

THE IDEALS OF MERDEKA

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The golden anniversary of Merdeka provides us with an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the ideals of democracy, non-violence, unity, mutual understanding, consensus and compassion. These are the very ideals that make up the foundation of our Independence, as fought for by Tunku Abdul Rahman, and it remains 50 years on, writes PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR



THE struggle for freedom all over the world has seen the rise of great thinkers and idealists.

Their values and ideals have inspired the struggle for freedom and provided the motive for solidarity and nation building in the post-independence era.

In Malaysia, however, there is a general feeling that the movement for independence has somehow failed to generate the kind of moral inspiration and intellectual discourse that accompanied the struggle for freedom in other parts of the world.

There is a need, therefore, to remind Malaysians of the great ideals and values of our own independence movement.

The golden anniversary of our independence provides us a grand opportunity.

The ideal of democracy

The newly independent nation was based on the principles of democracy, as enshrined in the Proclamation of Independence which declares that Malaya will be a democracy that is committed to safeguarding the "fundamental rights and liberties of the people".

Looking through the annals of history, we realise that the ideal of democracy had played an important role in getting Malaya its independence.

The leaders of the independence movement steered their struggle along the democratic road to independence.

And in his negotiations with the British, Tunku Abdul Rahman appealed to the democratic ideal by pointing out that the Alliance enjoyed the mandate to negotiate the terms of independence by virtue of its electoral success.

The British then realised the importance of throwing their weight behind the democratically-elected leaders of the future Malaya.

Even through the post-independence era, the ideals of democracy and freedom had to be continually invoked to counter the appeal of the communist ideology.

The ideal of peace and non-violence

Another important ideal that we should treasure is the ideal of peace and non-violence. The founding fathers of the nation succeeded in obtaining independence peacefully, thereby preserving the sanctity of our independence.

Tunku, who was largely influenced by the Indian political ideal of non-violence, was determined that "Merdeka will not be celebrated with bloodshed".

In his Merdeka speech at the Alliance rally held at the Selangor Club Padang at midnight on Aug 30, 1957, the Tunku linked non-violence with the broader issues of honour and glory.

"We have won our independence not by any act of violence but by constitutional means through mutual goodwill, understanding and trust," said Tunku.

"Let us not abuse this trust but honour it so that others will honour us. A nation born with honour will tread the path of glory."

It is this honour and glory that we should treasure and transmit as a legacy and a sacred trust from the independence era.

Four months after Independence, Tunku said: "It is through peaceful methods that this goal (independence)

has been reached, and it is through peace that this government aspires to provide for its people the economic and social development that is much needed today."

The attainment of independence through peaceful means has a larger implication for us as we reflect on its meaning for the present and the future. It has ensured stability and historical continuity on all fronts.

Speaking about independence without bloodshed, Tunku used to add that this was possible only through the joint efforts of all communities.

The ideal of unity

A country racially divided would have justified continued colonial rule and strengthened the hand of the insurgents.

Realising this, in his negotiations for independence, Tunku emphasised the achievement of the Alliance in bringing together the three communities in Malaya.

Even long after Independence, Tunku was the one leader who never tired of reminding his party members that "independence had been achieved, not by the efforts of the Malays alone, but also with the help of the Chinese, Indians and others".

The ideal of compromise and mutual understanding

We should also value the ideal of compromise and mutual understanding as another legacy of the independence era.



This ideal was reflected, for instance, in a number of negotiations held between Umno and MCA to discuss the allocation of seats for the 1955 federal elections.

Meetings were held at the Chinese Assembly Hall, Chinese Miners' Club, Sultan Sulaiman Club and at Tunku's house.

At one point, there was a danger that the Alliance would break up and Tunku had a difficult time convincing each component party, to forget self interest and think of the welfare of the country as a whole.

He told the MCA leaders that breaking up the Alliance was a retrogressive step, and would hurt the cause of independence.

He advised Leong Yew Koh, one of the MCA leaders, to withdraw his threat to leave the coalition.

