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Tunku's rise and fall

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HIS GREATEST HOUR: Tunku Abdul Rahman was seen as a visionary leader. Independence and the formation of Malaysia are regarded as his greatest achievements. However, two years into the country's independence, Umno began to lose support among Malays as wealth disparities between Malay and non-Malay communities remained wide, write Hana Naz Harun and Laili Ismail

At 48, Tunku Abdul Rahman became the second Umno president on Aug 26, 1951, succeeding party founder Datuk Sir Onn Jaafar, who resigned to form the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP).

A year after taking office, Tunku became the driving force behind a very important development in Malayan politics. His first challenge was the 1952 Kuala Lumpur municipal elections.

The elections had intended to give Malaysians a taste of politics before forming the Federal Government. It was in these elections that Malaya witnessed political cooperation between race-based parties, cooperation that paved the way to independence.

As Umno president, Tunku, through Kuala Lumpur Umno and Selangor MCA, had formed a pact which proved to be a beneficial partnership.

Although Onn's multi-ethnic IMP enjoyed the support of Malay aristocrats and non-Malay political leaders, the Umno-MCA pact had handsomely beaten IMP, who had teamed up with MIC, by nine seats to two in the 12-seat contest.

This victory, along with other successful endeavours in other major towns, sealed the Umno-MCA pact. This partnership held a National Assembly on Aug 23, 1953, at the Selangor Miner's Club, Kuala Lumpur, to discuss the road to independence with both agreeing to form the Alliance party, which MIC joined a year later.

It was in 1954 that Tunku began his campaign for Malaya's independence, but his initial efforts proved futile. The British administration was averse to the idea of granting independence for Malaya, worrying about racial harmony and economic self-sustainability.

Tunku's persistence began to bear fruit when the British administration finally agreed for Malaya to hold its first general election to the Federal Legislative Council, to be held in 1955.

It was announced that nomination day would be in June and that July 27 would be polling day.

Tunku travelled tirelessly, campaigning for the coalition, which later gained popularity among the people.

In 1955, Umno, under the leadership of Tunku, braced for Malaya's first general election,



Tunku Abdul Rahman addressing Umno Youth in 1958.

fielding 34 candidates.

The Alliance won the 1955 General Election with a landslide victory, winning 51 of the 52 total seats.

This was a resounding defeat for Party Negara, formed by Onn, who did not capture any seats from the 30 it had contested. The sole opposition seat was secured by the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party.

The ruling Alliance party, now consisting of three political parties of Malaya's three major races, played an important role in negotiating the transition to independence from British rule while facilitating the preparation of its constitution. Now Malaya chief minister, Tunku continued his work to gain independence for Malaya.

Tunku held constitutional talks in London in January 1956 with the Secretary of States for the Colonies Alan Lennox-Boyd. On Feb 8, 1956, on Tunku's 53rd birthday, he and Lennox-Boyd signed the Independence Agreement, which was scheduled for Aug 31, 1957.

Tunku announced the success of the Merdeka Mission in a public announcement at Padang Bandar Hillir, Malacca, on Feb 20, 1956. His brief speech was muffled by the constant chorus of "Merdeka" being chanted, and it was celebrated with much jubilation.

After Malaya's independence, Tunku, as its first prime minister, continued to dominate Malayan politics. He led Umno to its second successful general election in 1959, where the Alliance won 74

seats out of the 104.

Umno's performance, however, showed a decrease. Only 51 candidates won out of the 69 the party had fielded.

Tunku remained as prime minister, and proceeded to oversee the formation of Malaysia, which was described as one of his greatest achievements

In 1961, Tunku spoke at the Foreign Correspondents Association of Southeast Asia in Singapore, where he proposed a federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo (now Sabah), Sarawak and Brunei. Two years later, on Sept 16, all of the states, except Brunei, formed Malaysia.

The country went into its 3rd General Election in 1964, and while the Alliance party emerged victorious once again, support for the Alliance party had severely deteriorated in the 1969 elections.

