3rd NICHOLAS TARLING CONFERENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

EXALTED HEROES, DEMONIZED VILLAINS AND LOSERS:
ALTERING PERCEPTIONS AND MEMORIES OF LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, C. 1800- C. 2000

PROGRAMME AND PROCEEDINGS

12-13 November 2013
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
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Tan Sri Senu Abdul Rahman: The Era before Mahathir, 1946-1985

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Tan Sri Senu Abdul Rahman: The Era before Mahathir, 1946-1985

Ahmad Kamal Ariffin Bin Mohd Rus

Tan Sri Senu Abdul Rahman was one of the most important figures in the Malaysian national political stage from the early 1940s to the mid-1980s. His involvement and subsequent role in national politics culminated in the 1960s when he held a ministerial portfolio and led the UMNO Youth from 1964 to 1969. However, his political career during the post-Tunku Abdul Rahman premiership saw a gradual decline. This paper aims to analyse the extent of Senu’s connexion in party politics and his role in the Tunku’s ministerial cabinet, and the rationale behind his eventual exclusion from both fields in the 1970s. The two questions are discussed via a chronological approach.

This paper is divided into three main eras. The first era, 1946-1957, highlights Senu’s involvement in politics in Kedah. His role in national politics only began in 1955 after his appointment to the Secretary-Generalship of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Joint Secretary of the Alliance. His involvement in national politics manifested in the second era, 1957-1970. His appointment to the Cabinet and his leadership of the UMNO Youth provided him with room to contribute and be involved in both national and party administration. The third era, 1970-1985, saw a decline and withering of Senu’s involvement and role in politics. Discussion on this era focused on the contributing factors of this wane in his political career.

Early Background

Senu was born on 10 October 1919 in Jitra district in the State of Kedah. His family background, hardly considered affluent, meant Senu lived his childhood like other kampong children. Even though he was raised in hardship, his desire for the best and for improvement of his lot in life separated him from the other children. For example, since young Senu had kept the longing to study in an English school. However, due to his impoverished family life, he only received his education at the Jitra Malay School in 1927.

His stint as an untrained teacher in a Malay school in Langgar district in 1936 proved Senu was a brilliant student in Malay school. In the 1920s and 1930s, the dearth of teachers in Malay schools was addressed by appointing Student Teachers among students that excelled academically. Senu’s resolve to improve his lot and his deep interest in academia was evident for all when in the same year, he sat for the exam to qualify him to enter the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Tanjung Malim.

He was accepted into SITC in 1937. Within this institution, his leadership instinct, appreciation of political issues, and fighting spirit received wider guidance and exposure.

2 Ibid., p. 4.
3 Ibid.