

## **Razak and Najib - lights and shadows**

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**By Terence Netto**

COMMENT Six years in office as prime minister, it is being said about Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak that because his pedigree is estimable, his character and deportment are deeply puzzling.

By lineage, Najib is what is called a political blueblood, but his performance has been more plebeian than patrician.

Being the son of his father Abdul Razak Hussein, the second prime minister of Malaysia, who is regarded as a key figure in the modern history of the country, the puzzle inheres in why Najib "is not anywhere like the father", as Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently opined.

It is said Razak was frugal in his spending habits, parsimonious even with the public purse, whereas his son is profligate, even wanton, with the same.

The father waited 13 years to succeed predecessor Tunku Abdul Rahman as PM - at times he felt he would suffer the fate of RAB Butler, the British Conservative who missed out on being PM thrice - and when Razak finally did take over in 1970, he led from the front. And boldly, too.

Najib is neither trailblazer nor pacesetter; the needle of his compass wavers but does not return to true north. Question: What is Najib's true north?

Is he an Umno liberal or an ultra? Or is he somewhere in-between?

One cannot say for sure which is what you could not say of his father.

Razak romped through his law studies in a mere 18 months at the Inns of Court in London in the late 1940s, where he moved in Labour Party circles.

The reigning ideology in those circles was Fabian socialism, the thinking among left-leaning intellectuals that the struggling masses at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder needed the intervention of a selfless and educated coterie to climb out of poverty to something like educational and economic adequacy.

In its essence, the New Economic Policy, that pivotal document for the catapulting of Malaysia from gross imbalances and racial and economic poverty to a developed nation of equal and prosperous citizens, owed its inspiration to the schemes of the Fabians.

Unlike the son, the father did not allow his wife or children anywhere near the levers of power. They were largely anonymous, in jarring contrast to Najib's.

Razak had friends, mainly drawn from the intelligentsia with whom he consulted for ideas and suggestions.

But unlike the son, who enjoys robust health in his sixties, Razak was terminally ill by his late forties, about the time when the May 13, 1969 incident happened.

### **The ghost in the attic**

That incident is the ghost in the attic of this country's memory, an irruption that continues to trouble, like Banquo's ghost to Macbeth, the sleep of the sentient of this country.

The knowledge of Razak's leukemia was privy to very few and was probably the cause of a hurrying of the Tunku into retirement after the racial riots of May 13 were taken as an indictment of the Tunku's stewardship.

The Tunku (photo) was going to retire in any case, as he had said he would when his nephew, the sultan of Kedah became Agong of the country in September 1970 (the nephew is the present Agong, in his second tour of duty as monarch).

The Young Turks of Umno, who counted among their number Mahathir, had been baying for the Tunku's blood after the racial riots: he was seen as slow and lackadaisical about the deeply troubling issue of Malay poverty - the sleeper issue of the general election of May 10, 1969 when Umno and the Alliance lost its two-third majority in Parliament.

The issue detonated with the outbreak of the riots a few days after the polls.

The Tunku retreated from office although he had it in mind to fight to retain the Umno presidency if only to prove the point that he still commanded support in Umno in spite of what his detractors were saying about him being out of touch with reality.

The decision to withdraw and not to fight was to prevent a schism in the party between his supporters and Razak's backers.

The Tunku had long regarded Razak as his ideal deputy and was deeply mortified to find that his loyal lieutenant did not extend to him the courtesy of a graceful exit.

Razak died rather suddenly (his serious illness was only known to a few), an energetic premiership of a little over five years. Older by 19 years, the Tunku lived on after his successor's death for nearly 15 years and died at the age of 87 in December 1990.

In the last two years of his life, living in his preferred idyll of Penang, the Tunku afforded to inquiring visitors who sought him out on antecedents to events and issues then flaring in the public arena, grubby details that cast a bad light on Razak.

Those details would only see light of day if the visitors, several of whom are still living, publish their recollections of what the Tunku told them.

History sometimes affords the progeny of paramount leaders opportunity to reclaim the latter's legacy and have it defined not by their lapses and failures, but by their accomplishments and valour.

Something of the reverse may be happening in the case of Najib's career: it appears to be a playing out of the shadows and foibles of Razak, of which the Tunku vented to visitors.

We will not know for sure until those visitors publish their recollections. Suffice to say, this spool of history has some way to run before it can cohere into a narrative that will illuminate what we presently find puzzling.

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