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### Alimin Wahab [Brunei, Permanent Secretary in Civil Service]

Alimin Wahab

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Interviewee: **ALIMIN WAHAB**  
Interviewer: Shaun Hoon  
Date: 9 March 2015  
Location: Brunei

0:00:21

[Shaun](#)

So, Dato Alimin, thank you so much for accepting this invitation for an interview.

0:00:26

[Alimin](#)

My honour.

0:00:28

[Shaun](#)

We know that right now you are the senior trustee at Pusat Ehsan, a position with much influence in the society but you have another life, that is, positions with a lot of power. You were the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry Of Defence, Perm Sec at the Prime Minister's Office, CEO (Chief Executive Officer) at Petroleum Brunei, as well as the Chairman of Royal Brunei. Let us know what are those accolades and those experience, what do they make you?

0:01:07

[Alimin](#)

They are not prizes. They are not accolades. I don't know whether they are accolades. But anyway, I begin my life wanting to be a teacher, simple, just a teacher.

0:01:19

[Shaun](#)

Wanting to be a teacher?

0:01:20

[Alimin](#)

Yes, just a teacher, a secondary school teacher. That was even back when I was in Form Three, Form Two... Form Three, early secondary, and wanting to be a teacher because I feel there is a lot things I can contribute, and apart from the fact also, that my uncles, who are my mentors basically, these are the people who give me inspiration, and everything they guide me. They were teachers. Essentially, most of them are teachers. My father was illiterate, he was not educated, he was only educated in the Quran and Jawi, and all these. That's why my uncles become my mentors. That is why I feel very strongly, and I was

pleased actually when I graduated, I was able to teach in SOAS, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien College, and I was there about one year.

0:02:29

[Shaun](#)

And what did you teach, Dato?

0:02:30

[Alimin](#)

Geography and History.

0:02:32

[Shaun](#)

Why do you like teaching so much?

0:02:34

[Alimin](#)

Something to give to the community.

0:02:38

[Shaun](#)

So it's about giving, is it?

0:02:39

[Alimin](#)

It's about giving. Yes.

0:02:40

[Shaun](#)

You're a giver.

2:41

[Alimin:](#)

Yes.

0:02:42

[Shaun](#)

But it's...I mean from a teacher to a CEO of Petroleum Brunei, they are totally two different spectrums?

0:02:49

[Alimin](#)

Oh no. It's not different.

0:02:50

[Shaun](#)

It's no different?

2:51

[Alimin](#)

I don't think they are much different. The time when you are a teacher, practically you guide them. But when you are a CEO there's different guiding that you are doing because in that way perhaps, you're guiding the policy, you are guiding people to do certain things. There are things, which... that is not altogether teaching. That's very wrong if you were to take it that way. But there's a lot to teaching at that time, and you bring yourself to also being... you don't start saying... showing that you are a CEO, and you are more a teacher rather than a CEO. A lot of people appreciate that actually better than perhaps if you confront them as a CEO. But of course, not everybody is taking it that way. The world is full of complexity. People have got their own agenda. Then that is different. That's not something that I... my agenda is straightforward. I am to Him, and whatever it is to the end of the day. If I can be a better person than before, than myself, than I would love that.

0:04:22

[Shaun](#)

So you are accountable to a higher being, your faith, your God.

0:04:26

[Alimin](#)

Yes.

0:04:27

[Shaun](#)

But let's steer it back to where you were, how does a teacher go on to such a powerful figure in the society?

0:04:36

[Alimin](#)

I was a teacher with SOAS, and then came back, went for my diploma in Newcastle upon Tyne, University. That was '74. I came back with a diploma, what they call the PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) at that time already,

and I was supposed to be teaching in at that time the Sixth Form Centre. The Sixth Form Centre was in what is now the Science school. That means I have to be teaching in Malay and in English, Sixth Form Geography.

I was not educated in Malay. I feel really terrible actually that time when I was asked to do this, and I was complaining to them, I said, "Come on, you know my Malay was really Kampong Malay, you know. Why is it that you are...?" They were really trying to force me to go to teach in Malay.

0:05:33

[Shaun](#)

So, did you step up to it?

