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Tengku's chief legacy - his fight for racial harmony

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The most important legacy left by Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra to the country was his fight for racial harmony, and his struggle and determination to maintain it.

New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group-editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said racial unity and cooperation was a condition imposed by the British for granting independence to Malaya.

"The British were very certain that the races would not be able to unite. Their man, Datuk Onn Jaafar tried and failed, first by trying to open the doors of Umno to non-Malays. He was rebuffed and resigned, sulking.

"He then formed two non-racial parties in quick succession (Independence Malayan Party and Parti Negara), and both failed miserably.

"However, Tengku proved the British wrong. He did not change Umno but enticed MCA and MIC to join him in the fight for independence. The leaders of MCA and MIC then, saw that Tengku was the man to back. And the rest is history.

"He reunited the Malays after they were split by Datuk Onn and the formation of Pas in 1961, and successfully created racial harmony in the years before Merdeka," Abdullah said in his speech titled "Tengku Abdul Rahman: The founder of racial unity" presented at a seminar to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Tengku's birth today.

The seminar was organised by the National Archives and Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry.

Abdullah said there was no doubt that Tengku had fought hard for racial harmony but despite his efforts, he failed in his struggle when the May 13, 1969 tragedy occurred.

"Tengku fostered racial harmony and was willing to pay any price to maintain it, so much so that he displeased his own people, the Malays. Tengku had failed, with the bloody and vicious race riots of May 13 which must never be repeated.

"The Malays were getting impatient with Tengku's tolerant policies. Although they wanted to work with the other races, they did not want to be always on the giving side. That was Tengku's most obvious failure.

"Although the policies were said to be Tengku's, they were actually implemented with the consensus of the Cabinet. However, many Malays blamed Tengku for what was perceived as his pro non-Malay stance."

He added that while the May 13 incident may have been a failure for Tengku, it brought about a very important policy - the New Economic Policy.

Abdullah also spoke about Tengku's foresight in maintaining English as the second language of the country, as he believed that Malay was not yet a language of effective communication in the region, even in Malaysia.

"Tengku loved his mother tongue and used it most of the time and his desire to use English as the second language was not at the expense of the Malay language. He wanted us to be bilingual like him, like Tun Razak, like myself, and like the majority of the educated Malays back then.

"He had foresight but lost to the radicals in Umno. Today, Tengku's doubts about the Malay language replacing English have been proven true, especially with the reinstatement of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics."

Abdullah said like himself, Tengku was totally for the Malay language, but did not want the people's command of English to suffer.

"The more Malaysians speak many languages, the better."

During his 13 years of premiership, Abdullah said, Tengku also made a few wrong decisions but the major one was the separation of Singapore. He did so to avoid worsening Sino-Malay relationship which was getting tense following the participation of PAP in the 1964 General Election.

"Tengku was very annoyed because he was promised that this would not happen. For all his efforts, PAP only won one seat, and less than a year later, Tengku amputated Singapore and four years later, May 13 occurred."

Abdullah said even today, racial polarisation still existed, and the situation has worsened according to no less than the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself.

"It proves that the amputation of Singapore did not solve what Tengku had feared most - racial animosity and polarisation. It is bad now because we allowed our educational system to be hijacked by Islamic radicals who had turned national schools which was, and is, meant for everybody into almost exclusively, not even Malay, but Islamic-bent schools."

Abdullah said despite some of Tengku's weaknesses, he remained "the chief architect of our independence and our Constitution".

"The constitution may have been amended many times but it stemmed from Tengku's thoughts. We all owe him a lot."

He told the audience that he had written a book on Tengku, due to be published soon. The book is based on interviews, totalling some 24 hours, that he had conducted with Tengku in Penang and London, long before Tengku's death on Dec 6, 1990.

"The contents of the book will surprise many people," he said, adding that only Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had read the transcript.

"And to Dr Mahathir's credit, he has not tried to influence me to alter anything. The interviews were taped, and copies are kept here and overseas."

The other speakers at the seminar were academicians Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali, Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud, Datuk Ramlah Adam, Oong Hak Ching, former Sarawak Chief Minister Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakub, veteran journalist Said Zahari, and consultant psychiatrist Tan Sri Dr M. Mahadevan.

The seminar was opened by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

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