

Ghafar's diaries on the road to nationhood

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Former deputy prime minister Tun Ghafar Baba kept a diary of events that led to Merdeka. They provide a glimpse of how things were in the run-up to the nation's most important day 50 years ago. His son, Datuk Tamrin Ghafar Baba, shares his father's diaries with SONIA RAMACHANDRAN

ON Jan 1, 1956, 10,000 people gathered at the Singapore port to send off the Alliance's "Merdeka delegation".

Among those present was former deputy prime minister Tun Ghafar Baba, then the Malacca Umno chairman.

In the statesman's diaries obtained from his son Datuk Tamrin Ghafar, Ghafar had written: "We left Raffles Hotel at 2.45pm and when we arrived at the port, it was raining heavily. With no thought of the rain, the rakyat continued to march on, shouting 'Merdeka, Merdeka'."

"Before departing on the ship MV Asia at 5pm, Tunku delivered a speech. He shed tears while speaking and the rakyat cried along with him."

Ghafar's writings were also whimsical, as shown by an entry on Jan 12, 1956 about a coconut tree.

"The coconut tree was in Kuala Sungai Baru in Malacca. It was only six months old but was already ripe with fruit."

"The tree had been planted on July 27, 1955 to commemorate the first federal elections, and the first time it bore fruit was on Aug 1, 1956, the date the Merdeka delegation led by Tunku Abdul Rahman left for London to demand for independence. A coconut tree will usually fruit when it is 6 years old."

In his personal jottings published by Tamrin in a book called *Peritanku*, Ghafar said the Merdeka delegation left by the MV Asia to Karachi



where they took a plane to London.

On Feb 8 (Tunku's birthday), the Merdeka agreement was signed at Lancaster House in London.

In his diary, Ghafar said he received a telegram from Tunku on Feb 7, 1956 saying the negotiations which began on Jan 18 were "completely successful".

That night, a meeting was held at Rumah MCA to prepare for Tunku's return on Feb 19.

However, Tunku's arrival was delayed by more than nine hours, resulting in an emergency meeting on Feb 18 between the Umno, MCA and the MIC to discuss the repercussions of the delay.

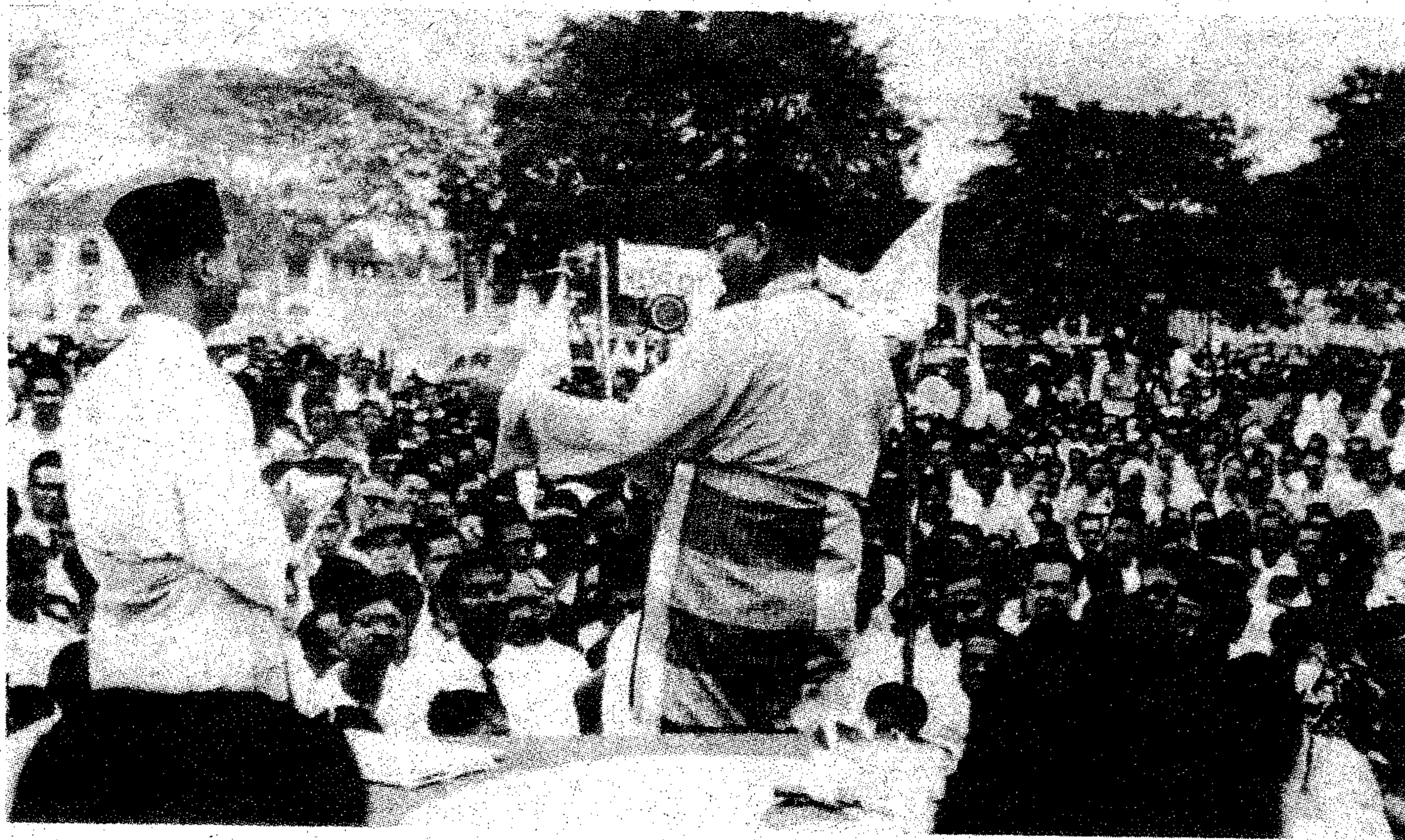
"On Feb 19, there was a meeting where the time for Tunku's speech was changed from 2.30pm on Feb 19 to 11am the next day."

