

Political Journey of _____

ABANG JOHARI

Premier of Sarawak

Roosfa Hashim



ROOSFA HASHIM is a distinguished biographer, renowned publisher, editor, and academician with a wealth of experience in the realm of publishing. Having authored numerous biographies of significant national figures, his literary contributions include *Perjalanan Politik Abang Johari: Premier Sarawak* (2024), *Perjalanan Politik Khaled Nordin: Sebuah Biografi* (2017), *Tan Sri Dr Mohd Shukor Mahfar: meredah badai, memimpin transformasi* (2015), and *Mohd. Ghazali Abdul Rahman 1938-2007: Dari Mercuri ke Mercuri* (2010). With a background as an editor at UKM Press and later as the Director of IIUM Press, Roosfa Hashim currently serves as an academician at International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). His scholarly endeavours extend beyond borders, as evidenced by his role as an Adjunct Professor at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei. Actively engaged in publishing initiatives within Malaysia, he contributes significantly to the Malaysian Scholarly Publishing Board (MAPIM). Internationally, he holds a position on the board of the International Union of Islamic Book Publishers (IUIBP), further cementing his influence and expertise in the global publishing community.

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Yang Amat Berhormat
Premier of Sarawak
Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Dr Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari
Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg

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Preface

THIS book about the life journey of the Premier of Sarawak adds to the series of biographies that I have been working on. Before this, I have written other biographies, including a recent political biography of Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin (published by the University of Malaya in 2015) when he was the Chief Minister of Johor. I have also written the life story of a business figure, Tan Sri Datuk Wira Dr Haji Mohd Shukor Haji Mahfar (Marzuq, 2015), the former Chief Executive Officer of the Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia (LHDN).

Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Dr Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg, or known as Abang Johari, the well-known Chief Minister of Sarawak, is recognised for being friendly, approachable, and humble, but at the same time has a wealth of stories and experiences. His aversion to publicity has hidden many fascinating stories that are worth reading for all of us. Therefore, it is appropriate to publish his biography.

Fortunately, Tuan Haji Ahmad Hazlan Ismawi, his private secretary, shares a similar work style and attitude as 'Abang Jo'. He was very helpful and approachable to me. A single phone call from my office at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Bangi in 2010 prompted him to request a formal letter from me. A simple fax sufficed; there was no need for a posted formal letter. No bureaucracy.

"That's the mark of a leader with a people's heart," my heart whispered.

In the last few months of 2010, Abang Jo's diary had no empty slots. Despite several phone calls and text messages (SMS), I could not reach Abang Jo.

"Who's this? Your number does not show up," Ahmad Hazlan replied in Sarawak Malay when I texted his other number.

Was it just an excuse? Diligence and effort are the steps to success. Ah, that is only suitable for school children. One cannot achieve one's objective without effort or without expending some resources.

"By mid-January, my phone will be fixed," said Ahmad Hazlan's message at the end of December 2010. That was his promise for the umpteenth time.

During the months of waiting for a meeting with Abang Johari, I talked with other people and read a lot about Sarawak – from its ethnic diversity to its flora and fauna, from Sarawak's *kek lapis* to *mi kolok* and Sarawak *laksa*, from the legend of Puteri Santubong to the ferocity of Bujang Senang in the Batang Lupar to political issues, economics, development, tourism – anything. And of course, not to be missed, from the decrease of longhouse inhabitants to the housing plans for Sarawakians, that led me to Abang Jo, the housing minister at that time.

The 27th of January 2011 was the date given to me to meet Abang Jo when I contacted Ahmad Hazlan in mid-January. However, the aim of flying from Kuala Lumpur to Sarawak was not just to have a conversation with Abang Jo. What if I also talked with taxi drivers, sellers of handmade bead chains from the interior, hotel workers, boat owners who crossed the Sarawak River, or grassroots members of Sarawak United Bumiputera Heritage Party or Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB)?

