

Ghafar Baba - a Malaysian leader through and through

Comment by WONG CHUN WAI

IT WAS never easy for reporters who had covered the late Tun Ghafar Baba as a Deputy Prime Minister. He was humble, approachable and kind, but for the press, he was never good copy.

In journalistic terms, it means he was not an exciting person and neither would he make any sensational news.

There was seldom any chance of getting page one news items at his assignments. Certainly, one could not expect him to make a controversial statement.

He shunned the limelight, preferring to work quietly for the country and Umno, instead of plotting and scheming away.

But he was consistently a Malaysian leader. As an Umno leader, one legacy that he left behind was that he proved that one did not need to make a racist remark to be popular to climb up the political hierarchy.

He wasn't sophisticated and neither was he internationally urbane, but he made Malaysians, especially the rural folk, comfortable.

At a time when politicians are disliked and perceived to be easily bought, people continued to look up to him as a trusted politician.

He had a constant reminder to his family members, friends and journalists - Malaysians should not waste time fighting each other.

"I would like us sitting together and discussing on how we can make more money together for the country," he once told me, saying disputes were a waste of time.

He blamed politicians for twisting facts to get themselves elected but lamented that Malaysians did not spend time finding out the truth.

"They just listen to the speeches made by their leaders and get angry at what they hear," he said in his biography, written by former aide Datuk Dr Alias Mohamed.

He never liked any references to the Chinese and Indians as "immigrant races", particularly by young politicians.

"They live here and they will die here. I advise the Chinese and the other races not to get hurt when the Government appears to help the

Malays more, because they lag very far behind. But I know that the Malays would not want the Government to help them forever. They too want to stand on their own two feet eventually," he said.

He was the last of the Mohicans, as one Umno veteran put it. The former *cikgu* from the *kampung* did not mind being talked about behind his back as a simple man.

He had always been forgiving, as his name meant. Those who were closed to him had seldom seen him losing his temper.

As a plain "Encik" for a long time, he did not care about honorifics, titles and perks.

He was fond of telling his listeners proudly that one Singapore newspaper reported that "the Chinese have Ali Baba, the Indians have Sai Baba and the Malays have Ghafar Baba". That anecdote, he made sure, was included in his book.

- His family home at Lembah Pantai was a spacious house with a swimming pool but it was always empty when I visited. Once, I just drove into the porch because there was no guard,

A maid showed me into the house. His long-serving secretary, Rahman Yunus, had telephoned to say that Ghafar wanted to see me to keep him updated on the latest political developments.

He wasn't very healthy by then and had sought both Western and Chinese medical treatment

I asked him whether he could climb the stairs but instead he showed me a room at the ground floor, where he said he slept mostly. It was almost spartan but the easy-going elder said he did not mind.

He had fought for the independence, was the youngest chief minister at one time and held a record of being unbeatable as a Member of Parliament. He had helped formed Malaysia, in short.

Ghafar was truly a nationalist and a leader of all Malaysians, who understood the importance of moderation and the politics of consensus, which continues today to be the hallmark of our Government.

We bade Ghafar farewell but he will remain in the hearts of Malaysians **forever**