

# END OF AN ERA

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He was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth yet he never let that prevent him from striving to get out of the shackles of poverty by working his way to becoming a teacher at the then premier Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris.

How many poor people of that era had the fortune and luck to even make it to school, what more a university?

At the age of 15, he was already aware of the need for Malaysians to be freed from the shackles of colonialism, and he was a freedom fighter in the ranks of Datuk Haji Yusoff bin Tun Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun H. S. Lee, Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun V. E. Sambanthan, and the many more unheralded forefathers of modern Malaysia.

His passing today signals the end of an era, the end of one of the last surviving original fathers of independence.

There are many things I can say about Ghafar. I served him as Press Secretary for a short period when he was Deputy Prime Minister, and have kept in

touch with him and his family over the years.

Two nights ago, as we stood outside the intensive care unit of the Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre, watching son Asri massaging his arms and reciting prayers for his unconscious father, the only signs of life displayed on a screen registering his blood pressure and respiratory levels. Family members related an incident that reflects what Ghafar was all about.

Just before he slipped into unconsciousness last week, he went into a state of depression, worrying family members and medical staff alike.

No one could prise out of him what his worries were until the hospital assigned two psychiatrists to speak to him.

Slowly, speaking with great difficulty despite the tubes in his respiratory passages, Ghafar told them he was concerned about Umno, about the people and about the future amid all the challenges facing the country.

Even in his last moments, his concerns were not for himself. They were for his people, his country.

Yes, he loved golf, he loved

tennis, he loved *keroncong* music and, in his younger days, the *joget*. But most of all, he loved his country, his people, Umno and the Barisan Nasional, with a passion not many have shown.

In an era when many strive to become Datuks, Tan Sias and Tans, Ghafar never felt it was his right to be rewarded with awards, turning down numerous offers from Sultans and kings, remaining a plain "En cik", or more affectionately, Pak Ghafar, until he retired in 1993.

Ghafar's loyalty to Umno and the country is perhaps best illustrated by looking at his political career.

Despite being one of the most senior vice-presidents in Umno when Tun Abdul Razak died in 1976 and was succeeded by Tun Hussein Onn as prime minister and president of Umno, Ghafar was not chosen for the deputy prime minister's job.

It went to Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ostensibly, Ghafar's lack of educational qualifications was the main reason for his exclusion. He could have made an issue of this and created a row, as many were known to do before that time and many more since.

But he resigned his Cabinet position, supported Hussein and Dr Mahathir, and remained a party loyalist, not uttering a word in protest.

In 1985, when the Malaysian Chinese Association faced its worst internal crisis, Ghafar was chosen and accepted by the Chinese to temporarily chair the party's affairs and resolve the problems.

A year later, when Datuk (now Tan Sri) Musa Hitam quit as deputy prime minister, throwing Umno into a crisis, Ghafar was asked to leave his business and serve as deputy prime minister. With nary a complaint, he dutifully took the job.

When Umno was declared unlawful in 1987 by the High Court and many party heavyweights



Ghafar and the late Tun Abdul Rahman during a visit to Penang in 1986.



Ghafar paying a visit to then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the latter's office on May 21, 1986.



Ghafar with some of his grandchildren at his Hari Raya open house in 1987.

left to form a rival group, Ghafar stood by Dr Mahathir, rebuilt Umno literally from scratch, and led the campaigns in by-election after by-election against former colleagues, ensuring the party's survival.

In 1990, when the ruling Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) pulled out of the Barisan Nasional coalition, of which Ghafar was the first and longest-serving secretary-general, on the eve of general elections to back Umno's rival group, Ghafar was entrusted with setting up Umno in the State.

He persuaded his long-time friend Tun Datu Mustapha Harun to dissolve the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), and that became the foundation for Umno in the State. Today, Umno is the strongest political party in the State and Sabah has seen an enduring period of political stability.

And he did it with none of the flamboyance or crassness of other leaders of that time. It was easier because he was trusted by those who dealt with him. He had no personal agenda, only the nation's agenda.

In 1992, when the Government faced a stand-off against the Malay rulers in the country's worst constitutional crisis, it was again Ghafar, with his tact and ability to soft-talk even the most hardened opponents, who played a crucial role in resolving the issue.

Any number of people can try to take credit for all these, but the truth and reality is that as deputy prime minister, Ghafar was entrusted by his boss, Dr Mahathir, to lead the campaigns and to resolve the issues.

And he did it with none of the flamboyance or crassness of other leaders of that time. It was easier because he was trusted by those who dealt with him. He had no personal agenda, only the nation's agenda.

Perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to Ghafar was in 1993, when those he had led and nurtured turned against him in a bid for power in one of the

ugliest and most vicious election campaigns in Umno.

That was the year when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim decided to challenge Ghafar for the Umno deputy president's post.

Even then, few know that Ghafar twice offered to resign his post to allow Anwar a free pass, because he did not want Umno to be split. But his offer was declined.

In the end, the vicious campaign saw Ghafar being attacked and ridiculed in public and in the media by those who ingratiated themselves with the younger Anwar.

Yet, in all the years I knew Ghafar, he never once displayed any vindictiveness or viciousness against his attackers; only hurt and puzzlement, not knowing what his sins had been.

He was forgiving; he was not mean. He was the quintessential Malay gentleman with that old-world charm so lacking

these days.

I have seen how he forgave his enemies and his critics; I saw how he would never allow anger to force him to utter words he would regret.

In 1995, when the dust had settled and Ghafar was all but forgotten, the Government tried to honour him by getting him to accept one of the nation's highest awards, the Seri Setia Mahkota (SSM) from the King, which would make him a "Tun".

Ghafar avoided taking calls and receiving visits from Dr Mahathir's office, and eventually, Umno secretary-general Datuk (now Tan Sri) Mohamed Rahmat sought my assistance.

Ghafar's son, Sofi, and I went to see him and persuaded him to let Mohamed meet him. I remember we said that whatever was to happen, Dr Mahathir was still Umno president and Prime Minister and Mohamed was his

emissary. It was this that made Ghafar relent — loyalty to his prime minister and his president in Umno.

Some days later, Sofi and I brought Mohamed and then Umno executive secretary Datuk Yaakob Mohamad to see Ghafar. He was hurt by what had been done to him but Ghafar never showed any anger or resentment, although he did seem a little aloof when he met Mohamed and Yaakob at first.

I stayed out of the meeting, but was later informed by Sofi that Ghafar had agreed to meet Dr Mahathir. Eventually, he accepted the award — but not because he wanted to be known as a "Tun". After all, he had turned down awards for more than 40 years.

He accepted it because he wanted to ease a conscience pricked by what had been done to him. He accepted it because

he wanted closure. He accepted it because he did not want Umno to feel that the Ghafar chapter was still open.

Throughout the 66 years since he joined the struggle for independence and 55 years since he joined Umno, Ghafar never went against his country or his party.

Loyal and patriotic from the beginning; loyal and patriotic to the end.

How does a nation bid farewell to a loyal son like Ghafar?

With respect. With gratitude. With a great sense of loss.

The writer is a former group editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times Press Group. He served as Press secretary to Ghafar when he was Deputy Prime Minister and is currently deputy chairman of the NSTP Board of Directors.

REASON TO EAT  
S.O.C O.R. CHICKEN CHOP #234

**"There's nothing to do after this afternoon's fire drill."**

TREAT YOURSELF EVERY DAY