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Tengku's story `for posterity'

Tan Gim Ean

FOR someone who knows the value of records, telling his life story "purely for posterity" would be a natural progression. That's what Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen did from mid-1995, narrating it to former Ambassador K.N. Nadarajah, a friend from his Foreign Service days.

The result of this is His Story (Pelanduk Publications), launched in Kuala Lumpur last Friday by the Tengku Mahkota of Pahang.

Rithauddeen and Nadarajah met for an hour every Tuesday, except when the Tengku's busy schedule didn't allow for it. What comes out in His Story is the life of a man who served as Cabinet Minister for two decades, his legal career, his views and insights on local and regional politics and economics, and his current involvement in sports and business.

The book opens with Rithauddeen's birth in a rubber estate near Kuala Krai, Kelantan, in 1932, and proceeds to introduce his family. Readers will learn how, through his father's emphasis on a good education, he took up law. Subsequent chapters trace his Ministerial portfolios - from Foreign Affairs to Defence, Trade and Industry, and Information - and his involvement in Asean, and regional co-operation.

Rithauddeen recalls the communist threat, and how Tun Razak coached him in politics. He then moves on to Mahathir's policies; what Cabinet meetings were like under the different premiers; the aftermath of the 1995 general elections; Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's return to politics; and his forays into the private sector, sports and social activities. His Story concludes with an overview of the Asian financial crisis and Rithauddeen's comments on efforts to restore investor confidence and get the economy moving.

Nadarajah says his aim as writer was "to do justice to the subject", and it proved to be an amenable task. "I felt at ease ... there was no protocol. I could call Tengku up at night to check something. He is an easy man who has a knack for remembering events, names and dates."

Both did not aspire for a book on historical facts nor documentary data. Instead, they opted to "present the gist of Asean" from the viewpoint of a veteran politician.

"As foreign policy is Tengku's main interest, I wanted to show the nature of foreign service, what Asean stands for, the difficulties faced by member countries and their relationship with each other," Nadarajah adds.

On his part, Rithauddeen says the book "reflects what I am, what I was basically. It's up to readers to emulate what they want. Even the bad things can serve as examples of what not to repeat."

He credits his parents and upbringing for what he is today. Uncles, aunts and cousins also showed him the value of family ties, and dedicated teachers, particularly at the Penang Free School, were instrumental in his doing well.

Personal memory shares space with accounts of public events which, Rithauddeen feels, are worth putting in writing.

"What has come out in my tenure of office is incomplete. It was too big a picture to cover. This biography is a start. If I have the time, and the life, I will enhance on what I have written, enlarge on certain issues and activities.

"Foreign affairs moulded my character. When I started, I was the youngest of all the Foreign Ministers. My involvement in sports has given

me the kind of aptitude to be adaptable - I can make friends with and talk to people.

"I belong to the old breed that's dying off. We were trained to be tactful, diplomatic and articulate. Having been Foreign Minister twice, I could see the change in the quality of service.

"If we want to see the country flourish, we must emphasise education. The quality of our students when they finish school, or university, must be of world standard. Only then can Malaysians be absorbed anywhere in world. We do produce people of such calibre, but very slowly.

"Everyone can aspire to become world civil servants. As a first step, English should be taught as vigorously as before, especially in the rural areas. I appreciate that the Government has recognised the importance of that."

A second book would cover such thoughts and more. Towards that end, Rithauddeen will again collaborate with Nadarajah.

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