

Run-up to the
50th Merdeka
Celebrations

SPECIAL

A dream of freedom

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In later life, Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun may have been a very controversial figure in Sabah's politics, but he will always be remembered as one of the leaders who paved the way for independence for the state once called the Colony of North Borneo, and the birth of a new federation called Malaysia.

By RUBEN SARIO
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AFTER more than four decades, Dayang Maimunah Tun Mustapha can still vividly recall the events in the early morning of Sept 16, 1963.

She remembers her father dressed in a white formal costume comprising trousers and a waist-length jacket and on his head was a *tanjak*, a traditional headgear of their Suluk community.

"I said to him 'You look so handsome and dashing', and my father smiled and simply said 'Today, your father is becoming Governor'.

"Then he got into his car and I can remember him waving to us, still smiling," says Dayang Maimunah who was just 16 when her father Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun became Sabah's first Yang DiPertua Negri or Head of State.

From his humble single-storey house in Tanjung Aru, Datu Mustapha headed for the Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu) town padang where other dignitaries including the late Tun Fuad Stephens and Datuk Harris Salleh (Sabah's fourth chief minister) were gathered.

A day earlier, the British government's last Governor for North Borneo Sir William Goode had sailed off, marking the end of an 82-year-long colonial era in this part of the world.

Forty-four years ago, on a balmy morning on Sept 16, Tun Fuad — or Donald Stephens as he was then known — stood up and proclaimed Sabah's independence and the state's entry into a federation that would be known as Malaysia.

"Let us look forward to the future with confidence and live to the best that is within us, to make Malaysia a nation which will win the respect and admiration of the world," said Stephens in his trademark gravelly voice.

Among those in the thousands who packed the padang that day as Stephens read out the proclamation was Datu Salam Datu Harun, Datu Mustapha's younger brother, who was then 25 years old.

"It was an emotional moment for everyone; many people around me wept for joy," recalls the businessman.

"All of us realised that we were inde-

»They would have dinner and then joget dances. Sometimes my father would pull out his violin and play his favourite keronchong songs «

DAYANG MAIMUNAH TUN MUSTAPHA



Tuned to music: Datu Mustapha indulged in his love for the violin by rendering his favourite tunes at private and State functions



Historic moment: Datu Mustapha is seated with then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak as Stephens reads the Proclamation of Independence of Sabah at the Jesselton town padang on Sept 16, 1963.

pendent, that we would determine our future."

Datu Salam also realised that moment was a dream come true for his elder sibling who had led a band of guerrillas in an armed struggle against the Japanese occupying forces during the Second World War.

"After the war, Mustapha often talked privately to us — his family — about the need for North Borneo to be independent, for its people to chart their own destiny.

"To him North Borneo had had enough of foreign rule," says Datu Salam.

But Datu Mustapha did not share

these thoughts with his children as he raised his family in his northern home district of Kudat.

Born in the remote Kudat seaside village called Kampung Limau Limauan on July 31, 1918, Datu Mustapha joined the

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Family man: Datu Mustapha with wife Toh Puan Hajah Rahmah and their family in London. Right: Datu Mustapha presenting Umno membership forms to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Feb 21, 1991. — File pictures courtesy of the Tun Mustapha Gallery

Key political figure in Sabah

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colonial civil service and was appointed District Chief with the title Orang Kaya Kaya (OKK).

As District Chief, his duties included presiding in the Native Court to settle everything from land to domestic disputes.

His son, Datuk Amir Kahar Tun Mustapha, as a primary school pupil remembers his father constantly meeting people.

"He had to meet the British officers, the kampung people, our relatives or he would be going off by boat to Sandakan or Tawau or Jesselton," says Amir Kahar, now a Sabah state assemblyman.

Dayang Maimunah says that despite her father's hectic schedule, he always made time for her and her six siblings. "He would try to have breakfast with us," she recalls.

And occasionally, her father would bundle her, her mother and a boatman for a two-week "tour" of the islands off Kudat in his speedboat named *Si Untung* (The Profitable One).

