

Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957-70)

Father of Independence

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ARGUABLY the most loved of Malaysian prime ministers, Tunku Abdul Rahman exuded grace and warmth, but had a steely resolve.

Who can forget the Tunku's calm demeanour in defusing what would have been a riot when supporters of Sports Minister Datuk Harun Idris tried to prevent the police from arresting him for corruption in 1978?

"If you do not obey the law, then this country would go to the dogs for Umno is the custodian of liberty and justice."

After saying his piece, the crowd parted and allowed Harun to surrender. Such was the Tunku's effect and influence.

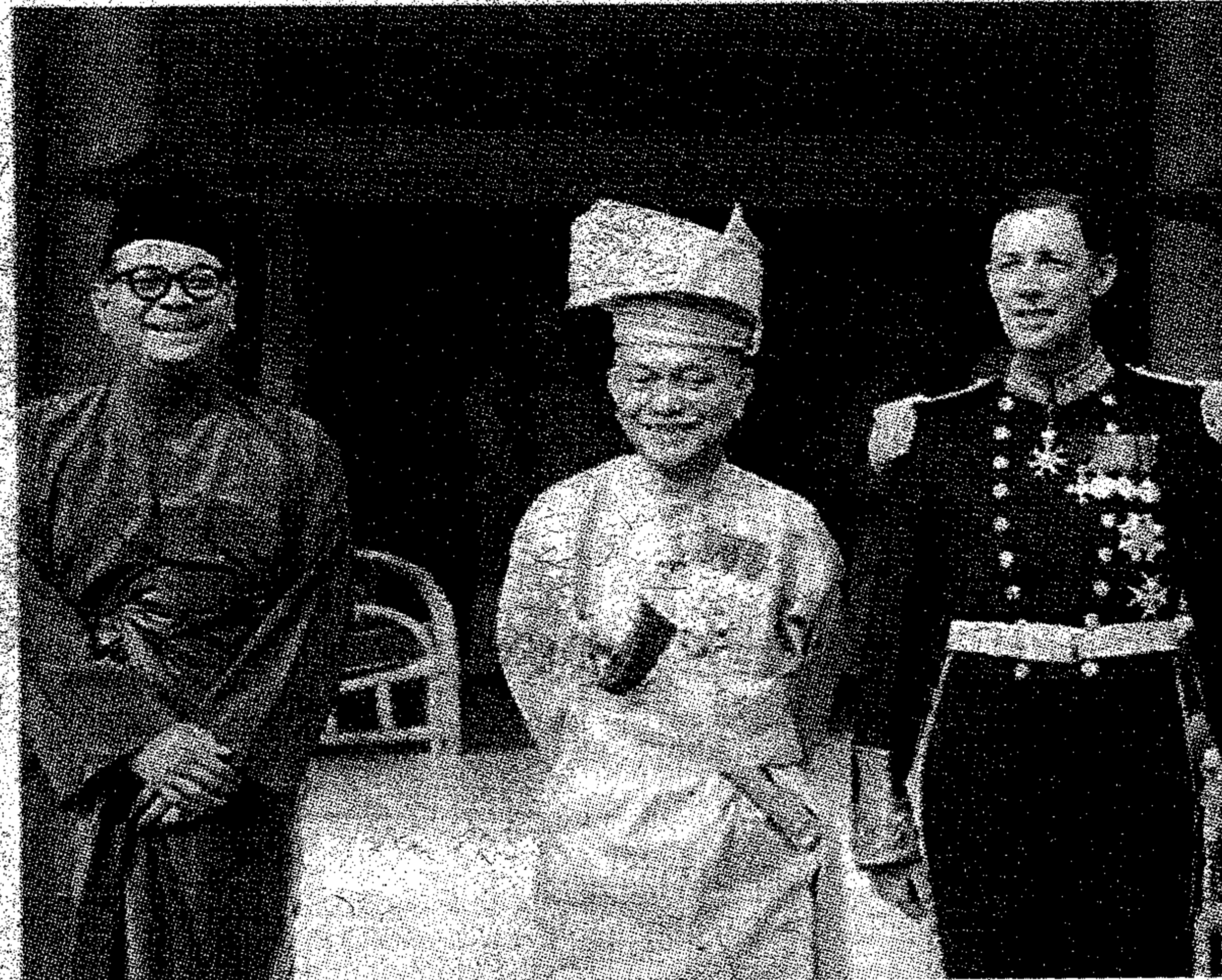
Still, in 1987, despite being the patron of and a columnist at *The Star*, the government suspended the daily for six months following a front-page report that was deemed sympathetic to Internal Security Act (ISA) detainees who had been arrested during Operation Lallang.

