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### Zainul Abidin Rasheed [Malaysia, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs]

Zainul Abidin Rasheed

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Interviewee: **ZAINUL ABIDIN RASHEED**  
Interviewer: Sabrina Chua  
Date: 13 January 2016  
Location: Singapore

0:00:21  
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, thank you very much for speaking with the Institute for Societal Leadership. I'd like to start... at the start of your career, you were a journalist. Why did you decide to go into journalism?

0:00:35  
[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

That's a very interesting question. You know, there were two choices I had. One was actually to be with SIA as a management trainee. I went for the second interview, and I had another interview to do research in journalism. I thought both of them would give me the opportunity to see the world, that was my main aim. I wanted so much to see the world because I felt that Singapore was rather insular, as though Singapore was the centre of the universe. There's so much to learn and so much to see from outside Singapore. So, I thought working with Singapore Airlines would be able to give me the opportunity, or as a journalist. Journalism, I thought that that is one area of a career where you really can... you are ahead of the curve. You know about developments, you know about issues. Whether you are forced to, or whether out of interest or passion, you have to read. You have to understand what is going on. I ended up as a research editor of a monthly publication about East and Southeast Asia. It's called the Asia Research Bulletin. That was my first job, and I worked there for five years, I really enjoyed it.

But five years down the road, there was a crisis at The Straits Times group. This was the precursor to Singapore Press Holdings. The editor, the former editor of Berita Harian, the Malay newspaper and his assistant were detained under the Internal Security Act for alleged Communist, pro-Communist activities in terms of their headlining, in terms of the content of the paper. The paper lost two most senior editors, and they were searching high and low for someone to replace the editor. In fact, I remember they told me they went around looking for some of the better, or the top leading Malays who were involved either in journalism or in corporate relations. Who would want to take that job when the editor has just been...?

0:02:59  
[Sabrina Chua](#)

That is my question. Knowing all this you still took up the job.

0:03:03  
[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

But I was part of the group then. The Asia Research Bulletin was part of The Straits Times group. So, they asked me whether I could help. Actually, my first reaction was no, not because of the political situation, but because at that time I did not have much faith in mass media journalism. I thought it was too sensational. Maybe I was too serious a journalist. I was a research editor, I was doing a lot of research, serious journalism. I liked it and I didn't want to really get into mass media journalism where you have to pander to circulation, and readership, which is very much into pop, entertainment, and not keen on very serious matters that affect life. But they were very persuasive, and I told them I don't mind giving five years of my life, to help them. I will find a successor for them as editor of Berita Harian. Which in fact, from day one, I already started scouting for people whom I thought would be good successors.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

But five years turned into twenty.

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

That's true.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

How?

0:04:24

[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

Five years turned into twenty. To be fair to myself, I even got people like Yatiman Yusof, who was formerly the Senior Parliamentary Secretary. I got Hawazi Daipi, who was also Senior Parliamentary Secretary, and Mr Maidin Mohamad, who was a political secretary, or Parliamentary Secretary. These are people I brought into Berita Harian, hoping that they would be able to allow me to leave after five years.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

But that didn't happen.

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

That didn't happen, partly because even people like Yatiman, whom I thought would stay as a very good editor, got hijacked, or got persuaded by the ruling group PAP (People's Action Party), and he in fact went into politics first. Then later Hawazi also came into politics. I found out that in fact, having been in the media, mass media, I found that there was a tremendous opportunity of actually reaching out to the people. Because if you really have ideas you want to share and develop the people, that's the instrument you need. A mass media that you can reach out to, engage, connect, and actually then you can share your ideas for development, ideas which I felt were very important for Singapore, the kind of Singapore that I wanted.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

That you wanted?

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

Yes.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Basically, ideas that the community itself is propagating? I'm asking this because, I mean...

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

No, that's a very, very good question. In fact, sometimes what you think you want for the community, of the leadership, may not be apt at that particular time. I give you an example, when I was editor of Berita Harian, I thought the Malay Muslim community was too much on very sensational, I've mentioned, or entertainment. The more you carry entertainment news, the more circulation will go up. But I thought, that it's about time that we educate the community in terms of the importance of economics. Singapore, basically, is an economic entity, it's a very successful economic miracle. To be part, a very integrated part of that society, you've got to understand economics. I was also a graduate of economics and Malay studies, which I thought was a very good combination for that kind of role. I started including a lot more news on economics, and importance of economics and finance in Singapore. Guess what? Circulation dropped.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Oh. So how did you...?

