



Tan Sri Abdullah Ayub

He oversaw every step of celebrations

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SHAH ALAM: The year was 1956 and the big day had been announced. Malaya was going to be independent in a year and preparations were under way for the proclamation celebrations.

Abdullah Ayub (now Tan Sri and 80) had just been sent to the Chief Minister's Office as Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj's private secretary.

And one of his duties was writing Merdeka messages for Tunku.

"I had sleepless nights composing these messages in Malay and English. People were asking for messages to be inserted in newspapers, souvenir programmes and magazines. Schools also wanted messages from Tunku," said the former chief secretary to the government.

"I was doing this for almost a month along with my various other duties as private secretary."

Abdullah found himself in the thick of things when he was asked to be one of the secretaries of the many committees planning the Merdeka celebrations.

His committee was to prepare for the installation of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

"We had to know the procedures. The five-year tenure of the king had just been introduced and nobody was sure of what to do," Abdullah said, recalling one of his major assignments in a long and distinguished career.

"The regalia had to be chosen and the outfit designed for the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

"So what we did was study the way other states installed their rulers."

It had been settled that the longest-ruling sultan would be the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and that was the Sultan of Johor, Sultan Ibrahim, but he declined.

"The next in line was the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Abu Bakar, but he,

too, declined. Only then was the Ruler of Negri Sembilan, Tuanku Abdul Rahman, appointed the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong."

Abdullah said drawing up the installation procedure took nearly a year.

Then arose the question of the venue as Istana Negara was not ready. "We installed him at the Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman (now the Malaysia Tourism Centre in Jalan Ampang). It was called just a hall back then. We built the hall for the purpose."

The invitation list was another headache and there was the question of who would represent the Queen of England.

"This was very important as the queen was the one who would be handing over the proclamation of independence. The queen decided that the Duke of Gloucester would represent her," he said.

The Japanese, Indonesians, Americans, French and other emissaries who were friendly with Malaya were also invited.

Where to house these VIPs was the next problem.

"At that time, we only had the Federal Hotel for VIPs and it had only just opened and couldn't house all the guests. So what we did was a requisition of some of the 'better' government quarters scattered around Kuala Lumpur, mostly in Federal Hill, and asked the occupants to stay elsewhere for a while."

The next problem was transportation. "We only had small Austin and Morris cars. These foreigners were used to big cars."

Abdullah came up with the idea of getting the private sector to import the cars.

"We asked them to import American cars and to lend them to the government for the celebrations. In return, they were exempted from paying tax on the vehicles," he said.

This was a brilliant stroke as it brought in more than 40 cars.

Protocol officers to accompany the VIPs were roped in from the civil service.

"I remember one protocol officer who found himself in a fix when a foreign emissary asked him where he could find girls. The officer refused to continue his duties as he didn't think his job was an escort service," recalled Abdullah with a chuckle.

Food to be served at official functions on Merdeka day was another concern.

"We had to decide whether to serve Malay or English food as there were people from all over the world at these functions. In the end, we decided to offer a mixture of both."

Rain was another worry and the help of bomoh was sought.

He remembers Tunku looking resplendent in a black and white ceremonial dress at Stadium Merdeka.

Tunku was standing on a red-carpeted dais in the centre of the field with the eight Malay Rulers and the Yang di-Pertuan Agong behind him.

The Duke of Gloucester wearing the white tropical uniform of a field marshal, read out a message from his niece, the queen.

The message read: "My thoughts and my good wishes are with you as you take up the great and stimulating

responsibilities of independence. I am confident that Malaya will respond worthily to the challenging tasks of independence, and that she will continue to show to the world that example of moderation and goodwill between all races that has been so marked a feature of her history. May God bless and guide your country in the years that lie ahead."

Then, said Abdullah, the duke presented Tunku with the constitutional instruments providing for the withdrawal of British protection over the Malay states and the crown's sovereignty over Penang and Malacca.

Tunku then faced the crowd and said: "Today, a new page is turned and Malaya steps forward to take her rightful place as a free and independent partner in the great community of nations. Though we fully realise that difficulties and problems lie ahead, we are confident that with the blessing of God, these difficulties will be overcome, and that today's event will be our inspiration and guide."

After speaking for a few more minutes, Tunku withdrew from a large leather case the proclamation of independence and held it up for all to see before proceeding to read it in Malay.

"As soon as he finished, exultant cries of 'Merdeka' rose in the air. Then, as the guns boomed and the new national anthem was played, the flag of independent Malaya was slowly raised up the mast," Abdullah said.

"With all the worries and hard work, the celebrations turned out to be brilliant in the end. It was a day that will remain in my memory forever."



The installation of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong at Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman, which was called just a 'hall' back then.



The Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Malaysia Tourism Centre now.