"Until two in the morning, another Umno Youth leader and I were busy finding outstation buses to ferry people from the outskirts of Malacca to Padang Bandar Hilir later that day," wrote Ghafar, who died on April 23 last year.

On Feb 20, 1956, Ghafar said the Merdeka delegation arrived in Malacca from London and were greeted by more than 100,000 people from all over the country.

"As the chairman of the function, I first invited MCA chairman (Tun) Tan Cheng Lock to speak, followed by MIC president (Tun) V.T. Sambanthan and then Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang of Perak."

"Before I invited Tunku, I said a few words: *450 tahun dahulu disebabkan kerenah raja, Melaka jatuh*



Tunku Abdul Rahman reading the proclamation for the date of Merdeka at a huge gathering in Padang Bandar Hilir, Malacca, on Feb 20, 1956. Beside Tunku is (Tun) Ghafar Baba.

ke tangan Portugis. 450 tahun kemudian, hari ini seorang anak Raja berjiwa rakyat datang menyelamatkan kita (Because of the antics of rulers, Malacca fell to the Portuguese 450 years ago. Today, 450 years later, a prince with the people at heart has come to save us)," said Ghafar.

Tunku then announced Aug 31, 1957 as the date for Merdeka — two years earlier than promised at the 1955 federal elections.

"The whole field reverberated with cheers of 'Merdeka' and applause. There were many who were crying openly," said Ghafar.

After his speech, the Tunku signed the declaration of the date for Merdeka.

"He borrowed my red fountain pen to do so. Although it was a cheap pen, it was a part of that historic event. Before Tunku put down his signature, he added the words *Insha Allah* (God willing) at the end of the declaration."

"Tunku was also presented a kris, which was supposed to be Hang Tuah's kris rumoured to be 100 years old," said Ghafar.

As Merdeka drew near, Ghafar had a slight misunderstanding with Tunku about the appointment of the first governor of Malacca.

