

## **Surin Pitsuwan: Scholar, Asean Internationalist**

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We saw the passing of statesman, scholar and diplomat extraordinaire Dr Surin Pitsuwan on Thursday. Born Abdul Halim Ismail on Oct 28, 1949, the son of Pondok Ban Tan in Nakhon Si Thammarat, southern Thailand, Surin broke with tradition. Instead of the usual religious studies in “Kedah, Kelantan, Mecca, Cairo or Indonesia”, as he put it, he moved abroad as a high-school student in Minnesota, the United States, on an American Field Service exchange scholarship in 1967-68.

He later returned to Bangkok to attend Thammasat University, and subsequently went to Harvard University, where he obtained his master’s degree and doctorate in Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies.

Surin was, and still easily is, the public face of Asean. He was Asean secretary-general from July 2007 to December 2012. Contrary to convention, Surin took an activist role and was involved in the peace process as facilitator and negotiator in the region. Writing in the op-ed page of this newspaper on June 17, 2011, he articulated the future of the region. He expressed a clear vision of Asean’s direction, hopeful of more innovative breakthroughs as it develops into an integrated, open, peaceful and outward-looking region.

He again narrated on peace at the recent two-day 4th World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilisation (WCIT 2017), organised by Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (USAS) in Ipoh, from Nov 20 onwards. After the opening of the Conference by Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir announced that the state government was mulling the setting-up of the Islamic Centre for Global Peace and Non-Violence at USAS in Kuala Kangsar, probably with Surin “to be appointed as the first chairman of the centre”. The proposal was among the motions tabled at the end of the conference.

Early in the conference, Surin in his capacity as former Asean secretary-general spoke on Global Peace, during the distinguished session following the Royal Keynote by the sultan. That was probably one of his last speaking engagements.

In the 3rd WCIT in 2016, also in Ipoh, he spoke of love, hate and extremism, making constant reference to “Perak Darul Ridzuan” — literally the abode of peace. He related that in his capacity as politician and diplomat, a government minister and as a Muslim, he felt a personal sense of responsibility to get Muslims to be engaged in peace and peace building.

His upbringing as budak pondok (reference to his religious school upbringing), through his sojourn at Harvard and other notable learning institutions, and his position as a minority in Thailand, and the “burden of being different from the rest of the budak

pondoks” have somehow, in his own words, “guided, motivated and inspired me for the past 40 years in public service”.

On Islamophobia, he reminded us that half of it “is our problem”. He asked could Muslims be the “force of motivation, innovation and the light of our forefathers during the time of Harun al-Rashid were the light of the world, when Europe was still in the dark (ages)”. The 1.5 billion Muslims should be that enlightened part of humanity. He had called on Muslims to redeem Islam in celebrating the diversity of opinion among the community, in not harbouring narrow and oppressive authorities. Diversity, differences and multiplicity need to be allowed.

He cited the sage and poet Jalaluddin Rumi, who, 700 years ago, alluded to change. Rumi had written that “merchants of old goods are gone, people who use to pedal outdated concepts, ideas and habit are gone, we are the new vendors, this is our bazaar”. The 21st century world is the bazaar that belongs to all. “Are we going through the old habit of thought?” he asked.

Surin’s career speaks for itself. His varied accomplishments from deputy prime minister and foreign minister to his stewardship of Asean are remarkable. He would have been the secretary-general of the United Nations, but Thai national politics and that fate were not on his side.

The internationalist that he was, the urbane Harvard-educated Surin was, at the same time, rooted in his community. Some years ago, I was at Pondok Ban Tan, his family’s madrasah, 750km south of Bangkok. There he told us — in his usually articulate American accented English — that the village surrounding the Pondok was populated by Malays from Kedah some 300 years ago. The consciousness of the notion of “homeland” is the larger extent of the Malay world. He grew up with the notion of Malaysia as the centre of the Malay world, and that the Pondok, was located at the periphery, in an environment much configured by the geopolitics of post colonialism and nationhood.

I last met Surin in Ipoh on Nov 20 recently after his session on global peace. I asked him, by way of an initial invitation, of being an eminent fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and International Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia. He reaction was “Please write to me, write to me, and I will respond”.

Al-Fatihah.

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