

Eminent class of patriots

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What they aspired for and agreed upon must never be forgotten – of a united multi-ethnic nation built upon the strength offered by the rich cultural diversity. Those were the hopes 50 years ago that are now entrusted to a new generation of leaders.



Malaysiaku Gemilang

Founding Fathers

A weekly series

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THE Merdeka generation of leaders was an illustrious class of men and women of considerable courage and integrity. They were already successful in their careers, some of them very wealthy, but decided to set aside time, comfort, and even personal interests to lead their people to independence.

Although from diverse backgrounds – aristocrats, rubber magnates, a miner, a fisheries officer turned journalist – and from different parts of the country, they shared a common educational background, one that allowed them to appreciate the country's rich cultural diversity as well as to have a broad world-view.

This was a generation that was uniquely placed to shape the destiny of this country. They were born at the turn or early part of the century – Tan Cheng Lock (born in 1883) was the oldest while Aziz Ishak (1922) was the youngest. Datuk Onn Jaafar (1895), Tun HS Lee (1901), Tunku Abdul Rahman (1902), and Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil (1909) were perhaps closer in age.

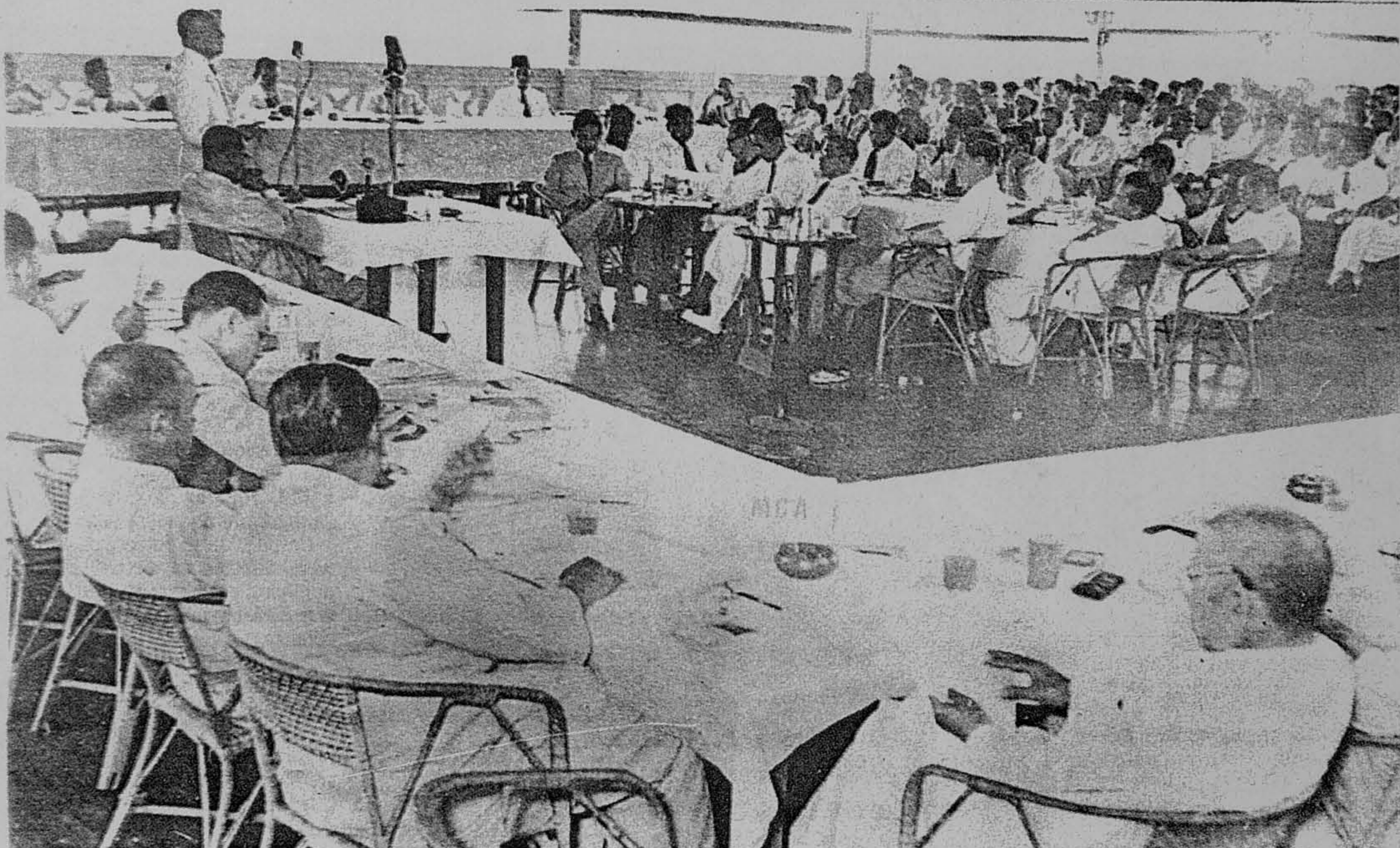
They all lived through colonial rule, the Japanese Occupation and the Emergency, and those were sometimes difficult and even dangerous times. They witnessed violence, whether this was the harshness of Japanese Occupation, the armed militancy of the Emergency or inter-ethnic fighting immediately after the War. This caused them to adopt a more moderate and realistic position and to consider viewpoints of the other side.