0:07:04  
[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

That's precisely the problem, the challenge we have. You may have the best of ideas, you may have all the leadership qualities you would like, you want to bring to the community, but if the community is not ready, you cannot just force it down community's throat. So, I find that you got to do step by step, but nevertheless I still continue to publish...

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Did the bosses pressure you?

0:07:28  
[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

...at least they know that it is important. They may not read. Circulation dropped, but at least they know in fact economics is important for their lives

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Were you under pressure to bring up the circulation?

0:07:41  
[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

It was. So, we had to quickly adjust again, and then we got to bring in the stories that will actually attract the readers. There is no point having a newspaper without readership, and you can't even educate, you can't even introduce the ideas. So, we must try and retain a readership with the kind of news they like, but at the same time, slowly inject the more important stories about politics, about economics. So that they got a fuller picture of what Singapore is all about, and what are the challenges Singapore was going through, and why they need a better understanding of that. So that, to me, was like a passion, was like a mission. And that actually, partly made me stay on for more than two decades.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

But one criticism of Singapore media is that there is very little press freedom. I mean, last year's press freedom index ranked Singapore 153, in between Russia

and Libya. So, what does that say to you? Did you experience any obstacles, shall we say?

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I've been to both Russia and Libya. I live in Singapore, born and bred in Singapore. I would say that that's an exaggeration. I don't know what yardstick they would use in terms of press freedom. If you look at the kind of letters that we have in the newspaper, the kind of commentary that we carry in our media, it's a lot more than what you can hope to see in many other countries. But, that's not to say that we don't have, I mean, we have total freedom, like in some of the media in the West, or some other even third world countries. But even among the countries, which have that so called 'freedom of expression', you'll find that each newspaper group has got its own policy, dictated by the owners, and by even the editors themselves.

But during our time, during my time, this was back in the mid '70s and the early '80s, we had real serious challenges about wanting to get our people together. We had challenges of, not only in the early days of Independence, having to fight forces coming from communism, the kind of trade union movements that were so belligerent and were so combative. Added to that was the problem of communalism, ethnic communalism, and they posed serious challenge in terms of wanting to get the people together. I recall that practically every day, we editors amongst ourselves do discuss. We are people, we are not just yes men, you know? But we believe that, we share with the government in terms of what we want to achieve for Singapore, and we knew that in fact there are serious problems outside in terms of matters related to press freedom and what it could bring about.

I remember the Maria Hertogh case, the riots in 1950, and I think if I remember correctly, the former editor or Editor in Chief of The Straits Times himself confessed and apologised for publishing the photograph of this girl, who was adopted by a Muslim family and had to go back to the original family, the Christian family, and the girl was kneeling at an altar. That really aroused emotions among the Muslim groups, and they went to the streets and rioted.

Myself, personally, I was almost killed in the racial riots. I was in school then, in 1964. We had our first riot in July 1964, that's why we celebrate our Racial Harmony Day today. Three months after the racial riots, we thought everything was back to normal, but no. In September, riots broke out again and we were in school then. I recalled that it was a Friday, and I had left school. This was in RI, at Bras Basah Road, and we left school early because being Friday, we had to go to the mosque. We didn't know that in fact riots had broken out. So, the group of me and my friends were going out, we went to City Hall first to pay PUB bills for one of my friend's water bills. Then we were told that riots had broken out, so we rushed to look for transport. At that time, there wasn't any buses or taxis, all filled up. So, we were caught. Just to share with you the emotions of that day. While we were waiting for a bus, a lorry came up. This is an open deck lorry. The driver was signalling to us, anyone going to Geylang? We were at Hill Street, near Raffles, Bras

