

# Prince who was 'the happiest PM'

Tunku was tireless in his efforts to integrate the various races and work out compromises in order to maintain harmony.

By CHEAH BOON KHENG

**T**UNKU Abdul Rahman (1902-1990) was a figure who rightly belongs to our present age – one who could reconcile liberalism, conscience and magnanimity while possessing power.

He was not only Malaya's first elected Prime Minister but also the man who led the country to independence, hence his title *Bapa Kemerdekaan* (Father of Independence). He is also known as *Bapa Malaysia* (Father of the Nation), for bringing about the present wider federation of Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah in 1963.

If these were not already outstanding nation-building achievements, he went on to earn an even greater accolade – the sobriquet "high priest of inter-racial harmony" – for his tireless efforts to integrate the various races, to accommodate their different interests and demands, to work out compromises, and to maintain peace and harmony.

It was the Tunku who showed since 1957 that although a Malay leader (Umno president) when he became prime minister he was transformed to a leader of a multi-ethnic nation.

He began his political career in Umno as an "exclusivist" Malay nationalist, but when in office he began building a more pluralistic and multi-cultural nation to achieve national unity.

He re-invented himself into an "inclusivist" Malaysian nationalist. For this, he came under attack from Malay critics within and outside Umno who wanted a more "exclusivist Malay" nation. But he took the blows and tried to weather the storm.

Acutely aware that Palestine had plunged into an ethnic maelstrom and civil war in the 1940s, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) into ethnic riots and bloodshed, he was determined to steer Malaya from a similar fate.

He guided the nation cautiously through the early fragile years of independence and the formation of Malaysia. His early widespread popularity helped him to restrain Malay nationalist demands.

The Tunku's leadership brought about political stability and economic success, that were essential for the country's survival, until the May 13, 1969, riots broke out and ended his career. Over those 12 years, he laid the foundations of national integration and the economic and social structures of a modern and workable system of constitutional democracy.

The riots were a temporary setback. Despite stepping down from office due to opposition from within Umno, subsequent party presidents and prime ministers have continued with the Tunku's policies of integration, compromise and multi-culturalism.

#### Alliance to the fore

The Tunku found his own way of fulfilling the needs of a multi-racial nation.

Born the seventh son of a Kedah sultan and his Thai wife, he pursued his schooling in Kedah, Penang, Bangkok and Cambridge. This varied educational background exposed him to peoples of different races and cultures, and to new ideas of liberalism and democracy.

From an obscure Kedah branch official, he was elected Umno's second president at its annual general assembly in 1951 to succeed Datuk Onn Jaafar, the founder-president, much to the surprise of Tunku and everyone else.



Malaysiaku Gemilang

### Founding Fathers

A weekly series



**Historic talks:** The Tunku flanked by MCA leader Tun Tan Cheng Lock (far right) and Chief Minister of Singapore David Marshall at the Baling Talks with communist leaders in 1955.

Although he was on the side of exclusionary Malay nationalism and opposed Onn's proposal for Umno to open its doors to non-Malays, he realised on becoming party president that he needed to accommodate the non-Malays.

Unlike Onn, who wanted a single party to represent Malays and non-Malays, the Tunku accepted a coalition of communal parties, bringing into an alliance with Umno the Malayan Chinese Association and, later, the Malayan Indian Congress. The coalition won all but one seat in the Federal Legislative Council in the first general election of 1955 and led in demanding for independence from the British.

This occurred in the midst of the communist insurrection, sometimes known as "the Emergency" (1948-1960). In fact, by early 1953, the initial Umno-MCA Alliance had won all the local elections, defeating Onn's multi-racial Independence of Malaya Party which thereafter decided to raise the stakes by demanding independence within seven years. The Alliance countered by demanding independence within three years.

As a first step, the Alliance decided to revamp the wholly nominated Legislative Council and demanded that elections be held for council seats. After considering similar demands from the IMP, the colonial government agreed to a small majority of elected seats, fixed at 52 out of



**Early days:** Tunku Abdul Rahman at Cambridge. — National Archives

elected councils, forced the colonial government to concede to the proposal that the five nominated seats, usually nominated by the administration, be decided by the majority party.

