

Editorial: A man who made history

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THE passing of Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba marks the end of an era. He was the last of that generation of old-school freedom fighters who fought not with guns but with charm and grace in the quest for independence and nationhood.

His political career was a roller-coaster ride of high positions, dignified exits and unexpected comebacks. But through all the highs and lows, the good times and the bad, he never wore his triumphs and disappointments on his sleeve. He resigned from the Cabinet quietly when he was overlooked for the post of Deputy Prime Minister in 1976. He walked away again rather than see Umno split apart in 1993.

It was his unwavering loyalty and clear-sightedness that helped Umno survive its de-registration and give birth to its revival. He played a leading role in defusing the constitutional crisis with the Rulers and in much else. Umno's successful entry into Sabah bore his imprint as did many crucial turns in Malaysia's formative history. Although he was an ardent Malay nationalist, he was never a chauvinist.

Ghafar's record at the polls is unrivalled. It was justifiably said of him that he could contest any seat and win. He won every election from the Melaka Luar state seat in the first-ever general election in 1955 to the Batu Berendam parliamentary seat in the general election of 1999. He had no peer as a political campaigner and vote-getter.

Although he had little formal schooling, he was a man of sharp intelligence and an astute politician. Above all, it was his personality and character that endeared him to Malaysians and made him widely respected by both friend and foe.

Throughout his lifelong devotion to party and country, he remained the quintessential Malay gentleman. He was refined in language, led an unassuming lifestyle, and did not have a single vindictive bone in his body. He never forgot his humble beginnings and felt deeply for the common people. He resisted official titles for a long time, preferring the administrative "Encik" and the honorific "Pak" that the Malays use to address their elders.

It is fitting that he has been laid to rest at the Heroes' Mausoleum in the National Mosque with full national honours. Ghafar deserves consecration in the short roll-call of luminaries who are remembered not for what they built, but what they stood for.