

Passing of a patriot: Sincerity, honour his lasting legacy

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MALACCA: A man of his word; a sincere friend. A great orator with an impressive memory and a politician who genuinely cared for the rakyat.

These and many more glowing accolades flowed from the close friends of Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba here.

An avid golfer who was also passionate about cars, Ghafar was described by best friend and former Malacca MCA chief Datuk Tan Ching Swee as a companion who always had a good store of jokes to lighten up his friends' days.

"Clean jokes, dirty jokes, he loved to make his friends laugh. He once told me, 'If my friends are happy, I'm happy'," Tan said in a telephone interview on Saturday after visiting Ghafar at the Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

"It was so sad to see him lying there. When I first visited him during Ramadan last year, the nurse asked him if he remembered me.

"He just grabbed my hand and wouldn't let go, all the while repeatedly muttering my name."

Ghafar's collegemate and Umno veteran Tan Sri Aziz Tapa, who studied with him at the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim in the late 1940s, described Ghafar as "the greatest orator of our time".

Ghafar, he said, had reunited Malacca Umno when it was at its lowest point in the early 1950s.

Known as a man of strong character, Ghafar was also humble and hardworking.

"I remember working alongside him in the 1950s. He didn't mind doing everything he could for the good of the party, from posting letters to cleaning the office, campaigning and giving public speeches."

Aziz said Ghafar was a teacher then and received repeated warnings from his school inspector to stay away from active politics.

"But he was a rebel at heart. He just continued doing what he thought was right and necessary to strengthen the party and win independence from Britain."

To Aziz, Ghafar's biggest and most unforgettable contribution to the country was his role in setting up Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Mara), formerly the Rural Industrial Development Authority.

"Without Mara, Malays would not have achieved the success they have today."

For his unwavering support of Umno and his passion to serve the people, Ghafar won the love and admiration of the first prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"Tunku used to call him mutiara dari Melaka (the pearl from Malacca)," Aziz recalled.

Perhaps the simple but emphatic words of MIC veteran Datuk S.K. R.M. Dorai Raj best described Ghafar: "He was a legend, a man who fought tirelessly for a better life for his people."