

## **LETTER | Tunku's last speech**

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**Adib Faiz**

LETTER | The late literary critic and activist, Edward Said, once wrote: “Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present”. This statement can be taken in a negative sense, with historical narratives being manipulated to legitimise oppression. But it can also be taken in a positive sense, with the lamp of the past illuminating the darkness of the present.

About a year ago, we saw appeals to the past in connection with the Rukun Negara, which was then entering its 50th anniversary. Politicians, leaders and thinkers spoke of upholding the Rukun Negara, the closest thing Malaysia has to a constitutional preamble. Articles were written, speeches were made, and public discussions were held. It was also the first time I ever heard of “Rukun Negara clubs” existing in government schools.

These and other such “appeals to the past” were made against a backdrop of

political turmoil. The Sheraton Move had taken place just a few months earlier, and Anwar Ibrahim would attempt to become prime minister about a month later.

A year later, Malaysia is in an unimaginable state of chaos. Our democracy is in crisis, activists are thrown into Black Marias, and corrupt politicians disregard - even mock - the suffering of the rakyat amidst a raging pandemic. To top things off, we now have a new prime minister, who is steeped in controversy surrounding his racist statements. So much for honouring the Rukun Negara.

Curiously, last year's appeals to the past left out an important contextual point. While the Rukun Negara was officially launched on Aug 31, 1970, the Rukun Negara's "five pillars of principles" were actually mentioned the day before, in Tunku Abdul Rahman's last official address as prime minister. In the broadcast, Tunku announced that he would be relinquishing the premiership, with the speech being his "last official... talk to the nation". The Rukun Negara thus came into the world in the context of Tunku's resignation, and the circumstances that led to it.

At risk of interrupting the flow of this article, I should clarify that Tunku did not write the Rukun Negara. This document was created by the National Consultative Council, a diverse body that featured some of Malaysia's best minds.

The parallels between Aug 1970 and Aug 2021 are striking. In both periods, the sitting prime minister resigned against the backdrop of a national crisis that temporarily suspended the parliamentary process. Both periods witnessed political intrigue and a scramble for power. Last but not least, Umno was at the centre of rapidly changing political developments.

By making these comparisons, I am not in any way comparing Muhyiddin's leadership to Tunku's. I am merely pointing out that, while our national circumstances are unprecedented, they are also strangely familiar. So often in Malaysia, we are so preoccupied with the broken machine of the present that we neglect the toolbox of the past. Our solutions lie forgotten, hidden in the darkened storeroom of history.

In view of this, it is worth examining Tunku's last official address to the nation more closely, to see what light it may shed upon our current situation.

### **How to say goodbye: Tunku's farewell speech**

An official political address is rarely delivered off the cuff. The speech is carefully crafted, so that it conveys the intended tone and message to one's audience. In the case of farewell speeches, the leader often reflects upon his or her legacy and time in office. Some leaders gracefully acknowledge the possibility of error.

Lastly, farewell addresses may contain advice for the nation, be they words of caution or words of hope.

Tunku's final address as prime minister contains many of these elements. It begins with Tunku declaring his intention to have a "heart-to-heart talk" with the nation. Tunku states his aims very clearly: he wishes to reflect on the past, consider "where we may have gone astray", and look forward to the future. He then recounts our national history up until May 13, 1969, examines our ideals and responsibilities as Malaysians, announces his resignation, and engages in personal reflection. While Tunku's language is simple and straightforward, he also speaks "earnestly", "passionately", and "seriously".

Those who want to listen to Tunku's 1970 speech can do so on BFM's website. Rather than recounting every detail, I will highlight some key points. We could frame these points as responses to two key questions: what is a "true Malaysian", and what is the true meaning of "unity"?

### **'True Malaysians'**

Right at the start of his speech, Tunku says, "All true Malaysians rightfully rejoice each year when the great day of Merdeka comes round". Beneath the surface of this simple speech, Tunku defines the concept of a "true Malaysian" in terms of

one's values. For Tunku, a "true Malaysian" is one who is committed to the wellbeing of everyone in the country, irrespective of race or creed. Tunku's constant reference to the collective pronoun "we" presents the idea of a shared project, be it in national successes ("that we, the people of Malaysia have achieved") or national failures ("where we may have gone astray"). Malaysia is a nation "we have built together". The focal point is not the government, but the Malaysian community.

