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Politics: The Tun Razak way

Abdullah Ahmad

LAST Sunday evening, members of Tun Razak's family, relatives, friends and colleagues gathered at his residence, Seri Taman (now Tun Razak's Memorial), for a tahlil, prayers for the departed, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his death.

Though unsaid, it was also perceived as an occasion to pay a generous and never-failing tribute to Tun Razak's intelligence, pragmatism, political far-sightedness and, more importantly, his responsive and sensitive spirit; his generosity and hospitality.

For the 400 people led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Razah, the drizzling Sunday evening recaptured old memories. As we grow older, the past brightens then grows dim.

I felt sorry for a Razakian veteran, only four years older than me, who appears prematurely aged. Sad indeed, he could not recall the many present who were on the same chartered Malaysia Airlines plane which took Tun Razak and us to Beijing 27 years ago.

The arrivals and departures of the many once powerful and influential figures did create considerable curiosity. But among the young - there were a number of them in their teens - the distant and past personalities hardly created an impression. Perhaps in their minds, the reputation of old faces had been overly magnified.

Tun Razak bin Datuk Hussein was born in Pekan on March 11, 1922 and became Prime Minister at 48. He was the nation's first Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, the Father of the Malaysian modern Armed Forces, when he was only 35 years old.

His contemporary at Raffles College and in England, Lee Kuan Yew, a year younger, became Prime Minister of a self-governing Singapore at 35 in 1959.

Had he lived, Tun Razak would be 79 in March. Before the May 13, 1969 race riots, not a few doubting Toms and Harrys, gave the patrician, reticent and outwardly cold (but warm in person) DPM much chance of succeeding the charismatic and happy-go-lucky Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra.

Tun Razak was the antithesis of the Prince and Premier. They were brought together by their pact to fight for independence and to jointly lead the nation if they succeeded.

Indeed, a Senior Minister in the First Cabinet (still living) told me, which was of course meant to be conveyed to Tun Razak, that he believed Tun Razak might not make it. He gave his reasons.

I immediately told Tun Razak what the man had said. A visibly shaken Tun Razak spent a considerable time then and afterwards discussing the matter with me, and concluded that there were no clear signs the Tunku would leave office anytime soon. Then Tun Razak had been Tunku's loyal deputy for a dozen years.

A contemporary of his at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) where Tun Razak was headboy, Datuk Seri Hussein Nordin, an MP, had expressed similar reservations earlier on.

We often spoke and joked about it. One afternoon Tun Razak lamented to me: "Maybe, I am destined to be the Malay Butler!".

He was referring to Rab Butler, the brilliant Deputy Prime Minister of Britain, who was passed over in favour of Lord Home. He had to give up his title in order to become PM, succeeding Harold Macmillan in 1962.

When I was a student at St John's College, Cambridge, Butler invited me

to a white-tie dinner in honour of Prince Charles at Trinity College where he was Master and Prince Charles was once a student.

The Butler precedent suddenly became relevant and the talk of Kuala Lumpur and as his "eyes and ears" I realised it was high time we took the bull by the horns. Tun Razak agreed.

The traumatic 1969 race riots hastened Tunku's departure from Malaysian politics and Tun Razak became PM on Sept 22, 1970. He had an agonising time deliberating whether to choose Encik Khir Johari or Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman as his deputy. He made the final choice only moments before delivering his acceptance speech at a special Umno general assembly at Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka.

Tun Razak did not talk to either. It came as a surprise to both Khir, and to Ismail, in particular. There were more people lobbying for Khir than Ismail. Khir was understandably disappointed.

Though Cabinet appointments and dismissals were his prerogative, Tun Razak did ask my opinion and in the case of Khir, he particularly sought the view of Datuk Wan Ahmad Omar, soon to be his principal private secretary. Wan Ahmad, an Old World gentleman and Cambridge-educated civil servant, came from Kedah. He knew Khir well and other Kedah politicians.

I can tell you that it was much harder for Tun Razak to tell Khir he was sending him as ambassador to Washington and concurrently the permanent representative to the United Nations in New York.

