

When 'Ketua Malaysia' fled into the jungle

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Malaysiaku Gemilang

Sarawak celebrates 44 years of Merdeka, through Malaysia, and FIRDAUS ABDULLAH catches up with a veteran who has been through it all



Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min doubts Sarawak could have achieved what it has today if the people had voted against joining Malaysia.

HE escaped Indonesian rebels who were after his head in the early 1960s and went on to survive the political jungles of Sarawak and, later, Malaysia.

It has been quite a life for Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min, the former deputy chief minister of Sarawak, who is now back to overseeing the family business.

Completely out of politics, Wong today remains the only Sarawakian who was a member of the Malaysia Solidarity Consultative Committee.

The committee, formed in 1961, was a prelude to the eventual formation of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963.

The grand old man of Sarawak politics is 85 now, but his memories of the struggles and threats faced on the road to Sarawak's independence 44 years ago remain clear.

The family sacrifice did not begin with Wong. His father, William Wong Tsap, a tycoon, was beheaded by the Japanese in 1945 because he was influential and the people of Limbang looked up to him.

As Wong said of his struggles in the 1960s: "It was not a smooth life then. I remember hiding in the jungle for about a week in 1962 to escape Indonesian rebels who were after my head.

"They wanted to kill me because I was branded 'Ketua Malaysia' for my role in urging the people to support the formation of Malaysia."

The Indonesian elements that were against Sarawak and Sabah becoming part of Malaysia failed in their mission.

"I risked my life to get the people to support the formation of Malaysia and I contested the 1963 elections in Limbang merely as a supporter of the idea. I won the election. I was not a member of any political party then.

"I refused to be part of any race-based political party and joined SNAP (Sarawak National Party) at the request of Tan Sri Stephen Kalong Ningkan, the first chief minister.

"In fact, I joined SNAP with just a phone call from New York."

Wong was among the first to represent Malaysia at the 18th session of the United Nations, together with S. Rajaratnam from Singapore, immediately after the formation agreement was inked in Kuala Lumpur.

"We did not know each other well but Ningkan said he wanted me as

deputy chief minister. And he wanted me to join a political party.

"That was the beginning of the new Sarawak."

The appointment was not unexpected. Four years after his father's death, Wong had established himself as a man of the people. He was well known in Limbang and beyond.

At first, he was a reluctant member of the Limbang mixed local authority in 1949 but when some commented that he was unlike his father who was concerned about society, Wong began "to move".

He later served in various capacities during British rule and in the Malaysian government, including a brief stint as the opposition leader in parliament.

Wong took SNAP into the opposition fold after Ningkan was removed as chief minister through a vote of no-confidence in the Sarawak Council Negeri in 1966.

SNAP remained a member of the opposition until 1976, but Wong suffered a political backlash that saw him end up in the Kamunting detention centre in Perak.

"In 1974, some people in the state accused me of disloyalty to the nation. I was eventually detained under the ISA (Internal Security Act).

"In the early 1960s, I risked my life to convince people to support the formation of Malaysia, but some who jumped into the picture much later made wild allegations and I landed in Kamunting.

"They convinced Tun Razak (second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak) of something which I'm unaware of until now."

Wong was eventually released when Tun Hussein Onn became the third prime minister in 1976.

Wong remained as SNAP deputy president. He later assumed the presidency and joined the state gov-

ernment in 1981 when Tan Sri Taib Mahmud replaced his uncle, Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Yakub, as chief minister.

Wong remained a formidable force in the state and served as minister for tourism, housing, environment, public health and local government until 2001.

SNAP was eventually deregistered in November 2002. It has appealed against the Registrar of Societies' ruling.

"I'm a happy man now. I'm totally out of politics and I don't even read the newspapers because some news may stir your emotions."

On the 44th anniversary of the formation of Malaysia, Wong said Malaysians had yet to "rightly recognise" the historic date.

He said Sarawak was lucky to be part of Malaysia and enjoyed the fruits of development, but that did not mean that the people had to give up their rights.

"I'm happy that I made the right decision to not only support the formation of Malaysia but also to have gathered the people of Limbang, and Sarawak in general, to support the formation of Malaysia.

"We were facing the threat of communism and the risk of being over-run by Indonesian forces when the British left in 1963, but all that was put to rest when Malaysia was formed and we started marching together as a sovereign nation."

Wong said he doubted that Sarawak could have survived, let alone achieve what it has today, if the people had voted against the formation of Malaysia.

He said the British were ready to leave their colonies in the region in the late 1950s and had approached community leaders to organise themselves to eventually take over the administration and politics of their land.

After the Federation of Malaya gained its independence in 1957, the British mooted the idea of forming Malaysia with Sarawak, North Borneo (Sabah) and Singapore.

"There were subtle moves from British senior officers who had, on many instances, suggested the idea to Sarawak and Sabah before Tunku (Tunku Abdul Rahman) made an open suggestion in Singapore in 1961.

"We in Sarawak and North Borneo were aware of this eventual move and had started preparing the ground for the birth of Malaysia."

Wong, who has been married to Valerie Bong for 57 years and has eight children, said the younger generation should show a greater appreciation of the nation, with its diversity and rich history.

"Happy birthday Malaysia, and may Sarawak continue to prosper together with Sabah and the other states," he said.