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# Remembering the Tunku

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“ It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the

epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...” Thus was the opening line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

This rather sums up events over the last week, mirroring highs and lows within a matter of days. The week began with fond memories of IDEAS' (Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs) 5th anniversary event, held in commemoration with our first prime minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman's (p.i.x) n2th birthday.

Although held annually, this year was special, where we had with us the Tunku's granddaughter, Datin Sharifah Menjelara Hussein, who shared heartwarming personal stories about his passion and vision for what would become Malaysia. Through her, we recalled his vision for a nation whose peoples of all walks of life cared deeply for each other regardless of race or religion, grounded firmly on the principles of liberty and justice, as was clearly stated in his Proclamation of Independence.

An animated panel discussion spoke of the need for a more liberalised Malaysia - both in economic and political terms, where opening up the economy would allow for greater choice, competition, and a rules-based environment in which transparency and good governance

would flourish. These are the conditions that would allow the country to propel itself forward.

Keynote speaker Dr Razeen Sally went a step further by saying that recent Malaysian policies like the ETP (Economic Transformation Programme) and GTP (Government Transformation Programme) merely skirt around the need to truly transform race-based preferential policies without really reforming government-linked companies. A lethal combination, in his opinion, is when there is excessive government presence in business - thereby competing with small and medium enterprises - and a weak government, since this results in cronyism.

But what made the occasion truly special was the launch of IDEAS' *National Unity Youth Fellowship*, followed by a weekend-long workshop for the 20 young Malaysian leaders that were selected out of about 50 applicants. These 20 will go through a nine-month programme, during which they will discuss issues related to politics, institutions, inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and socio-economic challenges to unity in the country, thereafter culminating in a National Unity Conference on Malaysia Day (Sept 16) this year.

Their exuberance and hope were reminiscent of the time I started out in activism and public policy discourse. This was a time at which, what was true and fair was not yet muddled by the notion that politics requires expedient behaviour. After working in various capacities within the government, civil society and politics, one's belief that government and politics can function without compromise is often challenged.

But what transpired on Tuesday went far

beyond that. Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, being sentenced to five years in prison for sodomy, has been criticised by several reputable international organisations, including the International Commission of Jurists, Human Rights Watch and Forum-Asia, given the nature and circumstances under which he was charged in August 2008. Many independent observers believe this was selectively and inappropriately carried out in order to spell an end to Anwar's political career.



Leaders come and go, but if the justice system has compromised on its own neutrality, integrity and oath to uphold the rule of law, then this is what will be internationally scrutinised in the days and months to come, at the cost of our credibility and inward investment opportunities.

At the anniversary event, we distributed copies of a book compiling quotes from the Tunku himself, generously donated by

Think City. One particular saying caught my attention, given the political quagmire that engulfs us today. He said, "There have been difficulties in our way to effect a settlement because of different ideologies that exist in the parties and the different political worlds in which we live. Nevertheless, if men accept the principle that they must live at peace with one another and bear goodwill and friendship towards one another, much of the difficulties will be overcome."

If the Tunku were alive today, one wonders what his opinion would be of the judgment that was so unanimously arrived at on Tuesday this week.

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