

Make Feb 8 a special day to remember Tunku's unifying legacy



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IF Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Alhaj were alive today, Malaysia's first prime minister would have celebrated his 122nd birthday on Feb 8. While memories of the Tunku may have faded for some, many Malaysians still remember him with great fondness and admiration.

One such individual is Tan Sri Yussof Latiff, the Grand Old Man of Penang, who is in his early 90s. Yussof never fails to do something special on this significant day to honour our Bapa Merdeka, who shone like a beacon in emphasising the importance of unity among the ethnic groups.

Yussof, who heads the Penang State Goodwill Consultative Council, has been holding Unity Day celebrations every Feb 8 in

Penang for many years to drive home the point that unity is a precious commodity that needs to be nurtured and cherished, especially in the younger generation.

To take this cause a step further, his council has asked the National Unity Ministry to consider holding unity celebrations and observing Feb 8 as a special day to remember Tunku's unifying legacy.

Tunku's foresight and vision as the country gained independence were put forward matter-of-factly by the man himself: "Our future depends on how well many different kinds of people can live and work together."

Given the recent displays of intolerance and insensitivity at the slightest occurrence of perceived ethnic or religious inappropriateness, there needs to be a reset of what and how we want our country to be.

Tunku, who many may not know, was responsible for the opening sentence of our national anthem *Negaraku, tanah tumpahnya darahku...* had this interesting observation at the dawn of Merdeka: "I have often noticed, particularly among chil-



*Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra
Alhaj*

dren, there is a complete absence of communal feelings and prejudices. In this respect, they must consider the grown-ups rather off to hear them refer to people by race. In the new Malaya (Malaysia), I would like the same spirit to prevail among all men who are equal in the sight of God and man."

In *Dialog*, a book published in 2017 before Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad became a cabinet minister five years later, he wrote some of the best tributes to Tunku.

He penned his thoughts insightfully on Tunku's noble values with great awe and conviction, giving us much hope as to how he feels on how the country should move forward.

The PKR member Of parliament for Setiawangsa wrote: "Junku, of course, is no longer with us. I cannot help but feel that we have not only been left bereft of his presence but also lost sight of what he stood for. Somewhere along the way, whether consciously or not, we have lost his spirit, and we are worse off for it.

"His values, particularly those related to participatory democracy, civil liberties, and his respect for the rule of law, are lost among those involved in today's politics. These values today are instead considered threats and not to be tolerated unless you conform to expected norms. There is very little tolerance for dissent and diversity. Yet these are precisely what Tunku cultivated, encouraged, and even celebrated.

"Tunku respected differences. He called the opposition out on its foibles. He never let anything or anyone threaten the security of

the country. But in politics and his daily life, no one could accuse him of not being a gentleman and ultimately, a statesman.

"He understood that democracy requires its leaders to behave like democrats, that no cause could justify abusing processes and institutions. As he was quoted saying, 'The people who made the laws should abide by them'. This is another thing we have lost.'

"The erosion of our fundamentals has indeed become fundamental. It leaves us open to exploitation, opacity, and corruption as our institutions wither and democracy declines.

"Malaysians must ask themselves if we have remained true to Tunku's ideals and vision. Given the sacred trust that he imposed on us as Malaysians, we should and must remain true to them."

Well said, Nik Nazmi!

Although Tunku left us 35 years ago, there's still much we can take inspiration from him as to how Malaysia can be more dynamic and cohesively better.

The writer is a former Bernama chief executive officer and editor-in-chief