

His story

Journalist, political insider and businessman. Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan is all three rolled into one. He has now compiled a book — *The Malaysia That Could Be* — of his writings on Malaysian society and politics. There are two chapters of fresh work that are meant to clear the air on certain events that occurred during the period just before and after Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped down as Prime Minister in 2009, on being pressured by Umno. **BY Petrina Fernandez**

Observing the tides of time in a professional capacity placed Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan in a unique position, one of influence and, consequently, great scrutiny. His colourful career in journalism includes reporting roles at the now defunct *Straits Echo*, *The Star*, Reuters and Singapore's *The Straits Times*, and in later years as chairman of national news agency Bernama as well as editor-in-chief and deputy chairman of The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd (NSTP).

But perhaps the most interesting expression of his vocation and himself is in his years as the author of The Sunday Column, a weekly editorial in *New Sunday Times* from 2004 to 2008.

Here, he wrote a wide array of philosophical musings, human interest stories of migrants and random encounters, the nuances of Malaysian society, sports, politics, social issues and injustices — varied topics of interest insightfully written to touch the heart or spark the mind.

In 1995, in between his media career, Kalimullah extended his interest to the corporate world. He held key positions in public-listed corporations such as MBf Group, FACB Industries Inc Bhd and TSH Resources Bhd, as well as ventured into business by co-founding ECM Libra Financial Group with Datuk David Chua Ming Huat and Lim Kian Onn, and investing in the vision of Tan Sri Tony Fernandes to launch AirAsia X, Tune Hotels Group and Tune Money. He retired from a 30-year career in journalism in 2008 when he left NSTP and from active business in 2009, though he remains chairman of ECM Libra.

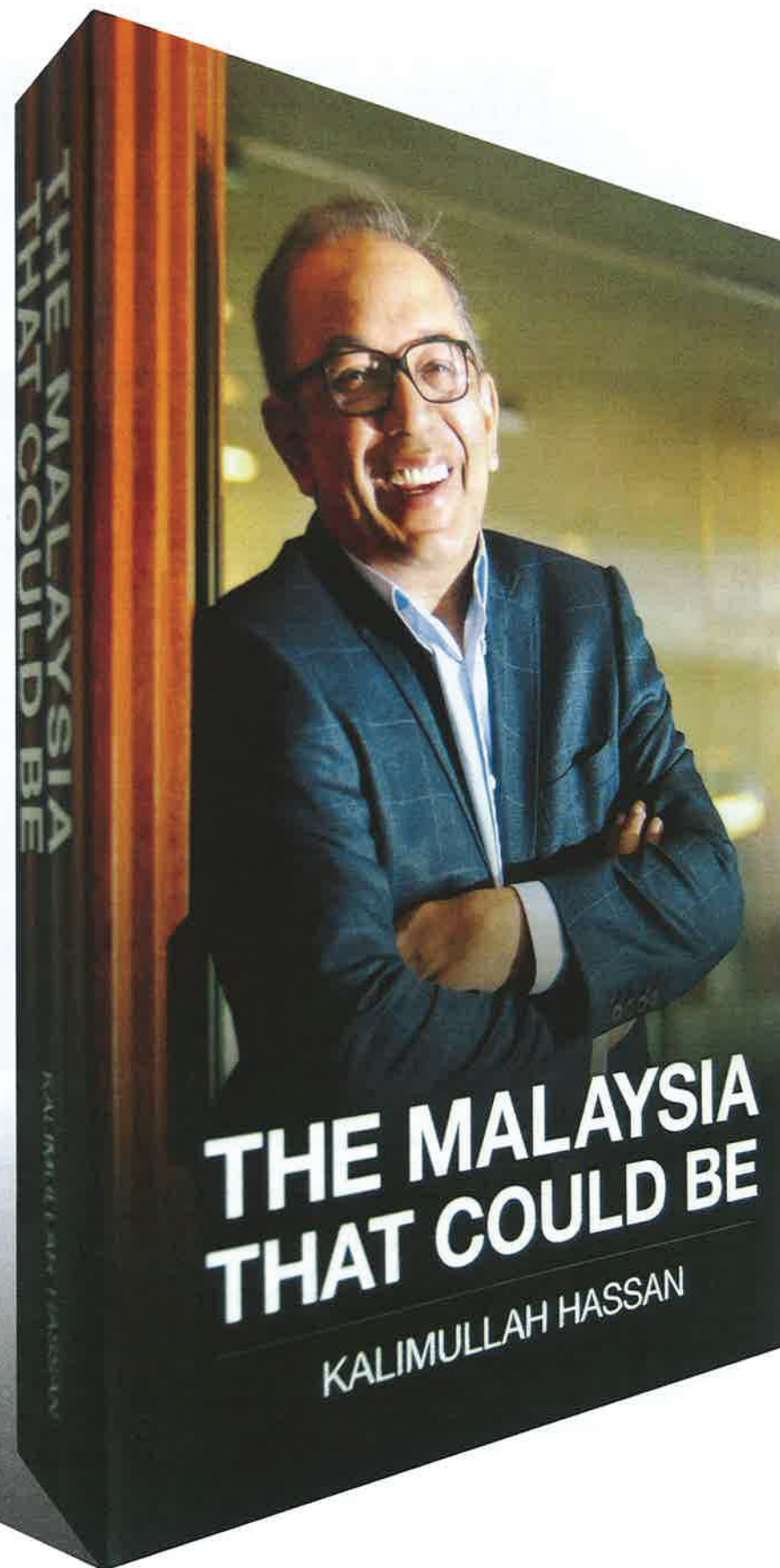
Today, he spends most of his time doing charity work undertaken by ECM Libra Foundation.