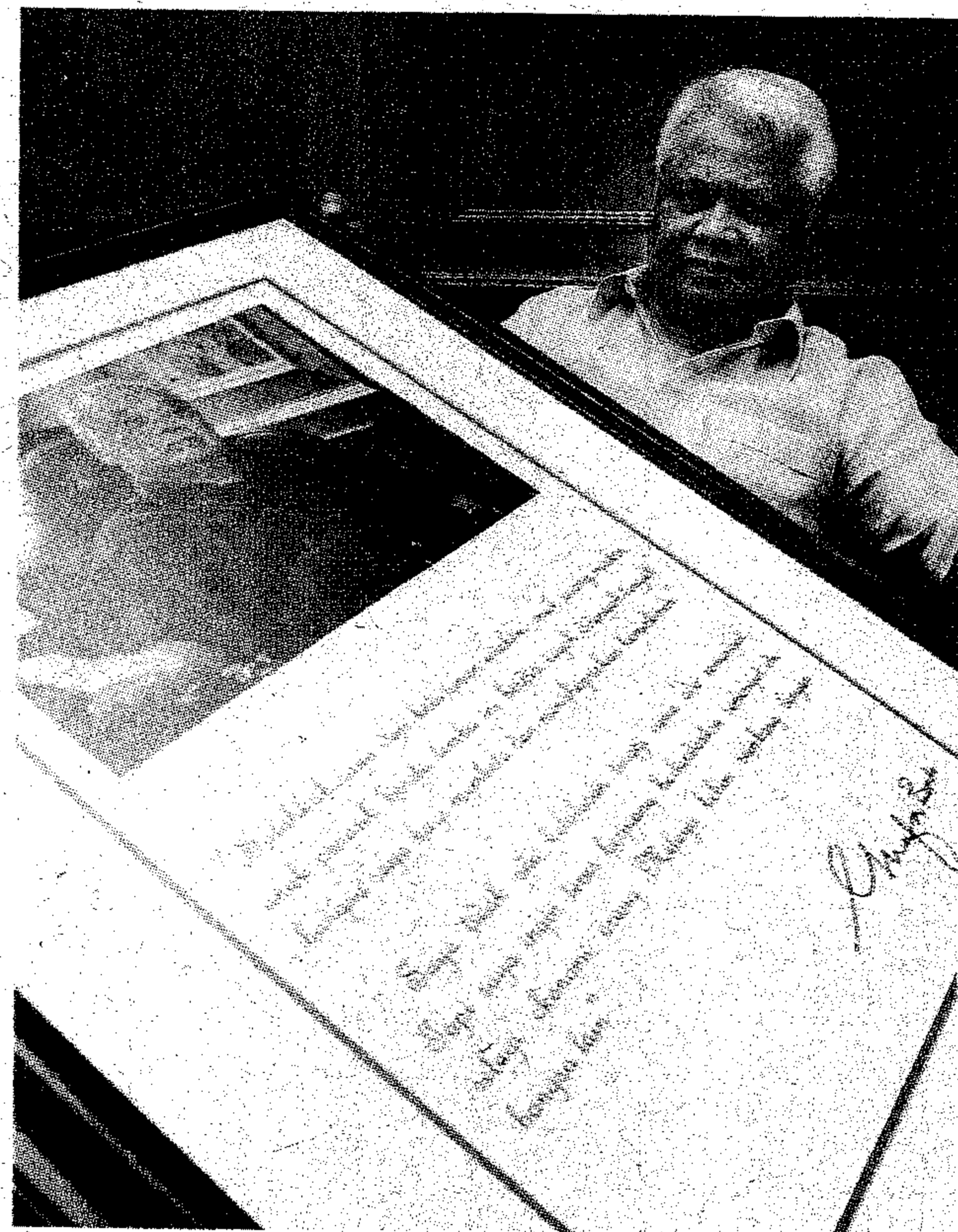
"Tunku wanted (Tun) Leong Yew Koh, a MCA strongman, to hold the post. I wanted the first governor to be a Malay. The Tunku rejected my suggestion."

"I did not know about the agreement between Tunku and the British that the governor for Penang had to be a Malay while the chief minister had to be a Chinese. For Malacca, it was the reverse. This rule was only supposed to be followed once after Merdeka."

Ghafar said he also headed a committee to design the Malacca logo and flag to replace the Union Jack. He also spoke about how he felt the first time he saw the Union Jack being lowered.

"At 4pm on Aug 30, 1957, I was told that a few Britons were gathered at Padang Bandar Hilir to watch the Union Jack being lowered."

"I didn't know about the incident as there was no announcement beforehand. To watch the Union Jack being lowered was a moment that I had dreamt about. So, I quickly got into a



Datuk Tamrin Ghafar Baba, holding a picture of Tun Ghafar Baba, says his father was a loving and caring man

trishaw and rushed to that place.

"I reached there just as two British navy officers were lowering the Union Jack. The flag was folded and carried to a ship that was waiting to take it back to England. I felt a deep sense of satisfaction to see the flag being taken away from our soil," he said.

Ghafar said he left for Kuala Lumpur that same night as the Umno Youth was lowering the Union Jack at midnight at the Sultan Abdul Samad building.

The next day, it rained slightly, he said.

"Everyone was present at Stadium Merdeka, including the Malay rulers, and the queen's representative who was the Duke of Gloucester."

"The rain subsequently stopped and the sun came out to welcome the historic day. Tunku read the Merdeka declaration which was followed by shouts of 'Merdeka'. The British flag was lowered and the Federation of Malaya flag was raised. *Negaraku* was also sung for the first time by thousands of Malaysians."

Ghafar wrote about the spirit of negotiation and co-operation between the parties.

In one entry on Jan 12, 1955, he wrote: "Umno and MCA held negotiations at Cheng Lock's home on Heeren Street in Malacca."

"The talks were about the Chinese teachers wanting Mandarin to be an official language of the country."

The outcome of the discussions seemed to be fruitful, as the diary said the meeting concluded with the MCA withdrawing its proposal.

Another example was an entry of a meeting on May 4 and 5, 1955 of a fun fair being organised jointly by the Umno and the MCA.

Tamrin, who gets emotional when he speaks about his father, said the leader was a reserved person.

"However, the minute we touched on the topic of Umno or political matters, there would be a sparkle in his eyes and he would get animated and talk for hours. That was his passion and the only way we could get him to talk. He was a loving and caring father and we miss him a lot."

