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Remembering the pain of May 13

By Nuraina Samad; Azura Abas

LIKE many Malaysians who have lived through that dark episode in Malaysian history, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad has kept a lid on what he went through on May 13, 1969.

Again, when others lost their loved ones in the collapse of Block One of Highland Towers on Dec 11, 1993, he hid the relief he felt when his daughter and her family escaped death in that tragedy.

Now he feels he can talk about how these experiences shaped his thinking and outlook on life.

Imagine being a 26-year-old UK-educated lawyer from a prominent Malay family, who had just become a state deputy public prosecutor caught in the heart of Kuala Lumpur on May 13, as he was watching a movie at the Federal cinema with his wife and young daughter.

He remembers the dress his late British wife wore, the movie they were watching (They Came to Rob Las Vegas), and the look on the faces of the young Chinese with headbands and bloodstained shirts as they herded the cinema patrons down the stairs.

Radzi remembers how he kept calm, remembering not to give his ethnicity away by uttering a word of Malay.

May 13 and the weeks that followed were like a bolt of lightning, jolting him out of any upper-class complacency.

As for the Highland Towers tragedy: "Knowing that your daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren could have perished when Block One of Highland Towers collapsed makes you not only deeply relieved but feel so small," Radzi said. "It was God's will that they escaped death."

Radzi was in his new Perlis home, doing some gardening, when the tragedy occurred. Only when he turned on the television later did he learn of the tragedy.

"My legs felt like jelly when I saw it on TV. My daughter and her family lived in the very block that collapsed.

"Of course, I did not know then that they were not at home when it happened," he said.

Radzi said his daughter, Karen, and her husband, Nasir, had been out looking for a religious book for his grandson, Sean, and later decided to visit family friends in Federal Hill.

"That was around the time Block One collapsed. I can only thank God they were not there."

The May 13 tragedy had not stopped Radzi from going for bigger things in politics, but Highland Towers did. He was all set to contest the 1995 general election but opted not to.

On Monday, he was named Umno and Barisan Nasional secretary-general.

At 62, though Radzi laments that his workload now will not allow him to indulge in his favourite pastimes of golf and gardening, he seems to have come full circle, if not by his own design.

After all, there is a saying: "Man proposes, God disposes".

Below are excerpts from Radzi's interview with NURAINA SAMAD and AZURA ABAS.

Q: Some time ago, you said that you and your family no longer found it conducive and appealing to live in Kuala Lumpur, so you moved to your home State of Perlis. That coincided with your not being active in the party. But it looks like you're back in the Government and the party in a big way. Does it feel good?

A: Oh, that was a long time ago, but, yes it feels good. But let me tell you why I accepted the offers. Two things affected my life. May 13 and the Highland Towers (tragedy).

During (the) May 13 (1969 racial riots), I was right there. I was in the Federal cinema watching a movie when the riots broke out. And I am here to tell the story. You know it is a long story. I have never discussed it as it is - well, was - a sensitive issue. But now, it has been so long, I can talk about it.

And two, after I moved to Perlis, Block One of the Highland Towers collapsed (on Dec 11, 1993). My daughter lived in that block then with her husband and son. I can only thank God they were not at home when the block collapsed.

These events changed my life. The experiences also enriched me, as I consider them gifts of God . I thank God that I am here. As you know, I have been out (of Government) for more than 17 years. I don't think anyone has made such a comeback. Normally, when people leave, they do not want to come back after leading a different kind of life.

Q: Did you know you would be offered the secretary-general's post?

A: It was not a surprise although it was quite unexpected. It shows that Pak Lah has confidence in me and we have come a long way together. Our fathers were close friends and they both fought for the country's independence. As I have told Pak Lah, we are the seeds of Umno, so we have to take care of Umno.

Q: You couldn't refuse?

A: No. Of course, this entails a lot of hard work and I know about hard work.

Q: You have kept a very low profile. After a long time, you are back and holding an important position. Some in the party may be unsure of your capabilities. Some are probably uncomfortable.

A: I think I am approachable. I am a good listener. I listen a lot before making any decision. I think these are good qualities.

Q: And working with Pak Lah, given that he is a close friend?

A: He is a very easy person to talk to. I am very grateful to him.

Q: One of the things you will surely have to face is making decisions that are unpopular with, say, divisional leaders. In Umno, leaders seem worried about making enemies of divisional chiefs.

A: My responsibility is to the president and the party, of course. I will use all my experience, upbringing and knowledge in law to do my job.

Q: Do you think this a different Umno?

A: Oh yes, definitely. It is a bigger organisation now compared to my father's time. There are about three million members. It is one of the biggest organisations.

Q: This makes the tasks before you daunting?

A: I would say, challenging. I am not scared or worried. And no, not intimidated. I will need to spend more time after the general assembly, God willing, to go down to the ground and visit the divisions. I cannot do that now because I do not want to be seen as campaigning or favouring certain people or candidates. For the time being, I will spend more time at headquarters to familiarise myself.

