

Tunku's unfulfilled legacy

TODAY would have been Tunku Abdul Rahman's 119th birthday. Tunku, who passed away in December 1990 is for most of us the greatest Malaysian. He was a statesman of great wisdom, nobility, charm, compassion, diplomacy, simplicity, with highest integrity, and he contributed greatly to advancing national interest by expanding the country to form Malaysia.

He prioritised national unity and harmony, and regarded and treated all as equal. The sad thing is that very few people, especially the younger generation know much about the father of our nation.

His powerful critics have long dominated our national narrative to the extent that he has been rendered somewhat obscure, more a historical figure than a great leader that inspired and moved the country to attain the greatest heights.

He was the worthy successor of another great man, Datuk Onn Jaafar, lamentably another much forgotten figure. During Tunku's time, Malaysia was the most promising country in Asia in spite of its many teething problems.

He could claim he was the happiest prime minister in the world. He believed he had a first rate Cabinet, which included the two Rahman brothers, Suleiman Abdul Rahman and Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun V. T. Sambanthan and Tun Tan Siew Sin. There was also an excellent civil service and he had great confidence and trust in his people whether they were government functionaries or the nation's footballers.

Today, in contrast, our country appears to be in a bind. Football prowess is a far off and fanciful thought because food and a decent life have become more germane concerns. Failure, fauxpas in public policy matters and fanciful fanfare over ordinary non-events have replaced solid and quiet progress.

In the halcyon days of the Tunku and Tun Hussein Onn, there was the highest respect amounting to reverence for the law. Tunku and Hussein are singled out because when supporters of the then convicted Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Harun Idris were holding him hostage and preventing him from leaving his home to serve his prison term, it was Tunku

who went unobtrusively to pacify the Umno Youth supporters and discreetly escorted Harun under the cover of night to prison. Hussein was then prime minister.

Harun was charged, tried and convicted and took the sentences imposed in stride. A lawyer himself, he recognised and realised the significance of adhering to and upholding the sanctity and spirit of the law. That was the essence and foundation of the harmony and law and order in our society.

Harun did not believe in the law of the jungle. Tunku later explained that he was sympathetic towards Harun. However, Harun had to commence the prison term as he could not have flouted the law. Currently, the country seems to be in somewhat of an odd abeyance, a kind of a paralysis and caught in a political and governance stupor. Malaysians are being subjected to a barrage of information and news clips by the mainstream media that a person convicted by the courts for the most egregious white-collar crime can be offered hero-worship, even acclamation and jubilation because a few untainted political leaders see no harm in keeping his company and seeking his patronage.

Most would recall that the Pakatan Harapan (PH) team, which took over the government in May 2018 had its shortcomings. But it is greatly missed. That government shot itself in the foot repeatedly but it provided abundant evidence that it was willing to take on squarely corruption involving the supreme political elite.

Shortly after the swearing-in of its attorney-general, former prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak was produced in court and charged with various kinds of corruption, abuse of office and forgery offences. He has since been convicted first at the High Court after a lengthy trial and most recently at the Court of Appeal. One appeal to the Federal Court is pending.

To its credit, the PH government showed unambiguous, unequivocal and the utmost commitment and concern about clamping down on not just corruption but corruption involving the country's supreme political elite. This was commendable, courageous and reassuring to the public.

A lasting after-effect of the short-lived PH government's actions is that it had whetted the public's appetite for more transparency, prosecutions and conviction of the most highly placed public officials.

Today most people, especially the well-educated groups, are disappointed that since the ouster of the PH government, the strong political and professional will to investigate and pursue corruption matters seems to have waned.

Prof Syed Hussein Al-Atas says in his book *Sociology of Corruption*, that "every bureaucratic machine suffers to some extent from an antipathy towards initiative and originality, from sycophancy and the preferment of intrigues and yes men. But when graft is added to these disorders, the machine ejects all honest men, selects for promotion the most ruthless and astute rogues and compels the rest to follow their example." The eminent professor had half a century ago accurately anticipated the direction of the country's governance trajectory. Institutions of the state, whether they are involved in policy-making functions, security, regulatory or enforcement responsibilities, should endeavour to protect and enhance the situation of the citizen and not exclusively the elite or the supreme political elite.

In the long term, it is strong institutions that matter, not individuals heading them. Individuals can be replaced easily but institutions need much time to be nurtured and established.

We have to think of institutional strength in Bank Negara, the police force, the Attorney-General's Chambers, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and not of the individuals that head these institutions. These individuals are certainly not indispensable.

We must not forget how Tunku and his small Cabinet team of upright men laid the foundations for a stable, spectacular and successful country based on the rule of law in what was a turbulent regional environment.

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