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Tun Razak in retrospect

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LAST night, led by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Razak, Tun Razak's relatives and friends gathered at his residence, Seri Taman in the Lake Gardens, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his death with a tahlil, prayers for the departed.

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 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 he 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 Razak, that he believed Razak might not make it. He gave his reasons.

I immediately told Razak what the man had said. A visibly shaken 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 Razak had been Tunku's loyal deputy for a dozen years.

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

We often spoke and joked about it. One afternoon he 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 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. Razak agreed.

The traumatic 1969 race riots hastened Tunku's departure from Malaysian politics and Razak became PM on September 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.

Though Cabinet appointments and dismissals were his prerogative Razak did ask my opinion and in the case of Khir, he also 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 and other Kedah politicians.

I can tell you that it was much harder for 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 knew, with considerable reluctance. However, I must record here that Khir, to his great 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 Razak in my final year in school and became close to him when I was a young reporter (1957-1960). He sent me for training in the US and upon my return in 1962, I worked for and with him until he died on January 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 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 Razak's public statements, appears to be inflicting wounds on the DPM. You should counsel him to go along with the current mood and political temperature, not temper it."

Dissenting politics continues despite coalition politics (Razak's enduring legacy), both within the Barisan Nasional (BN) as well as the Opposition's so-called Alternative Front. Razak had, 27 years ago, institutionalised a 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, 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, deadwoods 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.

Razak left a high 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 Razak was not a wealthy man.

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