These leaders sensed that they were living at a momentous time in the history of this country and that they were the ones privileged and even destined to take over the reins of power from a departing colonial power. But they also saw the independence struggle as a responsibility and duty to their communities and the nation. Politics then became a public duty and not a choice.

It is important to remember the ideals and hopes the founding leaders fought for and which Malaysians today continue to value. While they started as leaders of their communities, they soon embraced the wider vision of a nation. In that sense, they were towering figures.

If there was one objective that united these leaders, it was their single-mindedness in pursuing their dream of Merdeka and to bring about national unity in Malaya's plural society.

The post-war period was the age of freedom and democracy. Nations shackled by colonialism were breaking free all over the world. The apparent invincibility of colonialism had been exposed and the myth of the benign colonial power slowly



Historic moment: Tun Tan Cheng Lock addressing the Alliance's first National Convention on Aug 23, 1953. — Arkib Negara

unravelling. People in Malaya were inspired by the successes of the independence movements in India, Indonesia and Africa.

The path to Malayan independence may not have been filled with revolution and bloodshed as in Indonesia, Vietnam and India but it was no less heroic. Some had to pay a price for their political beliefs. Datuk Onn was forced into "exile" for a number of years. Tan Cheng Lock and HS Lee evacuated to India during World War II, aware that they were high on the wanted list of Japanese advancing forces. Later, Tan survived an attempt on his life by communist insurgents during the Emergency.

Public duty

The men and women who entered politics during these formative years had little thought about rewards of high office or wealth. The Tunku sold his property to finance Umno's early struggle. Politics then presented risks to life and career but these leaders persisted in their commitment to bring political change to the country.

Their ideals were well reflected in their speeches.

Cheng Lock best epitomised this sense of public duty in his remarks at the Alliance's first national convention on Aug 23, 1953: "The decisive sign of the elevation of a nation's life is to be sought among those who lead or sought to lead. The destiny of our Malaya depends upon whether this country is capable of producing leaders of dynamic quality, lofty character, disinterested public spirit, a high standard of moral worth, courage and uprightness with broadmindedness of vision and a certain soundness and moderation of judgment which

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DATUK ONN JAAFAR

springs quite as much from character as from intellect."

The ultimate goal of the leaders then was freedom and independence and national unity.

Tunku aptly summed this up in his speech: "This convention is not one that has been conceived and planned by a handful of self-appointed leaders to satiate their whims and fancies. The ideal was first conceived, as a result of the visit of Mr [Oliver] Lyttelton [Secretary of State for Colonies] to Malaya. We were informed by him that Malaya would be given independence as soon as the various races in this country are united, and from that moment on we were determined to show him and the rest of the world that we can and we shall be united."

Tunku's deputy, [Tun] Abdul Razak, reinforced the message in his address: "We are assembled here today as representatives of the various political parties in this country in order to give expression to the aspirations of the people we represent. These noble aspirations can be expressed in two simple words – unity and freedom. We desire to bring about unity among the people of different races who regard this

country as their home and home of their children in order that by our united efforts we can establish a united, independent and sovereign state of Malaya."