"We would stop on an island and go fishing or my father would go hunting for *payau* (deer) and we would spend the night there. The following day we would go to another island. It was like that for two weeks," says Dayang Maimunah.

She also remembers her father's penchant for hosting dinner parties at their seaside civil servants' quarters in Kudat then.

"They would have dinner and then have joget dances. Sometimes my father would pull out his violin and play his favourite *keronchong* songs such as *Saputangan* and *Bengawan Solo* and *Joget Malaya*," Dayang Maimunah says.

Datu Salam says his brother's dream of a North Borneo free from the shackles of colonialism was re-ignited as he witnessed the proclamation of Malaya's independence on Aug 31, 1957.

"He was in Kuala Lumpur and was among those representing North Borneo at Malaya's independence ceremonies," recalls Datu Salam who remembers Datu Mustapha developing a close friendship with Tunku Abdul Rahman by then.

"Tunku Abdul Rahman became his confidant and his advisor," says Datu Salam. Local historians reckon that the close friendship between both men was among the key reasons Datu Mustapha was immediately



Datu Salam: 'Tunku became Mustapha's close confidante and advisor'

certain that Sabah should take its place in the federation, unlike Stephens who was initially hesitant about such a move.

But according to Datu Salam, his brother's certainty of North Borneo's destiny was rooted in the realities of the day.

"He knew that North Borneo could not do much on its own then," he says, adding that his brother went out of his way to ensure that this plan was to come through.

Datu Salam recalls the time when a commission headed by a Lord Cobbold toured the length and breadth of the state in 1962 to determine if the people of North Borneo really wished to be part of the federation.

"When the Cobbold Commission was about to visit Kudat, Mustapha gave me \$250 and told me to arrange for crowds of villagers to come to the place where the hearings were to be held.

"He told me to distribute 50 sen to each of them and to tell them to shout '*Kami mahu Malaysia*,'" Datu Salam says.

Those efforts paid off with Datu Mustapha being sworn in as the first Yang DiPertua Negri of the renamed Sabah while Stephens took up the post of Chief Minister.

Dayang Maimunah says that even after her father took up residence at the state Istana, he remained at heart a simple kampung man.

"Unless there were official functions like state banquets or dinners, he would quietly



Dayang Maimunah: 'We would tour the islands in his speedboat'

leave the Istana and return home to our house in Tanjung Aru every evening. He couldn't take the rich food the Istana staff kept serving, like meat or curry chicken.

"In our house, my stepmother would prepare the simple kampung fare that were his favourites such as grilled sting ray and fried or boiled fish.

"And he had to have his *sambal belacan*. His meals would not be complete without that *sambal*."

That remained the routine for about year, after which Datu Mustapha resigned as Head of State and a political tussle broke out between Usno, the party he founded in 1961, and Stephens' United National Kadazan Organisation (Unko) that later became known as the United Pasok Kadazan Organisation (Upko).

