

LEARNING CURVE PERSPECTIVE

Journey of social science in Malaysia

WHEN I met Professor Datuk Seri Dr Syed Arabi Idid recently he revealed that he was writing on the origins and stories behind the birth of communication departments in Malaysia — specifically at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara.

A former International Islamic Universiti Malaysia (IIUM) rector and present doyen of Public Opinion and Electoral Studies in the country, Syed Arabi should perhaps also be recognised as a scholar on electoral behaviour.

Over the years, Syed Arabi — a former UKM professor and head of the Department of Communication, and later deputy dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities — has conducted numerous studies on the general elections.

His other interests include public relations, journalism and international communications.

In 2003 I contacted Syed Arabi to write a paper on the beginnings of communication as a field of study in Malaysia. It was for a colloquium I was organising on communication and the human sciences.

He was obliging but cautioned me that there was not much to write then because communication (and journalism) was only studied in the early 1970s, and therefore “quite recent”. It could not be appropriated well.

The recent launch of his books — *Syed Arabi Idid: Scholarship in Transformation* and *Syed Arabi Idid: Transformasi Pemikiran Komunikasi* published by UKM's Media and Democracy Research Group — in Bangi was attended by

A LIFETIME OF WORK: Professor Datuk Seri Dr Syed Arabi Idid and public opinion studies in the country

UKM and IIUM academic staff, former students, the public relations fraternity, his family and several former vice chancellors who were his schoolmates in Kedah.

Syed Arabi has influenced many, challenging our thoughts and perspectives.

Going through the two books, one gets a wealth of corpus from a multitude of fields in communication and mass communication, ranging from media studies, public opinion and public relations to communication education, from a social science perspective.

Based on a selection of papers and writings over the years, the books are in honour of the professor who celebrated his 70th birthday on Sept 28. In a career spanning more than 40 years, Syed Arabi's work depicts the

progress of communication, public relations and journalism in Malaysia, even during colonial times.

Kudos to Professor Faridah Ibrahim and Dr Change Peng Kee, who “had to sieve through thick volumes of papers”, some of which they could trace the soft copies, but mostly they had to scan.

It is social science rarely depicted through literature in the country. Economics and political science form the bulk of social science which has been published.

But Syed Arabi's books centre on communication studies and its various fields, and the empirical

work produced so far, providing insights into media usage and its routinisation in daily life.

Syed Arabi writes as a social scientist, who had carved his path in the larger field of communication studies.

In one chapter, he provides a survey of the origins and development of public opinion studies in Malaysia.

In recent times, the dynamism of public opinion has taken centre stage in the national political landscape, a sociological theme that Syed Arabi has been involved in throughout his academic life.

Led by Syed Arabi, UKM academics have conducted several public opinion surveys for almost three decades now.

But in hindsight, he admitted “we did more than just conduct mere polling as the academic drive in use called us to bring in more academic input and some theoretical perspectives in our study”.

Public opinion activity is not new in Malaysia. It was conducted among and by British administrators to gauge our (the natives) thoughts on several issues.

The then scholar-administrators needed to comprehend the culture, religion, language, eating habits, beliefs and taboos, especially of the Malays, as natives of the peninsula.

Fusing both sociology and anthropology, social science approaches and methodologies gained much usage in penetrating the psyche of colonised subjects, both in Asia and Africa.

Malaya and Malay society were, in a sense, a living laboratory for knowledge production. The colonial ideology and paradigm dom-

inated. But it was only with the setting up of University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1958 (parting with its sister university, University of Singapore, set up in October 1949) that gave impetus to the development of social science in Malaysia.

From then, research was geared towards meeting the needs of the new nation.

Later, with the setting up of USM, Universiti Putra Malaysia and UKM, social science research gained academic and scholarly visibility.

Although several related studies were conducted earlier in Malaya, the first known survey related to media consumption was undertaken in 1937 by Radio Singapore (then catering for Malaya) to understand the listening habits of its audience.

Syed Arabi provided a glimpse of how it was conducted. Some three questions were placed in the daily, *Straits Times*, on April 14, 1937, asking the readers' thoughts on Radio Station ZHL.

The questions were repeated on April 19 of the same year. The questions were:

1. What do you think of Singapore Radio Station ZHL?
2. What programme do you like the most?
3. What is your comment with regard to:
 - a. Local artistes
 - b. Foreign recordings

There was feedback. Replies were made by General Manager G.S. Dumeresque on April 21 and 28, 1937.

Interestingly, the second episode concerning public opinion was in 1954 when the United States Information Agency sponsored the study, *Communications and Public Opinion in Malaya*, conducted by the Bureau of Social Science Research at the American University in Washington. The Cold War then

dominated the agenda.

Syed Arabi noted that the outcome comprised opinions of Malaysians on the colony's economic conditions, of the government, and of the various races in Malaya. Since then, numerous studies have been conducted by institutions such as Survey Research Malaysia and the Department of Statistics (both in the 1960s) and individual academics.

Now there is the Electoral Studies Unit at IIUM, University Malaya's Centre for Democracy and Elections and Merdeka Center, among others.

Public opinion survey of elections came on-board in 1986 — as a challenge by the then director general, Department of Information, Ministry of Information.

That year, Othman Said challenged the academics at UKM's Department of Communication to conduct a public opinion poll of voters and voter intention “like what were being done in the United States”.

Syed Arabi took the challenge. Together with fellow academic Mohd. Safar Hasim and lecturers from the Department of Communication, studies on voter behaviour were conducted, and have continued for close to 30 years now.

And it was more than just polling. Syed Arabi is also concerned with voter perceptions on political personalities, political parties, national issues and problems, and the media.

Apart from conceptual, methodological and categorical problems, the representation of the findings in the media is also problematic.

Both the books chronicle Syed Arabi's thoughts and provide a facet of the journey of social science in Malaysia, without which the vastness of the ocean of knowledge would be without that single drop from the humility of the good scholar.



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