

# Hitting a high note with 'Negaraku'

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■ By **Sonia Ramachandran**  
sonia@nst.com.my

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The year was 1955 and the head of Malay Services of the Department of Broadcasting, Dol Ramli (now Tan Sri), was trembling in his shoes.

The Umno, MCA and MIC Alliance had just won all but one of the seats in the nation's first general election on July 27, 1955. The other seat went to Pas (Parti Islam SeMalaya).

Dol's director, A.T. Read, had instructed him to meet the new chief minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

"It was my first contact with him and I was trembling. I felt like a small fish in a big ocean.

"Tunku told me to sit and offered me drinks and cakes," recalls Dol in an interview with the *New Straits Times* at his home.

Tunku told Dol the country must be prepared to have a national anthem and charged him with organising a world-wide competition for it.

"He told me the prize money was \$50,000. I remember gaping. That was a lot of money at that time.

"I was only drawing \$640 and I remember giving my wife \$10 and she would buy fish, vegetables and eggs from the wet market at Chow Kit and come back with a full basket for that amount," said Dol, who turns 85 this year.

When he asked Tunku the deadline for the anthem, the Tunku told him: "As soon as possible. If possible, before August next year or the year after.

"That was the first inkling I got of the possibility of us getting political freedom from the British."

Upon returning to his office, Dol mentioned Tunku's request to Read, who left it to Dol to handle.

He then mentioned it to (veteran composer) Ahmad Merican (now Datuk), who by then had also joined the Malay Services.

"Ahmad's eyes bulged when I mentioned the \$50,000 prize money. He said many good composers would come forward for that money," said Dol, who later became director-general of broadcasting.

The next thing on the agenda was publicising the competition and asking for manuscripts with musical notations or tape recordings to



Tan Sri Dol Ramli (right) with Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Sungai Besi airport in 1958.



Tan Sri Dol Ramli with pictures from the past.

be sent in.

This he did by roping in the Foreign Ministry and Information Service to publicise it with the terms and conditions, including the term that the winning entry would be free of copyright and owned by the federal government.

The response was good, he said, with local submissions as well as those from the United

Kingdom and the United States.

"Even Benjamin Britten, a well-known British composer, submitted an entry. When Read heard about it, he wanted to take a look at the manuscript. He took Britten's entry and played it on the piano," said Dol.

The entries were then broadcast over the radio twice

a week, with each entry being broadcast in three variations: The first on a single piano note with no background music, the second with piano chord support, and the third with piano and chord work with guitar, double bass and drums.

Then came decision time, and Dol went to see the Tunku.

"I asked him what he thought and he said he didn't like any of them. I nearly fell flat. He told me to use Perak's anthem which happened to be *Terang Bulan*.

"I asked him if he was sure and he said, 'Yes, of course'."

Then came the problem of recording the music since the national anthem would require a big orchestra and the only one they had then was the five-piece radio orchestra band called "Puspahati".

It was then decided the police band, which had more than 30 musicians, would be used.

"The conductor of that band was white. When the Tunku heard it, he was very happy.

"I then asked him about the

## NEGARAKU

*Negaraku, tanah tumpahnya darahku,  
Rakyat hidup, bersatu dan maju,  
Rahmat bahagia, Tuhan kurniakan,  
Raja kita, selamat bertakhta.  
Rahmat bahagia, Tuhan kurniakan,  
Raja kita, selamat bertakhta.*

### Literal English translation:

*My country, land where my blood was spilt,  
The people live united and in progress,  
Blessings of happiness, may God grant,  
(And that) our King may reign in peace.  
Blessings of happiness, may God grant,  
(And that) our King may reign in peace.*

lyrics and he told me not to worry, that he would do it," he said.

True enough, Tunku came back with the lyrics within a few days and passed it to Syed Nasir Ismail (the late Tun and former director of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) who proceeded to correct the grammar and spelling.

"That was because Tunku was from Kedah and he used highly accented Malay," said Dol.

Once it was written and approved, the *Negaraku* was recorded.

"It took us to the end of 1956 to complete it and when it was done, it sounded great," Dol recollected.