

# 'Blackmail' forced Tunku's hand

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The Tunku spent more time in politics than with his family. The nation was the first love of the country's first prime minister. Tunku Ahmad Nerang talks to SONIA RAMACHANDRAN about what it was like being the son of a statesman



Tunku Ahmad Nerang points to himself as a boy in an old family portrait, with his grandparents Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of Kedah and Che Manjalara (seated), his father Tunku Abdul Rahman and his sister, Tunku Khadijah at the old palace in Alor Star.

TUNKU Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj was a reluctant politician.

According to his son, Tunku Ahmad Nerang, the first prime minister refused the post of Umno president in 1951 when Datuk Onn Jaafar stepped down.

Apparently, Tun Abdul Razak had asked him to take over but the Tunku was adamant.

The Tunku only relented after *Utusan Melayu's* Melan Abdullah (later Tan Sri) threatened to publish the headline *Tunku mungkir janji pada rakyat* (Tunku reneges on his promise to the people).

This was because he had promised in 1946, before leaving for England to complete his law course, that he would return and fight for independence when he passed his exams.

"My father asked Melan to give him a month. After two months of waiting, Melan went to see Tunku. The Tunku asked for another month.

"When that too was up, a fed-up Melan went to see him again and said he had no choice but to publish an article with the heading, *Seorang Anak Raja Tidak Mahu Membela Rakyat* (A prince does not want to fight for the people)."

The Tunku then said that he would consider the request on one condition — that he had the total support of Umno and that it would be full independence and nothing less.

"He felt independence un-

der British protection would only benefit a few and not the masses," Tunku Nerang, 74, said.

What probably clinched it for the Tunku were the "voices" he heard in court in Alor Star one day.

"He heard voices calling out 'Putra', the name his father, Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of Kedah, used to call him.

"Tunku couldn't see anyone calling him. All he could hear were voices," Tunku Nerang said.

After the case was over, the Tunku went to his father's room in the old palace nearby, sat in his father's rattan rocking chair and fell asleep.

"He then dreamt that his father had said, *Putra, belalah rakyat* (Putra, fight for the people). Tunku woke up then but since he was very tired, he fell asleep again.

"This time it was Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi and former Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru who he saw in his dreams," said Tunku Nerang.

His father, he said, took this as a sign that it was time for him to do something. He left Alor Star by car and arrived in

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”

Tunku Ahmad Nerang

Kuala Lumpur at 1am.

He went straight to Melan's house in Kampung Baru and told him to see him the next day.

Melan did — and the Tunku told him that he would accept the post of Umno president.

"And that was how my father, proposed by Bahaman Samsudin (the late Tan Sri who was minister of justice) and seconded by Melan, was voted in as the president of Umno to replace Onn at the Majestic Hotel Roof Garden in 1951."

Like the British aristocracy, Tunku Nerang was also expected to enter the military. So in 1954, he was sent to India to enrol in the Military Academy in Derahdun.

In December 1958, Tunku Nerang returned to Malaya and joined the Federation Regiment where he remained until 1967, when he opted out for a career in business.

"My rank was that of captain when I resigned. They offered me the rank of major but I refused. My father was very disappointed as he wanted me to continue serving the nation.

"He disapproved of my venturing into business as he believed business and politics should not mix.

"Since he was the prime minister, he did not want me in business at all. He believed the mixing of politics and business would lead to abuse. He believed one should never enter politics to make money."

This principle was something Tunku lived and died by, said his son.

Tunku was a rich man when he entered politics, owning rubber estates and shop houses in Penang and Alor Star, most of which he sold to finance Umno and to win independence.

"After being in politics for 15 years, my father ended up much poorer than when he entered politics.

"I am very proud of my fa-

ther as a leader, but as a father, he never had time for me and my sister, Tunku Khadijah."

Tunku Nerang's mother, Mariam Chong, was Tunku Abdul Rahman's first wife. She died of typhoid and malaria a month after he was born in Kuala Nerang in 1933.

"The Kuala Nerang people's dialect was such that they would look at the full moon when it was bright and say, *'amat nerang'*.

"So my father decided to name me Tunku Amat Nerang. He said I was supposed to be very bright."

But Tunku Nerang was not fond of that name as the Chinese at that time would call their drivers, Amat.

"So when I was 12, I changed my name to Tunku Ahmad Nerang in my identification card."

Tunku Nerang used to drive his father around while he was campaigning for the federal elections.

He recalls an incident in 1953, when after a long and tiring day of campaigning, a hungry Tunku and Tunku Nerang returned home past midnight to find nothing in the house to eat.

"I searched the kitchen and all I could find was one egg. I boiled it and then I went to my father's room and knocked on the door. He opened it and asked me what had happened.

"I told him I had searched the kitchen and found one egg which I had boiled. I told him I had cut it in half and that he could have one half.

"Tears rolled down his face and he patted my head and told me I could have the whole egg," he said.

Tunku Nerang's wife, Datin Liliana Nerang, described the Tunku as special in many ways.

"My father-in-law had a way about him. When he talked to you, he would make you feel very special. We would chat about everything, from football to current affairs," said the retired lawyer.

Added her husband: "This year we are celebrating 50 years of independence. I hope and pray that all the races in Malaysia will live together in peace and harmony, something which my father really cherished and believed in all his life."