At 8.00 a.m., I made my way into the living room of the Sarawak Housing Minister's office. I only had a little food for breakfast at the hotel because the appointment with Abang Jo had killed my appetite. All the buffet dishes at the hotel where I stayed seemed tasteless. That was more than ten years ago when I first started working on Abang Johari's biography.

I managed to have a conversation with Abang Jo that day. As expected, he was very friendly and open about his life. Nevertheless, he

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was very cautious in his responses regarding his plans and the possibility of becoming the Chief Minister of Sarawak.

At the end of the conversation, he generously showed me his photo collection and allowed me to use them for this book. Thank you, Abang Jo!

* * *

I regularly shuttled between locations for over a decade, with Sarawak being a frequent destination. Dato' Dr Jeniri Amir, my close friend, has consistently shared insights and updates on significant events involving Abang Johari in Kuching during this period. I made it a point to attend these events, capturing pivotal moments in Abang Johari's political journey through my lens.

Over the past ten years, Dr Jeniri has been persistent in his calls, whether through spoken words or concise text messages on my phone screen, urging me to participate in these events. He played a pivotal role in motivating me to write Abang Johari's biography, at times going as far as encouraging me to make the trip to Kuching.

"Attending the event is crucial!" was his frequent plea, directly or through his messages. He was adamant about not settling for a distant approach, emphasising, "Is this the *modus operandi* of a Chief Minister's biographer, merely working from afar in Kuala Lumpur?"

I countered this by asking, "Don't I already have someone close to the Chief Minister's Office in Kuching to assist me?" This exchange characterised the dynamics between Dr Jeniri and me, grounded in a long-standing friendship that also saw us collaborate on co-authoring a book.

I am aware of the close relationship between Dr Jeniri and Abang Johari. Dr Jeniri is highly qualified to write Abang Johari's biography, given that strong connection. Despite his significant role in Abang Johari's life, Dr Jeniri is committed to maintaining ethical standards and would not exploit his special position. Previously, Dr Jeniri successfully crafted a biography for Tun Openg, Abang Johari's father. Due to this experience, he suggested creating separate biographies for both individuals. While Dr Jeniri has already completed Tun Openg's biography, I dedicated myself to finishing Abang Johari's biography.

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However, Abang Johari was engaged in a competitive bid for the Chief Minister's position during that time. Considering the sensitive nature of the situation, we decided it was inappropriate to publish both books simultaneously. Our concern was that simultaneous releases could lead to various speculations, interpretations, and conclusions that might negatively impact Abang Johari's chances of securing the Chief Minister position.

Dr Jeniri Amir, being well-acquainted with *TV Sarawak* station, *Suara Sarawak* and *Sarawak Tribune*, also assisted me in obtaining materials from these sources. I managed to gather numerous photos from Suara Sarawak's collection.

* * *

ROHANA Bujang played a significant role in supporting me while I was writing this biography. When I reached out to her in Kuching on 30th September 2019, she generously supplied me with nearly all *Jiwa Bakti's* publications. Despite closely monitoring PBB developments, the materials she provided proved to be remarkably comprehensive and valuable. Special thanks to the staff members at the Chief Minister's Office Sarawak (now the Office of the Premier of Sarawak), particularly Aidi Zikri Ibrahim and Mohammad Hafiz Well, for their unwavering assistance in providing high-quality pictures. My sincere appreciation goes out to them for fulfilling every request for images needed for various chapters in this book.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the officials of the Sarawak United National Youth Organisation or Pertubuhan Belia Kebangsaan Bersatu Sarawak (SABERKAS) headquarters, namely Aymer Cedrick and Ruth Stephen Jimos. They contributed significantly by sharing substantial information regarding Abang Johari's involvement in SABERKAS and providing numerous essential pictures.

Acknowledgement is also due to the personnel at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) library. Tuan Haji Valentino Abu Bakar, a highly experienced senior librarian with extensive knowledge of Sarawak, provided invaluable assistance for which I am truly grateful.

