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Atuk Prime Minister

By Fazli Ibrahim

You can tell it's that time of the year again. Everything, from the mamak stall to your neighbour's gleaming Kancil, gets draped in the red, white and blue of the Jalur Gemilang.

Switch on the TV and you get the big boys of the corporate world exhibiting their loyalty to the country in 30-second slots, miniature movies almost - some of them so good you can't help but shed a patriotic tear or two.

Things may change - like the rainbow of costumes, uniforms and batik shirts paraded every year until recently, in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur.

This year, the parade is in Putrajaya.

But one thing remains - we never tire of watching that grainy black and white film clip of the momentous morning on August 31, 1957, when the country's first Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, proclaimed the magic word - "Merdeka".

Today marks the 46th anniversary of that morning, and during the period, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have followed in Tengku's footsteps.

We remember Tengku, Tun Razak and Tun Hussein with fondness, and are grateful for their contribution towards making what Malaysia is today. We are thankful for Dr Mahathir's leadership, under which the nation has acquired vision, direction and self-belief.

Yet, ordinary Malaysians rarely if ever get to see the private person in these individuals, the man behind the veil of high office and authority that comes with being the Prime Minister, the leader of the nation.

TENGGU ABDUL RAHMAN PUTRA AL-HAJ

FEW people would remember that Tengku - the consummate statesman who charmed monarchs, presidents and potentates - once described himself as the "happiest Prime Minister in the world".

Fewer still knew that Tengku, among other roles, was arguably one of history's happiest famous grandfathers.

Indeed, who could better offer a glimpse of the family man than their own grandchildren.

Tengku Rozani Putra, for one, remembers her grandfather, Tengku, as a caring, approachable man who showed concern for everyone, irrespective of race and standing in society.

"Tengku was just 'Tok' to me, someone I visited during school holidays. It was also a time for me to play with my cousins. Tok would often take us to Penang or Langkawi and we would also accompany him on his visits to the kampung.

I do not recall there ever being a large entourage, just a couple of bodyguards and the children," she says.

The dealer in a stockbroking firm is the eldest of five children of Tunku Datuk Ahmad Nerang, Tengku's only son.

She only became aware of who her grandfather was when she was about nine years old.

"I recall having to stand up in class to describe what I had done the previous day, which was sending off my grandfather at the airport as he was travelling abroad. A friend stood up and asked for his name. When I gave his name, the class teacher asked if he was indeed 'The Tengku'.

"I said there were many Tengkus in my family but my grandfather had his photograph in the newspapers. That was it - news spread around school!" she adds.

Most people remember the public face of Tengku as the architect of the country's independence. But he was a doting grandfather.

"There was once when we were picking chillies in his garden and were badly bitten by mosquitoes. He used some insect spray on me. I protested and said that I was not a mosquito. He laughed and replied that if I smelt like mosquito spray, the mosquitoes would not attack me," she says.

Tengku was apparently also quite bad at remembering names, his own loved ones included. In 1988, the then 28-year-old Tengku Rozani called Tengku's staff in Penang to say that she was dropping by to personally tell him that she was getting married.

"I told him my good news and sat for a while talking to him.

"Suddenly he exclaimed: 'Where is Tengku Razaleigh; why is he so late?'

"When I explained that it was Rozani visiting and not Tengku Razaleigh, he asked who Rozani was. I had always been known to him as Putri, and not Rozani.

"Incidentally, he called one of my sisters 'tahi lalat' due to a distinct mole on her neck. He never remembered her name either! He had pet names for various people."

'Tahi lalat' is Tengku Norin Putra, who's now an accountant residing in Seattle. She remembers the old days when Tengku lived at The Residency in Kuala Lumpur, the Prime Minister's official residence which today houses his Memorial.

"I remember May 13, 1969. We all went to the Residency for safety. I felt distraught that my father was not coming with us as we all drove off in Tok's car. I realised later that he wanted us to go first and he was there later that afternoon."

Tengku loved the idea of having his family living close by so much so that he asked his nephew, architect Raja Nazrin Raja Aman Shah, to design little chalets for his grandchildren in the compound of his other Kuala Lumpur home at No. 1 Jalan Tunku where several family members still live.

This home also holds memories for Tengku Norin and her husband, American Michael Eddington.

"Tok met Mike and insisted that we be married at the house. I am just glad that Mike had met him and knows who Tok was. Mike's family is more than proud of Tok. Because I lived away, I lost time to get to know him even better," she says.

