

## **Biographical Notes**

### **Syed Hussein Alatas (17 September 1928 – 23 January 2002) – Academic/politician**

Syed Hussein Alatas was a prominent Malaysian social scientist and public intellectual.

Alatas was born to Syed Ali Alatas and Sharifah Ragan Alaydrus in Bogor, Indonesia on 17 September 1928.<sup>1</sup> He received his early education in Johor, Malaysia<sup>2</sup> but spent his teenage years during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) in Sukabumi, West Java.<sup>3</sup> After the war, Alatas returned to Johor Bahru to complete his School Certificate at the Johor Bahru English College.<sup>4</sup> Alatas received his tertiary education at the University of Amsterdam where he earned his Doctorandus degree in 1956 and his PhD in 1963.<sup>5</sup>

In 1958, Alatas began his career as Head of the Research Department at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature, a Malaysian government body).<sup>6</sup> In 1960, he began lecturing part-time at the University of Malaya and by in 1963, he became the Head of the Cultural Division at the university's Malay Studies department.<sup>7</sup>

In 1967, Alatas arrived in Singapore to take up the position of Head of the Malay Studies Department at the University of Singapore. He headed the department for 20 years, up to 1987.<sup>8</sup>

He then returned to Malaysia to become Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. But his appointment was abruptly terminated on 16 January 1991 following an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Agency for alleged breach of office procedures. This allegation was believed to be politically motivated as Alatas pushed for changes at the university. He was eventually absolved of all charges.<sup>9</sup>

Alatas' last academic jobs were with the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He was attached to the Centre for General Studies (1995-1997), and the Department of Anthropology and Sociology (1997-1999), before his appointment as principal research fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Riaz Hassan ed., *Local and global: social transformation in Southeast Asia. Essays in honour of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2005), p. xii; Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, "Sdr Professor Syed Hussein Alatas", *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia website*, retrieved from <https://www.gerakan.org.my/about-us/former-presidents/item/3864-sdr-professor-syed-hussein-alatas-president-from-1968-1971/3864-sdr-professor-syed-hussein-alatas-president-from-1968-1971#.X-A3ZC0RrOQ>;

Masturah Alatas, *The life in the writing: Syed Hussein Alatas* (Selangor: Marshall Cavendish, 2010), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Choon-Yin Sam, "Syed Hussein Alatas: His Life and Critiques of the Malaysian New Economic Policy", *Asia Pacific: Perspectives*, Vol IX Number 2, June 2010, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Y K Ngui, "Withstanding the test of time", *Malaysian Business*. 1 July 2002, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Ngui, "Withstanding the test of time", p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Sam, "Syed Hussein Alatas", p. 55; "Obituary. Professor Datuk Dr Syed Hussein Alatas", *Internationales Asien Forum. International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, Iss. 1/2, (May 2007), pp. 227-228.

<sup>6</sup> Alatas, *The life in the writing*, p.57.

<sup>7</sup> Hassan, *Local and global*, p. xii; Sam, "Syed Hussein Alatas", p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Hassan, *Local and global*, p. xii; Sam, "Syed Hussein Alatas", p. 55.; "Lessons from Syed Hussein Alatas", *NUS News*, 20 September 2019; Ngui, "Withstanding the test of time", p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ngui, "Withstanding the test of time," p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> "Sdr Professor Syed Hussein Alatas", *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia website*, retrieved from <https://www.gerakan.org.my/about-us/former-presidents/item/3864-sdr-professor-syed-hussein-alatas-president-from-1968-1971/3864-sdr-professor-syed-hussein-alatas-president-from-1968-1971#.X-A3ZC0RrOQ>; Alatas, *The life in the writing*, p. 57.

Throughout his academic career, Alatas wrote extensively on religion, development, corruption, politics, ideology and colonialism among other issues.<sup>11</sup> One of his best known works was “The Myth of the Lazy Native” which explored how European colonialism constructed the myth of the lazy native in a bid to keep the locals under control.

Besides academic pursuits, Syed Hussein was also active in politics. He was a strong advocate for multiculturalism. In 1968, together with Tan Chee Khooon, Wang Gungwu, Lim Chong Eu and J B A Peter, Alatas founded the Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) and became its founding president.<sup>12</sup> Gerakan sought to be a viable national opposition party that was free from racial politics and extreme creeds.<sup>13</sup> Alatas argued that opposition parties should not oppose the government for the sake of opposing, but served to provide checks-and-balances.<sup>14</sup>

Although Alatas did not stand for elections in 1969, he was nevertheless appointed a senator in the Dewan Negara representing Penang State when Gerakan captured the Penang state government.<sup>15</sup> He was a member of National Consultative Council of Malaysia (1969-1971).<sup>16</sup>

Alatas left Gerakan when it joined the Alliance Party (forerunner of Barisan Nasional) in 1972. He went on to form a left-wing political party Parti Keadilan Masyarakat Malaysia (PEKEMAS) with other Gerakan members who left.<sup>17</sup> He later left PEKEMAS citing academic responsibilities.<sup>18</sup> Between 1982 and 1983, Alatas was a member of the Berjasa Party, a component of the National Front.<sup>19</sup> He re-joined the United Malays National Organisation in 1985;<sup>20</sup> he had been a member in 1946.<sup>21</sup>

Alatas was the only Malaysian to sit on the advisory board of Transparency International, a global coalition against corruption.<sup>22</sup> In 1999, the Penang state government conferred on him the DSPN (Darjah Setia Pangkuan Negeri) with the “Dato” title in 1999 in recognition of his contributions to academia and politics.<sup>23</sup>

Alatas passed away on 23 January 2002 at his Kuala Lumpur home following a heart attack.<sup>24</sup> He was survived by his wife Sarojini Christiana Lourdes, a former Radio Malaysia presenter, and children – Syed Farid Alatas (a professor at the National University of Singapore), Sharifah Munirah Alatas (a professor at UKM) and Sharifah Mastura Alatas (writer).<sup>25</sup> His eldest son from a first marriage to a Dutch lady in the 1950s died a week after him.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ngui, “Withstanding the test of time”, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Ngui, “Withstanding the test of time”, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ngui, “Withstanding the test of time”, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> “Gerakan: A perfect time to go back to square one — Imad Alatas”, *Malay Mail*, 24 June 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Ngui, “Withstanding the test of time”, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Hassan, *Local and global*, p. xii.

<sup>17</sup> “Gerakan: A perfect time to go back to square one — Imad Alatas”, *Malay Mail*, 24 June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Alatas’s ‘I quit’ shock for Kemas”, *The Straits Times*, 10 October 1971.

<sup>19</sup> “Alatas quits Berjasa, but not politics”, *The Straits Times*, 27 August 1983; “Alatas joins Berjasa Party”, *The Straits Times*, 23 February 1982.

<sup>20</sup> “Alatas applies to join UMNO”, *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1985.

<sup>21</sup> “The outspoken professor”, *The Straits Times*, 27 January 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Ngui, “Withstanding the test of time”, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> Sam, “Syed Hussein Alatas”, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> “Lessons from Syed Hussein Alatas”, *NUS News*, 20 September 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Sharifah Munirah Alatas, “Beauty and the brains: the Alatas family love story”, *Free Malaysia Today*, retrieved from <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2019/09/17/beauty-and-the-brains-the-alatas-family-love-story/>

<sup>26</sup> Alatas, *The life in the writing*, p.133.