But how would unity be achieved and what form of inter-ethnic cooperation should there be? Onn Jaafar sought to pave the way for the creation of a Malayan nation through a non-communal party, the Independence of Malaya Party. Tunku Abdul Rahman and HS Lee, on the other hand, felt that inter-communal cooperation should first be between dominant political parties that retained their distinct identities.

They regarded this as a more suitable and pragmatic alternative in that early stage of the development of the nation. As it turned out, the second approach proved more successful and durable with the advent of electoral politics.

Sense of commonness

What is also evident in re-visiting the contributions of leaders portrayed in this series is that a sense of national consciousness and identity was emerging from within the Malayan polity. The nationalists of the post-war period had gained an

awareness of commonness in their unique Malayan identity despite their political differences and socio-cultural backgrounds.

A Malayan was discernible, if not distinct. It was an identity that was beginning to bridge cultures and creeds.

What was developing was arguably much more than "a meeting at the market place" (a reference to limited interaction between the different races in colonial territories). This is evident at almost every stage of Malaya's constitutional development. The early leaders saw a great deal of each other socially and warm friendship was developed. Tunku, for instance, sometimes stayed with Cheng Lock in Malacca.

Umno in the post-Malayan Union period was reaching out to the non-Malay constituency. This is reflected in Onn's remarks on New Year's eve in 1947, urging closer relations between the Malays and non-Malays: "There were, there are and there will be differences of opinion of many matters, in the past as in the future, but in endeavouring to solve those differences, let us approach the problems in a tolerant and friendly manner, and let us avoid creating antagonisms and animosity where none existed before and where none should exist in the future. We, the Malays, offer the pipe of peace. Let us smoke it together in harmony and enjoyment for the good of the land which harbours, and for the welfare of the people therein."

This engagement is also reflected in the cooperation between Cheng Lock and the Malay Nationalist Party in 1947 when they formed Putera

Strong sense of camaraderie among leaders in Alliance

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(Pusat Tenaga Rakyat) and drafted a "people's constitution".

This ideal came to be expressed in the cooperation between Umno, MCA and MIC in the period leading to independence. A strong sense of camaraderie developed among the Alliance leaders and this is particularly evident when the leaders were drawing up the memorandum to the Reid Constitutional Commission.

A spirit of compromise and consensus was evident in the delicate negotiations that led to the joint memorandum and which served as the basis for the constitutional commission to frame the draft independence constitution.

The rights of all Malaysians on religion, language, citizenship, and spe-

cial privileges were safeguarded. They envisaged that in time a Malayan rather than separate ethnic identities would prevail.

Tunku's remarks in the Federal Legislative Council on July 10, 1957, in introducing the Constitutional Bill reflects the spirit of that age:

"The economic future is bright, the country must not be held back by the selfish and yielding attitude of any individual or groups of individuals. The Constitution provides the framework for a happy and contented Federation. Let us all firmly resolve to make it work. Let us make it work and build for ourselves and our descendants a Shangri-la whereby we can live in peace, happiness and prosperity."

Fifty years on, the challenge for all Malaysians is to develop the quality

and style of the founders and, more importantly, to steadfastly hold on to an open, democratic and just society to which all ethnic groups can contribute to.

There were others who also played important roles in helping to achieve independence. Men and women like John Thivy, Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmi, Boestamam, Tan Sri Khir Johari, Kadijah Sidek, Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Leong Yew Koh. Then there are the leaders in Sabah and Sarawak who had the same aspirations, men like Datuk Fuad Stephens, Datuk Stephen Kalong Ningkan and Tun Mustapha.

For a while they thought of setting up a separate regional arrangement but in the end they were persuaded by Tunku to be



Mass support: Tunku campaigning in the first parliamentary elections in 1959 under the Alliance Party. – Arkib Negara

part of what became Malaysia.

As the nation celebrates, its people look forward to the next 50 years and to build upon what has been achieved.

> *The Founding Fathers series was coordinated by Dr Joseph Fernando of Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Research Editor Dr Lee Kam Hing (leekh@thestar.com.my).*