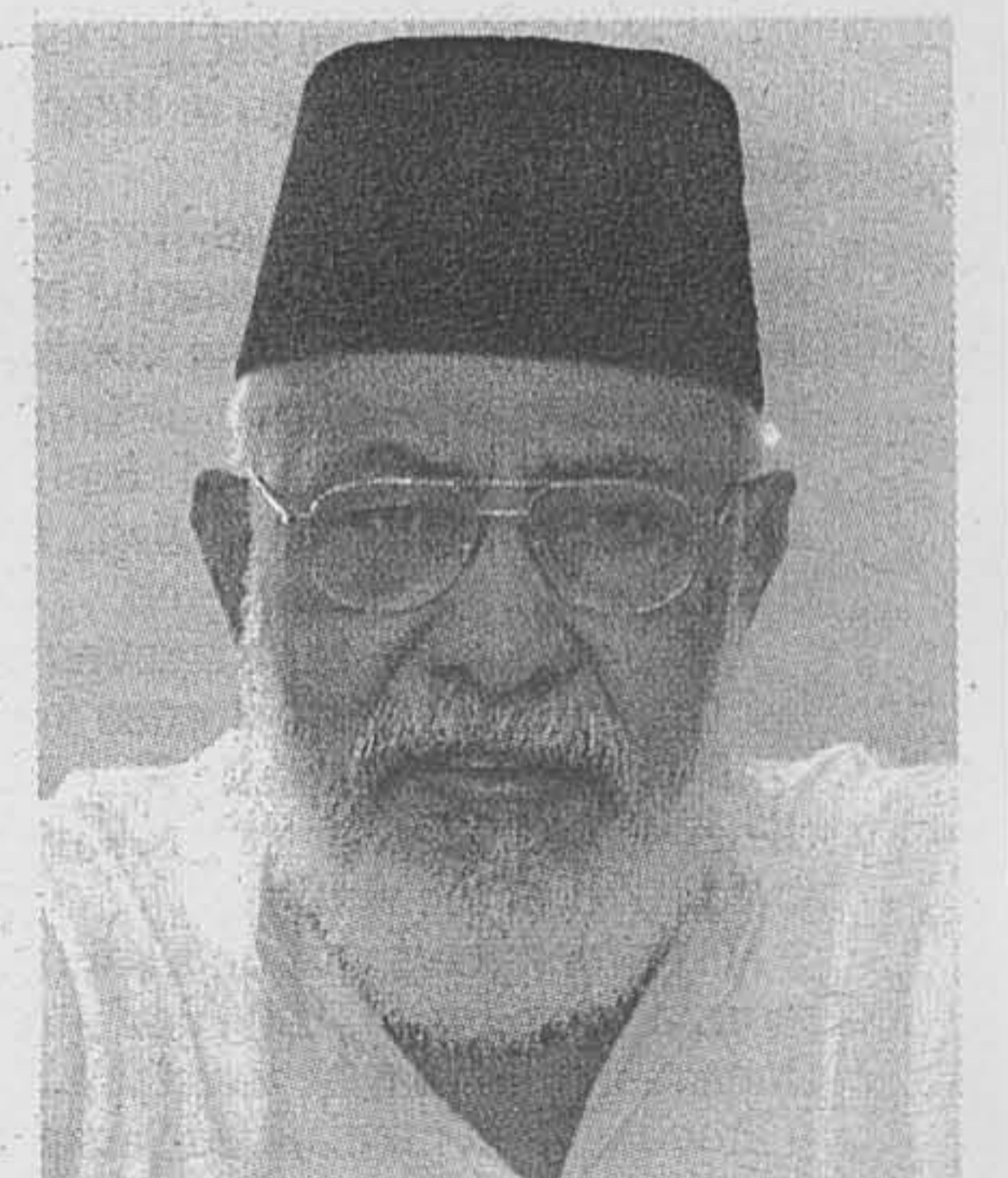
By then, however, Sabah was safely ensconced within the Federation of Malaysia.

In the intervening years, Datu Mustapha remained a key figure in Sabah's political landscape until his death on Jan 2, 1996. He was chief minister from 1967 to August 31, 1975.

For Dayang Maimunah, among the most poignant memories of her father is that of him cutting a dashing and handsome figure as he set-off for the Jesselton town field to realise his dream of seeing Sabah formally becoming part of a family called Malaysia.

Where were you when Tunku declared Merdeka? Share your memories and pictures of this momentous event (or as related to you by your parents and grandparents) by e-mailing us at merdeka@thestar.com.my

Great feeling to be out of colonial claws



ON Aug 31 1957, I was at the Stadium Merdeka where the declaration of independence was made together with my close friend A. S. Mohd Mydin and my five-year-old daughter Ayisha. It was a great feeling. Finally we were out of the colonial "claws", tutelage and control. At last we were able to throw those who exploited, enslaved, plundered and oppressed us out of this country. Malaysians stood up as free people and as their own masters. On that day it seemed like the brightest star had risen above the horizon, giving hope to a nation wanting a just and fair society.

S.M. Mohd Idris, President, Consumers Association of Penang