

REMEMBERING TUNKU'S LEGACY

"A LEADER takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be." This statement by Rosalynn Carter sums up the life and work of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, whose 118th birthday we commemorate today.

Tunku is best known as our nation's founding father and the driving force behind the peaceful transition of power from British colonialism to Malayan independence. But we forget the other scintillating aspects of his multi-faceted personality.

Those who knew Tunku well describe him as a person who was simple, humble, dedicated and incorruptible. He was a visionary with a noble dream of "unity in diversity" for our beloved land. Though his vision was ahead of its time, it is now recognised around the world that in any nation with diversity, the litmus test of success and stability is the ability to live together in peace, harmony and mutual respect.

In his personal life, Tunku was not trapped by dogma. He did not allow the noise of other opinions to drown out his own inner voice. As a leader, he found the smartest people he could surround himself with from the various communities to lead the nation.

Tunku was a great mediator and reconciler. Bringing diverse people together in 1957 and again in 1963 was his forte. Interracial peace and harmony were his enduring legacy to the nation. Ever since he inherited the leadership of Umno from Datuk Sir Onn Jaffar in August 1951, he worked ceaselessly to bring the racial and religious communities together under one political platform and chisel out painstaking compromises.

The demands of the British for some features of democratic governance had to be accommodated with the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, the special position of Malays and the desire of the federated states for some autonomy.

The Constitution of 1957 that he and his colleagues in the Alliance helped the Reid Commission to draft blazed a middle path. It incorporated many indigenous features of the Malay archipelago. Among them were the unique system of multiple Malay monarchs united by a Conference of Rulers, Malay reserve land, Islam as the religion of the federation, but freedom of religion for all other communities, and affirmative action provisions to preserve the spe-



Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaiming independence for Malaya at Stadium Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur, on Aug 31, 1957.



Tunku Abdul Rahman being sent off on his London Merdeka mission by 8,000-strong supporters on Jan 2, 1956. In the car are Singapore's local government, lands and housing minister Abdul Hamid Jumaat and two Federation representatives.

cial position of Malays, and, in 1963, of the natives of Sabah and Sarawak.

There was recognition of Malay and native customs, Bahasa Melayu as the national language, weightage for rural areas in the drawing up of electoral boundaries, and legal restrictions on preaching of any religion to Muslims.

At the same time, the Malay-Muslim/native features of the Constitution were balanced by many provisions suitable for our dazzlingly diverse, multiracial and multireligious society. Citizenship was granted to nearly 1.3 million non-Malays. This was a remarkable act of accommodation for the age. The electoral process and the chapter on fundamental liberties grant rights to all citizens. At the federal level, membership of the judiciary, the cabinet, Parliament, the public services and the special commissions under the Constitution are open to all citizens.

Though Islam is the religion of the

federation, Malaysia is not a theocratic state. The Constitution is supreme. Syariah does not apply to non-Muslims. All religious communities are allowed to profess and practise their faiths in peace and harmony.

Though Bahasa Melayu is the national language for official purposes, there is protection for the formal study in all schools of other languages. There is a right to use other languages for unofficial purposes. Though Article 89 reserves some land for Malays, it also provides that no non-Malay land shall be appropriated for Malay reserves.

Article 153 on the special position of Malays is hedged in by limitations. For example, along with his duty to protect Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, the king is enjoined to safeguard the legitimate interests of other communities. Even during a state of emergency under Article 150, some rights, like citizenship, religion and language, are protected by Arti-

cle 150(6A) against easy repeal.

In 1963, Sabah and Sarawak were given special autonomy in many areas. In addition to the above legal provisions, the coalitions that have ruled the country up to now have been built on an overwhelming spirit of accommodation between the races, a moderateness of spirit and an absence of the passions, zeal and ideological convictions that in other plural societies have left a heritage of bitterness.

Economic opportunities have given to everyone a stake in the country. The country is a rich cultural mosaic. The overall spirit of the 1957 and 1963 Constitutions was one of tolerance, moderation, compassion and give and take. This was Tunku's enduring contribution.

At the international level, Tunku was the main architect of our foreign policy and felt strongly about regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Unknown to some, he played a leading role in the establishment of the Organisation of Islamic Countries and was its first secretary-general.

As we contemplate Tunku's life and sterling leadership, it is sad to note that from being a plural society par excellence up to the 90s, we have become a society buffeted by the divisive problems of race, religion and region. But there is no need to despair.

Mistakes have the power to turn us into something better than we were before. Sometimes, it is by losing our way that we learn where to go.

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