Basah. Then I had a quick look at the driver, I saw a Chinese. I said, "My God! Is it safe or not?" Then I look at the attendant, happens to be a Malay. So, I said, "Not bad, 50-50." We all, about twenty of us, mostly Malays, we clambered into the lorry, and we went along. But the lorry, when it reached Lavender Street, near where Lavender Street MRT is now, the lorry just went dead. I looked out, I saw, those days you know, the street was actually filled with a lot of cottage industries, ironmongers, and all kinds of small industries. So we saw that the streets were lined by young Chinese workers. When the lorry went dead, we all naturally stood up to look for alternative transport. I guessed the Chinese workers, who were lining the street, when they saw a group of twenty Malays standing up on a lorry, they thought they were there to attack. So then all the Chinese boys disappeared into their cottage industries, and the next moment they came out with acid bulbs, bicycle chains, and iron rods. I was then a Secondary four... Secondary three student, and you can imagine what it was like. I saw with my own eyes, people were killed, maimed on the streets. They couldn't tell whether you were Malay, you were Indian, so it's just madness. But that was not the end of the story. I escaped, I managed to cling to a taxi, a moving taxi with the doors flung open. There were already about eight persons inside, I just grabbed the door and I was dragged for about twenty meters. Then somebody pulled me into the taxi, and we went to Geylang Serai. When I reached Geylang Serai, it was the reverse. I saw Malays were attacking innocent Chinese trishaw pullers, trishaw riders. In peacetime, they were all friends, they lived together. fruit sellers, market stall holders, Malays, Indians, Chinese, we were at best of relations. But because of the riots, it was just total madness.

That's why I told myself, this cannot be the kind of Singapore we want for ourselves and for our children, grandchildren. To some extent, that actually impacted on me, and coloured the way I look at things.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Were there any other instances where you felt pressured by the Government to take a certain stance, or cover an issue in a certain way?

0:15:51

[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

There were quite a number of issues, in fact we felt differently with the Government. I think the editors, where they felt that they feel differently, they were able to express. But the government then, in particular Mr Lee Kuan Yew, our founding Prime Minister, he is a very strong leader. He had very strong views in many areas. We could see actually why he had to really take very tough stances, especially against Western journalists, who had very rigid, in our eyes, way of looking at certain things, especially about press freedom, about race relations, and which we felt we know better in our own situation. So, every day practically we would have discussions among editors, how to play certain stories. If you feel in fact there is need for more room for discussion, we'll be pushing lines. From my own experience, I remembered there were instances where in fact we pushed a

line too hard, then we get rapped on the knuckles too, so we have to move back. But that didn't stop us from actually still challenging, pushing the lines. Because we felt that while we understood the kind of milieu, the political milieu then, and why the Government had to be very tough on certain areas, but we knew that in fact for us to get a greater integration of views, there must be a diversity in terms of views. We feel that in fact we need to slowly open up. In fact, that's that was one of the reasons I felt that I stayed on after five years. Because while I knew that in fact Mr Lee Kuan Yew was a very strong leader, and he can carry the ground in his own way. But I thought with the coming in of Mr Goh Chok Tong, who was more consensual, who was going for more discussions and more sharing. I thought it'd be more difficult. Because it's easier to manage when you have a strong policy. You don't agree, you leave. But if you agree, you work with us. But when you have a more open system, more consensual, if you don't know how to manage it, you'll get into chaos. You may have to go back again even harsher than the previous. So, I thought that in fact Mr Goh Chok Tong would actually deserve and need more support. People who share the need to open up, to loosen up but at the same time to manage it well. I felt editors recognised that, and so they helped.

But to some extent, editors have a better understanding of the thinking of the ruling group, because we were fortunate that whenever Mr Lee Kuan Yew travels, he invited editors to go along to cover his trips. In those days, Singapore just achieved independence, so we need also to show our presence all over the world, we went all over: America, Russia, Europe, Australia, India, China. It was not just to cover the visit, but it gave us the opportunity to get close to the thinking of our leaders then, in particular Mr Lee Kuan Yew. He often took the opportunity during these trips to have sessions with us over lunch, or over dinner, or over tea. He will call us and then he will say, okay this is the reason why he was doing this. This is the reason for this policy, or that policy. So, we were able to understand better what the thinking of the Government were, and why in fact it had to do and push some of the very unpopular policies, what was thought to be necessary. We were privileged in that sense, but that doesn't mean that we swallow hook, line, and sinker. There were areas where we felt differently, and we would also sometimes through discussions, challenge him, and he will have his own views. But personally, I have found that Mr Lee, the impression people have outside that he was so autocratic, and dictatorial, and he was thinking only of his own views. But there were many instances where in fact he sought feedback, opinion on speeches, important speeches he made, he would pass around to many people including editors, and we give him feedback. If he feels that in fact, we are sincere in our feedback, no matter how critical we are, he listened and if he was not convinced, he would call us, and he would ask what the basis for our view was, and he would debate with us.

