



By Kalsom Taib  
Published by  
Kalsom Taib Publishing  
396 pages

# The Shafee Yahaya Story: Estate Boy to ACA Chief

Review by Wazir Jahan Karim

**THIS NARRATIVE ABOUT** Datuk Shafee Yahaya, former Anti Corruption Agency (ACA) chief who assumed the position from June 16, 1994 to September 11, 1998, written by his wife, Datin Kalsom Taib, relates the story of an ordinary civil servant who began his career as assistant district officer (ADO) of Kuala Langat, then as private secretary to Tun Abdul Razak and Datuk Hussein Onn, followed by a long service in the National Security Council. He subsequently served in the National Housing Department and the Public Service Department before becoming head of the ACA four years before his retirement.

Shafee's beginnings in the Caledonian Estate in Seberang Perai is typical of many Malay and Indian professionals who had the benefit of good education and careers that merged with the growing elite group of Malaysia's upper middle classes. According to Kalsom, Shafee did not wish to write about himself because it would have been the biography of an ordinary civil servant, but she chose to write the book to spell out some truths of public governance – integrity, honesty and transparency.

This book portrays a man as embodying these qualities. A wife of course may not be objective but Kalsom relates her husband's *modus operandi* in public administration and through this we come to view his role and status as a civil servant – responsible to a public office within a system of public governance devoid of party politics. Although headed by politicians elected into power, these political maestros generally seek professional advice from director-generals and policy advice from secretary-generals. There is a clear line separating the public and the political, and both co-exist for the sake of greater efficiency and expediency.



Shafee, a civil servant trained in this way of thinking, emerges as a solid, efficient administrator who strongly believed that he had a duty to perform as chief of the ACA, and that the truth would prevail. Kalsom backs this concern for "the truth" with quotations from the Quran but this is distracting because the civil service has the essential elements of good and honest servitude without being God-fearing.

What went wrong for Shafee? In Chapters 10, 11 and 12, the writer relates an event in June 1998 when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, "kept quiet" when Shafee told him of his decision to investigate the then Director-General of the Economic Planning Unit. The writer notes significantly that the Director-General was promoted to Governor of Bank Negara (September 1998 to April 2000) while the investigation was still ongoing. The ACA raided the office of the Director-General on June 16, 1998 after receiving an official complaint on a privatisation project. The writer states that Shafee was scolded by the Prime Minister for starting the investigation.

The investigation took three years (long after Shafee's retirement in September 1998) and the report was submitted to the Attorney-General only on February 15, 2000. The case was closed due to a lack of consistent information and evidence. On June 12, 2000, Shafee testified in court at the trial of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the then Deputy Prime Minister, who had been charged with corruption and sodomy. He testified that it was not Anwar Ibrahim who had tried to stop his investigations on the Director-General. His exact words in the cross-examination were: "Yes, I was told off. 'How dare you raid my senior officer's office?' I was taken aback and I replied, 'This was based on an official complaint by an aggrieved party. I did what was officially required under the law...' Later he said, 'I was highly disillusioned and when I went home I told my wife I wanted to resign. But in view that I have two or three months to finish my extension - my wife persuaded me not to resign.'"

This court proceeding is offered in the appendix, where we finally hear the "voice" of Shafee who otherwise remains silent throughout the book. Was the Prime Minister angry with Shafee because he thought Anwar Ibrahim had led him to the investigation? Was Shafee a victim of the growing tensions between Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim, which led the Prime Minister to doubt his motives for conducting the raid? Was the raid an act of insubordination since the Prime Minister remained silent when informed and had not yet given his consent? Was consent from the Prime Minister necessary under the law?

Shafee denied that Anwar Ibrahim had led him to investigate the Director-General, but the Prime Minister seemed to have had doubts about that. Apparently, Shafee became caught in a web of suspicion and intrigue, although he doggedly stated he was merely doing his duty.

Many other civil servants and judges have suffered worse than Shafee did, such as suspensions, dismissals and withdrawal of salaries and pensions. The difference with Shafee is that he had Kalsom to champion him and a network of sympathetic senior retired civil servants and concerned friends and colleagues. Many had put loyalty, truth and

justice first; a few sought to consult their political superiors before making vital decisions but many believed that the truth would prevail if they did their duty. Some emerged from this experience better than others and there are no guidelines on how to make perfect decisions.

There is however a general guideline that consultative strategies do work and time is a necessary stratagem in sound decision-making. How often have our decisions not changed when we have had enough time to reflect?

This book provides useful insights into the life and career of a civil servant and suggests that goodness and truth override everything else. The book is well-illustrated and is worth reading even though many of the descriptions of public agencies can be obtained elsewhere. The writer does not analyse in depth other events like the Memali incident (November 1985) and Operation Lalang (October 1987) and even refers to the dead followers of Ibrahim Libya at Memali, Baling as "criminals"; social scientists would question this even if the writer had relied on written accounts of the incident. These events also relate to the tensions between public and political office and between the ruling government and the opposition. The reader would have liked to know more about and understand how decisions were made and how procedures and orders were given within the National Security Council which led to the loss of lives and key activists being imprisoned.

The book paints a glowingly nostalgic picture of the late Tun Abdul Razak and the writer tries to show how the consultative spirit of Razak contributed to the high morale in the civil service. Shafee, who served as his private secretary from June 12, 1969 to June 1, 1975, "admired Razak for his honesty (truthful, ethical, principled, high integrity), competence (able to add value), his ability to look forward (has vision, sense of direction), enthusiasm, and most of all, his sense of credibility (worthy of trust and respect)."

Razak "greened" Malaysia and gave it an iconic place in the global campaign against rural poverty. Mahathir Mohamad gave the world an alternative perspective of political and economic globalisation, from the viewpoint of undeveloped and developing nations, but unlike Razak his contributions did not surface from home-grown struggles of poverty or underdevelopment. He was reaching out to a different audience in a different phase of Malaysia's economic achievements.

Civil servants will always be home-grown and destined to serve, while the politician is required to be a visionary no matter how home-grown they are. Marry the two, and, if we get lucky, the visionary politician and loyal civil servant will come to exemplify the synergy between "government" and "governance", and "excellence" and "expedience". Spinners are best left behind the cotton wheel. ☉

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