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'Razak was like a father to me'

MAN OF VISION: The country's second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, is still remembered as a visionary leader 36 years after his death on Jan 14, 1976, writes Eunice Au

FORMER special assistant to Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tunku Tan Sri Shahrizan Tunku Sulaiman, first met Razak in Temerloh, Pahang, where he was serving as an assistant district officer in 1958.

Razak instructed Shahrizan and the district officer to come up with a scheme to distribute land to the people quickly.

"That time, bureaucracy was still slow and land approvals would take three to four years sometimes.

"Tun (Razak) wanted to give land to the people in the district fast so we set up land offices in the villages, called for applications and approved them at the same time."

"The new scheme was completed within a week in each village, a level of efficiency achieved only with Razak's persistence."

That first encounter left Shahrizan enchanted by Razak's style and leadership.

The following year when the elections were held, Razak won in the Pekan constituency, which included a sub-district called Rompin.

Coincidentally, Shahrizan was transferred to be in charge of Rompin, which brought about the beginning of his close relationship with Razak.

Shahrizan says Razak had many friends but no enemies and he was very friendly with the opposition.

When the then Ipoh municipality was governed by the opposition — the People's Progressive Party — headed by Datuk Seri S.P. Seenivasagam, Razak would often call at the former's home to have tea.

He would inspect the town and tell Seenivasagam later that he was very impressed and happy with how clean Ipoh was, Shahrizan shares.

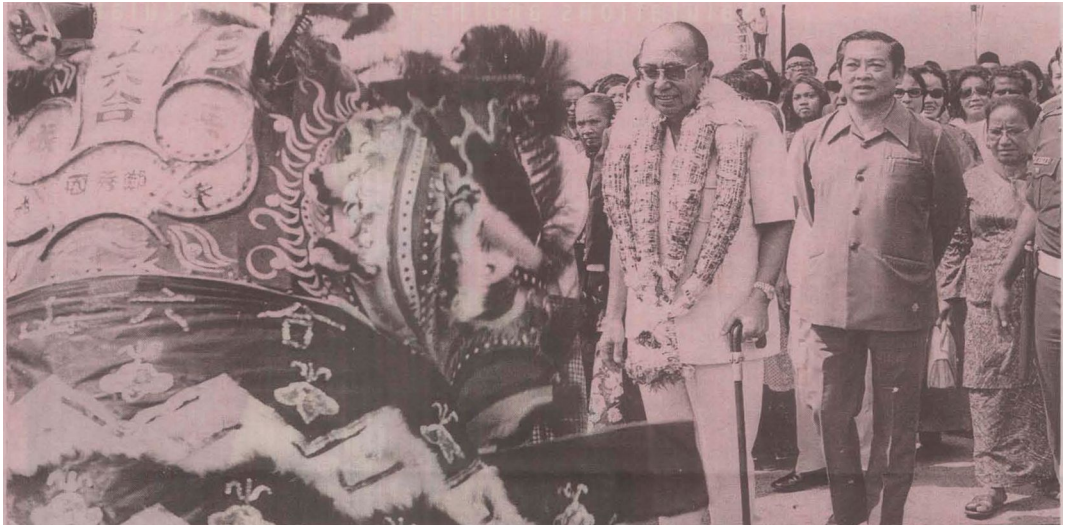
Another instance of Razak's affability was his relationship with former Penang chief minister Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, who was also from the opposition.

"Every year, Razak would take a small boat to Pangkor island to relax and Lim would come and join us, bringing along a special Chinese drink, rambutans and durians.

"Sure, in Parliament, Razak and his political opponents would attack each other on policies, but I had never seen Tun (Razak) attack anyone personally," Shahrizan says.

Razak, who was well known for his efforts in eradicating poverty, used to tell Shahrizan proudly of his barefoot schooling days.

"Razak also told me on the weekends, he rode on his grandfather's buffaloes and took care of them for a two-sen or three-sen reward."



A 'lion' welcoming prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein upon his arrival at Bayan Lepas airport on June 10, 1974. Then Penang chief minister Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu (on Razak's left) used to join Razak on his annual holidays on Pulau Pangkor. NST file pic

His experiences made Razak pick people whom he knew was in sympathy with the low-income group to advise him, Shahrizan says.

"At the top government level, Razak trusted Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman and depended a lot on them.

"Tun Tan's philosophy was that the government cannot spend more than it can afford and Razak respected him for that.

"As for Tun Dr Ismail, he was strict on corruption."

Shahrizan had originally planned to join Razak in Paris prior to his death but the trip did not materialise when Razak was transferred to London for medical treatment.

"I heard the news of his death over the phone and I was stunned for a few minutes.

"The first thought that came to my mind was what would happen to my country?"

"Would there be peace and prosperity? Would there be a power struggle in Umno?"

For Shahrizan, the death of Razak was not only a loss to the nation, but a personal loss as well for Razak was like a father to him.

"I worked with Razak both di-

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Tunku Tan Sri Shahrizan Tunku Sulaiman



rectly and indirectly for 18 years.

"He picked me up from a small district office in Rompin and made me what I am today."

There was one thing that Razak did not manage to accomplish in his lifetime, Shahrizan says.

"He wanted to restructure the

civil service because he was aware that promotions depended on seniority but there were many young people who were exceptionally good who deserved another channel where they could be promoted fast.

"If they had to wait until they

were 50 years old, they would have lost all their enthusiasm, energy and ideas.

"We were discussing this idea but it did not materialise in the end."

TOMORROW: Tun Musa Hitam's impression of Tun Razak