0:05:35

[Alimin](#)

Well, with a lot of pressure from their side. They were saying to me: "Are you Malay, or are you not a Malay?" Of course, I was Malay. But is just the caution that I was never trained in Malay, and I don't even know words in Geography in Malay.

0:05:57

[Shaun](#)

Sure. There are a lot of terminology.

0:05:59

[Alimin](#)

That's right. You know the funny thing? They came back saying, "There you are, the terminology is here. It's up to you to prepare yourself in the next two weeks."

0:06:08

[Shaun](#)

So, you have to fast track yourself very quickly?

0:06:09

[Alimin](#)

You have to. Well I mean, if come under pressure, it has to be done. Then I tell myself, "Okay, let's try this." I warned them of the consequence actually. At the end of the day, I am talking half Malay half, English in a Malay class. I did all the preparation for three months. Then by a stroke of luck, the principal, now the Minister of Education, PN Bakar, well, Cikgu Bakar at that time, he was transferred. He was... just been appointed one day as the principal of Maktab Sains... no... Maktab Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan... So, he was transferred, and I was told to come in.



0:07:13

[Shaun](#)

So, all the preparation went to waste?

0:07:13

[Alimin](#)

All the preparation. Nothing. I told them, "Come on." They were saying, condescendingly, "Forget that. Now you have to be the principal of Maktab Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan, Maktab Melayu, the Malay College." So, I said, "I come to that point now I had no defence anymore, and they were saying... Actually, I did complain. I said to these people, you have this situation. So, they come back saying... I said, "I shouldn't. I don't want to be the principal. I just want to be teaching. Because you all told me to teach so I am ready to teach." "No, no, we want you to be the principal of the Malay College." I said, "Goodness me." At the end of the day, I said, "I have not been trained to be a principal either." So, they came back saying, "No one in the world, no principal in the world is ever trained to be a principal."

0:08:26

[Shaun](#)

That's interesting. So what were the challenges that you faced when you were being thrown in deep water?

0:08:31

[Alimin](#)

You start getting back to management. So the issue of management is there. Forced on you actually. When you are brought into, or you are being forced to a situation to serve as a principal.

0:08:49

[Shaun](#)

You step up to it?

0:08:51

[Alimin](#)

You have to step up to it.

8:52

[Shaun](#)

How old were you then Dato?

0:08:54

Alimin

That was '74... twenty-seven.

0:09:02

Shaun

And were there a lot of teachers older than you?

0:09:05

Alimin

Oh yes, much older.

0:09:06

Shaun

So, how did you establish respect right away? Because leadership is about respect, correct?

0:09:10

Alimin

It's not difficult. I don't think that is. I don't want to say is completely easy, it's not. It's the way you carry yourself. They know me, they know that I was...

0:09:25

Shaun

That you are qualified?

0:09:26

Alimin

They know... I got this English background, and I have to be talking in Malay to the school. They know that this has to be done. I was talking in the assembly. Both in Malay and in English. I said, "I am not making an apology to this, for this purpose." I don't want to make apologies to anybody actually. Because they know I come back from the English education.

0:09:54

Shaun

So, you come with a package, and you have to....



0:09:58

[Alimin](#)

You have to develop the package. You have to develop. In the school, even as a teacher, you already begin to know what management of school is like.

0:00:07

[Shaun](#)

And how long were you a principal for?

0:10:09

[Alimin](#)

I was there for two months. Then they moved me to SOAS. They want me to be principal of SOAS, to take over from the expatriate principals.

0:10:25

[Shaun](#)

Was it more of a challenge? Do you think?

0:10:29

[Alimin:](#)

All these are very challenging.

0:10:33

[Shaun](#)

How long were you there?

0:10:35

[Alimin](#)

I was there for about one year and three months, as well.

0:10:38

[Shaun](#)

So, very short stint, you are constantly living in change?

0:10:41

[Alimin](#)

I think this is the thing. It gives me the impression even at that time, there is something else that these people are looking forward to. It's not, it's not...

0:10:49

[Shaun](#)

So, are you saying that somewhere in the government, people already have a plan for you in your career?

