

**Sunday June 18, 2006**



**Ahmad Noordin made decisions  
without fear or favour.**

### **The man who made a difference**

A Malaysian hero passed away last week, sadly, unbeknownst to many. Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin Zakaria continued to talk the talk and walk the walk of personal integrity and public accountability long after he retired as Auditor-General in 1986. SHAILA KOSHY reports.

HE WAS physically a small man, just slightly over five feet. He was a familiar sight in the Section 11 neighbourhood in Petaling Jaya where he lived. But not many recognised this frail human being in his twilight years as he sauntered about with his walking stick.

Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin Zakaria was a giant among men. And a national icon in his very own right. But true to his gentle, unassuming nature, his passing away on June 14 went unnoticed. "He led a quiet life the last 15-16 years but yes, it says something about our society," lamented Dr Chandra Muzaffar. It is truly sad because Noordin's life is a testament to the saying "all it takes is one person to make a difference."

From the late 1970s through the 1990s, his name was synonymous with transparency, integrity and accountability whenever one talked of the Auditor-General's Report, the tightening of the Official Secrets Act, the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal and Election Watch.

Born on Feb 18, 1921, in Kg Seberang in Pasir Emas, Kelantan, Ahmad Noordin's family struggled with poverty and World War II put paid to

opportunity for higher education. During the Japanese Occupation, Noordin was a student teacher, a postal clerk, an interpreter, and even did 10 months as a Food Control Inspector at the British Military Administration Supply Department in Kelantan.

It was only in 1947, at the age of 26, he had the chance to take and pass the Senior Cambridge Certificate. It then took him just a year to pass all the government departmental examinations on law. Little did he know when he took up a two-year correspondence course in accounting that one day he would become the Auditor-General and that he would have the civil service shaking in fear as he sniffed through their accounts.

His 10 years (1976-1986) as Auditor-General did not make him popular either with the Executive or the civil service. In an interview last year, Noordin said his courage to seek the truth came from knowing that the position of Auditor-General was a protected one:

“Like dismissing a judge, there needs to be a Commission headed by a judge to hear the allegations at an inquiry before the A-G can be removed. “I was happy that since it was a difficult process, my position was almost safe and therefore I could carry out my duties without fear or favour.”

Noordin turned 85 in February. He leaves behind wife Puan Sri Fatimah Hashim, 75, eight children and more than 20 grandchildren and great grandchildren. His daughter Nasirah, 54, said he had been admitted to hospital on June 6 with a fever. “My father was fine physically before this but he had dementia and it got worse in January.

“I took early retirement last year so I could look after him,” said the former administrative executive. Asked what it was like having a public icon of integrity for a father, Nasirah said: “My father was our hero. We admired him greatly. “We were all with him when he drew his last breath.”

In his lifetime, Noordin was the recipient of many awards. While the *New Straits Times* named him “Man Against Corruption” in 1981, *The Star* readers selected him as “Malaysian of the Year” in 1984 for his role in the BMF inquiry. In 1985 he was conferred the Ramon Magsasay Award, in 1986 the Tun Razak award and in 2000 the National Integrity Award by Transparency International (TI) Malaysia.

“In 1983, Aliran gave its first 'Outstanding Malaysian' award to Noordin for his work as Auditor-General,” said one of its founders Dr Chandra, who is also said the president of the International Movement for a JUST World. “His greatest achievement was making the A-G's reports public. He gave meaning to the role the A-G's in making the government accountable to the public on how it spent public funds.”

Public Accounts Committee chairman Datuk Shahrir Samad also said Noordin was synonymous with integrity. “There was a great deal of respect for him and his concern for integrity. He was one of the better known A-Gs.” Shahrir,

who has himself been referred to as “Mr Integrity” in recent months since his resignation as Backbenchers Club chairman, laughed in embarrassment when asked about a comparison between the two of them.

“Oh no! I can't compare with him. He was outstanding. When he talked everyone listened.” Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang described Noordin as “an outstanding Auditor General who made his office a byword for accountability.” “He was outspoken, intrepid for accountability in his association and his role as chairman in the BMF inquiry. “That role made him most famous and he became a symbol for accountability and transparency.”

Senior lawyer Chooi Mun Sou, who was part of the three-man inquiry committee, had not met Noordin prior to their appointment to the committee that investigated the BMF-Carrian group financial scandal in Hong Kong. The third man was Ramli Ibrahim, senior partner of Peat Marwick Mitchell, now KPMG. “Noordin was a good man to work with. He was a humble and prayerful man.

“We were a private committee with no power to call for witnesses and we faced a lot of stress and pressure but he always maintained a calmness, never any histrionics,” said Chooi, who also worked with him on Election Trust together with the late Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Koon.

In 1990, Chooi, Dr Chandra, and senior lawyers Raja Aziz Addruse, Datuk Param Cumaraswamy went on to set up an ad-hoc Election Watch chaired by the late Tun Suffian Mohd Hashim. “I remember Noordin saying 'we must keep any eye on things, make sure there are no irregularities',” Chooi added. “We travelled together on road shows to speak on the essence of free and fair elections,” said Param.

“His lifestyle always reminded me of what I read of the life of Mahatma Gandhi, with one difference, I never saw him in a loincloth!” said the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers and former TI Malaysia president.

Param sums Noordin up aptly – “Humble and unassuming as he always was and as small as he was, Noordin personified the three essentials of good governance in public service namely: transparency, accountability and integrity.”