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Up front and personal leadership

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Tunku's success in handling Sarawak depended on human relations

By TAN SRI DR ABDUL
TAIB MAHMUD

MY EARLIEST memory of Tunku Abdul Rahman goes back to my student days, when I had the opportunity of hearing him over the radio. He spoke from his heart, unlike other politicians, and had none of their tricks. He symbolised the very best in the Malays - kindness, consideration and sensitivity to the feelings of others.

No other Prime Minister would have been able to accomplish what Tunku managed to achieve through the sheer force of his personality.

According to Datuk James Wong in Parliament in 1990, if it were not for Tunku, there was no way that Malaysia would have been formed.

The British as well as the leaders of Sarawak had absolute trust and faith in Tunku. The Constitutional talks may have been difficult but Tunku himself was easy.

As Wong pointed out, Sarawak was concerned about entrenchment of safeguards, and because of this the talks faltered from time to time.

When Tunku was approached, he would merely gloss over the problem and tell the British: "Oh, that is not important, whatever they want, all right, give them the assurance they need."

Because of this psychological acceptance of one another in a spirit of give-and-take, some of the verbally agreed terms of the merger were not even written down.

Tunku was a visionary. Together with the British, he masterminded the Malaysian merger long before he announced it in Singapore. None of his Cabinet colleagues were even aware of what was hatching. Even Tun Razak, his own deputy, thought that Tunku must have gone crazy, as the country was only then beginning to discover its identity, define its national character and build its own structures.

As early as 1958 on board a ship to Langkawi, Tunku told me that he would support the formation of Malaysia, if merger would just be confined to Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. Later that year, Tunku visited Kuching and Sibul to gain the support

for merger from Malay associations such as *Barisan Pemuda Sarawak*.

Due to his reluctance to embrace Singapore, however, Tunku was slow in responding to what was basically a British proposal. The demographic structure of Singapore which favoured the Chinese, as well as political differences with the island state were key considerations.

However, the British wanted a confederation in which the threat of Communism in the region could be well contained.

Tunku's success in handling Sarawak had depended to a great extent on human relations. He was fortunate to have found a loyal and devoted friend in Temenggong Jugah, an illiterate but highly respected charismatic leader of the Iban community.

Tunku chose Jugah, who had excellent knowledge of local affairs, as Minister for Sarawak Affairs. Both Tunku and Jugah were of the same age, and got on well with one another. Jugah stood solidly behind Tunku during the Confrontation, spoke with authority and was able to provide excellent advice to Tunku on Sarawakian affairs.

With Jugah's help, Tunku was able to weather the political crisis in Sarawak involving the Chief Minister, Kalong Ningkan, who wanted Sarawak to be left to the Sarawakians, and resisted Federal involvement in local affairs.

Tunku had a great sense of humour. So his discussions with the British were not always serious. For instance, there is a story of how Tunku suddenly got up in the middle of the 1956 London Talks. Everyone expected Tunku to walk out of the talks in anger, but just then he said with as solemn a face as he could put on, "Well, gentlemen, I think we will have to adjourn ..."

Amid general alarm he continued, "So that we can all go for football at Wembley tomorrow." Everyone laughed and concurred. When talks resumed the following Monday, everyone was in cheerful mood.

Despite his easygoing nature, Tunku was morally and spiritually sensitive. He did not have a "holier than thou" attitude. I remember in



Close ties: Abdul Taib escorting Tunku to the premiere of Tunku's movie 'Sumpahan Mahsuri' in Kuching on Dec 16, 1989.

the 1970s him trying to persuade me to follow him to the racing course. I resisted initially but relented when he told me: "Don't try to be too serious. You don't have to bet if you don't want to. You are a good boy, you don't drink and all that, but try to enjoy yourself."

I went along. He took out his wallet, and suddenly realised that it was not the wallet that he had intended to bring with him. He called out to his bodyguard, "Alamak, this is my halal (legitimate by Islamic precepts) money. Mat, where is my other wallet?" Mat (short for Samad), his bodyguard then had to go all the way back to fetch another wallet.

Tunku said: "I always put \$200 in

a special wallet so that I can use it for betting. If I finish the \$200 I'll stop playing. I then asked him: "What happens if you win?"

Tunku answered, "If I win, then I'll keep a few hundred dollars, and the rest I'll give for charity."

When Tunku retired, the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organisation organised a farewell party which was attended by a number of religious luminaries in the country including Father Vendargon.

He was extremely touched by the gesture. I told myself, "In which part of the world can we find this, that the people of the different faiths come together to honour their former Prime Minister?"



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Although many of Tunku's friends deserted him, I am proud to have remained close to him till the end - which he reciprocated with fond affection for me and the people of Sarawak.

Tunku told me how important it was to honour our heroes. In his own case, he appeared unduly concerned that he would be forgotten by the people whom he loved so much.

He felt strongly for the martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for Sarawak's freedom. A memorial was eventually built on the grounds of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, at which Tunku laid the foundation stone.

Tunku seemed more emotional than usual during the function which was held in the midst of a heavy downpour. Although he was not scheduled to address the crowd, he insisted on making a speech from his wheelchair. He called on Malaysians of all races to unite and be loyal to the country. Several times during his speech tears coursed down his cheeks, and many of the guests too were moved to tears.

It was Tunku's last public appearance. I felt very bad, for he had a strong premonition that he was about to die.

Tunku passed away on Dec 6, 1990 on "malam Jumaat" (Thursday night), which according to Islamic belief, is an auspicious time for the soul to leave the earthly abode.

Tan Sri Dr Abdul Taib Mahmud was Crown Counsel for the Sarawak Government (1961-1963), then Minister at the state level (1963-1967) and at the Federal level (1968-1981). He returned to Sarawak to assume the post of Chief Minister in 1981.