

03/05/1998

Ghafar Baba - politician with the grassroots touch

Joceline Tan

TUN Abdul Ghafar Baba rarely shows much emotion. Thus, he was not quite his usual stoic self when he wept openly, almost burying his face in a snowy-white handkerchief, at a ceremony to receive the Tun Abdul Razak Award more than a month ago.

Somehow, the occasion moved him in a way that even the most poignant personal events in his 73 long years had not.

"Sometimes, I try to cry when I remember the deaths of my children, my father and mother ... still, I cannot cry," he says.

He is at home, his face gelled back in its inscrutable setting and slouched on one of those brocade-upholstered chairs with curly-wurly armrests and backs. About a dozen of these chairs are lined up against the walls of the living room in his new home in Taman Duta.

It is a large room, perfect for high-flying politicians and the crowds that seem to flock around them day and night.

But Ghafar has only a lone guest that afternoon. They sit there, two stark figures, conversing in muted tones and almost swamped by the flashy carpet beneath their feet; it is one of those modern machine-woven designs with virtually every primary colour in it.

A fleet of cars, including a sleek, golden Mercedes 350SLC and a posh-looking Bentley, are parked under the porch. Ghafar is said to enjoy driving and did quite a bit of it even when he was Deputy Prime Minister.

The house itself is big, its dubious architecture somewhat compensated by its location in the status-paved neighbourhood.

Right next door, in a multi-storeyed structure that looks like a hotel, lives the casino king, Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong. Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's Prussian blue-tiled mansion is just a stone's throw away, as is the home of former Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Harun Idris.

"There, somewhere," says Ghafar with a vague sweep of an arm, are the homes of one-time Umno significant Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen, the still significant Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik and the Tan Chong family (of Nissan fame).

Life has grown quite sedentary for this former Deputy Prime Minister since retreating from the political frontlines in 1993.

"It was the first time something like that happened to me ... in 50 years," he says ponderously of the events of 1993.

That was the year, he found himself defending his deputy presidency in Umno against Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, a candidate who seemed to be everything which he was not.

But what really left him dumbfounded was the ferocity with which the political tide turned overnight against him.

Cabinet members abandoned his side and the grassroots thinned out from under his feet. He eventually withdrew from the contest.

"This is what you call politics, full of uncertainty. Friend in the morning, foe in the evening," he recalls with surprisingly little rancour.

By then, this plain-speaking man with the folksy mannerisms had been in politics for more than 40 years - longer than his mother had lived and about the lifespan of his father.

"Few can match his record in Umno," says Wanita Umno permanent chairman Tan Sri Aishah Ghani who has known him for close to 40 years.

Ghafar was part of that vital political spine of teachers who helped Umno realise its early glory. He had initially been drawn to the radical

Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) and was active in the then nascent trade unions.

He joined Umno when the MNP was banned by the British and heard Tunku Abdul Rahman for the first time - in "Oxford Malay" (his way of describing Tunku's heavy Kedah slang) - in 1951.

"When the penghulu asked: 'If I join Umno, can you increase my salary?' Tunku said: 'No, because I have no power. But Umno is struggling to get the power. After that, I may be able to revise your salary.'"

Somehow, the young Ghafar thought it explained rather well what independence was about.

"Independence meant power and power meant helping people. I was really impressed."

A little simplistic yes, but not an entirely ineffective way of explaining a complex idea to the grassroots. And that, by and large, has been Ghafar's political approach for a great part of his career. JOURNALISTS who covered him were usually divided into two camps of opinion - one group found clarity in his simple way of putting across ideas, the other found his views elementary beyond belief.

But both were in agreement on one point: they rated him one of the more sincere politicians they knew.

Ghafar says that if Tunku inspired him towards Umno, it was Razak who was instrumental for his rise in the party.

"He guided me, encouraged me to stand for election, to become Chief Minister (of Malacca), to join the Federal Government. As I said, I regarded him as a brother, a good friend and a good leader."

He also credits Razak for his push on education and his initiative to re-tailor the government administration to suit an independent state.

Ghafar rose quite rapidly in Umno even by contemporary standards. He joined Umno in 1951, was a State Assemblyman by 1955, Chief Minister of Malacca by 1959, vice-president of Umno by 1962 and a Cabinet member by 1967.

His penchant for the humble life even as he rose up the political hierarchy is almost legendary by now.

