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Peace and harmony the main goals

By Annie Freeda Cruetz

YANG di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin has a notable presence in Malaysian life and is focused on instilling a strong sense of multiracial unity in Malaysians, ANNIE FREEDA CRUEZ writes.

IN his two-year reign as the 12th Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, 61, has often emphasised that Malaysians should view their diversity as a strength.

They should always be aware of the sensitivities of other races.

At the opening of the first session of the 11th Parliament recently, the King said Malaysians should uphold multiracial unity and have mutual respect at all times and shoulder the responsibility of maintaining racial harmony along with the Government.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, known as "The Ruler of Integrity and Respect", has always been interested in his subjects and believes that racial harmony is the root of peace and prosperity in Malaysia.

He has called on Muslims to unite and pool their resources for the future.

He was quoted as saying: "I am sure Muslims in the country understand and realise the importance of unity in a community and country. We must work to preserve and strengthen our unity for the progress of our race, religion and country."

The King said Islam did not want its followers to lag behind and be left out of development.

But Muslims, in accordance with Islamic teachings, should be ready to make changes and escape from poverty and backwardness to a modern and more systematic way of life.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin urged Muslims to practise the teachings of Islam as taught by Prophet Muhammad and not follow others whose morals and ways of life were not based on Islam.

He has also spoken on the Islam Hadhari concept and how it emphasises development as well as improvement in Islamic education and the implementation of Syariah.

"Islam is a religion which loves peace and Malaysia has proven that Muslims and non-Muslims can live together in harmony.

"However, narrow interpretation, extreme practices and negative actions are the main causes behind the Muslim community's weakness and why it is left out of development," he said.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin supports the Government's National Service as he believes it will increase patriotism, national integration and racial harmony.

He has also voiced his concern over corruption.

"This problem has to be addressed immediately and I am proud the Government does not discriminate in its efforts to eradicate corruption," he said.

He is concerned over the increase in social ills and immorality, which has resulted in crimes such as child rape, incest and drug abuse.

"The Government, communities and parents, religious teachers, ulama and Islamic experts should address this problem.

"The approach of punishing, blaming others and having lectures should be changed. Ulama and preachers should approach those afflicted with social diseases and give them guidance and advice," said the King.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin is worried about developments in and outside the

country, such as increasing international trade competition, the slow recovery of the global economy and worldwide terrorist activities.

He is glad the Government has taken measures to improve the efficiency and ability of the country to meet such challenges.

He wants Malaysians to brave such problems together.

"World history is filled with examples of empires and civilisations that were destroyed or have disappeared from the face of the earth because their citizens did not work together," he said.

The King also never hesitates to pay tribute to the deserving and a case in point would be former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his 22 years of service.

And when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became the country's fifth Prime Minister, the King congratulated him.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin in his two years of reign has visited several ministries, government agencies and corporations, attended armed forces and police functions and celebrations, presented sports awards, been to exhibitions and launched festivals.

Among the many events he graced recently were the National Water Festival Month in Alor Star, the trooping of the new colours of the Royal Malay Regiment at the Sungai Besi military camp in Kuala Lumpur, the national-level Maulidur Rasul celebrations at Putra Stadium in Bukit Jalil and the "Colours of Malaysia 2004" at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium.

He also performed the menepung tawar (blessing) ceremony for Syahrizal Samsudin and his bride Noreen Daud, both 25, at their bersanding ceremony at a hotel in Subang recently.

Syahrizal, an engineer with ExxonMobil, is the youngest child of Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah also made a three-day official visit to Syria.

His busy schedule is a testament as to how mindful he is of his duties as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. It is also a reflection of one used to a life-time of responsibility, ranging from palace administration to military service.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, who was born in Arau, Perlis, on May 17, 1943, initially attended the Arau Malay School. He was then educated at the Wellesley Primary School and Westland Primary School, both in Penang, until 1955.

After continuing his education at the Penang Free School, he went to the Wellingborough Public School in England in 1963.

He then took a two-year officer cadet course at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, England, where he learnt the qualities of leadership and served as house captain and school prefect.

On his return to Malaysia, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin began a career in the armed forces, which stamped him with the military bearing he carries till today.