A "true Malaysian" embraces diversity, accepting others of different backgrounds. Tunku emphasises this early on, as if eager to make his point: "... whatever they are, whatever may be their age, whatever their race, whatever their creed, we are all Malaysians, this is the bond that unites us."

Just as there is a "true Malaysian", there is also the opposite. Tunku describes May 13 in seismic terms, calling the riots "a mental and social earthquake" that "we can never, never forget". However, the Tunku says that the riots prompted the realisation "that so many so-called Malaysians are not Malaysian at all".

Looking at the original draft of Tunku's speech, multiple groups are mentioned: Tunku condemns those who follow the ideologies of foreign dictators, as well as communists. However, Tunku's draft speech also mentions "Malay extremists", though only in passing.

Based on Tunku's book entitled May 13th: Before and After, this group may refer to the "ultras" in Umno, a new breed of Malay nationalists who would dominate the party's leadership. In his book on May 13, Tunku's condemnation of ultra-nationalism is explicit and unreserved.

For whatever reason, Tunku's final broadcast of his farewell speech did not define those who "are not Malaysian at all". However, it is safe to conclude that anyone who attempts to rip apart a multicultural society and create chaos is, for Tunku, not a "true Malaysian".

### **The meaning of 'unity'**

People often speak of national unity. But what does unity actually mean, in terms of one's personal commitments and actions? Without any concrete definitions, appeals to "unity" may conceal oppression, greed and moral compromise.

One way of understanding unity is the willingness to overcome differences in the interest of the common good. Tunku urges all true Malaysians "to sink, and forget, any difference they may have, and regard each other honestly and truly as fellow Malaysians". This does not contradict the idea of diversity. Rather, it means that certain goals are universal in nature, transcending our outward differences.

For Tunku, all Malaysians must “work together in cooperation and harmony for the common good of each and all of us”. In 2021, the great movement of cooperation is undoubtedly Bendera Putih, a national expression of solidarity and welfare that sprung up in connection with Covid-19.

However, I personally believe that movements of resistance can also be movements for the common good. Protecting our fundamental liberties, upholding parliamentary democracy, insisting upon rules of engagement in our discourse: these goals transcend political, religious and racial affiliations.

True unity requires responsibility. There is an idea in Tunku’s speech that Malaysia is not merely something we inherit, but something we must protect. For Tunku, the consequences of division are a matter of life and death, concerning “our lives and those of our dependents”.

Tunku evokes the image of an explosive that may go off at any moment: “a divided nation will blow into smithereens and those with it”. We are also presented with an alternative image; “a bright and happy future” is possible, as long as we “work for it”. Set against Tunku’s plain language, these contrasting images strike the right balance between the threat of danger and the warmth of hope.

“Unity” is hollow talk without a commitment to the common good, a sense of responsibility, and an understanding that our actions have consequences. With these ideas in mind, Tunku paints an image of a united Malaysia: “After all, it is your Malaysia. This nation belongs to each one of us. We are all part of it, and each has his part to play.”

Having made these points, the Tunku exhorts Malaysians “to observe peacefully the following five pillars of principles”, listing out the principles of the Rukun Negara. Tunku has already given his audience much to think about, making them consider their country, their responsibilities and themselves more deeply. It is up to his fellow Malaysians to interpret the Rukun Negara in the years to come.

I could end here, but I’d be remiss if I did not let Tunku have the last word. After briefly announcing his resignation, Tunku reflects on his legacy. Rather than listing out his achievements, he merely highlights his key success: “support from all sections of (the) community (of) Malaysians, irrespective of race or creed”. The Tunku ends with the classic image of himself as the happy prime minister, whilst forcing our attention back on the people of Malaysia:

“... I have always considered myself as the happiest prime minister in the world. It has always been my most ardent hope, and ambition, to make all Malaysians, fellow Malaysians, the happiest people of the world too.”

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