



KEEPING ALIVE RAZAK'S LEGACY

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His foray into politics may have been unplanned, but Datuk Seri Najib Razak's pedigree has more than prepared him for the inevitable journey that is almost similar to his father's, writes AISHAH ALI



IF Tun Abdul Razak Hussein had wished for more time during his final days at work to implement his plans, he would be pleased to know that not only is his legacy alive, most of them come under the stewardship of his son.

It is a strange twist of fate that Malaysia's second prime minister, his life cut short by leukaemia, would have his aspirations for the country continued by his eldest son, Najib.

"The irony is, he did not want me to be a politician," says Najib as he recalls how he had, at 22, just started out as an executive in Petronas when his father died in a London hospital in 1976.

"He wanted me to be an accountant, to be like the late Raslan (Mohamed Raslan Datuk Abdullah) was accountant-general and the first chairman of Bank Bumiputra, who died in a car crash in 1971).

"At that time, he was very much into creating a new generation of Bumiputera entrepreneurs and technocrats and was anxious for me to join the ranks of corporate leaders.

"That's what he had in mind for me. He didn't encourage me to enter politics."

But Najib knew that the calling was inherent. Like his father, he had felt the need to work and care for his people and country at an early age.

Unlike his father, he didn't show it.

Razak, on the other hand, had been a political activist from young. Growing up poor in a kampung near Pekan had given him the resolve to change the lives of

rural folk.

Thus begun his crusade as a freedom fighter, first when he enrolled as a member of Wataniah, the secret anti-Japanese resistance force during the Japanese Occupation in 1941-45 and then as secretary of the Malay Society of Great Britain, while reading law in London in the late 1940s.

Together with Tunku Abdul Rahman, as president, he would organise forums and talks on good governance and racial harmony.

This formidable partnership would continue and the talks would escalate, as we know it, to a point when the duo went down in history as architects of independence.

Razak had consistently proven to be an able and loyal number two until he became prime minister in 1970 when Tunku stepped down.

If Najib was initially uncertain about stepping into his father's shoes, he has emulated him step for step, journeying through a similar political path as his father.

Razak served as state secretary of Pahang before becoming menteri besar from 1955-56; Najib became menteri besar from 1982-86; Razak was minister of education from 1956-57, Najib held the same portfolio between 1995-99; Razak was minister of defence from 1957-1959, Najib assumed that portfolio in 1990-95, and was appointed to the post again in 1999, serving till now.

Both father and son served as Umno Youth leader. Later, Razak became deputy president of Um-

no and deputy prime minister, likewise Najib who is Umno deputy president is now deputy prime minister.

And had he ever thought what he'd be today if he remained in the corporate world? Najib says he does not like to look back.

He was home in Kuala Lumpur after graduating in industrial economics from the University of Nottingham, England, when news of his father's death was an-

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Deputy Prime Minister

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nounced.

"I was pretty shaken up," he recalls. "I thought this couldn't happen.

"I knew he was ill but there was some indication that he was recovering and it was during this time that I could see his determination to get better so that he could finish his work.

"My father had also to deal with the political challenges he was facing.

"He wanted time to do these things and I know how much it meant to him to get better."

Razak's death was a blow to the nation.

Najib was almost immediately persuaded to contest in his father's constituency of Pekan in the general election that year.

"I was at a crossroads. I knew I was too young to take the plunge into the deep end of the pool. I could have decided otherwise, I suppose, I knew the inherent risks of entering politics.

"But my inner feelings told me that I would want to enter politics at some point, so why not then?"

"In any case, Umno is a party that practises democracy and you have to contest at every general election. If you do not measure up, you will get the signals to prepare your exit.

"So I accepted the challenge that I'd either sink or swim."

Intuitively, it was in his father's people politics that he sought guidance.

His father's friendliness and warmth have left him and his brothers a lasting impression.

Razak was a caring father and despite his hectic routine, he

would make time for his family.

"When my brothers and I were in boarding school in England, he would write to us regularly.

"Life in a public school was rather austere.

"We had to communicate but they didn't allow you the use of telephones unless necessary.

"So we wrote to each other using aerogrammes, and it cost only 40 sen each.

"He would write back. He had beautiful handwriting.

"He was a people person. He always had time for the common man.

"I remember him always *menggamit* (gesture of acknowledgement with his hand) to the people whenever we entered the gate of Sri Taman (the official residence of the prime minister).

"They would be waiting to see him and he would tell all of them to come in.

"There would always be a guest for lunch because he had this extensive network.

"He was so well-connected and the beauty of it was that he had a wonderful, almost photographic memory of faces as well as how one is connected to the other.

"For instance, he knew that this penghulu is the son of that person and he also knew intimately the background of the people he was dealing with."

It was a great asset for a politician, says Najib.

But Malaysia is different today. By this he means the country has evolved rapidly, so much so that the complexities of issues, not least, race relations, require more sophisti-



One from the album. The Razak brothers (standing from left) Nazim, Najib, Ahmad Johari and Nizam, with Nazir standing just behind Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Rahah Mohd Noah.

cated handling.

In this, Najib is seen as a moderate, for his frequent stress on racial unity and power sharing.

"I believe that's the only way forward for us. We can't go our separate ways. There must be a sense of togetherness, that we are one big family."

He says the spirit and philosophy behind rural development and the New Economic Policy are still valid and he believes in them.

"But we have to adapt to new realities. We should help Bumiputeras who are deserving but we must also help non-Bumiputeras.

"Bumiputeras should compete so that the best will emerge.

"I also think that we must not

deny non-Bumiputeras and that is why it is becoming easier for them now to secure places in universities.

"I've seen the figures reflect this. I think the complaints we are hearing are no longer about getting places in local universities but being sent to universities abroad on Public Service Department scholarships.

"I had liberalised and globalised the system when I was education minister.

"We have more private universities, colleges, training programmes and a whole range of educational facilities that are available now.

"The whole landscape has changed."

Taking Felda as an example, Najib says the agency, started by Razak as one of the poverty eradication schemes, is going global.

"The sky is the limit for Felda. It is an organisation that is well-managed and we've fulfilled a socio-economic obligation by giving land to the landless and helping to eradicate poverty.

"We've touched the lives of almost one million people. The next stage for Felda is to go global."

For Najib, Felda has become a passion because it is strongly identified with his father.

That is why despite heading 30 cabinet committees ranging from cleanliness of toilets to heavy investments, Najib asked Prime

Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi to be put in charge of Felda.

"I wanted it for personal as well as professional reasons.

"I truly believe I can make a difference for Felda."

Chances are, what he has achieved with Felda would have been some of the things on Razak's mind.

But as with the legacies he left behind as *Bapa Pembangunan*, the best is his own flesh and blood — the illustrious Razak brothers, Najib, Datuk Ahmad Johari, Mohamed Nizam, Mohamed Nazim and Datuk Nazir. — Merdeka Press Secretariat

■ aishahali.ishak@yahoo.com