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CHEN WAS RAZAK'S 'IMAGE MAKER'

He helped to soften Razak's image among the Chinese

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IT was the second day after the nomination day of the 1964 General Election when then deputy prime minister, rural development minister and defence minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein dropped by to check on the Damansara parliamentary constituency.

It was the seat that Michael Chen (now Tan Sri) was assigned to contest for.

Chen, then 31, overheard Razak asking then MCA president Tun Tan Siew Sin: "Is that the young man whom you have talked so much about? Why assign him to a constituency that he is not likely to win, as if we are sacrificing him?"

Chen said he was nervous when he heard it.

His nervousness was natural, as the Damansara constituency was seen as a Socialist Front stronghold. It was also the first time Chen had met Razak.

This was despite both of them had attended the same law school in the United Kingdom — Lincoln's Inn in London.

"We have never met before. He



Tan Sri Michael Chen said, on average, Tun Abdul Razak would visit three villages a week. PIC BY HAMIDI SAMSUDIN

left before I joined the law school," Chen said.

The election results saw Chen and the Alliance (precursor to Barisan Nasional) winning the seat by a 500-vote majority in a three-cornered fight between candidates from the Socialist Front and People's Action Party.

At the first session in Parliament, Razak called Chen to his office in Jalan Dato' Onn and told the latter that he wanted to appoint the young lawyer as his parliamentary secretary.

"I never expected it because I had no experience whatsoever.

"Furthermore, based on normal procedures, the party would usually recommend the name (for such a post)."

Disregarding established norms, Razak had personally

called for Chen. However, the latter told Razak that he was not ready for the post.

"My vision at that time was to become a good lawyer. One cannot practice law and be involved in politics at the same time.

"I also had parents and siblings to look after," Chen said.

Razak was disappointed with Chen's response and had given him an hour-long lecture, telling him that young people should look after the interest of the country and its development rather than make money for oneself.

However, Razak did not give up, and invited Chen's father-in-law to play a round of golf with him the next day.

"After the first teeing, he told my father-in-law, 'your son-in-law is a hopeless person', and Razak

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carried on with his golf game," Chen, now 85, said.

His father-in-law phoned Chen. "Have you offended Razak?" he asked Chen, before persuading his son-in-law to take up the post as parliamentary secretary.

A week later, Razak called Chen again, and this time, he knew that the MCA man could not say no.

Chen said the first responsibility that Razak entrusted him with was to help him soften his image among the Chinese community.

The community viewed Razak as "not so friendly" and anti-Chinese.

"He asked me to help him change this negative image among the Chinese community. I told him that I am not an image maker. But, he insisted me to do so."

Chen said all he did was tweak Razak's weekly work routine, and this proved to be quite effective

in endearing him to the Chinese community.

Razak's weekly schedule saw him spend the first three days at his office, while Thursday to Saturday, saw him going to rural areas to visit villages.

Chen said on the average, Razak would visit three villages a week.

"I told him, he should visit one Chinese new village and two other villages a week. He agreed, so I arranged the opportunity for him to meet the Chinese community and vice versa."

Chen said the first Chinese new village that Razak visited was Kampung Perting in Bentong, and a year after that visit, the Chinese community's perception towards him changed.

"As the Chinese say, 'when you meet each other face to face, you enhance the relationship.'"

Chen also played another pivotal role in laying the ground work for diplomatic ties between Malaysia and China, as well as the historic handshake between Razak and former Communist Party of China chairman Mao Zedong in Beijing in 1974.

"At that time, the Communists were pushing down to Vietnam. Everyone was scared of the domino effect that would take place. No leader in the region tried to rectify the problem.

"But, Razak had the courage to start diplomatic ties with China, which rectified the whole situation," Chen said.