

The towering intellectual

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Article

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He was a towering intellectual, an internationally renowned scholar and thinker. Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas passed away on Jan 23 after a heart attack. He was 78.

Born on Sept 17, 1928 in Bogor, Indonesia, his thoughts and contributions began from his early days in universities, both in Malaysia and Singapore.

He served as the fourth vice-chancellor (May 1988-January 1991) of University of Malaya, fully committed to the ideals of scholarship.

Earlier on, Syed Hussein was thrown into the limelight for his critical comments about the declining quality of education.

His last stint was at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia which began in 1999.

Among his more notable works, now regarded as classics, are *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (1977) and *The Sociology of Corruption* (1968).

They remain relevant today as Malaysia marches to become a developed nation.

With the added dimensions of globalisation and the resurgence of Islam, Syed Hussein's legacy is more so felt, given his concern about how we handle the challenges of modernisation.

His critical assessment about "the captive mind" of the post-colonial world seems to be as relevant today as it was when he first introduced it. In *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, for example, Syed Hussein raised pertinent questions about Western biases towards Asian society.

In particular, analysts highlighted how Syed Hussein studied the dynamics of Malay politics during and after the colonial period and noted the colonial fabrications of the identity of the colonised natives, including the Malays.

In fact, the late Edward Said (1935-2003), author of another monumental work, *Orientalism*, considered Syed Hussein's work as highly original and had in some ways influenced his own masterpiece.

Admittedly, through such fabrications, stereotypes were created shaping the eventual perception of the natives themselves. No less among them are the views expressed in the *Malay Dilemma* (1970), one which Syed Hussein took exception to.

In other words, Syed Hussein attempted "to deconstruct Western ideologies in order to detect contradictions in colonial strategies that continue to inform the policies of post-colonial governments", wrote a Stanford-based analyst.

"Generally speaking, the colonial scholars' views of the natives were denigrating and very much loaded with colonial interests," Syed Hussein was quoted lamenting.

Ironically, the natives somehow seemed doomed to a self-fulfilling prophecy when they themselves accepted the denigrating stereotypes heaped upon them and gradually grew to live by them.

Other works that Syed Hussein was noted for dealt with corruption. This can be noticed from the other titles that he published, namely *The Problem of Corruption* (1986), *Corruption: Its Nature, Causes and Functions* (1990) and *Corruption and the Destiny of Asia* (1999).

He is also responsible for the section on "corruption" in the *Oxford Companion to World Politics* (1993).

Here, too, it is apparent that Syed Hussein's views have not been taken seriously by society at large.

Still, another passion of Syed Hussein was his struggle for justice and multiculturalism. He was, after all, related to Datuk Onn Jaafar who demonstrated similar ideals long before.

In parts, this led him to venture into the world of politics to become a prominent founding member and founder-leader of a new political party in 1968.

Though barely a year-old, the party won major seats in the north during the historic 1969 general election.



However, disillusioned with what took place subsequently, Syed Hussein formed another party in 1972, but it was short-lived, leaving another set of his ideals unfulfilled.

Notwithstanding all these, being the illustrious giant he was, endowed with the genuine and sincere intents of a scholar, Syed Hussein was relentless.

He continued uncompromisingly to advance his ideals and became a much-sought after advocate, hallowed by his untarnished determination, outstanding credentials and, above all, his utmost humility.

Needless to say, his demise leaves a noticeable vacuum in the fledgling intellectual community in Malaysia.

Fortunately, as with all giants, all is not lost. The uniqueness and freshness of his ideas, whose time have come, will continue to inspire many to push ahead the principles and values he nurtured.

Undoubtedly, he remains a benchmark for all well-meaning academics and students of higher learning in the struggle to liberate "the captivated mind" in tandem with the national mission to produce towering Malaysians.

As we approach 50 years of nationhood, Syed Hussein will go down as an intellectual hero who refused to submit to, what is termed as, "infantile mimicking of Western theories and ideas" — a phenomenon now rampant among us.

We must continue to realise some his-unfulfilled ideals and dreams. *Al-fatihah*.

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