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Our country, our responsibility

Abdul Razak Ahmad

DATUK Azizul Rahman Abdul Aziz, 70, was secretary to the Parliament from 1972 until he retired in 1988. He served as head of the Parliament's administration under three Prime Ministers: the late Tun Abdul Razak, the late Tun Hussein Onn, and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

After receiving his early education at the Clifford School and then at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, Azizul went to further his studies at the University of Malaya, then in Singapore.

After graduating, he joined the civil service in 1955 as an assistant district officer for Kuala Kangsar before being promoted to district officer.

He was Perlis State Secretary from 1967-71 before being selected to hold a short six-month stint as Deputy Secretary-General of the Ministry of Rural Development under Tun Ghafar Baba. Azizul then capped his illustrious civil service career by becoming Malaysia's longest-serving secretary to the Parliament.

During his tenure both in Parliament and as a district officer, Azizul enjoyed a close working relationship with almost every major political figure in the country, both in Government as well as in Opposition. He was part of the civil service that literally built up the nation's administration handed over from the British after Merdeka.

`WHEN I was in university just before our independence, my friends and I were very caught up in the fervour for Merdeka. My seniors like Dr Mahathir, who was at that time the president of the Malay Muslim Union, subsequently went into politics. I decided to join the civil service instead.

I joined the civil service in 1955 as assistant district officer for Kuala Kangsar. It was a very influential job. At the time, my colleagues and I felt we had a mission. We would visit the rural areas, meet the kampung people, ask them what their problems were and we tried to help as much as we can.

We felt satisfied because we were making a difference in people's lives. The motto for civil servants and politicians during the time was: Can I help? Where could I help? How could I help you? Then it was service before self.

Now, some politicians' first consideration is: What is my habuan? What is my portion? I feel very sad at this.

Most of the MPs or State Assemblymen at the time were from the rural areas. Most of them were Malay schoolteachers or village heads. They were generally new to politics, even groping to find their way.

They were very sincere. They really worked for the rakyat then, because they were very imbued with the spirit of independence.

When I was at the University of Malaya, Malay students constituted only eight per cent of the student population. The rest were Chinese and Indians. There were also too few opportunities to become doctors, scientists, engineers. There were scholarships, but minimal. Most of the Malay students were on a scholarship. No scholarship, bungkus (forget it).

Before independence, let's say there was a football match, and a team from Hong Kong was invited to play against the Malayan team, which consisted of Malays, Chinese, Indians.

You see the big crowd... and all the Chinese would be cheering the Hong Kong team! The same thing when a hockey team from India came. The Indians

would be cheering them instead of Malaya.

But then, you must remember that we weren't independent yet, we didn't have our own flag. And we were all British subjects. The racial interaction was very poor, and the loyalty was always with the "motherland".

I was thinking to myself then, that one day, we must completely change all this. There must be only one flag, one loyalty. But then I thought, what could I do?

You must remember that the British were a colonial power with their own agenda, politically, economically. When they first came to Malaya, the first thing they did was to take the best land and give it to the British companies. Some of the prime land they "bought" from us for a meagre one cent per acre!

They regarded Malaya as their milking cow. They took so much out of our nation, and they returned to us just enough to get us going.

In those days, most of the land belonged to the Sultan, in name. But under the agreement between British and Sultans, there will always be this clause: "The Sultan shall receive advice of the Resident."

Shall!

Translated to Malay it means "akan menerima" (shall receive), which the Sultans thought wasn't binding. But since the English translation of the treatise was the version that was legally binding, this meant that the Resident had the right to take whatever land and gave it to the big British interests.

We had to gain independence, or our lot was never going to change. At the time, you must understand, the outlook for us was completely bleak! It was like a dark tunnel with no light at the end.

I could see the rural Malays in the kampung with absolutely no hope in the future. For them life just dragged on. Nobody cared for them. Most of them were smallholders. They were given about six acres of land per family. That's where they toiled to earn their living. Their children married, their family grew in size but the area of the land wasn't getting any bigger. There were no job opportunities for us, very few amenities, medical services were lacking.

When I saw all these, I knew that things had to change. But who would carry out these necessary changes? Would the colonial government do it? They didn't care! It was up to us. Merdeka was nothing less than the culmination of our efforts to determine our future destiny, of all Malaysians.

Look at all the successful Malaysians and try to trace their origins. Where did they get their scholarships? Who subsidised their parents' education? Who gave them the opportunities, incentives? Some are now professors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, specialist doctors. I hope these people never forget the ladder upon which they climbed. It was all through the fruits of independence.

On Merdeka Day, I was very happy. I thanked God. I was only 29 at the time.