"I am *Bapa Malaysia* (the Father of Malaysia). So how can they say it is a threat to national security?" said the bitter Tunku.

His greatest achievement was, of course, gaining independence and securing the formation of Malaysia, but his post-premiership saw him push even harder for a united nation for fear that the race to acquire wealth was causing internal conflicts within the various communities.

The Tunku maintained the need for special privileges for the majority but also made it clear that this had to be in tandem with the protection of the rights of the minority.

His first words to newly-independent Malaya via a radio address are immortalised: "Independence was won by the spontaneous support of all communities in this country - Malays, Chinese, Indians and others who regard Malaya as their home."



Emerging from King's House, Kuala Lumpur after signing of the Merdeka Agreement on Aug 5, 1957 are Chief Minister of the Federated Malay States Tunku Abdul Rahman; Yang di-Pertuan Besar Negri Sembilan Tuanku Abdul Rahman and the last British High Commissioner to Malaya Sir Donald MacGillivray.

The May 13, 1969 tragedy marked the end of Tunku's premiership. In September 1970, he resigned in favour of his long-time and loyal deputy Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

But in spite of the adversities he faced, the Tunku never lost his wit. *theSun's* political editor Zainon Ahmad remembers one meeting with the Tunku.

"Tunku was old and in frail health. I was to interview him with the understanding that it might be his last interview. Arriving at his home, I saw the Tunku in shorts and slippers cleaning the drain.

"He said: *Hang nak interview saya buat apa? Saya dah tua. Dah tak penting lagi. Hah! You ni nak buat obituary lah ni!* (What do you want to interview me for? I'm already old. No longer important. Hah! You want to write my obituary, don't you!) *Ok,*

then. If we have to, then let's do a good job of it!"

Former *New Straits Times* news editor Felix Abisheganaden remembers Tunku for his openness and as a friend of the press.

"He would always ask us for our opinion. He would say that the press and the government were one and made us feel that we were also playing our role in nation building," said Abisheganaden.

Press conferences, he reminisced, would be preceded by a round of drinks.

"When everyone was high and happy, he'd say: *'Ok gentlemen, what are we here to discuss?'* And he'd give you the whole story."

Abisheganaden said Tunku's wit and humour were legendary, citing an incident upon Tunku's return from the Haj together with then Education

Minister Khir Johari (later Tan Sri). "When the press asked him: 'Sir, we can refer to you as Tunku Abdul Rahman Al Haj, but how do we refer to Encik Khir?', Tunku's reply was, 'That's simple. Call him Khir Johari Al Cohol!'"

Describing the Tunku's administration as the "golden years", Abisheganaden said it was an innocent period before ultra-racial sentiments started creeping in.

"Tunku's liberal lifestyle was, of course, the focus, and he was called un-Islamic," Abisheganaden said referring to Tunku's critics, PAS and Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Despite the manoeuvrings in Umno to get rid of him, the Tunku was steadfast. "I will resign properly," he said.

And this, according to Abisheganaden, was how the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) came about. "The Saudis decided on having this body and elected Tunku as its first secretary-general. You can say the OIC started off as a retirement plan for the Tunku!"

Under Tunku Abdul Rahman's premiership:

- » Bahasa Melayu becomes the official language
- » Bank Negara and Bank Bumiputra are formed
- » The Emergency ends with the historic 1955 Baling talks
- » Primary education is given free
- » Malaysia is formed
- » Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) is formed
- » The Youth and Sports Ministry is established
- » Three-year Confrontation with Indonesia ends
- » First Malaysia Plan launched
- » Asean, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is formed
- » Majlis Amanah Rakyat or Mara, to encourage and develop bumiputra entrepreneurship, is established
- » Malaysia International Shipping Corporation is established
- » Makes Islam the official religion