Q: Has Umno reformed since the 1999 general election?

A: Umno is currently at the top tier after winning an overwhelming majority in the March general election. Umno is at its best form now and I have to maintain this. Not easy to do that.

Q: But it feels good to have that responsibility?

A: Yes, but I must pay tribute to Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob who was the secretary-general for the past five years. He went through a lot, like the 1999 general election which was a real big blow to Umno. He was there to

help the party, and during the transition of power from Tun Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) to Pak Lah.

Tun Dr Mahathir did his job very well. I pay tribute to these people because they are Umno leaders who brought back the party's good image.

Using (Pak Lah's) personality, integrity and new image to create a wave that really awed the people and overtook everyone in the 2004 general election, Umno is now at its highest stature. And I am now the secretary-general.

My God, it is a challenging job for me to maintain this! I mean, it's a different thing altogether if you start from the bottom; you can see the improvement.

Q: If you have your way, how would like the party to be, given that Umno is known for perpetuating some very negative traits in its culture, such as the "surat layang" culture?

A: I have to look into the weaknesses in the party. As we progress, Umno members are becoming more sophisticated and educated. Previously, most of our members were kampung-based people (and) more loyal to the party.

Q: They are not (loyal) now?

A: Oh no... I mean, they were more focused on the party. It's a new ball game now. When people join Umno, they want projects. When they become division chiefs, they want projects. All these things, lah.

Q: That seems to be pervasive now?

A: Because the country has progressed and is doing well.

Q: What can be done?

A: We have to control it. Get things right.

Q: You can do it?

A: Yes. But it will take time.

Q: You won't be popular.

A: I am here to serve the president and the party.

Q: What are the good traits in "Umno culture" that you think should be retained?

A: Tolerance. Umno has always been a very tolerant party. The Umno leaders in the supreme council, for instance, are very tolerant of other races and about sharing things. This is a gift to the country. That is why the Chinese and the Indians are very happy to work with Umno. They feel very comfortable.

Q: People say Pak Lah is a nice guy.

A: Nice, but very tough!

Q: Umno elections are coming. You have expressed your hope that the election will be smooth. Are you expecting any problems during campaigning?

A: I hope not. We have laid down the dos and don'ts.

Q: This won't stop people from trying to circumvent the rules.

A: Of course.

Q: Is this acceptable?

A: No.

Q: With the new administration intensively promoting transparency and clean leadership, indiscipline is not expected to be tolerated. We expect the disciplinary committee to be working overtime. Maybe. More than ever now, the party will be taking complaints seriously. Have you met leaders to tell them not to mess up?

A: I have not met any of them yet as I was only recently appointed to the post. But I would like to reiterate here, to urge all those involved in the party's elections to adhere to directives.

Fee payments have caused many people to be unhappy. The reason is very simple. For example, there are 200 members in a branch and only 150 of them are active. When elections come, the incumbent's challengers will

call back all the inactive members, and this can upset the results.

In Umno, there is no such thing as paying arrears. If you are inactive for five years, not paying fees and not attending meetings, it is okay. When it comes to elections, they will only have to pay the fees and cast their votes. This is what most incumbents fear. But winning and losing is normal in politics, although to some people it is a way of life.

Q: Can you tell us about your role as minister in charge of legal affairs?

A: I look after the Attorney-General's Chambers, the insolvency division, legal aid bureau, the administration of the court, the court buildings and all that, under me, lah!

But not the judges. I must emphasise that. The judges are independent. It's a bit difficult with the misconception that the judges are under me. No. They are independent.

Q: Do you think the criticism that judges are not independent is just a perception?

A: Yes, it is only a perception. It is untrue. In our system of democracy in the country, there are three branches. The judges come under one.

Q: And you believe in the independence of the judges?

A: Yes, yes. As a lawyer, I would like to emphasise that. Although I am a minister in charge of the law, I have no control over the judges.

Q: Your relations with the Bar Council?

A: I have met with the Bar Council. I hope we will be meeting more often. I have a close rapport with the Bar Council.

Q: And that is essential to you?

A: Yes. The Bar Council represents between 12,000 and 13,000 lawyers. They are among the biggest professional bodies in the country. People always think the Bar Council is with the Opposition. No, it is not. If you view it that way, it will be difficult.

I listen to them and, of course, they have to listen to what I have to say as well.

It works both ways. If we respect each other, we can work better together.

If we do not talk to each other, how can we work together?

Q: You know most of them?

A: Yes. And the judges.

Q: You have been in the legal profession a long time. Surely this is helpful in your position now?

A: Yes. It helps me understand my work better, to work better with the people in the legal profession.

Q: Do you now have the time to do things you want to do?

A: No. Unfortunately, now I cannot play golf any more. And I can't do my gardening.

Q: Is your family happy with your decision to return to national politics?

A: No. Especially my wife, who is a lawyer. She does not look forward to my extra work.

(Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad is married to Datin Mahani Abdul Hamid.)

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