I recalled one instance, there were quite a number but let me share with you one instance. This was the closure of Nanyang University. At that time, I think we all know that Nanyang University was the hotbed of communist sympathisers. Nanyang University was becoming like a second red University, compared to the Singapore University, the precursor to the NUS (National University of Singapore). A lot of people who came out of Nanyang University felt very disgruntled. They're like, their degrees were not recognised, they got lower salaries, so all the more, it



created the situation where Nanyang is a place for people who are unhappy. They ended up also became disgruntled people. The Government in fact had called on one professor, I remembered from Cambridge, very objective exercise. This professor came to Singapore and did a study, and the professor concurred with the Government, and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, that in fact Singapore doesn't need a Nanyang University. One University of Singapore would be sufficient. So, Mr Lee in fact had come up with a statement, a press statement to be issued, to say that we are going to close Nanyang University. He called a group of editors to show us the press statement. But we used the opportunity to tell him that in fact we don't agree, all editors including myself, said we don't agree with you closing Nanyang University. Because Nanyang University is not just about university, it was about the sentiment of the Chinese educated, Chinese ground Singaporeans, who felt so strongly for Nanyang University. When it was first established, even trishaw pullers used to queue up and just give a dollar, or a few dollars to share, to support that Nanyang University. You cannot just close the university and forget about that history. He listened to us. I don't think he was convinced at first, because he had done all the studies to show that the best way is to close it down. So, we suggested that maybe save Nanyang's name, and develop something else. As it turned out, he withdrew the statement, press statement, and announced later that the Nanyang University was converted to NTI, Nanyang Technological Institute, which then later became NTU. So that's how we practically, Singapore saved Nanyang. But the point I was making, that he was willing to listen, provided he feels that we are sincere. We're not just trying to ridicule him or disagree for the sake of disagreeing. My experiences have been very productive, and I learnt a lot from just working with Mr Lee.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

What was your view of Mr Lee, as a leader?

0:24:28

[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I think there's no question about it, he is a real first-class leader. a person who is totally dedicated to Singapore, s believer in what Singapore can do, and a brilliant mind, but not perfect. He had his own problems, controversies. One of the problems is that he just sometimes speaks his mind, too loudly that in fact there was an occasion where his ideas, his mind about the Malays, the Malay community for example, in the Hard Truths, that I think, upset a lot of Malays.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

I was leading up to that, you publicly came up to say that it did hurt the community... which is a very brave thing to do.

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

That's right, yes. I think it hurt my election results too. Last election, his book came out just about before election. But he did explain that, he said that two years before, the book took some time to publish. Just before election, and it did hurt the Malays. He was basically making a point, that it would be difficult for the Malays to integrate in Singapore because of its religious values. He saw Islam as the religion practised by Muslims, as quite inhibitive, and will make it more difficult for them to integrate, whether it's about food, or whether it's about the religious practices.

We do not deny that it can be difficult; we can see it in present day context, all kinds of things are happening in the Muslim world. Even amongst the Muslims, the intra-Muslim problem is a big issue now, how to handle it. We can feel the majority of Muslims reject, for example, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the extremism that comes with it. It is a battle for Muslims themselves. It doesn't help if actually non-Muslims also feel as though the majority of Muslims are like that. At the same time, we like to feel that Muslims in Singapore are quite different, because we are part of a different milieu. The Singapore milieu, Singapore system, and we were very frank with each other on how we see problems. We were able to tackle them. There are still problems, but we are making progress, in terms of integration.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Do you think your ethnicity has helped or hindered your career?