0:10:54

[Alimin](#)

I think so. I have that impression, because even when I was in SOAS for about less than three months. I was there in '75... no '74, in August or September around that time, and by December, they are already saying, "We want you to be in the Sixth Form Centre."

0:11:22

[Shaun](#)

So, in hindsight, it's a bit like a management training programme for the Perm Sec, is it?

0:11:28

[Alimin](#)

You can say that. That is a good way of saying it. But I didn't see it that way before actually.

0:11:35

[Shaun](#)

But from education to Ministry of Defence, again totally different spectrum?

0:11:39

[Alimin](#)

Yes, very true.

0:11:41

[Shaun](#)

Dato, let's switch topic a little bit. We both know that the international oil prices have not been good. It has gone down to fifty... sixty, and let's put on your Petroleum Brunei CEO hat right now. What will Dato Alimin do in today's

situation? What kind of leadership do we need, or what kind of areas of attention do we need to pay to overcome this so-called crisis?

0:12:14

[Alimin](#)

In all respect, the normal thing to do would be to go back and make sure that... the thing with management is trying to make sure you have a balanced book. Try to... that's where the driving point is. But then, how you do it? That's another thing. Where are the most affected areas in respect of... the most affected area I believe would be in the marginal field. There are projects actually that you may have already signed on, and because what brings the high price, what would be the thing that...

0:13:12

[Shaun](#)

The driver.

0:13:14

[Alimin](#)

That drive the high price in the industry. People will take gambling on, gambles on the marginal field, and where it is more expensive, and they expect that because the oil price is so much, they should be able to have a fair return at the end of the day. That part, I don't think we are there yet actually. We are not in that position actually yet.

0:13:43

[Shaun](#)

But shall Brunei be concerned Dato? Let's leave Petroleum Brunei aside, yes?

0:13:48

[Alimin](#)

Of course, we are concerned.

0:13:49

[Shaun](#)

What should we be doing?

0:13:51

[Alimin](#)

At the end, the present situation as such; you earn about 100 over barrel per day.

0:13:56

Shaun

Yes, your income slash into half.

0:14:01

Alimin

What happens to all the social projects and... or economic project that you have to undertake, you have undertaken, and part of the project may already be halfway through. People start speculating about the pressure to... not talking about the bridge to Sungai Kebun, but the bridge to Tiburon, or perhaps even nearer home to the development in Pulau Muara Besar, where are we? I don't know...

0:14:37

Shaun

So if you get a phone call from up there, and say, "Hey, what will Dato Alimin do? What should we be concerned about, and what's our plan?"

0:14:47

Alimin

I have to be briefed exactly where our...

0:14:53

Shaun

So we have to face the reality?

0:14:54

Alimin

Oh, we have to. We have to face the reality, and going forward how we could reduce the impact of the down...

0:15:05

Shaun:

So are we looking at what, spending more...?

0:15:07

Alimin

Spending cuts. We have garnered quite a lot of assets over the years from, especially the time when we have very high oil price, and we have been prudent in that sense. I mean prudent as much as we can in respect of keeping things for

the rainy days. It doesn't stop that... from coming down, but it does stop the hemorrhage that may suffer as a result. That's good enough for the while.

0:15:51

[Shaun](#)

Another point that I have to make is that the name of the game is diversification, right? What else can we do aside from being reliant on oil and gas? What's your thought on this very big word diversification for Brunei?

0:16:09

[Alimin](#)

In the first place, I must humble myself, the fact that there may be better brains in the government on that issue. Diversification is not easy to achieve, but you go back to all the Middle-Eastern oil producing countries, they have the same problem. Diversification is not something that is easy to come by. The dominant position of oil in the economy, and more likely that the policy may be a lot more broadening the use and the application of oil for the economy. A lot is being now looked into. We have, in fact if I may say that you have methanol now in BMC, Brunei Methanol Company. If I may say humbly as well, we began the negotiation. We talked that over in the board when I was the CEO of Petroleum Brunei, and it come to the point when we recommend two major industries. The first one is methanol, where we talk to the larger part of that would be with the Japanese interest. We have also another proposal, which we recommended to the government, which was ammonia and urea industry. But I think the government wants to put that on the backburner for this one, for some reason.