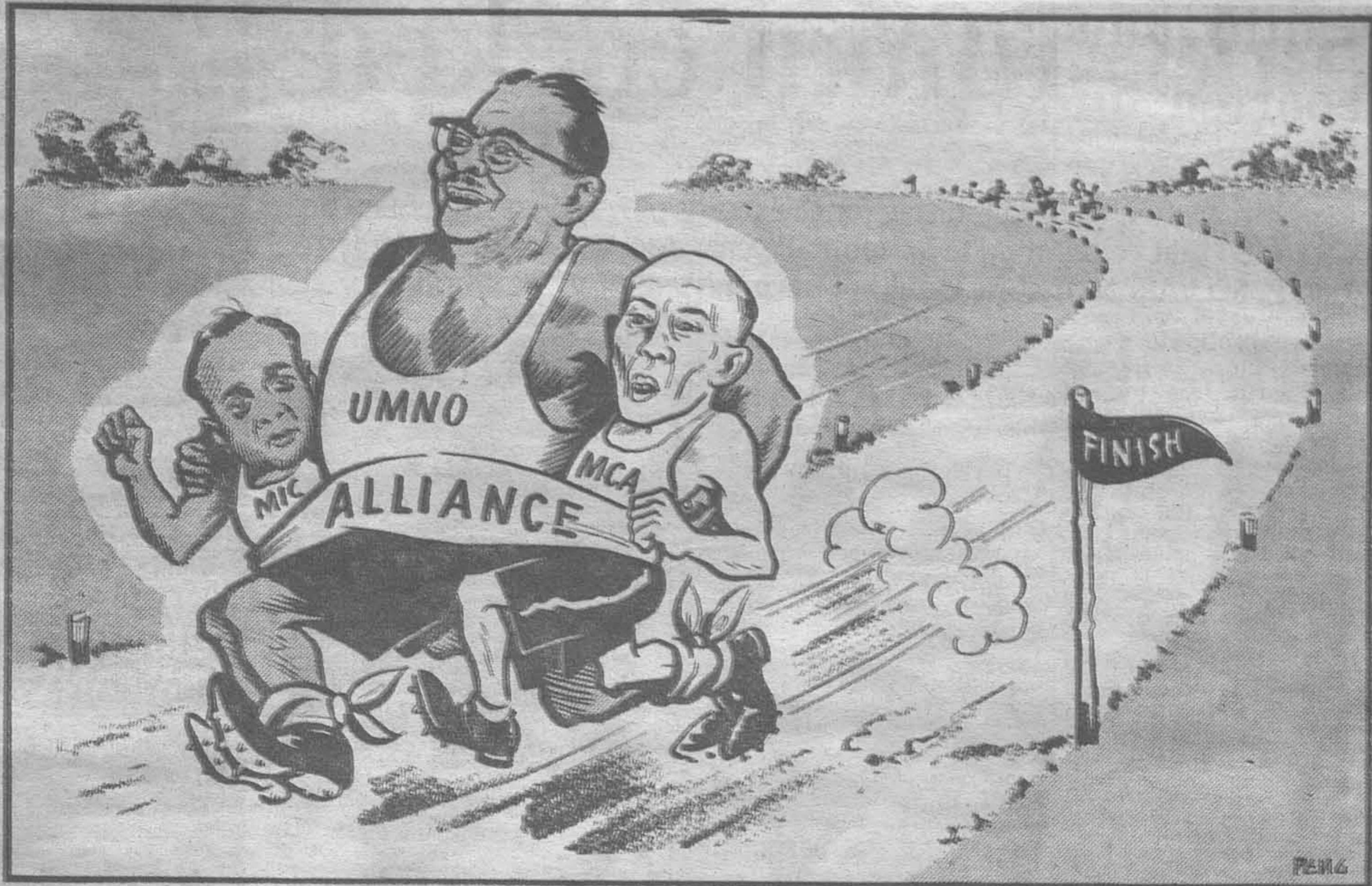
"Let not the question of a few seats change our plan for independence and our promise to work through thick and thin," said Tunku.

But the fact was that Malay voters outnumbered others by a great majority, besides constituting a bedrock of support for the Alliance.