He served as a second lieutenant in the 2nd regiment of the Malaysian Reconnaissance Corps, and was posted to Sabah and Sarawak in the mid-1960s. Although he resigned in 1969 to devote his energies to affairs of state, he returned to the armed forces in 1970, this time to the Territorial Army where he served as captain.

He was the commanding officer of Regiment 504 in 1981, and was appointed colonel-in-chief of the Malaysian Rangers two years ago.

As a soldier, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin made lifelong friends and enjoyed the comradeship which exists between members of the same unit.

It was also a toughening episode, with long hot days and cold nights on patrol, and the rigours of several conventional warfare exercises in Libya, France, and England.

His years with the armed forces also coincided with some of the most dramatic periods in Malaysia's history, including the Emergency, the Confrontation, and the race riots of 1969.

Exposure to these situations equipped him with experience for his reign.

In fact, during his recent visit to the Sungai Besi military camp, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin urged the Royal Malay Regiment to preserve its traditional excellence as the backbone of the country's security forces.

Learning from its weaknesses and successes of the past, he said, the Royal Malay Regiment should prepare for the future with all its uncertainties and new developments in international politics.

The King, who is the Supreme Commander of the Malaysian Armed Forces, said members of the Royal Malay Regiment should not compromise or be complacent about the national and regional security situation.

"You must be vigilant and ever ready to face internal and external threats that can disrupt the well-being and peace of this land we love," he said.

He reminded the regiment to safeguard its good name and honour, and to keep away from unhealthy activities which may affect its image.

The King said basic military principles should not be allowed to sink with the passage of time, as discipline and a high level of preparedness should remain the main agenda.

Malaysia's 12th Yang di-Pertuan Agong is also a caring ruler.

On Feb 15, the Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Foundation was launched with an initial contribution of RM1.55 million to help the under-privileged, the sick and the elderly.

The foundation, incorporated on Feb 14, was launched by the King.

Apart from receiving and administering funds for designated groups, the foundation will also provide funds for medical and surgical facilities, scientific research and to construct and maintain hospitals and other medical institutions.

On the personal front, he is married to Tuanku Fauziah Tengku Abdul Rashid, a member of the Kelantan royal family.

The marriage took place on Feb 15th, 1967, after a 3 1/2-year courtship, much of it long-distance, as at the time he was serving in the army. They have two children, Syed Faizuddin, 35, and Sharifah Fazira, 30, and are a close family which still gathers every fortnight despite busy schedules.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin's experience in palace administration spans over 42 years, as he was appointed the Raja Muda of Perlis on Oct 30, 1960, when he was 17.

He first served as Regent in 1967, when his parents the Raja and Raja Perempuan of Perlis toured Europe and the United States for four months.

He was proclaimed the sixth Raja of Perlis on April 17, 2000, but had little time to adjust to his new duties. Aside from his royal duties he holds other positions, including the chair of the Islamic Religious Affairs and Malay Customs Council.

He is also Chancellor of Universiti Teknologi Mara and patron of the Red Crescent Society of Malaysia.

As the issue of education is particularly close to his heart, the King is also chairman of the Tuanku Syed Putra Foundation, which was established to help university students, both locally and abroad.

In what little free time he has, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin indulges in his passion for golf, a sport he first fell in love with in 1970. He is also a football and tennis fan, which he once played on a regular basis.

Off the sports field, he enjoys reading, watching television and surfing the Internet.

As for his favourite food, this includes nasi kandar. Tengku Syed Sarifuddin is also known to share a love for Penang food with the Queen.

People who have met the King have noted his down-to-earth nature, and his willingness to step out from behind the royal facade to meet subjects.

There are stories of his readiness to dispense with the kind of protocol that imposes a barrier between the King and the rakyat.

Many are not aware that the King has a wonderful sense of humour and loves to collect watches. His Majesty has a vast watch collection and his favourite collector's piece is a Breitling. His interest in the latest technology, for example, handphones and computers is impressive.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, the Raja of Perlis, was installed as the 12th Yang di-Pertuan Agong on April 25, 2002 in a ceremony steeped in tradition.

The Malaysian monarchy is a unique institution which, since 1957, elects the King from among his brother Rulers for a five-year reign.

Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin of Terengganu was re-appointed Deputy Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin was elected the Yang di-Pertuan Agong by the Malay Rulers on Dec 12, 2001 following the death of Sultan Salahuddin on Nov 21.

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