For instance, as Malacca Chief Minister, he eschewed the spacious official residence for his own wooden kampung house and continued driving his own car, using the state car for only official functions.

Aishah recalls how he "spoke little but worked hard" and how his home was never locked, opened to visitors day and night.

But in 1976, while Minister of Rural Development, he suddenly resigned from Tun Hussein Onn's Cabinet after the latter picked Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as his No 2. Despite his strenuous denials, the perception remains that he was deeply peeved at being sidelined.

A decade was to pass before he returned to the Cabinet, this time as Prime Minister Dr Mahathir's No 2, following Tan Sri Musa Hitam's resignation.

His comeback sparked off fresh interest about his political style - by then the kampung-style of politics for which he was known had become rather rare in the sea of young, restless-for-position-and-power types that had made their appearance in Umno.

Much was made of his grassroots touch and approach. He was extolled as a model of forbearance and humility, as that traditional facet of Umno that members should never lose touch with.

His reputation soared and some political reporters even began describing as an "under-estimated strategist, "mediator par excellence" and "power-broker".

At the same time, there were those who thought his career was chiefly about being at the right place at the right time.

They found him just as uninspiring as ever even after being away from the scene for close to a decade.

According to veteran journalist Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail, a member of the influential Razak inner circle, Ghafar's survival has hinged largely on the fact that he was uncontroversial. More important, he did not pose any sort of threat to others.

"He was not associated with any faction or camp ... no strong views, so he was, well, harmless," says Samad.

Indeed, he was a mild personality compared to other more vocal and peppery figures such as Tan Sri Syed Albar Jaafar, Tan Sri Syed Nasir Ismail, Tun Senu Abdul Rahman and Aziz Ishak. And he was definitely tame in contrast to the subsequent generation of "young Turks" like Dr Mahathir, Musa and Harun.

The result was that he was someone most people, ambitious or otherwise, felt comfortable - and safe - with.

Johor Umno's Datuk Shahrir Samad has this to add: "He had no pretensions, no hidden agenda. He knew his limitations and he survived by making himself useful."

It is probable that by 1993, even these "qualities" had reached its limits. The party had grown more sophisticated, the grassroots more discerning and the ranks less reserved about what they wanted.

In other words, the party had changed dramatically from the Umno he grew up with.

Ghafar admits as much: "I did not realise it ... that this thing could happen until it really happened. I thought all the time there was no change in Umno (members') attitude, that it was like in the beginning. I thought it was still the Umno I knew."

But he denies, to this day, any ambition to be Prime Minister.

Even if he did not reach the pinnacle, the fact that he has come thus far is proof of what he calls the "beauty of democracy".

The first time he realised this was when, as Malacca Chief Minister, he found himself seated alongside the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong at the Rulers' Conference, the very same royalty for whom he had picked tennis balls 25 years earlier.

Ghafar, the eldest of 10 siblings, was orphaned when still an adolescent. His brothers and sisters were sent off to live with relatives while he somehow managed to make a living on his own, become a teacher, join Umno and go on to become one of the country's most significant personalities.

Today, he and another sister, are the only surviving members of his own family.

Several days following the interview, Ghafar made a strange request that all mention of his family be omitted although he had talked quite freely about his children and two wives during the interview.

"He's a very, very private person," says Dr Alias Mohamed, Ghafar's former Press secretary and author of Ghafar: A Biography, a rather well-put together volume on Ghafar and his achievements.

Alias himself had his own unique experience with Ghafar's pronounced sense of privacy. The book had actually been completed sometime in 1991 but the subject of the book refused to allow its publication!

"It was only in 1993, after (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) announced his decision (to challenge Ghafar) ... I went to see him and I said: 'Look, you need this. Even Umno people don't know you well.' He is so private, he thought people would accept that."

According to Alias, Ghafar disliked having a bodyguard around him, he refused to use the siren when travelling in his official car and when he went to the mosque, preferred to sit quietly by himself among the back

rows.

"It's got to do with his childhood and upbringing," Alias says by way of explanation.

Many think that just because Ghafar speaks in a monotone and goes about wearing a gloomy expression that he is one of those all-work-and-no-fun types.

Those who know him more intimately say he does know how to have fun and he himself insists: "I am healthy, happy, following all the events in the country."

And several times during the interview he says: "I can feel it. I think I can go on another 15 to 20 years."

(END)