

# Remembering Saleh Chowdhury

## A journalist and freedom fighter

MANZOOR AHMED

**S**ALEH Chowdhury, veteran journalist, freedom fighter, and president of the Bangladesh chapter of Commonwealth Journalists Association, passed away on September 1, at age 82.

Journalism was his vocation and avocation; but in April 1971, he left behind his wife and a young son, journeyed to his home in Sunamganj bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya, and took up arms to fight the Pakistani predators. No matter that he had absolutely no military training or experience, and he was the gentlest human being. But when the call of conscience came, he had no hesitation about what to do.

Saleh was a fighter for freedom in all its dimensions—a fighter against human indignity and bigotry in all forms, and a true protagonist of a generosity of spirit that embraced all who came into his circle.

We first met in 1955 as first-year college students in Murari Chand College in Sylhet. Senior in age by a few years, he came up to me and struck an acquaintance that was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. He had many ideas—interesting, esoteric, and not often practical—but some struck a chord, and we became co-adventurers in many initiatives.

Deeply interested in writing and literature, Saleh recruited his friends

including myself to start a literary journal called *Ishara*, which did not last long. Co-curricular activities at the college were another area that attracted us. We participated in the activities of college students' unions, cultural events and even occasionally embarked on protests against certain political moves of the government or some inane administrative steps of the college authorities.

I had gone off with a scholarship to the American University of Beirut just before General Ayub's military coup and martial law in October 1958. Saleh completed his BA and moved to Dhaka in search of a job, preferably in a newspaper—not easy to come by if one aspired to get a living wage. A chance encounter with the Dean of the Department of Social Work of the Punjab University impressed the dean enough that led to an offer of a scholarship to Saleh for a master's level study at the Punjab University.

For Saleh, the Punjab University days brought into sharp relief the fault lines in the religion-based nation-state premise. At the same time, true to his generous and humanistic credos, Saleh developed an appreciation of the life and culture of the common people in Punjab, and formed some personal lifelong friendships.

On return from Lahore, with a few interesting detours, as a teacher in the newly established University Laboratory School of Dhaka University, and short



Saleh Chowdhury

journalistic forays into several newspapers, Saleh landed in the then *Dainik Pakistan*, later *Dainik Bangla*, where he continued till he retired as a Senior Editor.

On return from the battlefield in December 1971, with the declaration of victory, Saleh rejoined *Dainik Bangla* in his old position as the Assistant Editor. Characteristically, and ignoring advice from well-wishers, he never tried to parlay

his freedom fighter's credential to claim higher position or any other advantage. Many years later, in 2014, someone noticed that Saleh had never been paid the freedom fighter's allowance that was his entitlement. When the accumulated amount was finally paid, he donated it to build memorials for his fallen comrades in Sunamganj.

Saleh Chowdhury was a person of many talents. He dabbled in painting

and drawing, sculpture, poetry and literary writing, and writing for children. In any of these fields he could have excelled, if he concentrated hard enough. Restless and impatient, chronicling and commenting on the contemporary scene as a journalist seemed to suit him most. But he maintained a lively interest and engagement in all the other fields.

Saleh had a particularly close personal relationship with two of the giants of Bangla literature—poet Shamsur Rahman and novelist Humayun Ahmed. He compiled and edited several volumes of the collected works of Humayun, who called him *Nanaji*. As a colleague of Shamsur Rahman, who was for a time the editor of *Dainik Bangla*, a government-owned newspaper, Saleh was a counsel and confidante in navigating the often politically treacherous waters for a poet with sensitivity and integrity.

Saleh's creative works, such as a brief volume on his memoir and one on his interaction with Humayun Ahmed, were in a light and journalistic vein, in which his generous spirit, old-school aristocracy, and forgiving nature shone. He expressed the wish to write more on his experience as a journalist and the contemporary times, and his take on the creative talent and popularity of Humayun. This is not to be any more.

Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at BRAC University.

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## A very Singaporean dilemma in picking a president



WARREN FERNANDEZ

**S**INGAPOREANS will head to the polls to pick a new president on September 23.

Or maybe not.

For just how to go about selecting a successor to Dr Tony Tan, who completed his six-year term on

Thursday, now hangs in the balance. Whether there will be an electoral contest, or a walkover on Nomination Day on September 13, turns on the decisions of a six-man Presidential Election Committee (PEC), helmed by Public Service Commission chairman Eddie Teo.

The committee's role is to ensure that potential candidates for the job meet a set of qualification criteria set out by Parliament. These aim to ensure that anyone who aspires to the post has the experience, independence and financial nous to play its custodial role of safeguarding the nation's financial reserves and appointments to some key government posts.