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While exploring the enchanting Bako National Park, a tourist destination developed by Abang Johari, I received invaluable assistance from Anita and Zulkifli, also known as Li. Afham Jauhari Aldi, my former student who had become a senior officer at the National Archives of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, played a crucial role in acquiring materials related to Abang Johari. Additionally, Afham connected me with archive officers at the Sarawak branch, where Law Hieng Sui, Archive Assistant I, and Mohamad Fiqri Mohamed, Archive Assistant II, provided further assistance.

A significant contributor to this project was Tuan Haji Ahmad Hazlan, the Senior Private Secretary to the Chief Minister of Sarawak. He facilitated my second meeting with the Chief Minister on 14th January 2020, at Level 5 of the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly (DUN).

While waiting for the meeting with the Chief Minister of Sarawak, I was fortunate to meet and have a conversation with Tan Sri Datuk Amar Wilson Baya Dandot. He provided much information about the time since he first came to know Abang Johari.

I conversed with Dato Seri Abang Haji Abdul Karim Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg and Dato Dayang Hajah Madinah Tun Abang Openg, who are close family members of Abang Johari. Abang Abdul Karim, the President of the Sarawak Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) and the Sarawak Business Federation (SBF), is a successful businessman. Meanwhile, Dayang Madinah, a distinguished female Malay politician, was the first woman senator from Sarawak.

In addition to information gathered from personal contacts, interviews, and electronic methods, this book extensively relies on various sources, including books, magazines, and newspapers, whether in print or electronic format. Consequently, it is not feasible to enumerate all the sources, encompassing journalists, writers, and researchers. Their names and contributions are in the reference list of this book. I would also like to thank Malaysian Institute of Translation & Books for their efforts in publishing this book.

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On 13th January, 2017, Abang Johari Tun Openg, affectionately known as Abang Jo, ascended to the role of the sixth Chief Minister of Sarawak, a poignant moment amid the mourning for the recently departed Tan Sri Adenan Satem. With a political legacy spanning 36 years, Abang Jo's journey began in 1981 when he clinched the Satok State Legislative Assembly seat. He carried forward the mantle of his father, Tun Abang Haji Openg, Sarawak's inaugural State Governor post-independence in 1963, and his father-in-law, Tuanku Bujang Tuanku Othman, the second governor of Sarawak. Born into prominence, Abang Johari's ascent was anything but easy, navigating a political landscape fraught with conflicts and familial rifts, notably the discord between Tun Abdul Rahman Ya'kub and his nephew Tun Abdul Taib Mahmud. Surviving the tumultuous 'Ming Court' episode, Abang Jo's political trajectory demanded patience, composure, and strategic waiting for opportune moments, ultimately culminating in his elevation to the pinnacle of Sarawak's political hierarchy. Delving into the intricacies of YAB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg's forty-years odyssey, this book unveils the entirety of his remarkable journey through the labyrinth of Sarawakian politics.

Political Journey of _____
ABANG JOHARI

Premier of Sarawak

"The author masterfully crafts the biography, a gripping and interesting portrayal of Abang Johari's rise to prominence, offering invaluable lessons and wisdoms in leadership. A compelling narrative based on a 12-years research, it delves deep into the political journey of a transformative and visionary leader."

**Dato Dr Jeniri Amir,
Senior Fellow of The National Professors Council**

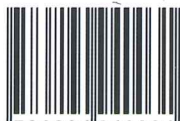
"... I found out that Abang Johari is very committed to prevent the contagion of COVID-19, in order to restore and rebuild the state of Sarawak based on low carbon emission through renewable and sustainable resources."

**Dato' Dr Madeline Berma,
Fellow Academy of Sciences Malaysia**

"... the youngest son of Sarawak's first governor, the late Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg bin Abang Sapiee is fated to be one of Sarawak's transcendent leaders, who is tactful, attentive, noble and smart."

**Datuk Abang Sallehuddin Abg Shokeran,
Former Director of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka**

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