

THE name's "Bon" but he's not quite the British special agent who has been licensed to kill. Unlike James Bond, the boyish Edmund Bon fights his battles in the courtroom and in the public forum.



BY RITA JONG

Bon is a lawyer who focuses on human rights and constitutional issues. Besides his legal practice, he keeps busy with activism work to highlight legal issues of public interest through the MyConstitution campaign, the Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights project, and through the LoyarBurok blog. His mission is to create awareness and share knowledge among youths to encourage them to take part in nation building.

Despite his boyish looks, Bon insists he is not young anymore. He turns 40 in June. Despite the 16 years of legal practice tucked under his belt, this yoga enthusiast confesses that he never wanted to be a lawyer but just went "with the flow" because most of his friends were doing law.

The accidental lawyer

As a child, Bon wanted to be "everything from an archaeologist to a fire fighter ... anything exciting and adventurous, but never a lawyer", he tells *The Heat* in a recent interview.

While waiting for his SPM results, Bon worked as a waiter at a Pizza Hut outlet and at wedding banquets, apart from doubling up as a tuition teacher. It was then that he came across a Brighton college offering scholarships at a British Education Fair.

"I applied and got the scholarship to do my A-levels at Bellerby's College in Brighton in the United Kingdom. When I was doing my A-levels, all my friends were either going to do Accountancy, Economics, Medicine or Law. Since I couldn't do the first three, I chose Law. Most of my close friends also wanted to do Law. So I went with the flow," he explains.

That was in 1992. He then studied Law in University College of London and did his English Bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1997. He was called to the Bar upon his return to Malaysia the following year.

In 2008, Bon also took his Master's degree in International Human Rights Law from Oxford University.

Younger days

Edmund Bon was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1974 and grew up in Ampang. He has a younger sister. Both his parents were

Bon to be a legal eagle

As a young boy, Edmund Bon wanted to be an archaeologist or a fire fighter, but never in his wildest dream did he think he would take up legal practice. Today, the 'accidental lawyer' has matured into a strong proponent of human and constitutional rights in Malaysia

Bon serves as a tutor in legal education at Universiti Malaya



Bon celebrating his 1st birthday

teachers but his father later joined a multi-national petroleum company.

His surname is a quirk due to a mistake on the part of government officials during the turmoil of World War II. "My grandfather had registered my father's birth in Seremban, and the official who took down my father's surname heard it as 'Bon'. The correct pronunciation would have been 'Yun' or 'Woon'," he explains.

Bon studied at the Methodist Boys School in Kuala Lumpur where he served as a prefect and joined the Boys Scout.

Initiation during Reformasi era

Upon graduation, Bon returned to Malaysia during the height of the Reformasi movement. He served

in the Legal Aid Bureau to fulfil the requirement that new lawyers needed to do at least 14 weeks under the legal aid programme. "There were many categories to choose from and I picked 'dock brief' where I was required to mitigate for people who pleaded guilty," he recalls.

At that time, the political scene in the country was heating up. Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had been sacked as deputy prime minister. "We needed to defend those who had protested against the sacking," he says.

The areas around Masjid Jamek and Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur were the scene of running battles between Reformasi protestors and the police. Hordes of people were getting arrested and charged in court.

Bon and his legal aid colleagues were required to go to the police station to interview those who had been arrested. "There were so many people. We spoke to 50 to 60 people who were facing charges for street demonstrations daily," he says.

Like Bon, there are many lawyers

His first case that made the news

EDMUND BON Tasted his first five minutes of fame when he was handling mitigation for a senior citizen who had been charged for stealing. He was with the Legal Aid Bureau at that time. "The old grandmother had been charged with the theft of crayons and colour pencils," he recalls.

"I can't remember how old she was or when it happened. I argued that this old woman was senile and that we should take pity on her instead of sending her to jail and making her pay a fine. So I asked for her to be bound over

and the court granted my request," Bon recalls.

That was the first case Bon handled that was reported in the newspapers

Since then, Bon has gone on to handle many high profile cases - from criminal cases to those involving constitutional human rights matters.

