

REMEMBERING THE FIRST RECTOR OF IIUM, TAN SRI DR. MUHAMMAD ABDUL RAUF, 1983-1987.

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Alhamdulillah, by the grace of Allah SWT, I am among the most fortunate students of TSMAR who had been into contact with *al-Marḥūm* from 1963 until 2002 in four major periods of my academic life. The first was in 1963, when I was a first-year student in the University of Malaya. He was teaching us basic Arabic in the first term, and Islamic history as well as Qur'an and *Sunnah* to the senior students. We were impressed with his congenial personality, pleasant demeanor and his teaching method which made learning Arabic fun and easy.

The second contact happened in New York City when I was studying at Columbia University from 1968 until end of 1975. TSMAR was the Director and *Imam* at the Islamic Cultural Center in Manhattan. His family was living on the 3rd Floor of the ICC, and because I knew his son Br. Feisal as my good friend (since 1960-1961 when he was studying at Victoria Institution when I was in Form Six there), I was often invited by Br. Feisal to have refreshment or meals in their house. Brother Feisal was studying engineering at C.U. when I was there, and as President of Muslim Students Association, C.U. he was actively involved in Islamic religious activities to which I was drawn. As a friend of Feisal, I looked forward to being invited to his house because his mother, Puan Sri Buthainah was a great cook and she spoke Malay fluently. I really enjoyed my relationship with TSAR, Br Faisal and the other family members. The relationship with TSAR was interrupted after he was transferred to become the new Director of the Islamic Center in Washington DC. However, I remember a tragic event when he was the *Imam* in Washington. It was when the IC was forcibly brought under the control of pro-Iranian dissidents and TSAR was detained by the intruders. Thank God, the intervention of the Washington police saved TSAR and the IC. After that incident, the pro-Iranian dissidents started to offer their Friday prayers in the street outside the IC even in winter.

My third contact with TSAR which proved to be the most important and most enduring as far as I was concerned, was when he became the first Rector of IIUM in October 1987. I was no longer a student, but an academic staff of the new International Islamic University. With his experience as the Principal of *Kolej Islam Malaya* (Muslim College Malaya), Head of the Department of Islamic Studies, UM, and professor of Islamic Studies in the university in Al-Ain, UAE, TSAR was the right choice to be the first Rector or Vice Chancellor of

IIUM which was following the British academic system at the time. He was well-known to many people and political leaders in Malaysia because of his reputation as an international Islamic scholar from al-Azhar, with a PhD from University of London, who could speak English and French fluently, and was highly regarded by the late Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn. They knew of his significant contribution to the development and progress of Islamic religious education in Malaysia at the secondary and tertiary levels. He was responsible for reforming the syllabi of Islamic religious knowledge in Malaysia's government schools, and his books on the teaching of Arabic, Islamic History and Islamic thought written in English were used in many Muslim countries.

It so happened that many of the academic staff of IIUM also had known him as an able administrator cum Islamic scholar and some were his former students and colleagues in UM. In fact he was liked by everybody because of his friendly, polite, gentle, simple and humble personality. Throughout his career, he has demonstrated his great capacity for patience, perseverance, resilience, self-restraint, selflessness and clemency. It was no wonder that he endeared very easily to the Malay staff and students; besides, he knew Malay culture very well, spoke Malay with them and had lived amicably amongst the Malay community for many years in Klang and then later in Petaling Jaya. His wife and children, especially Br. Feisal, were also very popular with the local people. It was most unfortunate that a terrible thing happened to him in the first year of his residence in Section 17, Petaling Jaya. TSAR made it his habit to drive by himself before dawn to pray the Fajr prayer at the nearby Kolej Islam Mosque. One morning, while he was about to drive the official car to the mosque, an intruder rushed up to him, pushed him out of the driver's seat and got away with the new BMW that the government bought for his official use. We were relieved to know that he was not injured in the incident, as the robber sped away with the BMW. But it was certainly a traumatic experience for the gentle Rector.

In the first two years of his rectorship, TSAR spent a lot of time communicating with heads of Muslim universities in the Arab world to make them aware of the existence of the IIUM in Malaysia and to inform them of the plans of the fledgeling Islamic university. Then he planned to make several official visits to several higher education institutions in Kuwait, Jordan and UAE to introduce IIUM to them, in the hope that academic or material assistance would be forthcoming from the affluent Arab states. *al-Marḥūm* Tan Sri Ahmad Ibrahim and myself were fortunate to be requested by TSAR to accompany him on this academic mission to Arab countries. Throughout the journey, TSAR was welcomed by the hosts and able to impress them as a profound thinker, as well as an exemplar of Islamic intellectuality, polite diplomacy, humility and universal humanitarianism. Back in

Malaysia, I remember enjoying becoming his assistant when he paid a courtesy call to the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra in Penang and had a nice lunch with Tunku, or whenever he went to Menara Petronas in KL, to see the late Tun Hussein Onn, who was the first President of IIUM, to get the former's signature or to get his official approval to travel overseas.

