Arshad: The man and his mission

HIGHLY HONOURED:
In mastering himself, he helped change the nation’s destiny

It was a gathering among friends, acquaintances and family members. They came from far and near. Some have not met him for years. Others were representing those whose paths have crossed with him over many years. Some 200 of us gathered to honour Tan Sri Arshad Ayub, but instead, felt honoured by him.

I have known him for many years. But, I have always been an admirer of his intellect.

I was fortunate to have worked with him on a board of a public-listed company. I have seen him in action. He was always tough, forthright, firm, but fair, and just. He will scrutinise minute details, literally, with a magnifying glass. I joked with other board members that I suspected forensic auditing was, in fact, invented by him.

But, he is, first and foremost, a gentleman. He is always the fatherly figure who will eventually bring calmness to the boardroom. He is the one who will normally be the voice of reason and conscience. Chief executive officers (CEOs) have had sleepless nights before facing him in board and audit committee meetings, but Arshad does not preach; he guides and plays mentor.

“You survive Arshad, you can survive anywhere,” says a CEO.

Despite the difference in our age, we have a lot in common. We came from Muar. Our parents were rubber tappers. We came from very poor families. But, he endured more than I did. He lost his father because of dysentery when he was still very young. As the eldest child, it was incumbent upon him to feed the family. He was a sickly kid.

Despite that, Arshad knew the only way to unshackle the yoke of poverty was via education. Arshad almost did not make it in his studies. He could have ended up as a trishaw puller or a labourer with the Forestry Department. He did not get into the University of Malaya in Singapore. He went to the College of Agriculture in Serdang.

Later, he got through his Higher School Certificate and, in September 1954, he got a scholarship to study Economics and Statistics at the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth. He pursued education tenaciously, despite earlier setbacks.

He was lucky. He had many to thank for. But, he taught us the virtue of hard work, fearless determination and the will to succeed.

A book about him is titled A Second Chance: Life and Mission of Arshad Ayub. It is a book that demands attention. It is not so much about what he has achieved, but more importantly, how he can inspire us.

It is a truthful story of a poor village boy, who was given a second chance to succeed academically. And, in doing so, it changed him and he became a change master himself. And, this helped change the destiny of his nation.

He is committed to helping his pangs, for he knew they needed to leapfrog and be jolted out of their complacency. He wanted to instil in young Malays the meaning of self-respect, credibility, dignity, accountability and achievement.

When he was entrusted to head Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM, now UiTM), his priority was to produce professionals in various vocations. And, to prepare them for the realities of world. It was a gargantuan task, but Arshad knew failure was not an option. Arshad did more than just produce professionals and technopreneurs; he instilled the spirit of self-confidence in them.

He believed in “building values” — the key for success in an ever-changing landscape. Hundreds of thousand of ITM graduates are grateful that Arshad was there during its formative and critical years. ITM is just one of his many stellar achievements in various endeavours. He is, undoubtedly, one of the finest minds in the country. He is the embodiment of the best and brightest the country has to offer.

In a career that has spanned almost six decades, he has worked with or for all the prime ministers. Integrity is his middle name. He has been bestowed almost every conceivable honour the country can offer. The fact that he is the recipient of the coveted Merdeka Award in Education and Community speaks volumes of his contributions.

Yet, even at 86, Arshad is not showing any sign of slowing down. For many who know him, this indefatigable crusader of excellence will continue to make his mark for many years to come.

^ zulu.jj@hotmail.com
^ Twitter: @Johan_Jaaffar
A SECOND CHANCE
Life and Mission of Arshad Ayub

Johan Jaaffar was a journalist and currently chairman of media company.