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Umno co-founder Sulaiman Ninam Shah gone but not forgotten

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IT was to be the last letter Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah wrote to Umno. Indeed, it must have been written with a heavy heart. The letter to Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob was to say that he would not be able to chair the 54th Umno general assembly.

He was in poor health and would not be able to perform the intense duty of Umno permanent chairman - a job he had been doing "par excellence" for the past 28 years.

He was dearly missed. Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Umno leaders and delegates could not help themselves and made references to his absence.

The 83-year-old co-founder of Umno knew that he had to abide by the doctor's advice not to tax himself and did this reluctantly.

All he could do throughout the proceedings which went on without him at Putra World Trade Centre's Dewan Merdeka from July 17-21, was to watch what was on television from his Petaling Jaya home.

He had expressed his disappointment especially since it was to be Dr Mahathir's last assembly before he steps down in October.

Needless to say, Umno's grand old man managed to appeal to delegates attending the assembly to heed Dr Mahathir's advice, uphold unity and strive for Umno's struggle for the Malays.

Sulaiman who suffered from my-eloid leukaemia (cancer of the blood) fought his illness but succumbed to it in the early hours of yesterday.

His passing is a great loss to Umno for he was not only among a small group of the party's surviving pioneers but one who was a model member.

Mourning the loss along with his wife, Toh Puan Rose Othman and nine children are close friends in Umno, Barisan Nasional and the Opposition parties.

Sulaiman had intended to announce his wish to quit due to health reasons at last year's assembly, but never got to do so because of the unexpected announcement by Dr Mahathir, who stunned the delegates with his intention to resign as Umno president.

An able chairman, Sulaiman kept the chaotic situation under control, repeatedly appealing for calm as Dr Mahathir was swarmed by party leaders and delegates to reconsider his decision to resign.

Also fresh in the minds of delegates was Sulaiman's display of being such a sport, especially among the World Cup fans among the delegates.

The assembly coincided with the eagerly awaited soccer match between Brazil and Germany and Sulaiman had kept delegates updated on the progress of the game.

Over the years, although known to be firm in handling assembly proceedings, he had thrilled delegates with his wit - something delegates always looked forward to, to keep them from falling asleep inside the hall.

He would crack jokes and make funny remarks to catch the attention of delegates but no one can dispute that he had performed his duty with excellence, all owing to his vast experience.

Delegates told to stop speaking while in top gear debating an issue never questioned Sulaiman's interjection. That is the kind of respect to someone who never missed to chair the assembly throughout his tenure as the party permanent chairman.

Born in Kampung Sarang Buaya in Muar, Johor on Jan 2, 1920, Sulaiman was

the youngest of four children.

Besides being a well-known figure in politics, Sulaiman was also a successful entrepreneur, especially in the transport sector. He was the chairman of the Pan Malaysian Bus Operators Association, chairman of the Malacca-Singapore Express Berhad, director of Laksamana Tour Sdn Bhd, chairman of Top Coach Builder Sdn Bhd as well as executive chairman for T & T Properties Sdn Bhd, chairman of board of directors of Menara Landmark, chairman of Rent-A-Car Kuala Lumpur and an independent board member of Pelaburan Johor Berhad.

Sulaiman started his career as a police constable in 1939 in Johor at the age of 19.

He retired in 1942, holding the post of an inspector, to get involved in business and social organisations in the State.

He joined Umno in 1946, became a deputy president of the Batu Pahat Municipal Council and the Parit Jawa assemblyman in 1959 when he contested on the Alliance ticket.

Back in Muar, Sulaiman was a well-known philanthropist, particularly to orphanages.

Sulaiman had always been synonymous with Umno. He was a figure who was as popular as all the top party leaders.

His absence at the last general assembly was very much felt by party leaders and delegates.

Even Dr Mahathir, in his policy speech, said the assembly was different without him.

His absence may from now be a permanent feature of future Umno assemblies, but his invaluable contributions to the party will not be forgotten.