Whenever he had some free time in his office in the temporary Petaling Jaya campus of IIUM, he would be quietly working on a book, a translation of his earlier works, revision of his book on the teaching of Arabic or on some articles about Islamic issues. In addition to securing al-Azhar's support of IIUM by sending Arabic instructors or lecturers to IIUM, TSAR's tenure as the founding rector of IIUM helped to boost the academic credibility, Islamic and international identity and global ummatic relevance of the new university. With his wise and people-oriented leadership – he was just the opposite of an authoritarian task-master – he left IIUM after five years of pioneering headship on a stable, peaceful and conflict-free foundation. He stayed on in Malaysia for another two years as the academic advisor at KUSZA in Kuala Trengganu, thanks to the persistent persuasion of his beloved student and Kolel Islam Malaya pioneering alumnus, Tan Sri Dr Yusof Nor.

It should be noted that his greatest contribution to Malaysian religious education was during his first appointment in British Malaya in 1955 to become the Principal of the Muslim College Malaya in Klang. He raised the academic status of the College in the eyes of al-Azhar; improved the curriculum and produced quality graduates with PhDs from al-Azhar; managed to get the Shaikh Al-Azhar to visit it and to give his blessings to the College; helped the new nation of independent Malaya to improve the quality of Islamic religious education; wrote a few books in English on Arabic and Islamic history; presented a series of lectures on Islam in English over the radio which was appreciated by even the non-Muslim listeners; managed to persuade the government and the Council of UM, whose Vice Chancellor was Prof. Oppenheimer, to establish the Department of Islamic Studies in UM such that he had to manage two institutions at one and the same time. The first two Prime Ministers of independent Malaya used to seek his advise on religious matters and at least three Ministers of Education looked up to him for consultation on Islamic educational matters. Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was his student and among the few first batch graduates of the Department of Islamic Studies, UM, has this to say about his former teacher:

He was a scholar and a humanitarian who contributed immensely to the development of Islamic Studies in Malaysia and the development of a large class of ulamas steeped in the true Islamic tradition of being moderate and temperate.....But Dr Rauf's wisdom and counselling and his concern for Malaysia – for which the country is grateful – has also helped many of us under his care to act responsibly when carrying out our duties.

(Muhammad Abdul Rauf, *Autobiography of an Azharite American: From the Nile to the Potomac*. Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan: USIM Publisher, 2012, Foreword)

The fourth contact was when I was given the task of becoming the third Rector after Dato' Dr. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman vacated the position at the end of 1999. Both Br Feisal and his parents used to come to Kuala Lumpur on vacation from 2000- 2002. I considered it my duty to provide transport services of IIUM to TSAR or Puan Sri whenever they required such services. To get some materials for his writing purposes TSAR always mentioned the name of the librarian Puan Arfah to secure from the IIUM library whatever he needed. I would like to mention that whenever TSAR came to Kuala Lumpur, I did not miss the opportunity to buy good quality durians if they were in season and brought them to the apartment they were staying, because I knew very well that TSAR, Br Feisal and Puan Sri loved durians very much.

Finally, let me say a few words about the nature of TSAR personality. It would become obvious to those who get to know him up close, that TSAR was a Sufi-oriented Azhari scholar who not only memorized the Qur'an when he was ten years old, but in fact was accustomed to the devotional spiritual practices inherited from his father who was a local Sufi *shaikh*. Even as child he used to hear the *dhikr* sessions of the disciples of his father. In fact, the village they grew up in was also well-known for Sufi *tariqah* celebrations and traditions. To know a little bit more about the spiritual personality of TSAR, let us listen to what his son Imam Feisal who also inherited his father's spiritual genealogy in addition to his own adherence to a particular *tariqah* (Jarrash) has to say:

Dad was known for a religiosity steeped in and defined by deep spirituality and good ethics. It was not a piety that was self-serving, but that delighted in improving and transforming others towards their best behaviour, overlooking their shortcomings....He was never vindictive, leaving those who wronged him to Divine justice, and considered his patience in the face of other's wrongdoings toward him as a means of drawing down upon himself God's forgiveness for his own shortcomings.....His years of work were marked by many delightful stories of how he sought to transform hatred into love, healing broken friendships and relationships.....I wish he had written more about this, but he could not speak about his accomplishments without feeling that it was bordering on the sin of pride.

(Muhammad Abdul Rauf, *Autobiography of an Azharite American: From the Nile to the Potomac*. Bandar Baru Nilai, Negeri Sembilan: USIM Publisher, 2012, p.xvi.)