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I came from a very modest family background. In my personal case, the opportunity that came for me, whether it's editor of Berita Harian, that's actually partly because I was a Malay. But through Berita Harian, I was able to become editor of Sunday Times, and Associate Editor of The Straits Times. Through that I also became Member of Parliament. I worked in Ministry of Foreign Affairs rising to be Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. All this, I feel that it's part of the total formula, it helps. Although I must say that, when I was with the university for example, I deliberately did not want to be a prominent Malay leader in Malay organisations. I moved myself out, I'd be active in the Student's Union, with the Economic Society. But because we were so short of our own leaders among the Malay community, every time I got pulled back to be part of the Malay programme.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

But why did you want to distance yourself away from that?

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I wanted to do that because I felt it was also good for the community, that more and more Malays should be involved in the non-Malay activities, so that's where they interact. We'll use it as an opportunity to understand each other better. If we don't mix or be active ourselves with non-Malays, how do you understand them? Similarly, how will non-Malays understand Malays, if we don't get the chance to interact? I feel it was very important, but the numbers were so small that each time we pull ourselves out, we get pulled back.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Why did you decide to enter politics?

0:28:42

[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I have never seen myself as a politician, as such a party man. In fact, when I was first approached in 1976, that was only about five years after leaving university, and I said I wasn't interested. I told them I would like to serve Singapore, but through the ground, through the community, through the non-government institutions. That's why I'm with media, with Mendaki, and with MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), and a few other Malay Muslim organisations, like the Scholarship Fund Board, there was a People's Foundation I worked with, and many other NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization). But twenty years after that, after going through what I wanted to do, then Mr Lee Kuan Yew himself tried to persuade me to join in 1996. He said, you already done what you wanted to do, work outside, now try coming to work from inside. So, I felt that there wasn't any more excuse. I thought, maybe it's good also to come in and understand the government better, the party better, how they saw this thing, and then see how we can marry the two. So, fifteen years in government, working with the other Malay MPs (Members of Parliaments), working with the other Malay Muslim groups gave me the opportunity to bridge further. That was basically my main mission in life, how to bring the Malay Muslim community closer mainstream. I felt that the way forward is that we all must work together within the national framework. Both government, NGOs, Malay Muslim organisations, we got to work together as a team. But that doesn't mean that we just have one-track mind, because we got to have room for different viewpoints, even different programmes.

Another example, when I was asked to head the Mendaki, that was a time when the Association of Muslim Professionals came into the picture. I was upset actually, because I was trying hard all my life trying to bring that unity, and suddenly this Association of Muslim Professionals came and said, "No, no that's not the way. The Mendaki is too close to the Government, we want something more independent." So, I thought it's an opportunity for me to actually get the young Muslim professionals to work with Mendaki, strengthen Mendaki as a foundation, as a base for self-help groups. But I think on hindsight, I think government was right in offering them saying, "Yes, if you feel you're serious about helping the Malay community, form your own Association of Muslim Professionals. We even prepared, the government even prepared to give them funding." I was against it at

first, because I thought it will divide the community. I even asked, I remember asking Mr Goh Chok Tong, I said, "What were you trying to do, pulling the carpet from under my feet? I've just been given the opportunity to work, and make a success of Mendaki, are you trying to do a divide and rule?" I even asked him that [Laugh], I remembered. He laughed, and he said, "No, of course not." But he said, "What do you do?" Not only the professionals, but also the community is divided. There are members of the community who didn't want to have anything to do with Mendaki.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Why?

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[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

Because they think it's too much government, too pro-government. They want to have something more independent. So, when AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals) came with their own programmes, then we have more people from the community benefitting from programmes that will uplift them. That's the way forward, I thought. We need more players, more approaches, diversity is part of life. But within the diversity, let's have some unity.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, what is your vision for Singapore, and what kind of leaders do you think we will need to take us there?

0:32:44

[Zainul Abidin Rasheed](#)

I think Singapore has got the ingredients. When Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away, I was again very happy to see, in grief, we became more united. That also shows to me that the fundamental values of what Singapore is all about, the hard work, the discipline, the clean leadership, sincere, able leadership without corruption, remains. That will ensure that we will be able to withstand whatever challenges, whether from outside, or whether from economic, or political.

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[Sabrina Chua](#)

Thank you very much, sir, for speaking with us.