The self-published *The Malaysia That Could Be* was a long time coming, encouraged by family members and friends who wanted a compilation of his stories and accounts of history. Business partner and friend Chua suggested the title over coffee about eight years ago, and when the book began to finally take shape in 2013, Kalimullah honoured the idea by developing this theme.

"If you look at it, we had all the makings of being the greatest country in Southeast Asia," he says in an interview. "We had the resources, the infrastructure, the education and political systems. We could have done so well but we're now being compared to Zimbabwe, which is shameful because we had such great potential."

"The original premise of the book was a compilation of columns, but after back surgery and a stroke that left me temporarily paralysed on one side, I decided to set the record straight on some things," continues Kalimullah, his limp and occasional dependence on a cane a permanent reminder of the health scare.

"This made me realise that we are all mortal and our time is finite. During Tun Abdullah Badawi's years as prime minister, a lot of things were said



about him and his supporters and friends, including me. I don't want my children and friends to keep fending off the wrong perceptions of others so I wanted to go on the record with what happened according to what I saw."

That decision manifests itself in two chapters written as a postscript, detailing political, business and personal implications that arose from his relationship with Abdullah.

"Pak Lah is indeed my friend; he's a very decent man," he says. "He had an opportunity and for whatever reason, he let it go. He tried to redeem himself after the (setback of the) 2008 general election by setting up the MACC and compensating the judges [who were sacked during the 1988 judicial crisis]. He told [Datuk Seri] Najib [Razak] to promise he would carry out the reforms and Najib did promise at the Cabinet meeting, and we can see how that turned out. This is not a defence of Pak Lah but an affirmation that he had his strengths. There was a reason why people could attack and criticise him — he allowed it."

Greater freedom of the press was a stand of Abdullah's time as PM and Kalimullah enjoyed his liberty as editor-in-chief at NSTP.

"If you look at the columns from those days, there were two things that I was dead-set against — playing the race and religious cards. There was pressure from some right-wing guys who said I wasn't promoting the Malay agenda and I made it very clear that as far as [NSTP group editor] Datuk Hishamuddin Aun and I were concerned, there was only a Malaysian agenda. After I left, they removed Hishamuddin."

According to Kalimullah, he paid for holding his ground in several ways, some more hurtful than others. He shrugged off smear campaigns, including a notion that he owned The Malaysian Insider news portal and was therefore responsible for pro-opposition articles — "there were banners in public calling me a traitor

to the country" — and that he hid Malaysian Today editor Raja Petra Kamarudin [when he was issued arrest warrants for defaming Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor] in the modest London apartment his daughter, then 17, lived in while pursuing her studies.

"I didn't even know the man — we had met only once," he says. "Photos of the apartment were circulated and my daughter was so scared that we had to go out there and move her into a different place. Worse yet, was that even good friends whom I partnered with in business succumbed to pressure when my name began being mentioned in this manner and I was asked to resign from roles relevant to them."

Kali, as he is known to friends, says he bears the personalities mentioned in his book little malice, though he does admit that bitterness and nostalgia do tinge some of the retellings and turned the exercise into a form of therapy. These are, however, offset by the immortalising of moments of great joy and pride: a speech he delivered at his daughter Lara's wedding, for instance. "Like I said, this book is ultimately for my family. When my granddaughter grows up and reads it, she will know how I felt giving away her mother; moments like those."

"Like most journalists, I started my career thinking I would change the world," he continues. "And when you start working, you realise it's not going to happen. But when I had the chance to be editor-in-chief, I was determined to use the platform for good. We raised tens of millions of ringgit for disaster relief when the tsunami hit in 2004 and the flood of 2008. I'm not proud about some of the political pieces I wrote, I wasn't excited about them, but I was really proud of the human interest ones. It's easy to merely give money to a cause but raising awareness and galvanising action, these I found fulfilling."

Publishing the book was both rewarding and therapeutic, and the friends with whom he has privately shared the book are positive in their feedback, though "someone did say I might get into trouble for this," he laughs.

"Knowing all the minefields we have in Malaysia, I had to tread very carefully. At this stage in life, I don't want to go through a protracted period of having to be called in for questioning so I was quite careful. It's not a comprehensive account of eyewitness history, just my view of things. People can dispute it, it's up to them. This is how I remember the events; that's why I wrote it."

The Malaysia That Could Be is distributed by MPH and retails at RM100 for the hardcover and RM80 for the paperback versions. All proceeds from sale of the book will be channelled to Hospice Malaysia and the Sahabat Support Centre. **E**