This successful campaign impressed the public. And its election manifesto, which included an offer of amnesty to the armed communist rebels, helped in its landslide victory in the 1955 elections.

One of the Tunku's first tasks was to hold talks with leaders of the armed communist rebels at Baling (Kedah) in December 1955 on his offer of amnesty. At the talks, he proved a skilful negotiator and refused to meet the communists' demands.

This impressed the British government, and at the independence negotiations in London in January 1956 the Tunku used to good effect the communists' promise to him at Baling to lay down arms. Among the terms he asked for was independence by Aug 31, 1957.

The British government granted almost all the Alliance's demands, including an independent commission comprising experienced foreign jurists to draft the nation's constitution.

#### Social contract

Independent Malaya's constitution, which the Tunku helped draft and is now incorporated into the present-day Malaysian Constitution, has been described as a "social contract" arrived at in negotiations by the Umno-MCA-MIC Alliance Party.

It recognises "the special position of the Malays," Malay as the national language, Islam as religion of the state, the Malay rulers as constitutional monarchs, and non-Malays rights of citizenship and freedom to practise their religion, language and culture.

Under his leadership, Malay political primacy was a reality, with Umno's dominance in the Cabinet and in almost all state governments, a Malay paramount king and Malay sultans as sovereign rulers of nine states.

The Alliance government began adopting a series of five-year plans (the first for 1955-1960), for Malaya's economic and social development to bridge the economic disparity between the Malays and non-Malays.

The Tunku's administration managed the economy well, attracting foreign investments, boosting industrial development and rubber and tin exports, and thereby putting the country ahead among the newly independent countries of the British Commonwealth.

In 1963, the Tunku successfully negotiated with the British to combine Malaya with Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo (now

»He (Tunku Abdul Rahman) laid the foundations of national integration and the economic and social structure of a modern and workable system of constitutional democracy«

98 seats. But this did not satisfy the Alliance which asked for a 60% majority, confident it would win the elections and govern the country.

This campaign for a working majority, which included an Alliance boycott of the government and withdrawal of its representatives from all

# A star among leaders, Tunku had an inimitable common touch

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Sabah) into the new state of Malaysia, which came into being in 1963. However, Singapore left the federation in 1965.

In 1970, a year after the May riots, Tunku decided to retire from politics. He stepped down from office although he was convinced his policies were right and his critics wrong.

His long-time deputy Tun Abdul Razak succeeded him as prime minister and Umno president. Thereupon, Tunku went to Jeddah at the invitation of the Saudi King Faisal to become secretary-general of the General Secretariat of the Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers (1970-1973).

On returning home, he retired to Penang and wrote a regular column in *The Star* and in that role he was more vigorous in the defence of human rights than he had been as prime minister. Most of his articles have been compiled and published as his memoirs.

The Tunku died in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 6, 1990. His death witnessed an unprecedented and spontaneous outpouring of grief by people of all races and walks of life. This was a true testimony to how much they all loved him.

The Tunku married three times. His first wife was Chinese, Chong Ah Yong, who bore him two children. On her death, he married an English woman, Violet Coulson, from whom he had no children. In 1939 they divorced and in that same year he married Sharifah Rodziah

Saiyid Alwi Barakbah.

The Tunku was fond of sports, played golf and also owned racehorses. During his tenure in office, he used to describe himself as "the happiest prime minister." The people were drawn by his simple and down-to-earth attitude.

Although a prince, he had a common touch. He never allowed his royal background to stand in the way of his relationship with the ordinary people. On his death, stories abounded of his love and concern for the ordinary individual, such as cooks, gardeners, drivers, and whoever sought his help in time of need. They showed him as a man overflowing with kindness.

The Tunku will long be remembered as the architect behind Malay primacy, of entrenching it judiciously with the fine ability to balance the interests of the other races in Malaysia as well. His legacy has allowed Malaysia to enjoy political stability and racial harmony.

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*The Founding Fathers series is coordinated by Dr Joseph Fernando, a senior lecturer with the Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur; and Research Editor Dr Lee Kam Hing.*



**Seal of independence:** Tunku Abdul Rahman (right) signing the 'Merdeka' agreement at a ceremony in Lancaster House in London on Feb 8, 1956. Looking on is Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. — National Archives