

DATE: 14/08/2007

A nostalgic tale of two Putras

In the early 1960s when Tuanku Syed Putra was King and Tunku the Prime Minister, the two Putras fostered a close relationship that they would keep for many years to come.

By **TENGGU BUDRIAH
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IN THE early 1960s, the country was ruled by the two Putras: my husband Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra who was the King, and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the Prime Minister.

The ascension took everyone by surprise. One day, as my husband was playing tennis in Arau, he received a call.

It was the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman on the line.

He said: "Tuanku, as Deputy King you must get ready to come to Kuala Lumpur immediately. The King is seriously ill. Please bring along things, enough for one month's stay."

Soon after we arrived in Kuala Lumpur, the King passed away. So, what was supposed to have been a month's stay turned out to be a full five years' stay for us!



Malaysiaku Gemilang

Excerpt from
Prince Among Men
Published by Arkib Negara



Good friends: Tengku Budriah and her husband, the late Tuanku Syed Putra ibni Syed Hassan Jamalullail, visiting a frail Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Penang Gleneagles Medical Centre in February 1990. The royal couple remained good friends with the first prime minister long after they had left the Istana Negara and Tunku had stepped down from office. — National Archives

Many years later, Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra recalled: "I was not sure what was going to happen and whether I could complete my term of office. It was a challenge. Everything was new to me, and I was young, just going on 40. The ruling system was new, and no one knew how things were to be done. Fortunately, for me and the country, things went well, thanks to the Tunku and his team of ministers. I became the first King to complete my term of office!"

Tunku was a visionary and statesman who left the routine, administrative matters of government largely in the hands of able leaders whom he personally chose and trusted while he concentrated on the larger issues.

It took the new King some time to realise this. When Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra first became the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Tunku used to turn up at Istana Negara every Wednesday morning at 9am for Cabinet briefing, and the King used to ask Tunku many questions.

On one such occasion, just before he left Istana Negara, Tunku quipped: "The next time you ask me a lot of questions, I'll send Tan Siew Sin" (the then Finance Minister).

The two Putras did not care much for protocol. Both of them were able to laugh off any slights without showing the least trace of annoyance.

I used to remind Tunku: "Never assume people are deliberately rude when they do not offer the respect due to a head of state. It is always better to assume they simply do not know that they are not acting according to protocol." In accepting this, we were much happier people.

The exception perhaps was in matters of foreign diplomacy.

Rulers are the best of ambassadors and the ceremonious exchanges between sovereigns and Heads of States are bound to generate goodwill among nations.

This was important for an emerging country like ours.

In the beginning of his reign, the King did not share Tunku's interest in golf. But Tunku, who was himself a late starter, prevailed so much so the (Selangor Golf) Club was bestowed the title "Royal" and is today known as the Royal Selangor Golf Club.

In September 1963, Malaysia was formed and Almarhum Tuan-

ku Syed Putra became known as the last King of Malaya, the first King of Malaysia and the only King that Singapore has ever had in modern history.

The Stadium Negara, the Parliament House, the National Museum, the Subang International Airport, the National Mosque and the wharves at Klang Straits represent some of the milestones of progress which marked our happy reign.

But there were sad times as well. Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra was perturbed that the separation of Singapore from Malaysia had to happen on Aug 9, 1965, just three weeks before the Merdeka celebrations, and about one month before he left office. He could sense the (same) sadness in Tunku, coupled by the psychological burden of our imminent departure from Kuala Lumpur.

They kept the relationship alive to the last years of Tunku's life. We used to visit Tunku at his Ayer Rajah (now Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman) home in Penang, as well as his seaside bungalow at Tanjong Bungah.

Even as we talked, people of all races used to come by. There was no formality, no protocol.

At the University Sains Malaysia convocation dinner hosted by Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra in his honour, Tunku made a powerful impression with his advice for the young graduates:

"You must always remember that no matter how high you climb up, you must come down the same way. Be good to those you meet on the way up. When you come down, you will meet them again, unless of course you decide to jump down and break your neck!"

As the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra was proud that all ministers worked together as a team in happy harmony. Tunku himself commented later: "That was how we used to feel - like real comrade-in-arms."

Her Royal Highness Tengku Budriah Almarhum Tengku Ismail, the Raja Perempuan Besar of Perlis, is originally from the royal household of Pattani in southern Thailand with links to the Kelantan palace.

During the reign of her late husband, Raja of Perlis Tuanku Syed Putra ibni Syed Hassan Jamalullail as the third Yang di-Pertuan Agong (1961-1965), the author, as Raja Permaisuri Agong, enjoyed a palace perspective of the Tunku's leadership.