

Ulasan Buku / Book Review

Raja Mohammad Alias. The Architect of Felda by Rokiah Talib, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2009. ISBN 978-967-942-897-1. 201 pages.

This beautifully produced and well-written book presents major features of the 35-year career of Raja Tan Sri Mohammad Alias' with the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda). There is also much interesting background about Felda, and about Raja Alias' personal life. The author, Dr Rokiah Talib, is well placed to write the book, having studied Felda and its activities over many years and written numerous accounts of its development. The book is in a wide coffee-table format, which belies its sophistication and comprehensiveness.

The volume commences with a foreword by the then deputy prime minister, Dato' Sri Mohd. Najib, moving to an account of Raja Alias' early life and to a consideration of the genesis and development of Felda. The latter includes Felda's expansion into upstream plantations and seed production, and into downstream processing, manufacturing and marketing. All chapters of the book revolve around the role of Raja Alias, and reflect as well the deep knowledge of Felda on the part of Rokiah Talib.

Later in the book the author addresses Raja Alias's involvement with the wider commercial world beyond Felda. This especially includes Maybank, the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation which he rescued from financial difficulties, the Boustead Group, and the Kuala Lumpur Commodity Exchange. She goes on to explore Raja Alias' management and leadership styles, his relations with Felda settlers, his family life and his legacy. She examines in a concluding chapter Felda's role as a showcase to other countries, doing this through photos of Raja Alias with visiting dignitaries. The whole volume is indeed spiced with interesting photos, and these vividly bring to life the events described.

The book sketches many crucial junctures in Felda's development. It also describes the deep impacts made by Raja Alias, from the year 1966 when he joined Felda as an assistant to the then Chairman, Taib Andak, to the time he resigned as Chairman in 2001. He had meanwhile been Director-General from 1969, and Chairman from 1979.

Raja Alias emerges from the pages of this book as a man of wide vision, comprehending the broader implications of what was happening and its likely future effects. He appears as an able politician, good at dealing on the one hand with the manifold problems of settlers, and on the other with the political and bureaucratic personalities impacting on Felda at a high level. He is also

technically knowledgeable, and very much down to earth with his 'walkabout' style. He is an outstanding manager and strategist, using appropriate organizational structures to secure the effective implementation of Felda policies. He is a strict disciplinarian, yet ultimately sympathetic to human problems and commanding the fierce loyalty of those who served him.

The book examines many interesting and contrasting elements in the role of Raja Alias in Felda development. One among many, for example, is the relationship between Raja Alias and Taib Andak, where the latter sensibly gave rein to the competent and dynamic officer that Tun Razak had permitted to join him (p. 64). Later, when Raja Alias himself became Chairman, he had the problem of handling his deputy, Alladin Hashim, and apparently did so in a similar hands-off style. But he still ensured that the strict guidelines of his preferred policies were carried out, and was effectively the guiding captain of the ship (p. 69).

Another quite different element treated was the overseeing by Raja Alias of Felda restructuring towards a more devolved organization. This saw the development of regional offices in an operationally effective way and the setting up of Felda Holdings to prosecute downstream commercial entities. The latter were thereby given more freedom to develop in an economically appropriate manner (p. 72). It appears, in fact, that this growth of downstream activities attracted considerable criticism of Raja Alias, who was accused of neglecting agriculture and the settlers. But the activities may now be seen as critical to Felda's effective functioning, and a major aspect in its continuing success.

A further element was the development pushed by Raja Alias of *Koperasi Pemodalan Felda* (KPF), or Felda Investment Cooperatives, run by committees of settlers and Felda staff. The KPF encouraged saving, and the investment by settlers in Felda commercial entities (p. 141). This turned out to be quite successful, and the control of entities by settler groups was a key factor preventing their later proposed sales by government to outside commercial interests.

A final element that can be cited amongst numerous others was the unsuccessful prosecution by Raja Alias of the 'share system', whereby settlers were to receive shares in operations run by Felda, rather than land titles (p. 93). This move was thought to enable settlers to cope better in old age, and would apply to all those who had not yet received titles. This was a rare instance in which Raja Alias did not get his way. The move was opposed by many settlers, and he was in consequence overridden by his political masters.

The volume may be judged an outstanding publication, which apart from providing great insight into the character and achievements of Raja Alias, also covers many vital events in the development of Felda as one of the world's most effective government-sponsored land development institutions. Raja Alias emerges as a true architect of an organization which has benefited large numbers of previously poor families, is financially self sustaining, and which up to the present at least has

proved a real asset to Malaysia's national economy. The book is recommended to a wide readership, both within and outside Malaysia.

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