the issue—that Sumatra would also consider joining the expanded federation in the future should Malaysia succeed as a federation. Another is the idea that the eventual separation of Singapore from Malaysia was to the Tunku a foregone conclusion from the very start, and that the prize that he was really after were Sabah and Sarawak.

Tunku Abdul Rahman passed away in 1990 at the age of 87, twenty years after he retired as prime minister of Malaysia. From 1955 until 1970, he was the wily leader who led Malaya to independence in 1957 at a difficult time of inter-ethnic tension and communist insurgency; expanded it into Malaysia in 1963 through the addition of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, and in the face of Indonesian and Filipino

opposition; and oversaw the peaceful separation of Singapore from the federation in 1965. These were no mean feats but be that as it may, his exceptional political standing could not help him survive politically the racial riots of May 13, 1969, and he retired in September 1970.

Bitter though he obviously was over what he considered treachery from within his party, and saddened by the inability of his erstwhile supporters to appreciate the imperatives of post-colonial nation building, the Tunku comes across nevertheless as too much of a Malay gentleman to be openly spiteful against those who had failed him.

Nevertheless, the prerogative of age allowed him to be frank about some of his former colleagues and party members. But even when his view of others was negative, it was never malicious. I am sure this book will help a new generation of Malaysians appreciate what kind of statesman the first prime minister of their country was.

Now that it is finally in the public domain, we will soon learn if this time capsule turns out to be a Pandora's Box. It wouldn't surprise me if it does.

---

Ooi Kee Beng is Deputy Director of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; and author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS 2006) and *In Lieu of Ideology: An Intellectual Biography of Goh Keng Swee* (ISEAS 2010).

## GEN Y AND THE TUNKU

KHOO KAY KIM

At a time when the younger generation of Malaysians are increasingly unaware of the country's history, Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad's book on his conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister, should prove very educational. That it was written about three decades ago will likely help to persuade the reader today to try to make a comparison between the first two decades of Malaysia's history and the present.

The book focuses on two aspects of Malaysia's history: its internal politics and its foreign relations. Malaysians today may know something of the country's current politics; so much information is being circulated on social media; but Malaysia's foreign relations today are unlikely to draw the attention of the people. The communist threat from both outside and within no longer exists. Even China is now on good terms with Malaysia, thanks to Tun Abdul Razak's late-May 1974 trip to China. Singapore today is no longer perceived by Peninsula Malaysia as a threat politically and economically whereas when ethnic riots broke out in Singapore in July 1964, the Tunku immediately expelled Singapore from Malaysia the next year, fearing a similar ethnic conflict in the Peninsula. But it did not prevent May 13, 1969, from occurring in Kuala Lumpur. Indonesia's politics too, which Malaysians used to follow closely, no longer draws the same attention here as Malaysians no longer hear of *Ganyang* Malaysia (Crush Malaysia).

# For Review only

Although Malaysia's current politics cannot but haunt the people, there is not likely a predisposition on the part of the people today to compare the country's leaders with those of the past because they do not know most of the personalities discussed in this book.

There are few Malaysians today who can claim to have as much inside knowledge of Malaysia's government as Tan Sri Abdullah, who served so many years as Tun Razak's right-hand man. What is said in this book, directly and indirectly, about the Tunku, may not be entirely new as he was a very high-profile leader. He was very comfortable with the people although a member of the Kedah royalty; and, being addicted to sports, especially football, he was often seen among the people. Indeed, throughout the period that he and Tun Razak led the country, Malaysia's sporting achievements were outstanding. Presently, our football team cannot beat Laos and Timor Leste.

The Tunku's relationship with other members of Malaysia's leadership is much less clear than what is revealed in Tan Sri Abdullah's book which, incidentally also throws light on other Malaysian leaders, not just Tun Razak but also, among them, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Ghazali Shafie and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is still very much in the limelight.

Malaya, not just Malaysia, was a very complicated country. There have been, since 1895, nine monarchies (*kerajaan*); each one is still different from the others. Young Malaysians are not exposed to these differences. It would be difficult for those outside Kedah to know what the Kedah society was like. Being older than even Melaka, which was founded in the late fourteenth century, Kedah's *nobat* was nevertheless derived from Melaka's and it was the same *nobat* which the Tunku used for the installation of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong in 1957.

It is interesting to note that this work was written like an academic exercise. There are numerous references. It should therefore prove very

useful to students who are doing research on Malaysia.

The book is likely to be even more revealing for non-Malays, as the cosmopolitan nature of the society tends to limit the knowledge of each community vis-a-vis that of another. The Tunku, although in no way communal in his outlook, nevertheless had to focus on z and its supporters. Finally, he had to step down because UMNO was no longer happy with the way he was managing the Malay community. Subsequently, it was Dr Mahathir who won over the Malays and he held the baton for slightly over two decades.

Young Malaysians should be educated about their own country because the future of the country depends on them. The present book should help them to look at things more intelligently. In the long run, there is no doubt that only intelligent *rakyat* can ensure the well-being of the nation in the years to come.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dato' Abdullah Ahmad is married to Datin Fauzah binte Mohamad Darus, counsellor at the Malaysian High Commission, London, the UK. They have three children. He lives alternately in London, Kok Lanas and Kuala Lumpur.

(June 30, 1985)

Dato' Abdullah Ahmad was born on July 4, 1937, in Machang, Kelantan, in Malaysia. He received his early education at Malay College Kuala Kangsar; Sultan Ismail College, Kota Bahru, Kelantan; and Mara Institute of Technology. He holds a degree of Master of Letters from Cambridge University, England.

Dato' Abdullah Ahmad has been for the past twenty-eight years a journalist, a press aide to Vice-President Lyndon Johnson of the United States, newspaper director, political advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister of Malaysia, member of parliament, assistant whip in parliament, deputy minister, and member of the UMNO (United Malays National Party) Supreme Council. He was Tun Razak's closest confidant for fourteen years. Dato' Abdullah was detained as a political prisoner under the Internal Security Act from 1976 to 1981.

He is a Fellow of the Centre for International Affairs, Harvard University, Fellow of the American Political Science Association, leader of Kok Lanas UMNO Division, member of the Kelantan State UMNO Liaison Committee and the Kelantan UMNO Election Committee. He is also a chairman of Sharikat Permodalan Kebangsaan Berhad (SPK), and SPK-Sentosa Corporation Berhad, director of Perwira Habib Bank (M) Berhad and several other companies.