

Crusade Against Corruption

Tunku Abdul Aziz Tunku Ibrahim believes Malaysia can win the battle against corruption.

By Seelen Sakran

IF Hong Kong took 30 years to totally break free from corruption, I am certain, given the same amount of time, Malaysia can also achieve the same,' says 71-year-old Tunku Abdul Aziz Tunku Ibrahim, the outgoing president of the Malaysian chapter of German-based Transparency International (TI).

Having capped a fulfilling eight years at TI, Abdul Aziz is calling it a day. He reminisces his achievements and failures as well as his life's journey to fight corruption.

If one were to consider Abdul Aziz's greatest achievement at TI, it would be creating awareness of the negative impact of corruption in all levels of society in the country since its humble origins in 1995.

'We existed on an informal basis from 1995 till 1998, but received strong support back then and do so even today from the Malaysian Institute of Management, under the stewardship of Dr Tarcisius Chin and the German-based non-governmental organisation Konrad Adenauer Foundation,' he tells *Malaysian Business*.

Chin, who has known Abdul Aziz for a long time, describes him as a fine gentleman who is prepared to call a spade a spade, without losing his temper. 'He is an energetic and dynamic Malaysian leader who founded TI at the right place and time.'

What actually motivated Abdul Aziz to establish TI? In no uncertain terms, he feels corruption in any shape or fashion is harmful. 'We have already seen numerous examples of the consequences of the abuse of power in the public and private sectors globally. I do not think I need to impress upon that. The only difference between then and now is that the word corruption was considered taboo back then.'

Back in 1995, TI released its first Corruption Perception Index (CPI). It has been doing so ever since, and in the process, has become an authoritative measure of the perceived level of corruption in the countries surveyed.

Malaysia's position on the CPI was 23 out of 41 countries in 1995. What was Malaysia's former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reaction? Abdul Aziz says, 'When the reporters stopped him in front of the Parliament house, Dr Mahathir's reply to the reporters was to ignore this perception as Malaysia's position was in the middle, which was nothing to worry about.'

Abdul Aziz says the strange thing was, while Dr Mahathir seemed unperturbed, he nevertheless felt the latter should have taken a closer look at this perception index. 'He sent three Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) officers to our International Secretariat in Berlin, Germany, and interviewed me. I gave them a full briefing on the methodology. They came away



Pix by Wan Izzah Abu Bakar

Abdul Aziz: Aims to see Malaysia as the least corrupt nation

impressed by the integrity of our methodology.'

Helming TI in Malaysia, what was Abdul Aziz's one failure? He answers, "The failure was my inability to create awareness, especially among people of non-English speaking backgrounds, of the larger implications of corruption. For them, everything was okay, as long as things were in order and running.'

On his reason for retirement, Abdul Aziz says it's time for him to step down, as per the constitutional provision of TI, which prevents office bearers from holding a position for more than six years or three terms.

So, how did Abdul Aziz land this position to battle corruption? Looking back at his career path, there was a telling sign that this purely voluntary job was waiting for a person like him.

Born into a middle-class family in Alor Setar, Kedah in 1934, Abdul Aziz had a well-balanced life growing-up. 'I had my early education in Alor Setar. After World War II in 1946, I continued my education at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College, which was where Dr Mahathir also had his early education.'

Abdul Aziz's stay in Kedah was short though as his police officer father was later transferred to Klang.

'My father told us that it is no use driving a big car around town when the coffee shop talk was that one was on the take. That is how he looked at life.'

Upon completing his studies at Klang High School in 1953, he went to England, at the age of 18, to complete a certificate in teaching at the Liverpool Institute of Education.

Why teaching? Abdul Aziz says, 'My headmaster at Klang High School, Dr James Rawcliffe, felt that since I was a good rugby player, I should teach the game to others. He said if I became a teacher, it would be a good way for me to introduce the game to Malaysian schools.'

He adds, T returned home in 1956 and taught for five years in Pahang as a service to the Government to repay my scholarship. I later went to British North Borneo (now Sabah and Sarawak) to teach rugby.'

After his five-year stint in Sabah and Sarawak, Abdul Aziz headed to the



Abdul Aziz (left) with the Mayor of Taipei discussing corruption issues in local government in 2002

University of Tasmania in Australia to enrol for a degree in political science and economic history.

In Australia, Abdul Aziz was actively editing the university newspaper called *Togatus*. 'I am proud to note that I became the first Asian to edit an Australian university newspaper, which I helped turn from an inconsequential newspaper to one where mainstream newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne began to quote.' After four years of studies, Abdul Aziz felt he should become a journalist.

However, that ambition was nipped in the bud, as he was recruited by Guthrie Plc (now known as Kumpulan Guthrie Bhd) to join them in Malaysia as a junior executive in 1964. Abdul Aziz was, in fact, the first Malaysian to be recruited to such a position, which was the preserve of Europeans at that time.

After a happy six years at Guthrie, Abdul Aziz was then called to do national service as Bank Negara Malaysia's advisor by the then-governor, the late Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali.

T agreed to serve for three years, partly coaxed by the then-Deputy Prime Minister the late Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman,' he says.

Three years later, Abdul Aziz joined Dunlop Malaysia Industries Bhd (which is part of Sime Darby Bhd), where he climbed the corporate ladder to become the group director of Sime Darby.

In 1985, lured by the international arena, Abdul Aziz left for London to take up a diplomatic position at the Commonwealth

Secretariat, a position he held till 1992.

He officially retired that same year, and took time to relax and reminisce his life and past accomplishments, including his personal goals.

Incidentally, Abdul Aziz is married to a retired teacher. They have two daughters; one is a freelance writer living in Kuala Lumpur, while the other is a doctor living in England.

In 1995, he started on his new goal, which was to establish the Malaysian chapter of TI.

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, who has known him for 40 years, says, 'Abdul Aziz is a person of high morals and integrity. He practises what he preaches as he is not for rhetorics. Today, TI is a household name because of his relentless pursuit to fight corruption, even with limited resources. It is a pity he is leaving.'

What does the future hold for TI with Abdul Aziz out of the scene? For starters, TI will be moving to a new office in Plaza Pantai, KL in February. Secondly, the national oil company, Petroliaam Nasional Bhd, will support TI's work for the next three years.

Abdul Aziz says, "There will be an annual general meeting in March where the new president will be elected. At the moment, Datuk Param Cumaraswamy will hold the fort.

'My aim for the nation in the coming years is to see Malaysia stand up and be counted as the least corrupt nation.'

That will indeed make Abdul Aziz a very happy man. **mb**