

A wonderful legacy from the Tunku

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LOOKING BACK

By Zaini Mohd Said



I WAS just over 9 years old in December 1955 when I heard from the older boys that Tunku Abdul Rahman, the chief minister, was meeting Chin Peng in Baling, Kedah. I did not comprehend fully then what this meeting meant. The boys said that the Tunku wanted to talk the communist leader into surrendering and I took it just as that.

However, we had by then our fears and dislikes of the communist terrorists. We were, therefore, in some wonder and awe that the Tunku dared to have a face-to-face encounter with their leader. "Tunku is very brave to meet their chief," I remember thinking.

I began to know the Tunku better beginning in 1957, initially as the prime minister of the Federation of Malaya and subsequently Malaysia. I sometimes listened to him speak on the radio in Malay, always with his distinct Kedah accent.

What struck me every time was his simple and often repeated call for unity, co-operation and *tolak ansur*, the give-and-take phrase of that time which I thought meant compromise. But I later believed he meant acceptance of our racial diversity. These, he said, were the imperatives in order for us to progress and survive as a nation.

By the time we became Malaysia in 1963, Tunku appealed to me as a leader who was not only clever but also had the welfare of the rakyat in his heart, with anything for himself (if there was any) last. I choked with proud emotion when I woke up one morning to hear him announce that we would become a bigger country with the formation of Malaysia.

The Tunku was to me the prince of the people, a simple and humble man. This showed in the way he dressed, talked and smiled.

In his speeches, he constantly highlighted our common values, traditions and the fact that all the races worked together, speaking Malay to

communicate in everyday life. His frequent calls firmed my beliefs that we were a strong nation because of our diversity, and that we could develop magnificently by working harmoniously together for the benefit of our people.

In many respects, the Tunku was a personal example and his philosophy my guiding spirit throughout my years of service in the army. This spirit was apt because we had all the races in the military and even more so as we were serving the rakyat.

This helped me overcome the cold, irritating discomfort of the many nights in mosquito-infested jungles, relieved after seeing far in the distance the dim lights of homes where I knew men, women and children were sleeping soundly in relative security.

It helped me accept the fact that our service would not help us to amass wealth but was actually a life of self-deprivation and giving.

"Your real rewards shall come only in the afterlife," a superior always reminded us. It gave comfort and confidence because it helped lead me towards decency and balance as a person.

The national leaders after Tunku undoubtedly gave more impetus and substance to the early aspirations of the founding father. The country has progressed and developed magnificently because of all of them.

Yet, I am convinced that it was the solidly laid foundation and care for the imperatives that got us to where we are today. I cannot imagine what it would have been like if this had not been done.

Maybe the May 13 situation in 1969



Tunku Abdul Rahman's repeated calls for *tolak ansur* laid a solid foundation for Malaysia.

could be an indicator of one consequence. Bearing that in mind, and after having observed what happened in Bosnia and seeing the ongoing disaster in Iraq, what could have been is even more difficult to imagine.

The recent majestic and proud installation ceremony of the 13th Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin, was a succinct representation of the peace, prosperity and progress in the country today.

There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. If only some of us could realise that and defend it with their lives, if need be.

We are always happy to see all the races working together and helping each other. Yet there are still too many occasions when we observe people doing wrong and are shy, or worse, do not have the courage to put it right.

We turn a blind eye and wish someone else would do it. That, we think,

would absolve us from the responsibility.

The country will celebrate its 50th year of Merdeka in a few months. It would be appropriate to remember those truths expounded by the Tunku and revitalise them in all the simple ways imaginable.

I know that it would be refreshing to savour an occasion when residents in a housing community could get together, not to protest but to strengthen relationships during an evening tea session.

Corporate leaders could sit down and chat about life and happenings in the country with those lower-rank employees while having roti canai and teh tarik. Maybe they could listen to these people tell who they are and where they come from.

Schoolchildren, instead of going to museums and the Petronas Twin Towers, could visit one another to know where they live and who their

parents are. Government functionaries should just have more time to mingle with each other during happy hour (not that happy hour) and lighter moments to understand one another better.

As for myself, I want to smile and wish more people well than I ever did before and to maintain that practice even after Aug 31. I also want to coax the next person not to litter, while I clean up my own surroundings.

No more rage and screaming "bloody murder" at the next person who offends me on the roads and highways.

And when I do have a little bit more in the pocket, I will try to give to those boys and girls that I still see in want, anywhere I go.

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