

TUNKU

*His Life
and
Times*

The Authorized Biography of
Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj

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Pelanduk
Publications

Published by
Pelanduk Publications (M) Sdn. Bhd.,
24 Jalan 20/16A, 46300 Petaling Jaya,
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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Pelanduk Publications (M) Sdn. Bhd.,
P.O. Box 8265, 46785 Kelana Jaya,
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Sheppard, Mubin, Tan Sri Dato', 1905-1994
Tunku: his life and times: the authorized
biography / Mubin Sheppard.
ISBN 967 978 495 9
1. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, 1903-1990
2. Prime Ministers—Malaysia—Biography. I. Title.
923.2595

Printed in Malaysia by
Eagle Trading Sdn. Bhd.,
81 Jalan SS25/32, 47301 Petaling Jaya,
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

801671 /

29 NOV 1995
Perpustakaan Negara
Malaysia

Preface

THIS BOOK tells in words and pictures the life and times of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj (1903-1990); it chronicles his royal ancestry, early childhood, early education, initiation into politics and the attendant trials and tribulations, and his crowning achievement as the principal architect of Malaya's independence.

He was not politically brilliant, but he had a charisma very much his own. He did what no one else could have done at that time. Against all odds, he managed to unite the Malays, Chinese and Indians. He formed the Alliance—comprising UMNO, the MCA (led by Tun Tan Cheng Lock) and the MIC (led by Tun V.T. Sambanthan)—which won the 1954 Legislative Council elections. It was the first step towards racial harmony in a pluralistic society and a sure step towards independence, which came on August 31, 1957. Tunku led the campaign for independence through peaceful means. His unique qualities were invaluable and no one else could have united the three communities at all levels or could have pre-

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served this unity through the testing months before the Alliance's Merdeka Mission set off for London and achieved a miracle. The period between 1955 and 1957 marked an important transition in Malaya from colonial administration to political independence. It was also a time when the newly-elected Alliance Government, though not completely in control of the reins of power, began to grapple with the problems of nation-building in a multiracial society.

What made Tunku so determined to end British rule? Most of us know the oft-repeated incidents which particularly shaped his determination for self-rule, but it is worth recounting. While Tunku was an undergraduate in Cambridge, he was twice refused a place in the hall of residence. When he remonstrated to Reverend Chaytor, one of his tutors, he told him point blank: "The College was built for Englishmen. If I gave you a room to the exclusion of Englishmen, they would not like it."

From that moment on, there grew within him an intense anti-colonial feeling. He was determined to fight for the independence of his country. Incidentally, when it was found out later that he had been refused residence, a place was offered to him, but he refused it.

On August 3, 1955, when Tunku arrived in Kuala Lumpur to assume the office of Chief Minister (soon after the federal election in 1955), he found to his dismay and annoyance that no house had been allocated to him or any of his colleagues. There weren't any car or office space allotted to them either. The Deputy Chief Secretary told Tunku that these had not been provided because at the time they did not know who was going to come in and form the Government. Tunku remarked that whatever the election results might have been, they should have expected new people to take over the administration, working jointly with the colonial government.

The Deputy Chief Secretary then drove Tunku to see the government quarters which he said were available. When he saw the house, he was so disgusted that he refused to accept it; it had only two bedrooms. Though it was intended for clerical service officers, it was not even fit to be given to a lower echelon official of the Malayan Civil Service. Next day, the Deputy took him to view a big

house at 1 Hose Road. Though it looked old and dilapidated, he accepted it, and moved in. Then the weather changed and he found out the reason the house was vacant. "One night, during a severe storm, the roof developed multiple leaks. At three in the morning I woke up to find myself wet through. My wife and I had a lot of trouble trying to find a dry spot where we could push our bed to. Thereupon I decided that I could not put up with the colonial government any more. I would not wait four years for independence. At that late hour in the damp house, I made a vow to win our freedom in half the time—two years, not four."

This book also chronicles Tunku's career through the first nine golden years of his premiership during which he established Malaya, little known and economically underdeveloped, as a country which great nations were glad to be friends with; while at home, he became famous as an enthusiastic patron of Asian football, local horseracing and traditional Malay culture. At the same time, he created various imposing landmarks in the nation's capital, which soon adorned travel posters: the National Mosque, the National Museum, the National Monument and the Parliament House. Despite bitter opposition from Indonesia under Soekarno, Tunku brought together by means of his own patient diplomacy, Sabah, Sarawak, and for a time, Singapore, to form Malaysia.

When Tunku retired in September 1970, it was perhaps inevitable that most of his colleagues regarded his career as having come to an end. But King Faisal of Saudi Arabia recognized Tunku's enduring capacity for leadership, and persuaded him to undertake the task of establishing an Islamic Secretariat in Jeddah, with the principal purpose of uniting forty Muslim States, spread over the Middle East and North Africa. Tunku successfully completed his mission and went on to found an Islamic Development Bank despite almost insufferable non-cooperation from all quarters.

After his second retirement late in 1974, Tunku returned to his homeland, to find his past achievements ignored. With no political or commercial support, Tunku quietly emerged as a writer of weekly feature articles on current affairs which attracted readers all over