One of the many cases that he was involved in was the 2009 power struggle in Perak where two politicians slugged it out to be *mentri besar*. He represented Datuk Seri Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin from *Pakatan Rakyat*.

Nizar had sought a declaration from the court that he was the lawful *Perak mentri besar* and not rival Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir from the *Barisan Nasional*.

Bon was also involved in the Royal Commission of Inquiry in 2011 which was held to find out the circumstances leading to the death of former political aide Teoh Beng Hock in 2009, hours after he was questioned by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission at its office in Shah Alam. At that time, he appeared as a counsel for the Malaysian Bar.

He also appeared for the Malaysian Bar in the M. Indira Gandhi's custody battle for her three children with her

estranged husband, Mohd Ridzuan Abdullah, who had embraced Islam.

In 2007, when a few human rights lawyers were arrested by the police for taking part in the Human Rights Day Walk in Kuala Lumpur, Bon appeared for them on a civil suit they filed against the uniformed men for unlawful arrests.

Another earlier case which Bon worked on was the habeas corpus application filed by nine students who were detained under the now-repealed ISA. In 2003, the nine who were then aged 16 to 21, were suspected of training to be leaders of the Southeast Asian terror network *Jemaah Islamiah*, which had been blamed for several bombings in Southeast Asia.

who cut their teeth in the Reformasi years, including Fahri Azzat, Amer Hamzah Arshad, Latheefa Koya and N. Surendran. The more well-known lawyers such as Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan and Ragunath Kesavan were their mentors.

Some, like Latheefa and Surendran, had gone into politics while handling human rights issues while others continued to focus on the cause outside the realm of party politics. Latheefa is PKR legal bureau chief while Surendran is vice-president of the party.

Upon completion of his tenure in legal aid, Bon joined Chooi and Co, one of the country's larger law firms, to pursue his cause for human rights. "I did habeas corpus cases and was involved in a background case for Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor (formerly PKR national youth chief who is now with Barisan Nasional) in 2001," he says. (Ezam was appointed director of communications for the Finance Ministry on March 15).

"In 2004, we also did the Jemaah Islamiyah case and got involved with many ISA (Internal Security Act) and freedom of expression cases. If it wasn't for this Reformasi period, I wouldn't be doing what I am doing now. It was good training ground," Bon says.

His compatriot Amer Hamzah, who is also a human rights lawyer, says it was Bon who had roped him into doing such cases. "I remember I first met him at the old Kuala Lumpur criminal sessions court and discovered that we both had a strong interest in criminal cases. We decided to



Bon (far left, back row) at the launch of a human rights campaign

do criminal and legal aid cases together," says Amer. "He also got me involved in numerous human rights cases and we did a number of criminal trials, unlawful assembly trials and habeas corpus cases for ISA detainees."

Amer describes Bon as an outstanding lawyer with a "good legal mind" who has the ability to come up with ingenious legal arguments. He adds that Bon is truly an activist at heart, who believes that change can be achieved via social activism.

Teaching future lawyers

For the past three years, Bon has been

serving as a tutor in legal education at Universiti Malaya.

"I teach International Human Rights Law and I see that the legal education in

"I have no intention of becoming a politician. Politics changes you and being a political player is not something I want to do."



"But now we are in 2014 with so many different jobs and opportunities. And students will need to not just deal with a problem in black and white, but also to

all our universities and the LLB programme do not adequately prepare our people for the legal service. The skills which are being taught are a method for the 1930s, where everybody learns the same thing and come out and do the same thing," he says.

know how to deal with a client properly. This practical aspect of the practice is not taught," he says.

Bon the man

When not tutoring or arguing cases, Bon indulges in yoga. He attributes his boyish looks to this ancient exercise as well as the fact that he likes what he does.

What about taking up politics like his compatriots Latheefa and Surendran? He has, after all, been courted by both Pakatan Rakyat and Barisan Nasional.

But Bon is not swayed. "I have no intention of becoming a politician. Politics changes you and being a political player is not something I want to do," he says.