Its work takes on greater significance this year since the election is a "reserved" one, meaning that for the first time, Parliament has mandated that only members of the country's Malay minority community will be eligible to run. It thought it necessary to do so as Singapore has not had a Malay president since 1970.

Pity Teo. For he now faces the unenviable task of having to decide which of several conflicting principles—each important in itself—he and his committee will uphold, or give more weight to. There is just no pleasing everyone, much as they might try.

Consider the principles at stake. First, that the presidency should be open to all races that make up this ethnically disparate nation, with each having a realistic chance of aspiring to the Republic's top job.

This is critical if the nation is to live up to its pledge of being "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion", a founding tenet that goes to the heart of Singapore's reason for being.

Second, that given the importance of the president's custodial powers, the best man or woman should be chosen for the job, in line with Singaporeans' strong belief in meritocracy, which has been reinforced in the

public mind over the past five decades of independence.

Third, that the president should be voted into office by the people, to give him the mandate to stand up to, and oppose if need be, an elected government that he thinks is unwisely drawing on the reserves or making dubious appointments to certain top jobs.

This provision that the president should be popularly elected was introduced in 1991 when the largely-ceremonial role of the President was expanded to include the new custodial powers over the reserves and appointments.

Prior to this, the President had been nominated by Parliament, which exercised its judgement to select a respected Singaporean, who was manifestly up to the job, and able to draw support from a wide spectrum of society. That practice, which was widely accepted, allowed for an informal rotation of

chosen by voters, there was just no turning back.

They also insisted that, for all the progress the country has made over the years towards developing a common Singaporean identity, it was foolhardy to shy away from the reality that race continues to be a powerful factor influencing electoral choices and outcomes.

Hence, they concluded that a minority candidate would face an uphill task in an open contest, which led to the decision to hold a "reserved" election.

This remains controversial, but to my mind, is neither unreasonable nor unrealistic. Yet, even if you accepted this contention, the solution proposed poses problems, as is manifested in the present quandary faced by Teo and his panel.

So far, only three candidates have expressed interest in standing for election, although there is an off-chance that more



Presidential candidate Madam Halimah receiving the Doctor of Laws degree from outgoing President Tony Tan Keng Yam in 2016.

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the post among the various races.

Last year, a proposal was floated by a constitutional review commission that the country revert to the old practice—which, in my view, would have been the best way to deal with the conflicting principles mentioned above—but it was shot down by government leaders. They argued that having moved to a system where the president was

might emerge over the next few days. But of these three, only one meets the criteria to do so. She is none other than Madam Halimah Yacob, who qualifies in light of her previous role of Speaker of Parliament, one of several top posts mentioned in the Constitution as an automatic pass to qualification.

The other two would-be contenders—Farid Khan, 61, chairman of a marine services firm,

and Salleh Marican, 67, chief executive of a listed property company—do not meet the requirement of having led a company with an average shareholder equity of USD 500 million in the three most recent years.

The presidential election committee is empowered to exercise discretion and could, if it chose, override these criteria and allow

Something, as they say, will have to give.

So what is Teo and his committee to do?

Well, the best that can be done under these difficult circumstances, in my view, would be for the committee to accept that there is only one candidate who qualifies under the present rules spelt out by Parliament. Madam Halimah might then be declared elected in office unopposed on Nomination Day. This seems to be the option most people are now anticipating, going by the betting talk making the rounds.

The committee might also point out that the next election, as spelt out in the constitution, will be an open one. The upshot of this is that while the new president might seem to have won an easy victory, she will have her work cut out for her. She will have to work hard at connecting with the people, upholding the office and generally doing a stellar job, in the hope of winning over some of the doubters, over time.

Then, six years from now, she should stand again, to defend her position in an open contest.

Given her nearly four decades of service to the community, as union leader, MP and Speaker, as well as her likeability and common touch, some believe she could well win on her own merits, perhaps even now.

But in any case, she should be ready to be put to the test in an open fight in a few years' time once people have had a chance to see her perform in the job.

This will not satisfy the purists. But it is a pragmatic approach that Singaporeans are familiar with. After all, Singapore has long had a system of Group Representation Constituencies, where newbie potential ministers and minority candidates are fielded as a team with established leaders to help them gain a foothold in Parliament. Once there, they are expected to establish their own credentials and defend their positions at subsequent polls. The same now goes for the coming presidential contest.

The GRC system have never been popular in some quarters, but many Singaporeans would grant, however grudgingly, that it has worked to achieve its purpose of ensuring ethnic representation in Parliament, thereby contributing to the hard-won racial harmony the country now enjoys.

The writer is Editor-in-Chief of Singapore's *The Straits Times*, and its sister publications in English, Malay and Tamil.

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