Khir took the appointment, I know, with considerable reluctance. However, I must record here that Khir, to his credit, always put the interests of Umno and the nation above his own.

A project by credible scholars should be started to seriously study and reflect the many sides, achievements and the unfinished agenda of the second PM.

I first knew Tun Razak in my final year in school and became close to him when I was a young reporter of this paper between 1957 and 1960. He sent me for training in the US and upon my return in 1962, I worked for and with him until he died on Jan 14, 1976.

There is so much to write about and to evaluate his massive contribution to Malaysian politics, Government and even Foreign Affairs, especially in the Malaysia-Indonesia reconciliation, the formation of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) and Malaysia's radical foreign policy realignment beginning in 1970.

In spring 1974, Tun Razak travelled to China, a first by a Malaysian Prime Minister, to give tangible expression of our non-aligned foreign policy.

I accompanied Tun Razak most of the time but the journey to China created in me greater political realism and historical awareness that whether at home or in international relations, it is imperative to pursue a policy that seeks to avoid tension, to strengthen co-operation and enhance harmony.

Tun Razak's China historic visit was a delight on the personal level and definitely enhanced the Government's standing among Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese.

In the general election in summer, the newly established BN scored landslide victories in Parliament and State assemblies. For Tun Razak, the 1974 general election was his first election as Prime Minister and also his last (he died two years later).

In spite of being so successful at an early age at MCKK, in London and later on in the civil service and ultimately as a politician, there were also, besides peaks of delight, troughs of failure if not despair in the illustrious man's life.

I can recall vividly what the former Senior Minister said to me:

"Dollah, your advice, as reflected in Tun Razak's public statements, appears to be inflicting wounds on the DPM (Tun Razak). You should counsel him to go along with the current mood and political temperature, not temper it."

Dissenting politics continues despite coalition politics (Tun Razak's enduring legacy), both within the Barisan Nasional (BN) as well as the Opposition's so-called Alternative Front.

Tun Razak had, 27 years ago, institutionalised a larger than the tripartite Alliance vehicle for political pluralism within the Malaysian context, giving voice to the passionate contemporary controversies as long as it did not endanger the Malaysian whole.

BN's two-thirds majority victory in the 1999 general election notwithstanding, it does look - only slightly more than a year afterwards - like the BN is a failing brand soap.

It is foolish, even suicidal, for the Opposition and opportunists to prematurely write off Umno and BN. Umno is changing even though the shift is not yet visible. Umno and the Government are in the process of restoring the credible accountability. I urge the sooner the better.

From 1999 it is going to be a steep climb upwards. But a cleaner, more transparent and leaner Umno and Government will get to the summit, provided they face the new political realism squarely and sincerely.

The people will support a rejuvenated Government and Umno. Get rid of buffoons, passengers, carpetbaggers and time-servers. Then, the voters will support the ruling party as they always did before.

Malaysians are a practical people. They will find their way to the truth about things despite the Opposition's blanket of propaganda against Umno and the Government.

When the voters, the young in particular, see changes, they will figure out for themselves. The saving virtue of Malaysians is that they do not believe everything which is alleged by the Opposition. However, it is imperative that the Government must come out clean and be seen to be clean, trustworthy and efficient.

Tun Razak left an unmatched standard of personal integrity. He lived simply and even frugally, something his political successors and those nearest and dearest to him ought to seriously ponder. When he died Tun Razak was not a wealthy man.

It was and is a pleasant lamunan (reverie) to recall the good times as we waited for the Magrib prayers. How powerful one was and what courage one showed in the face of political adversity.

Nostalgia, as Carolyn Heilbrun said in an article in the New York Times a decade ago, is a dangerous emotion because it is powerless to act in the real world and yet it glides easily into hatred and resentment against those who have taken our Eden or Camelot from us.

The great consolation last Sunday evening was that only the "good and beautiful" people were present.

I am now reading V.S. Naipaul's *Between Father and Son*, the story about the melancholic but loving father whose broken dream of succeeding as a writer would be realised in the singular achievement of his son.

Tun Razak, thank God, departed, not distressed by unfulfilled ambitions.

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