That, perhaps, will be his greatest strength yet. ■

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KLANG VALLEY

- Alamanda Putrajaya
- Alpha Angle
- Bandar Tasik Selatan
- Bangsar Village
- Bukit Raja
- Giant Stadium Shah Alam
- Great Eastern Mall
- Mid Valley megamall
- Publika

- Setia City Mall
- Shah Alam CityCentre
- Subang Parade
- Taman Maluri Cheras
- The Curve
- 1 Utama
- KLIA

PENANG

- Gurney Plaza

PERAK

- Kinta City

NEGERI SEMBILAN

- Jusco Seremban 2
- Giant Senawang

MELAKA

- Mahkota Parade

JOHOR

- Aeromall, Senai Airport, JB
- City Square, JB
- Taman Universiti, Skudai

KEDAH

- Tesco Sg Petani

SARAWAK

- MPH The Spring Shopping Mall, Kuching

POPULAR

KLANG VALLEY

- 1 Utama
- AEON Cheras Selatan, Balakong
- Ampcorp Mall
- Ampang Point Centre
- Bangunan Lee Rubber
- Bukit Raja Klang
- Bukit Tinggi
- Cheras Leisure Mall
- Empire Subang
- Festival City Mall, Setapak
- Ikano Power Centre
- IOI Mall
- Jusco Rawang
- Kepong
- Paradigm Kelana Jaya
- Pearl Point Shopping Centre
- Selayang Mall
- Sunway Pyramid
- Taman Equine, Seri Kembangan
- Tesco Kepong
- Tesco, Ampang
- Summit, USJ
- Wangsa Walk Mall

PENANG

- Bukit Jambul
- Gurney Plaza
- Jusco Perda
- Komtar
- Megamall
- Queensbay Mall
- Sunway Carnival
- Tesco Jelutong

PERAK

- AEON Ipoh Station 18
- Ipoh Kinta City
- Ipoh Parade
- Tesco

NEGERI SEMBILAN

- 9 Avenue Nilai
- Jusco Seremban 2
- Terminal One, Seremban

MELAKA

- AEON Bandaraya
- Mahkota Parade
- Melaka Jaya Jusco
- Plaza Melaka
- Tesco

JOHOR

- AEON Bukit Indah, JB
- Batu Pahat Mall
- Harris, JB
- Kluang Mall, Johor
- Kompleks Legenda Muar, Johor
- Plaza Pelangi, JB
- Sutera Mall, JB

KEDAH

- City Plaza, Alor Setar
- Jerai Plaza, Gurun
- Kompleks Star Parade, Alor Star
- Tesco, Sg Petani
- Sg. Petani
- Tesco Mergong, Alor Star

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- Kota Bahru Mall

PAHANG

- Kuantan Mega Mall
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- Popular Bookstore Taman BDC Stampin, Kuching
- Popular Bookstore Tun Jungah Centre, Kuching
- Popular Bookstore Bintang Mall, Miri
- Popular Bookstore Delta Mall, Sibul

BORDERS.

- 1 Mont Kiara
- Bangsar Village II Gardens
- The Curve
- Times Square
- Tropicana City Mall
- Queensbay Mall



- Alamanda Putrajaya
- Bandar Utama
- Great Eastern
- Gurney Plaza, Penang
- Island Plaza, Penang
- Jaya One
- Mid Valley
- Mont Kiara
- Mutiara Damansara
- Subang Parade
- Sunway Pyramid



- Bangsar Shopping Centre
- Citta Mall
- Hartamas Shopping Centre
- Pavillion
- Sunway Giza

PENANG

- Gurney Paragon Mall

SABAH

- Times One Borneo Hypermall, Kota Kinabalu
- Times Suria Sabah
- Shopping Mall, Kota Kinabalu
- Times Warisan Square, Kota Kinabalu

Others

- Books & Magazine @ KLIA
- Books @ LCCT
- AEON Big Mid Valley
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- Giant Hypermarket Kelana Jaya
- Giant Hypermarket Kota Damansara
- Hero Supermarket
- Jason Food Hall
- Jaya Grocer Bukit Jelutong
- Jaya Grocer Empire Subang
- Mercato Hartamas
- Mercato Pavilion
- Perniagaan Wafada @ LCCT