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A close friendship

Tan Siok Choo

I REFER to the Diarist's comment in his column NST Diary entitled "It's got to be Dr Mahathir" (New Sunday Times, June 10). The Diarist referred to an instance when my father, the late Tun Tan Siew Sin, refused to hand over the Ministry of Finance to then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj while my father was on leave. There are three points that I would like to make about this incident.

First, although considerably put out by my father's refusal, the Tunku did not regard it as an act of insubordination or personal disloyalty.

This open-minded approach by the Tunku was crucial in helping to create a climate conducive to intellectual dissent and honest criticism between himself and his ministers as well as between ministers and civil servants.

The Tunku, however, exacted revenge by recounting this incident with considerable relish whenever he had to introduce my father to visiting heads of State.

When the then Japanese Premier visited Malaysia, the Tunku described my father as "an impossible fellow, he refuses to do what I want".

Astonished, the Japanese Premier asked the Tunku: "Why don't you sack him?"

The Tunku replied: "Oh no, I can't do that. If I did, the country would go bankrupt."

Similarly, when the late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia visited Malaysia, the Tunku cited my parents as an example of Malaysia's religious tolerance.

The Tunku told the Emperor my father was a Buddhist while my mother was a Christian. A staunch Christian, the Emperor suggested my mother could convert my father to Christianity.

"That's not likely," the Tunku said with blithe disregard for my mother's feelings. "If he won't listen to me - and I am his Prime Minister - he won't listen to his wife," he said.

Again, this incident was related to the bewildered Emperor, clearly unused to disrespect from a Minister.

Second, this incident highlighted the Tunku's absolute trust in my father, in his integrity and in his judgment.

As Prime Minister, the Tunku could have pulled rank and overruled my father. Instead, in an unprecedented act of enlightened leadership, he accepted my father's implicit assessment of his inadequacy in financial matters and acceded to my father's suggestion that Tun Razak assume the position of acting Finance Minister.

Third, the Tunku's absolute trust helped to enhance my father's effectiveness as Finance Minister and as MCA president.

My father could make unpopular, though essential, political and financial decisions knowing he could rely on the Tunku's whole-hearted support.

Furthermore, my father could disagree with the Tunku and his Umno colleagues without worrying about being undermined by back-biting and innuendos from his political rivals.

On several occasions, this total support was stated explicitly by the Tunku. For example, during the 1964 general election campaign, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew suggested Umno should replace the MCA with the PAP because the latter was capable of securing greater support from the Malaysian Chinese community.

Without hesitation, the Tunku publicly announced Umno would stand by the MCA even if the latter was reduced to five MPs. Furthermore, the Tunku and other Umno leaders made clear to the PAP that any attack on the MCA would be regarded as an attack on the Alliance and therefore on Umno itself.

Although both the Tunku and my father were friends, this trust and support stemmed from a sense of shared values and common objectives.

Both the Tunku and my father believed in a multi-racial Malaysia, consensual decision-making and preferences for Bumiputeras without denying other ethnic groups opportunities for advancement.

Some may argue my father's considerable clout as Finance Minister was due to the fact that he was from the MCA and as such, incapable of threatening the Tunku politically. Even so, I believe the above incident encapsulates the strong relationship between the Tunku and my father and their high regard for each other.

Furthermore, I would add the trust, confidence and friendship between the Tunku and my father as well as with other political leaders provided the template for successful inter-ethnic relations in this country - politically, economically and socially.

Twenty-seven years after the Tunku stepped down as Prime Minister in 1971, the onset of the worst economic recession failed to impair significantly this country's enviable record of multi-racial harmony.