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Man of the hour

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Tan Sri Mohd Khir Johari was involved in the Malaysian political scene from its inception and served in the Cabinet of three prime ministers, standing shoulder to shoulder even with Tunku.



Malaysiaku Gemilang

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Close rapport: First Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman chose fellow independence pioneer Tan Sri Mohd Khir Johari (left) as his Minister of Commerce and Industry in 1960. — NATIONAL ARCHIVES

By TAN SRI MOHD
KHIR JOHARI

TUNKU was my friend, my mentor, my colleague, and later on my boss. By the time he passed away on Dec 6, 1990, I had enjoyed some 48 years of a very close relationship with him.

Quite by accident it was politics and patriotism that first brought us together. When the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Forces in 1945, the Communists in Kedah, then known as the "Bintang Tiga" or "The Three Stars," tried to take over the state as their flagship before the arrival of the British Occupation Forces.

Tunku enlisted the assistance of a small band of young men, which included me, to stop these elements from achieving their objectives. We had no arms whatsoever, but with sheer guts, we managed to put up a front pending the arrival of the British-led Force 136.

This was our first taste of confrontation with the Communists. The lesson in human leadership and sacrifice was imprinted in my mind. Tunku was to me clearly the "Man of the Hour."

The second phase of our relationship started with a common desire to help the victims of the Japanese-sponsored Burmese Death Railway, who managed to escape into Kedah.

They originated from various states in the peninsula and Indonesia. They were in dire circumstances and needed medical attention and shelter.

A few of us (including the late Tan Sri Senu Abdul Rahman), started from scratch a home which we called "Rumah Miskin" or Home for the Poor. Tunku was the chairman and I the secretary.

In later years, he used to tell me that it was the prayers of these victims which contributed largely to his

becoming Prime Minister.

On Aug 25, 1951, at the Majestic Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, Tunku was elected president at the General Assembly of a little-known body — Umno.

Umno's founder, Dato' Onn Jaafar, had resigned to lead a rival (multi-racial) political party, the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), and had predicted that Umno would disintegrate within three months.

Dato' Onn had the support of some of the leading British civil servants, and at first, even several leaders of the Malayan Chinese community.

Tunku, a lone figure and a voice that lacked eloquence, toured Umno branches throughout the country and spoke vigorously in his Kedah Malay in favour of a wholly Malay Umno.

I must say here that the Royalty in him played a significant part in the role he was destined to play throughout these years.

Meanwhile, Col H.S. Lee, Tun Omar

Yoke Lin Ong and a few others, had initiated in preparation for the first municipal elections a coalition called the Alliance of Umno and MCA.

Tunku knew nothing of this, and was at his country home in Seberang Prai (Province Wellesley) when an Umno member asked him to return to Kuala Lumpur urgently. There he found a number of Umno members opposed to this new venture, while Dato' E.E.C. Thurasingham, a leader of Dato' Onn's party, vehemently declared that it would never work.

This last statement inspired Tunku. He quickly recognised the potential advantages of the coalition, and

declared that he would go all out to support the Alliance move. Its manifesto was pure and simple — *Merdeka!*

Tunku always treated his Cabinet colleagues with candour and affection. One day, Tunku brought up the subject of honorific titles, above "Dato," to be awarded by the Federal Government.

In ancient Malacca and Perak, the highest title accorded to citizens was the "Tun" followed by the title "Tan".

All my colleagues supported using these as Federal titles, until Tunku said: "Now supposing the government had to confer the title of Tan to an Indian and his name is Dass. What will happen? Can you imagine? Tan Dass

(whose pronunciation is similar to the Malay word for toilet) would become a laughing stock wherever he goes."

Hence it was Tunku who suggested that the title "Tan" be changed to "Tan Sri" instead, and the wife "Puan Sri."

A problem arose as to how the wife of a "Tun" should be addressed. I remember voicing aloud that the consort of a Sultan is generally called the "Sultana" to which Tunku, spontaneously and to the hilarity of all present, said "Tun, Tuna!" (The wife of a Tun subsequently came to be titled "Toh Puan.")

Allow me to briefly examine the disturbances of May 13, 1969, in Kuala Lumpur — to put the record straight for the benefit of posterity. It seems that even today a few people are still blaming Tunku for the incident.

The trouble really started with the procession of May 9, 1969, on the eve of the Federal election.

Communist sympathisers, secret society members and hooligans spearheaded the move, supposedly to ask the people to boycott the election on May 10.

Tunku and I were in Kedah at that time and I can say without any fear of contradiction from any quarter that had he been consulted, he, as Prime Minister, would have rejected the request for a procession and the result would have been different.

To blame Tunku would be to ignore the facts and would be, I would think, an act of deplorable ingratitude for a life dedicated to the service of the nation since 1945.

Born on Jan 29, 1923, in Alor Star, Kedah, Tan Sri Mohd Khir Johari was an MP from 1955 to 1982. Upon his retirement he held positions in several organisations, most famously as President of the World Wide Fund for Nature of Malaysia (WWF).