0:18:11

[Shaun](#)

So the key is to keep on identifying new industries, while we still have the reserve and the ability to do so?

0:18:15

[Alimin](#)

A lot of that may have already begun actually, because methanol can be a derivative for a lot of things in the world. If you begin to do that here, some part of the derivatives, manufacturing, you will be... I believe they have 300 people, over 300 people working for BMC. You can easily triple that for all the other industries. But you have to begin to develop the capacity of the people, and that is the big thing. It is not a short-term thing. I don't believe in this short-term speculative gain all that.

0:19:02

Shaun

The investment goes back to developing people.

0:19:05

Alimin

Oh yes. Oh yes.

0:19:08

Shaun

Regardless what industry?

0:19:10

Alimin

Regardless what industry. At the end of the day, the world is your oyster. If it is not applicable here, it is applicable somewhere else, and it is your people.

0:19:23

Shaun

I am so curious about your life journey. As we were talking about just now, you owe the community a book that we can learn from your hindsight really, Dato. So, what happened?

0:19:35

Alimin

It's not written.

0:19:36

Shaun

It's not written. Hopefully it's properly documented here.

0:19:39

Alimin

It's not written. I owe you. [Both laugh]

0:19:44

Shaun

It's a good story to learn for people of the next generation, sincerely. So, what happened?

0:19:50

[Alimin](#)

But you are talking about... This is why I don't want to be prescriptive. This is exactly why. I was born in different sort of timeline, time zone. You can't say, you can do it again. You can't. There is no way you can go through the way that I went through. Not many people perhaps appreciate the fact that you went through so much. This is why my respect for my partner. This is why at the end of the day, she was there!

0:20:25

[Shaun](#)

It's not a one person's journey, yes?

0:20:26

[Alimin](#)

Yes. It's not a one's person journey. No. That's right. The whole family comes in into this, and how I was not able to, not just perhaps look after them. Well I try to be there as father and be there all the time. But they are obviously... There's only twenty-four hours a day.

0:20:49

[Shaun](#)

From young you were a workaholic?

0:20:51

[Alimin](#)

Well I was made, not I was made I was... I forced myself...

0:20:57

[Shaun](#)

You were wired. You were wired that way, your genes. You are wired to work hard, because there's huge responsibility bestowed on you, and there's no other way but...

0:21:07

[Alimin](#)

It's a self-thing actually. It's not anybody wanting you to. There wasn't anything like that, and it was just you wanting to make it happen.

0:21:19

[Shaun](#)

When people give you a task, you want it done.

0:21:23

[Alimin](#)

I feel it is once you been given a trust, and trust is the most difficult thing to do, and you want to be able to level up to that task, and to the trust, because I feel you know, it's no good being given a trust, and you are not able to do it. If you are not able to do it, you must tell so that you are not up to it.

0:21:51

[Shaun](#)

So looking back Dato, do you think you were happy with your career? You were being shuffled or being pushed around into different positions. In hindsight right now, do you think that those are happy moments?

0:22:02

[Alimin](#)

Very interesting question. That time when I was not able to be a teacher, because that's what I want to be. That time I was not able to be a teacher they said, "You become a principal, you do this you do that." It gave me the fundamental psyche, I would say in what is it that at the end of the day you should do, in order to be able to make a success of the thing that you are trusted to do. You are not talking about doing things you love anymore. But to love doing things that...

0:22:56

[Shaun](#)

That's been given to you?

0:22:57

[Alimin](#)

That's been given to you.

0:22:58

[Shaun](#)

Which is more important, Dato?



0:23:00

[Alimin](#)

Well, the thing is the world is not made of me and myself only. At the end of the day, there are people who judge for you for whatever their agenda is. It's not something that I depend. A lot people from the career development that I have gone through. I mean that's the thing...

0:23:23

[Shaun](#)

So it's not just for your own pleasure?

0:23:24

[Alimin](#)

No, it's not.

0:23:25

[Shaun](#)

It's a bigger accountability to the outside world.

