

Tun Hussein Onn (1976-81)

Father of Unity

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TUN Hussein Onn began and ended his premiership in tears – announcing the death of second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in 1976, and his own resignation for health reasons in 1981 following a power shift in Umno in favour of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Coming from a political dynasty that included his father, Umno founder Datuk Onn Jaafar, the third prime minister of Malaysia wore the tag of *Bapa Perpaduan* (Father of Unity).

This label was attributed to many of his policies which were geared towards bridging the racial divide and putting an end to the pigeon-holing of the major ethnic groups into economic classes, a task he inherited from his predecessor.

What remains his most profound legacy is the setting up of the National Unit Trust (Amanah Saham Nasional or ASN) scheme in 1981 where government-owned shares were transferred into bumiputra hands, and controlled by Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB).

The scheme allowed many bumiputras to make a killing at the stock market and PNB became an organ for the government to acquire controlling stakes in companies – both local and foreign.

Although ASN was geared towards benefiting the bumiputras, it would later evolve to include other races under Amanah Saham Wawasan.

Hussein's administration saw strides in positioning Malaysia as an influential voice on the world stage, with the prime minister playing an important role in charting the course for Asean, especially when Malaysia became the grouping's chair under his premiership.

Hussein, who was in the



Third prime minister Tun Hussein Onn visits a Made in Malaysia Trade Fair in Changkat Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur on Sept 24, 1975.

Indian army, strengthened ties with China which were renewed by his predecessor Tun Razak, who was also his brother-in-law. Hussein's son, Hishammuddin, is the current Umno Youth chief and education minister.

His foreign policy paid dividends with a leap in foreign investment. The economy also charted a 40% growth in 1978 – just two years after Hussein took over – undoubtedly due to the strong foundations set by both his predecessors.

Remembered for his meticulous style and for being a stickler for details – as evident from the pen, pencil and ruler he carried with him – cabinet meetings could go on for hours.

But his simplistic nature was also legendary. Former Asean secretary-general Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie best describes this while relating how Hussein and his Thai counterpart Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan resolved an oil dispute in the Gulf of Thailand at a *kuey teow* stall in Chiangmai.

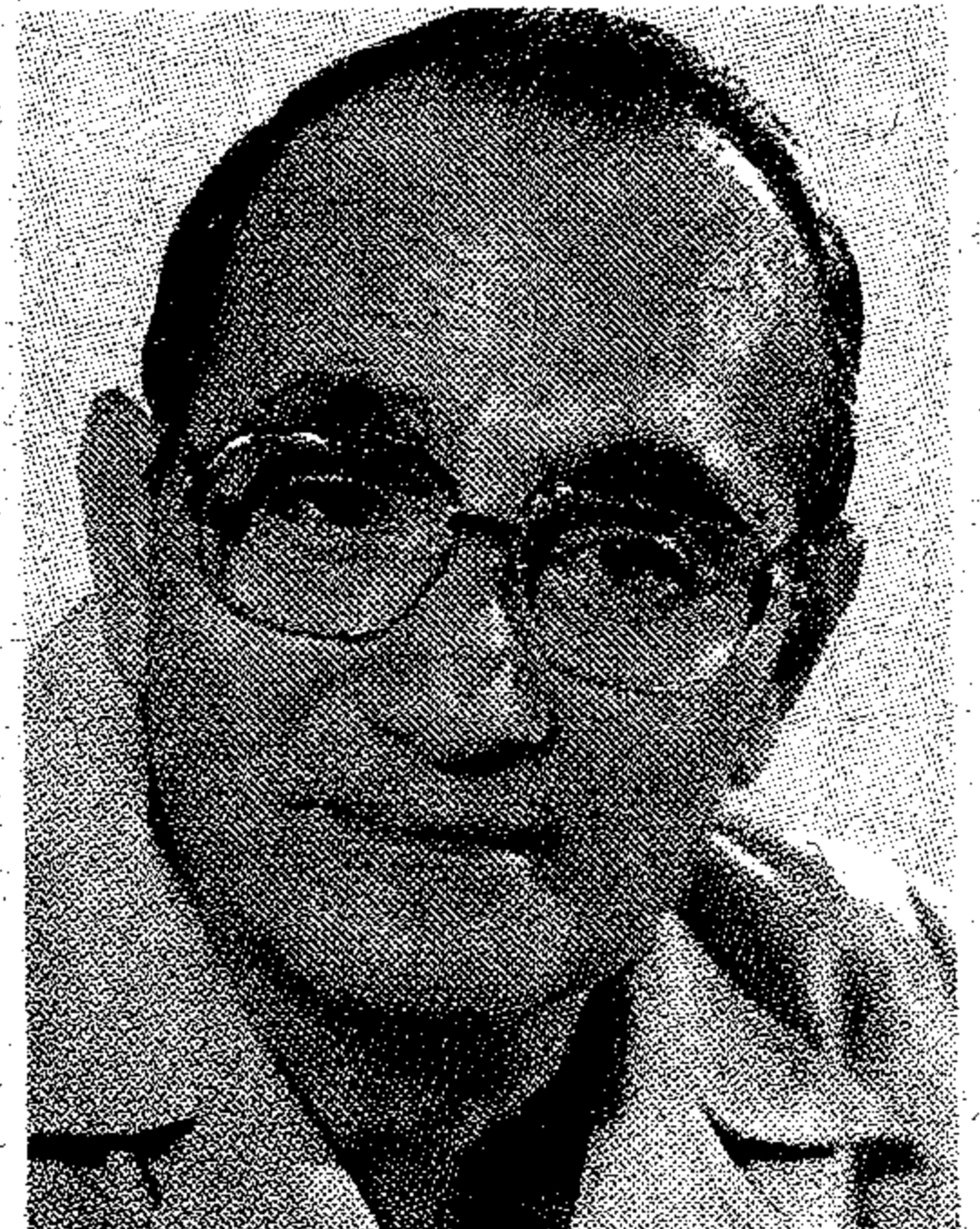
“Instead of the hotel it was scheduled for, the treaty was

signed over bowls of beef noodles – all because Hussein wanted to taste for himself if Kriangsak's endorsement of the beef *kuey teow* as the best in Thailand was true.”

Hussein's words about power, which he continuously drummed into officialdom, continue to resonate for Malaysia till today: “Power is given to us not to lord it over others, not to improve our standing nor to enrich ourselves. Power must be used for the good and well-being of the people at all times. Power must always be used for the benefit of the people.”

Under Tun Hussein Onn's premiership:

- » Amanah Saham Nasional created
- » Permodalan Nasional Bhd established
- » Rukun Tetangga launched
- » Koperasi Usaha Bersatu launched
- » Third Malaysia Plan launched
- » Federal Territories Ministry established in 1978
- » Malaysia becomes top semi-conductor exporter



“A leader must be honest. By this, I mean not just by the support he gives to his party's struggles, but also through his thinking, considerations and actions.”

– Umno general assembly, 1981

“Without pure honesty, a leader will use his position as a bargaining tool to achieve position, seek influence, name and riches. He will use his party and its struggles as a mask to fulfil his own desires. He will take advantage of a crisis for his own benefit.”

– Umno general assembly, 1981