Against this reality, Tunku had a difficult time persuading Umno members to come to terms with MCA.

"But I saw — as I see it today — pure loyalty to the party, (and) influenced perhaps by my sincerity, they finally agreed to this slight adjustment to the allocation of seats," said Tunku.

Needless to say, the compromise was important at a time



This cartoon first appeared in the *Straits Times* on July 30, 1955.

when the slightest evidence of disunity would have played into the hands of the communists, and delayed independence.

The ideal of mutual consensus

The idea of compromise is linked to the fourth ideal — mutual consensus.

Being a consensual leader, Tunku decided that the Alliance should speak with one voice. This was imperative at a time when MIC was accepted as a new coalition partner.

"We do not want our leaders to go out and say things that are contradictory to what others are saying," said the Tunku.

A "Book of Guidance" was compiled, and all Alliance leaders were expected to follow the guidelines in the book

whenever they made statements.

Tunku's consensual leadership was again evident in his decision to travel by boat with the other members of the Merdeka Mission to attend the historic London Conference of 1956.

He felt that the long journey would provide the members of the mission, including the Rulers' representative, an opportunity to thrash out their differences in a cordial manner.

Members of the mission held meetings on board the ship, "every day, every morning". It was only after they obtained complete agreement on all matters of importance that they decided to disembark in Karachi and take a plane to London.

Years later, in an interview

“
Independence is like a tree. If everyone takes good care of it, the tree will grow, blossom and bear fruit. If we neglect the tree, it will surely die and be fit only for use as firewood.
”

Tunku Abdul Rahman

with Lloyd Phillips, a retired Malaysian civil service officer, Tunku recalled: "I brought them on the boat and every day I kept hammering into their heads to agree, for the good of Malaya, to all these terms because it was not going to hurt anybody; so when we finally arrived in London, we spoke with one voice."

Compassion and forgiveness as exemplified in the life of the nation's founding father can also be acknowledged as one of our Merdeka ideals.

Tunku's compassionate and forgiving nature was evident soon after his party had won the 1955 general elections, and Tunku had become the chief minister of the Federation of Malaya.

When a minister urged Tunku to sack a government servant for having worked against the Alliance, and victimising party supporters, Tunku replied: "I am not going to do this because God has given us victory, and in this hour of triumph I should be giving thanks to Him, and humbling myself in prayer."

Tunku even went on air to announce his position on the matter.

A classic example of Tunku's compassion was his act of taking off his shirt and handing it to a vagrant who was wearing a torn and tattered shirt.

This happened just a few days before Merdeka at the site of the football stadium that was being constructed to commemorate Independence Day.

True to his compassionate nature, Tunku in 1955 pledged that if the Alliance was voted to power, he would

press for a general amnesty for the Malayan Communist Party.

The promise was fulfilled soon after his election victory in 1955.

Again, upon independence in 1957, the air force dropped some 12 million leaflets, bearing the signature of Tunku, into the jungles announcing Malaya's amnesty offer to the remaining 1,800 armed communists.

Following an encouraging response, the amnesty offer was extended for several months. Even after two years of independence, Tunku continued to look at the option of dealing harshly with the communists with disfavour.

"We can fight the communists, we can shoot them without any feeling of remorse but to shoot one schoolboy would be a tragedy and crime for which we could not forgive ourselves, because these boys do not know what they are doing."

Tunku likened independent Malaya to a newly-planted tree.

"If everyone takes good care of it, the tree will grow, blossom and bear fruit. If we neglect the tree, it will surely die and be fit only for use as firewood."

For the tree to stand firm against the storm, our ideals must be strong. The golden anniversary of Merdeka provides us with a grand opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the ideals which inspired the peaceful struggle for independence. — MPS FOUNDATION



Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang Datuk Abdul Wahab Toh Muda Abdul Aziz (in raincoat), leading the amnesty procession organised by the Alliance in Ipoh. On his right is Assistant Minister of Education Too Joon Hing, and on his left is Minister of Health and Social Welfare Leong Yew Koh, and Minister of Education Datuk Abdul Razak (behind Leong).

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