

Spotlight: Razak's 3 endearing legacies
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In the last of a three-part series on Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, his former personal secretary for 13½ years, Datuk Zakaria Ahmad, shares stories about the leader who always made time for common citizens. Eunice Au writes

DATUK Zakaria Ahmad, 79, who had accompanied the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein on many occasions and was tasked with taking care of him and his children, understood the iconic Father of Development well.

Zakaria had to comprehend Razak's character, the way he behaved and know what he wanted, and did not want.

That included knowing what Razak liked to eat.

"When we went overseas, diplomats would ask what our prime minister (Razak) liked to eat and I would say spring chicken or steak."

The two also had a secret code for Razak's daily appointments.

"Blue ink indicated that the person would come and could be trusted; red ink meant the person cannot be trusted and it was not certain he or she would show up; while pencil scribbles meant the person would not come," Zakaria says chuckling.

The amiable leader always seemed to have time for the common citizen.

Zakaria recalled that once, a man from Kuala Lipis, Pahang travelled a great distance to meet with Razak just to ask one question: "When will Tun (Razak) bring us cows?"

In those days, the government gave away a pair of male and female cows to villagers so that they could earn a living, Zakaria explains.

"Razak told the man he would tell the Agriculture Ministry to send the cows soon and he did it.

"To him, there must always be a reply to a request, yes or no.

"He did not like delays and could not tolerate staff who did that."

Razak's penchant for speed and efficiency could be seen in his quirky way of reading letters, Zakaria shares.

"Razak did not want to read letters from top to bottom.

"He told me the front is the kata-kata aluan (nice words) and the ending is the conclusion which takes too much time to read.

"The middle is what people want so he reads that part."

This listening ear and love for the people was perhaps his most endearing trait.

During floods, Razak would visit the affected sites in a motorboat and identify the areas that needed immediate help.

"He knew that people by the river would find it difficult during floods so he made sure they were moved further away from the river."

His undying care for the people was also extended to Zakaria.

Once, when Zakaria was inflicted with iritis -- an inflammation of the iris, Razak visited him in the hospital.

"The eye specialist was surprised and asked why I did not tell him I was Razak's personal secretary."

With so many people to meet, Razak had devised a system which allowed him to communicate and touch base with all Malaysians.

Once a month, he would organise separate dinner functions at his residence, Sri Taman, for the Sultans, governors, cabinet ministers, senior government officers, senior police officers, armed forces' officers, businessmen, corporate leaders, Umno leaders, menteri besar and Umno members so that he could listen to their suggestions and also tell them his plans for the country.

After the May 13, 1969 race riots, Zakaria said a lot of people had asked Razak to take over from Tunku Abdul Rahman but Razak had said no.

"He told me he could not depose Tunku (Abdul Rahman) because they were good friends.

"He said Tunku appointed him as the deputy prime minister so he could not depose him and he did not want people to do the same to him later."

Zakaria believes that Razak's stance set the standards for future Umno presidential hand overs, where it is always peaceful and not done by force.

In 1970, after serving Razak for years, Zakaria asked for a job transfer.

Razak refused to grant his request at first but in the end, appointed him as head of the Ceremonial Division.

When Razak went for a medical check-up in London in 1973, Zakaria found out that the former was stricken with leukaemia. Before Razak left Malaysia for the final time, Zakaria went to see him.

"Razak said to me 'I'm not here, take care of yourself'.

"I can still remember that phrase until today."

Upon Razak's death, Zakaria's appointment as the head of Ceremonial Division turned out to be truly poetic.

The long-time aide Zakaria received his boss's body at the Subang airport and brought it to the Parliament House for people to pay their respects before burial.

"There was a procession from Parliament House to Masjid Negara for prayers and thousands of people crowded around and followed Razak's body.

"That was how popular he was.

"He was buried in the Makam Pahlawan behind Masjid Negara and my ceremonial duties ended there," Zakaria says, with tears in his eyes.

There were three greatest legacies that Razak passed on to Zakaria, which the former had carried out by example, that is -- to speak the truth, honour your words and respect others.

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