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Breakfast just 20 sen, lunch 80 sen

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KUALA LUMPUR: The opening of the first Kedai Rakyat (Malaysia thrift shop) on Wednesday to help urban families reduce their grocery bills reminded Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak of a "people's restaurant" that was introduced by his late father, Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, during the recession in the 1970s.

When Najib reminisced about the Restoran Rakyat during the launch of the thrift shop, his memories resonated with many Malaysians of the older generation who remembered that one could have nasi lemak for breakfast there for just 20 sen and enjoy a balanced meal of rice and curry with vegetables for just 80 sen.

At the time, inflation was raging throughout the country and this spurred Razak to find innovative ways to help low-wage earners cope with the higher cost of living.

One of them was the introduction of the people's restaurant, or Restoran Rakyat, which opened its doors to the public, most fittingly, on Aug 31, 1973, which is National Day.

Razak himself was the first paying customer at the eatery, located in Jalan Parlimen in the heart of the city.

He served himself and paid 80 sen for his lunch right after officiating the opening eatery, which was

housed in a handsome, air-conditioned Minangkabau-styled building that gave off a "resort-like" atmosphere to many customers.

He had queued up at the food counter to get his meal, together with some 100 other VIPs.

But while he was the first paying customer, the second in line, the then national imity minister Tun V.T. Sambanthan, brought much laughter to the crowd when he forgot to pay, earning himself the headline "The VIP who nearly got off" in the newspapers the next day.

"He quickly dipped into his pocket when the crowd reminded him. Everyone paid, for the restaurant's organising committee, headed by Toh Puan Rahah (Razak's wife and Najib's mother), really meant business," reported the *New Straits Times* then.

The eatery's first lunch comprised fish curry, rendang, kangkung, sambal belacan and cucumber slices. The rice was Mahshuri Special and there was also alternative choices of asam laksa and rojak.

Hundreds of holiday-makers flocked to the eatery for their lunch after the National Day parade, with the queue beginning from as early as 10am.

One regular patron recalled that the eatery was always packed during lunchtime.

"The restaurant was clean and the food was good. I could get a full meal



Tun Abdul Razak himself was the first paying customer at the self-service eatery.

for less than RM1.

"It reminded me of eating at my university's hostel because we were given no plates, but trays for our rice and *lank* at the eatery."

While the idea was to provide affordable meals to low-wage earners in the city, Razak was mindful that the new eatery might affect the business of petty traders around the area. Therefore, he directed that it operated only up to 3pm daily.

"This is to ensure that petty traders in the city, especially those in the vicinity of the restaurant, will not lose their customers."

He also called for such restaurants to be set up in other state capitals to help Malaysians cope with the rising cost of living.

One of the first states to answer his call was Johor, where the second Restoran Rakyat opened

its doors less than three weeks later in Johor Baru, officiated by the late menteri besar Tan Sri Othman Saat.

Several Restoran Rakyat are still operating around the country.

Similarly aspiring to help Malaysians deal with rising global inflation and food costs, Najib wants more Kedai Rakyat (Malaysia) to be set up around the country.

Items sold at the thrift store are about 30 to 50 per cent cheaper than usual market prices.



The first Restoran Rakyat, or people's restaurant, was first set up in Jalan Parlimen, Kuala Lumpur, to help urbanites hard-hit by the 1970s recession to cope with rising inflation.