On their way to Langkawi for their honeymoon in 1989, Tengku Norin and her husband stayed with Tengku at his home in Penang.

"That morning we had breakfast with him, just the three of us. That was quite intimate. Usually Tok would be surrounded by a lot of people.

"That breakfast was the last meal I had with him," Tengku Norin says.

Tengku Munawirah Putra, the youngest of five siblings, missed being a Prime Minister's grandchild, since she was born in 1972, a couple of years after Tengku had handed over the reins to Tun Razak.

Still, the brand manager for a local broadcasting network has her own stories to tell, especially when Tengku was living at 16, Jalan Air Rajah, Penang.

"One of the many animals that normally lived in the compound of Tengku's homes were chickens," says Tengku Munawirah.

"I hate chickens... well, not entirely. I love them fried, roasted, barbecued, steamed - you get the picture. Whereas Tok, he liked them running free.

"He had chickens at all his houses as far back as I can remember, in his Alor Setar house and in both houses in Penang - the beach house at Batu

Ferringhi and in Jalan Air Rajah.

"Even in the KL house, the one I am staying in now, I can remember the exact location where I skidded on chicken poo."

She says Tengku's family used to go to Penang at least twice a year - to attend his birthday celebration and for Hari Raya. Sometimes the family members from out of town stayed at the house.

"This was when I despised chickens the most. Obviously, there were roosters. At dawn, they would make the most annoying noise. I can still remember when my cousin, Sharifah Menjelara, rudely woken by a really loud one, stormed out to the balcony and screamed at the top of her lungs 'Shutttt Uppppp!' Well, that didn't do any good, except to wake the rest of us.

"That morning, at the breakfast table, I said, 'Tok, ayam Tok bising la, tak larat dengar, pagi pagi dah buat pasai' (Tok, the chickens are really noisy, they are a nuisance so early in the morning).

"He said 'ayam bunyi tu baguih, tandanya pagi, kena mangkit la, buat apa nak tidoq lagi (good that the chickens make noise, means it's time to wake up)'."

When she was younger, Tengku Munawirah also couldn't understand why people raved about Tengku and why they saw and treated her differently after finding out who her grandfather was.

"But I just loved getting away with excuses for missing school when we needed to go to Penang because of Tok, whether it was his birthday or other things. The teachers thought it was a big deal as soon as his name was slipped in. Suddenly my excuse for leave becomes a national necessity," she says.

TUN ABDUL RAZAK HUSSEIN

WHILE Tengku's grandchildren were fortunate enough to have known him in person, Tun Abdul Razak's first grandchild, Mohd Nizar, was only born in 1978, two years after the second Prime Minister had passed away.

Nizar is the eldest son of Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak.

"My biggest regret is that I never had the opportunity to meet my grandfather in person. I've always heard about how great he was, how sincere and how trustworthy he was as a leader," he says.

The walls of Tun Rahah Mohd Noah's home, where the family gathers weekly for dinner, is lined with photographs of Tun Razak - here, a formal portrait, looking every inch the Prime Minister in suit and songkok, and there, a silkscreen interpretation by Redza Piyadasa of the First Couple and their five sons.

Looking around, one cannot help but notice that some of the grandchildren bear strong resemblance to their late grandfather.

On such nights, there is plenty of laughter in the bungalow's airy living room, especially when some of the grandchildren studying abroad are home for the summer break.

Nizar's sister, Puteri Norlisa, is reading law while his brother, Mohd Nasifuddin, is studying computer science - both at their father's alma mater, the University of Nottingham.

"I remember asking my father what the Tun was like as a person," says Nizar. "He had a good heart, a kind heart. Despite the very stern-looking, serious exterior, he cared deeply about the rakyat. For example, he went to the kampung, the swamps, the rivers... just to hear their problems and try to resolve them, and I think those are the hallmarks of good governance," says the analyst consultant at Accenture, the IT and management firm.

"I reckon Tun was exactly like how my daddy is - very strict, full of

authority, full of manners," adds his 15-year-old sister Nooryana Najwa.

But the Tun was not just a figure of authority. Like any good father, he made sure he spent quality time with the family.

"Daddy says that on weekends, Atuk used to bring him out and that Sunday was the highlight of daddy's week," says Nooryana.