0:23:28

[Alimin](#)

That's right. It's getting to love of the thing that you are asked to do. To love them. Not just to love them, obviously. To be able to fulfill all the requirements in need. You are no longer the person you are, you want to be. You are no longer a teacher here, but you can't take that off you.

0:23:54

[Shaun](#)

So once you are a teacher, you are always a teacher?

0:23:55

[Alimin](#)

You are a teacher. That's the psyche that I brought myself through all this career. I am not just a teacher. They cannot take that away from me. They cannot take that away from me. I am not going to be anything else, but a teacher... but then I am a teacher, plus, plus, plus, okay.

0:24:17

[Shaun](#)

So, what I am learning from you, Dato, is a great leader is a great teacher too. Because great leaders are great developers of people, and you need to be a great teacher to be a developer of people.

0:24:27

[Alimin](#)

You do, you do have to be emphatic in that sense of the need for a lot of things beyond your vision. That's the thing that you have to accommodate yourself. Accommodate the other people's vision as well. The societal vision that you are talking about. The vision of the higher up. The government perhaps, or those people who represent the government. So, these things come to you. Is it important for you to be a teacher, continue to be a teacher? Yes, it is important. As I said they cannot take that away. But the thing is the same thing, you cannot take them away from the thing that they have in their mind. They want you to be something else. Something whatever it is, fulfilling the state's requirement, fulfilling the requirement of society as such, fulfilling you yourself to your family, fulfilling your role in the family. So, all these things coming to you. At the end of the day, they cannot, nobody is taking that away from you.

0:25:40

[Shaun](#)

So Dato, what do you think are the qualities that make a good leader? Is there anyone that you think of when you think of great leaders?

0:25:50

[Alimin](#)

Great leaders do give themselves to the community. There are no leaders otherwise without... The community must be the one that they serve. At the end of the day, it is because of the community that we become whatever it is we are.

0:26:13

[Shaun](#)

So it's a servant leadership kind of mentality?

0:26:15

[Alimin](#)

We are. We have to be. The leader must have the tenacity to pull through. I know is very hard to... You come back to the issue of popularity. I don't have that. I don't feel that is... It may be temporarily... it may be useful. It may be useful to connect that with a lot of other things. But in itself, I don't think that will be the case.

0:26:50

[Shaun](#)

The end to itself.

0:26:51

[Alimin](#)

The end to itself. No. I don't think so.

0:26:53

[Shaun](#)

Dato, a very interesting question. We know that we have a very benevolent king, His Majesty. You have the privilege of direct access to him. What are some of the things that you have learned from His Majesty?

0:27:09

[Alimin](#)

Timing. His timing. He is never late. One thing he is never late for his appointments. Never! Never, not even one second late. If you work with him, you have to be there. They have been telling us all this while, make sure you be there. If possible, even one hour before that. But he is there...

0:27:42

[Shaun](#)

And punctuality speaks a lot. The underlying understanding of punctuality is about respect as well. He respects. He is like the top guy in Brunei, and if he respects your time and be punctual, that means there's something about humility in this leader that we can all learn from.

0:28:01

[Alimin](#)

Bear that in mind with all the function that you see happening in Brunei. Not even once.

0:28:08

[Shaun](#)

Dato, we have come one full circle here from the start of our conversation, which is your role at Pusat Ehsan. From your CV what I have seen is you have 1.0, 2.0. 1.0 is the life of a powerful man with great title. 2.0 is a life of a man with great significance and great testimony in helping the weak, in defending the poor, in the things that you do for people that are less privileged. Let's end this with your thought on Pusat Ehsan, and your ambition and vision for it. What would you like Pusat Ehsan to be?

0:28:56

[Alimin](#)

I would like Pusat Ehsan to be another centre of excellence for all the programmes that we offer. Those programmes include the programme for learning, education for the disabled, education programme that we offer and the rehabilitation programme to the kids. A centre of excellence, which Brunei can be proud of that's what...

0:29:30

[Shaun](#)

Beautifully said, Dato.

0:29:32

[Alimin](#)

Thank you.

0:29:33

[Shaun](#)

Thank you so much for the privilege to talk to you and learn from your experience. Thank you very much.