

Datuk Onn Jaafar's rich legacy

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AS thousands of Umno members gather in Johor Baru next week to celebrate the party's 60th anniversary, I recall those days when as a young girl I followed my father on his daily visit to see Datuk Onn Jaafar, the founder and first president of Umno, who was dying in his hospital room.

My father and Onn, both born in the 1890s, were men of a different age and a different moral fibre.

"They don't make men like him these days," said many old Umno leaders when they found out I was my father's daughter in those years when I covered the annual Umno general assemblies, I swelled with pride.

He was from that generation of Umno members who was with the party not because they wanted to get rich or to benefit from the trappings of position and power, but because they believed in the cause.

My father was one of the six men who met one historic night in January 1946 in Batu Pahat to form Umno.

The White Paper to form the Malayan Union had just been published. There was uproar as Sir Harold MacMichael had obtained, by force or guile, the signatures of all nine Sultans to transfer the sovereignty of the Malay states to the British Crown.

In Johor Baru, the Persatuan Melayu Johor, led the protest against the Sultan and transferring his power and jurisdiction over to the King of England. My father was then the chief clerk at the Public Works Department.

He loved to tell us how one day his *Mat Salleh* boss asked him what the fuss was all about and how he took the guy out to the verandah of the government office on Bukit Timbalan and pointed out to him, "You see that flag flying out there? That is the flag of Johor. Now you want to bring that down and replace it with the Union Jack.

"You can take your Union Jack and chuck it in Antarctica where there are only penguins. Here we have a constitution and a people."

My father knew that a strong and fearless leader was needed not just to fight against the British proposals, but more importantly to unite the numerous small Malay associations in the 11 states under one leader and one organisation.



Malays demonstrating against the Malayan Union in 1948 in Batu Pahat. Inset Onn.

By then Onn had long established a reputation as an outspoken man who stood up for what he believed was right.

His combative writings as a journalist in newspapers of the 1920s and 30s drew a following in Johor, Singapore, Penang and Malacca, and among educated Malays in the other States.

He railed against British policies which kept the Malays backward, the Sultans for not pushing for the promotion of qualified Malays in the civil service and, most of all, he tirelessly exhorted the Malays to dare to be different.

He was obsessed with the need to *betulkan orang Melayu* (to make the Malays better), as one of his daughters said.

He called on Malay parents to push their children to excel in their studies and to send their daughters to school.

He castigated those Malays obsessed with differentiating *Melayu Jati* (pure Malays) from Malays of Indian or Arab descent.

He reproached them for being parochial and state-centred, seeing themselves as *orang Selangor, orang Perak, orang Johor*.

He rebuked them for being choosy about jobs, for losing their skills in traditional crafts

such as wood carving, weaving and batik making. He berated them for wanting to be only wage-earners, instead of entrepreneurs.

He said the Malays were left behind in every field because they were too afraid to take risks, therefore losing opportunities to others.

This kind of forthright writing, criticising the shortcomings of the Malays, the Sultans and the colonial rulers, was unprecedented in Malay journalism of the 1930s. Those who followed his writings regarded him as a man without peer, undaunted by authority and fearlessly independent.

My father, who had known Onn since the 1920s when both lived in Muar, felt Onn was the only Malay leader who had the charisma, eloquence and indomitable spirit to unite the Malays to oppose the Malayan Union. In 1946, Onn was a district officer in Batu Pahat.

My father and two friends from the Persatuan Melayu Johor, Syed Alwi al-Hadi and Syed Abdul Rahman Abu Bakar, drove to Batu Pahat, to discuss their plans with Onn. There they were joined by Mohamed Noah Omar, then a magistrate (who later became the first Speaker of Parliament and whose two daughters, Ra-

hah and Suhailah, married two Prime Ministers) and Syed Ahmad Alwi.

The six men huddled together until 3.30am discussing strategy and action in Noah's house.

As the spokesman for the group from Johor Baru, my father presented their proposal.

At that time he said there were so many small Malay parties and associations, those formed before the war and those that had just sprung up to condemn the MacMichael Treaty.

These societies were more loyal to their Sultans and States than to the idea of nationhood. What was needed was one big united organisation that would raise a clarion call throughout the country, from Johor to Perlis.

Onn readily agreed as he himself had just organised the Malays in Batu Pahat to form the Pergerakan Melayu Semanjung Johor. It was already attracting thousands of members from Muar, Tangkak, Kluang and Pontian. When Onn asked what should this new party be called, my father suggested United Malays Organisation.

He told me he was inspired by the recent establishment of the United Nations Organisation, formed to unite the na-

tions of the world to promote peace after the end of World War II.

The next day, the group of six met again at Onn's house. He dictated a letter to be sent to *Utusan Melayu*. It announced the formation of Umno and proposed a Congress of all Malay associations to form this new party. Onn's timely letter provided the catalyst that energised the Malays into concerted action.

And so it was on March 1, 1946 that thousands of Malays from all 11 States came together at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kampung Baru in a historic display of Malay unity and power. Forty-one associations and parties attended this first Pan-Malayan Malay Congress, each sending up to six delegates and 14 observers. Delegate after delegate supported Onn's proposal for the formation of a United Malays Organisation. A working committee was formed, comprising Onn, Datuk Panglima Gantang of Perak, Datuk Nik Ahmad Kamil of Kelantan, Datuk Hamzah Abdullah and Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Za'aba) of Selangor, to draft the party constitution. It was Za'aba who proposed that the word "National" be added to Umno. Umo became Umno.

The congress met for four

days, and a second congress was planned for May 11 in Johor Baru. It was held at the Sultan's palace — the Malay Sultans by then firmly on the side of the *rakyat*.

It was here that the Umno constitution was adopted and this first mass-based Malay party was officially launched. Onn was unanimously elected the party's first president and Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang, the secretary-general. Umno's first headquarters was established on the first floor of a shophouse in Jalan Ibrahim on the Johor Baru waterfront.

The man who could have become the first Prime Minister of independent Malaya died in 1962; his dreams of a non-communal approach to politics unfulfilled.

Like all men of principles, Onn preferred to resign from the party he founded and led rather than compromise on his fundamental belief that it was time for Umno to admit non-Malays as full and equal members.

There can be no doubt, however, that whenever Onn's political career is reviewed, his enormous contribution in shaping the political future of the Malays and of multi-racial Malaya is central to the continued peace and prosperity enjoyed by Malaysia today.

It was Onn who saw not just the stability, but the necessity for inter-ethnic co-operation and bargaining.

His own experiment with the Independence of Malaya Party failed.

His dream of transforming Malayan communal politics to a non-communal approach did not work in 1951 and still could not work 55 years later.

But he opened the doors to what eventually evolved into a workable inter-ethnic coalition system of Government that has successfully managed race relations in this country.

In his vision of national unity and multi-racial co-operation, he opened a trail that forced the Malays, Chinese and Indians to accommodate each other's competing demands and interests, and adopt a give and take negotiating process that eschewed a winner-take-all mindset.

It is this long-established culture of accommodation, respect and compromise that has served this ethnically divided country so well, while others have failed.