Now, where would a Prime Minister take his children on a weekend outing?

"He used to take us to Hock Lee's restaurant in Kenny Hills to eat Penang laksa," recalls Datuk Ahmad Johari Razak, Tun Razak's second son.

And being the grandchild of the country's second Prime Minister can spring some pleasant surprises, as Nazrieena Zera, Ahmad Johari's daughter found out.

"We had a lesson on Tun Razak during a history class. The teacher pointed me out as Tun Razak's granddaughter and the whole class applauded," she says.

As the evening wears on, it becomes clear that the grandchildren not only inherited Tun Razak's features, but his preferences as well, no doubt shaped by an upbringing in kampung surroundings in Pekan, Pahang.

"He liked simple food, especially ikan sungai, freshwater fish like patin. Sometimes the fish was brought in from Pahang," Tun Rahah says. Apparently, Norashman Razak, Nizar's youngest brother, has developed a liking for ikan patin masak tempoyak as well.

"Ashman once burst into tears over the fact he never got to meet Tun Razak," says Nooryana.

While many of us think of August 31 as just another hari cuti, a chance to laze all day in front of the TV or to go mall hopping, Nizar hopes the meaning of Merdeka would not be lost on his generation.

"Malaysia has a young population, mostly born after 1957 and who take the meaning of Merdeka for granted because they never had to go through the hardships and challenges that my grandfather's generation faced in in wrestling of independence from the British and fighting the communists. These were hard-fought victories," he says.

#### TUN HUSSEIN ONN

MALAYSIANS will remember Tun Hussein Onn as an officer and a gentleman, a self-effacing leader who served the country with humbleness.

Tun Hussein went to school at the prestigious English College in Johor Baru before serving as a cadet in the Johor Military Forces. Later, he joined the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun.

His baptism of fire came when World War II broke out - Tun Hussein was commissioned as a captain in the Indian Army. Serving under the 19th Hyderabad Regiment, he fought in the Middle East before being posted to the military headquarters intelligence branch in New Delhi to prepare for Operation Zipper, code name for the reinvasion of Japanese-occupied Malaya.

His experience as a career soldier left a deep impression on him, even after rejoining Civvy Street as a lawyer and later as an administrator.

"I am an old soldier," he once described himself.

Few alive today would remember Tun Hussein's dramatic return to his homeland in September 1945, when he landed with part of the British Military Administration flotilla at Morib Beach.

With that armed conflict over, Tun Hussein became involved in a struggle of a different nature. His father, Datuk Onn Jaafar, founded the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) in 1946 to mobilise the Malays against the Malayan Union plan. At the age of 28, Tun Hussein became the party's first secretary general and the head of its youth wing in 1950. After a long absence from politics following his father's resignation from Umno, he rejoined the party in 1968 at the urging of Tun Razak.

Tun Hussein won the Johor Baru Timur parliamentary seat in the 1969 General Elections and was appointed Education Minister in 1970.

He rose to become Deputy Prime Minister and was sworn in as the country's third Premier upon Tun Razak's death in 1976.

He was a man of few words - but the little he said spoke volumes of his sense of duty as Prime Minister.

"I would rather be politically unpopular than fail in my duty. What is one's political future compared with one's responsibility! Baik diumpat keji sekarang daripada dikencingkan kubur kemudian (It is better that they curse me now than urinate on my grave later)."

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

TWENTY-two years is a long time to lead a country - so long that many us practically grew up knowing no other Prime Minister but Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Fondly known as Dr M or simply PM, Dr Mahathir's tenure has delivered the biggest bangs in the country's recent history, from its own car industry to the tallest building in the world.

Perhaps more than his predecessors, Dr Mahathir has led the country in the full glare of television cameras, making him the country's most recognisable face, so much so that we sometimes feel we know the man as well as we do our neighbours.

But there is more to Dr Mahathir than the face we see on the screen. For instance, Ineza Roussille lets on that her grandfather has a great sense of humour.

The 16-year-old daughter of social activist Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir recounts seeing a lighter side of her grandfather.

"He was really happy when the whole family went to Pangkor to celebrate his birthday and he sang My Way for, like for the hundredth time," she says.

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"I'm more familiar with the family member part, because I see him more as that than the statesman," she says.

And being family also means sharing some of Tok Det's characteristics and features.

"Many people say I look like him and for the longest time, my stance was exactly like his, with the legs bent back and all," she says.

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