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Tunku and the two Tun Tans

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A COMMON vision and shared ideals – these were the two factors that prompted Tunku Abdul Rahman to work closely first, with Tun Tan Cheng Lock and later with his son, Tun Tan Siew Sin.

All three men were determined to win independence from Britain without bloodshed and to create a political and legal framework for this country that would enable Malays, Chinese and Indians to share power and live in harmony. And all three believed in the concept of a multi-racial Malaysia.

Tunku and the two Tun Tans, however, were more than political allies – they were also good friends.

Indeed, whenever Tunku visited Malacca, he would stay with Tun Tan Cheng Lock at the family ancestral home in the then Heeren Street, now renamed Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

One indicator of the Tunku's high esteem for Cheng Lock was the fact that the latter was awarded the title of "Tun" in 1958, one of the earliest Malaysian Chinese to be so honoured.

Yet another indicator was Tunku's decision to accord Cheng Lock a state funeral when the MCA founder passed away on Dec 13, 1960, the first time this signal honour was given to a member of the public. This honour was all the more remarkable because at that time, Cheng Lock was no longer MCA president nor did he ever hold any government post.

When Cheng Lock passed away, the Tunku penned a tribute that was published in the *Straits Times*. He described Cheng Lock as one of Malaya's illustrious sons, a pillar of strength to the Alliance Party and one of the fathers of this country's independence.

"Without (Cheng Lock's) patriotic support in those early days, I might say here that my mission for independence could not have been achieved except probably at the cost of trouble and bloodshed," the Tunku wrote.

Given his strong friendship with Cheng Lock, the relationship between the Tunku and Siew Sin was equally close. What is perhaps unique is the fact that both men could be – and often were – exceptionally frank in expressing their sometimes differing views. Yet their differences of opinion never caused offence or dented the high regard each had for the other.

A joy to work with

"It was a real joy to work with Siew Sin. He was a very careful finance minister, sometimes a little bit too careful and I had differences with him over matters of expenditure. I said his tight-fisted policy was not helping the country to get richer," the Tunku wrote in a personal tribute when Siew Sin passed away.

"One day, he asked me for leave to go to Europe and I readily agreed. Then before he left, he came to have a last discussion with me and asked who would take his place as finance minister. I told him not to worry about that. I would take it over from him. He turned around and said:

'You finance minister? Then I won't go on leave.'

"That is the type of man (Siew Sin) was, straight and frank and honest and sincere. I appointed Tun (Abdul) Razak (Hussein) as finance minister and so he went off," the Tunku added.

This incident underscores one point – the Tunku never regarded Siew Sin's refusal to hand over responsibility for the Treasury as an act of insubordination or worse, of disloyalty. Above all,



Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman returns on Jan 29, 1969 after attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London. He is met by Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin, deputy premier Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Works, Posts and Telecommunications Minister Tun V.T. Sambanthan. The Tunku is carrying granddaughter Nurhayati, and holding Faridah, his adopted daughter.

it illustrates the absolute trust the Tunku had in Siew Sin's judgment, even though it reflected adversely on the prime minister. This helped to enhance Siew Sin's effectiveness as finance minister and contributed significantly to his record breaking 15-year tenure in the post.

Because of the Tunku's unwavering support, Siew Sin was able to make financial decisions that were economically necessary although politically unpopular, and to disagree with the Tunku as well as with his Umno colleagues without worrying about being undermined by jealous political rivals.

Describing Siew Sin as a typical Malaysian who "lives and thinks Malaysian", in his address to the MCA's general assembly, the Tunku recounted an incident when some Chinese rice millers complained about Siew Sin's refusal to entertain their request.

"I remember one occasion when some Chinese rice millers met him in Kuala Lumpur and made certain demands for the increase of the price of rice and to be given certain laxity in dealing with their merchandise.

"Siew Sin told them off and asked them to return home. They immediately came to see me and complained that Siew Sin is not a Chinese, to which my reply was, he is a Malaysian and they must follow his example."

An 'impossible' fellow

Tunku never forgot his finance minister's refusal to hand over responsibility for the Treasury to him, even though he was the prime minister, and often recounted this incident when introducing Siew Sin to visiting dignitaries.

When Eisaku Sato, the then Prime Minister of Japan visited Malaysia in September, 1967, Tunku described Siew Sin "as an impossible fellow, he won't do what I tell him", and then proceeded to relate this incident to the Japanese premier.

"Why don't you sack him?" the Japanese premier asked.

"Oh no, I can't do that. If I did, the country would go bankrupt," Tunku replied. According to Siew Sin, this encounter left Tunku in good humour, and the Sato considerably confused.

Having known Cheng Lock, the Tunku often adopted an avuncular attitude towards Siew Sin. On one occasion, concerned about Siew Sin's health and his sedentary lifestyle, the Tunku tried to persuade his finance

minister to take up golf.

Having played rugby, football and hockey, Siew Sin regarded golf with considerable disdain. How difficult was it to hit a golf ball into a hole a few hundred yards away, he asked.

Realising persuasion wouldn't work, the Tunku decided to capitalise on Siew Sin's well-known dislike for waste. The prime minister ordered a set of made-to-measure golf clubs for Siew Sin. Presented with this expensive gift, Siew Sin had no choice but to sign up for golf lessons.

His first golf lesson was at the Royal Selangor Golf Club with the Tunku as an interested spectator. A diplomat, aware of this epochal event, asked the Tunku about the finance minister's first attempt at golf.

"Did the ball go?" the diplomat asked. "Yes, the ball went and so did the minister," Tunku said. With considerable relish, he proceeded to describe Siew Sin's flying leap after his club hit the ball.

Reinforcing the close relationship between the two men was the strong sense of political solidarity both men displayed towards each other. One incident illustrates the Tunku's unwavering support for the MCA as Umno's partner in the then ruling coalition, the Alliance.

During the 1964 general election campaign, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew tried very hard to persuade the Tunku to drop the MCA and admit the Singapore-based People's Action Party, or PAP, into the Alliance.

Flatly refusing to consider the PAP as a potential partner, the Tunku declared the three Alliance partners – Umno, MCA and MIC – would swim or sink together.

"Even if there are only five MCA members left or five MIC, we will always stand together united in common purpose," the Tunku told an election rally on March 28, 1964.

If one week is a long time in politics, the friendship and political relationship between Tunku and two generations of politicians – first, Tun Tan Cheng Lock and later, Tun Tan Siew Sin may well be an unmatched record in longevity in this country.

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