The opposition won 54 seats, causing the Alliance to lose its two-thirds majority. The Alliance lost its grip on Penang to political party infant Gerakan, Kelantan to Pas and lost its footing in Perak and Selangor.

The drastic change in the political landscape resulted in the racial riots in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969, three days after polling day. A state of national emergency was declared by the king, resulting in the suspension of Parliament.

While coping with the May 13 racial riots as well as with losing a few local governments to opposition parties during elections,

Umno timeline

Jan 8, 1952

Kuala Lumpur Umno and Selangor MCA form a pact to contest the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections. The pact wins nine out of 12 seats.

Aug 23, 1953

The Umno-MCA partnership holds a national assembly to discuss the road to independence and agrees to form the Alliance party.

Feb 1, 1954

MIC agrees to join the Alliance.

July 27, 1955

The first Malayan General Election is held. The Umno-MCA pact wins 51 out of 52 seats.

July 31, 1955

Tunku Abdul Rahman, as Umno president, is appointed chief minister. The Umno House in Batu Road (Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) is officially opened.



Jan 1, 1956

Tunku, with Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil, Tun H.S. Lee and Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang, among others, leave for London for the Merdeka mission.

Feb 8, 1956

Tunku and Alan Lennox-Boyd sign the Independence Agreement, scheduled for Aug 31, 1957.

Aug 31, 1957

Malaya achieves independence. Tunku becomes prime minister and Razak is his deputy.

Aug 19, 1959

In the first election after independence, Umno wins 51 of 69 seats contested. The alliance remains as the government.

May 27, 1961

Tunku, at the Foreign Correspondents Association of Southeast Asia in Singapore, proposes for a federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo (now Sabah), Sarawak and Brunei

Nov 4, 1961

Umno holds an extraordinary general assembly to support the formation of Malaysia.

Sept 16, 1963

Malaysia is formed, with the federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak.

April 25, 1964

The third general election is held. The alliance emerges victorious and Tunku remains as prime minister.

May 10, 1969

Umno wins 51 out of 67 seats it contested in the 1969 elections. The Alliance, however, sees a drop in performance. The opposition wins 54 seats, causing the Alliance to lose its two-thirds majority. The alliances loses Penang, Kelantan, Perak and Selangor.

May 13, 1969

A racial riot ensued in Kuala Lumpur. A state of national emergency is declared by the king, resulting in the suspension of Parliament.

Sept 22, 1970

Tunku resigns as prime minister, succeeded by Razak.



Jan 23 and 24, 1971

At the Umno general assembly at Merlin Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Tunku steps down as president, and Razak takes over.

Umno was plagued by in-fighting, which later saw the young Dr Mahathir Mohamad (later Tun) requesting Tunku to resign.

Due to these crises, the government had announced emergency rule all over the Malay peninsula under the National Operations Council, helmed by the then deputy prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

Tunku was forced to resign as prime minister in favour of Razak on Sept 22, 1970, and stepped down as Umno president in 1971.

Umno Veteran Club secretary-general Datuk Mustapha Yaakub said Tunku's biggest contribution to the country was that he brought about independence, with the help of Umno and its allies under the Alliance coalition.

The reason Dr Mahathir became critical of Tunku's leadership, Mustapha said, was the fact that he was not entirely successful at fulfilling the Malays' aspirations after

gaining independence.

"Tunku was indeed the Father of Independence, but many Malays were against his premiership, as they believed his achievements did not go beyond securing independence for the country.

"Mahathir did not agree with the way Tunku managed the country at that time and this caused a rift. Despite this tension, however, Umno remained strong at the highest levels, which made the leadership transition to Razak rather smooth," he said.

Mustapha said Umno had been able to weather leadership issues as all leaders in branches and divisions believed that unity was important.

"We would always fall back to our slogan 'Bersatu, Bersedia, Berkhidmat' (Unite, Be loyal and Serve)."

TOMORROW: Tun Abdul Razak Hussein's leadership and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad