

Remembering the Tunku: Special address by Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam at IDEAS 4th Anniversary 8 Feb 2014

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REMEMBERING THE TUNKU

By Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam

At IDEAS' 4th Anniversary And 111th Birthday Of The Tunku

On Saturday, 8 February 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

I am greatly honoured, to be invited to give this address on remembering the Tunku on his 111th birthday anniversary and the 4th anniversary of IDEAS.

I feel unworthy of this privilege to deliver this address on the Tunku.

Let me say at the outset that i admire our late beloved Tunku Abdul Rahman greatly and feel that I cannot do enough justice to such a great leader.

2. WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED ME TO SPEAK?

Is it because – at my age there are only a few of us left, who served under Tunku's premiership?

Or is it because I, like many or most Malaysians, believe in Tunku's values and salute his great achievements?

Indeed, I was a university student when I was thrilled to hear him shout "Merdeka" seven times at the Merdeka stadium on the first Merdeka day in front of the tumultuous crowd on that bright sunny day on August 31st 1957.

At the outset, let me say that, i am an admirer of our late beloved Tunku.

I believe that Malaysia would be a much better and happier country – if we followed his golden rules and values.

3. WHAT THEN WERE THE TUNKU'S VALUES? WHAT WERE HIS ASPIRATIONS AND HIS DREAMS FOR OUR BELOVED MALAYSIA - AND WHAT ARE THEY TODAY?

The late Tun Suffian, our former chief justice, in the book "Prince among Men" – described the Tunku thus –

"Though a prince he was a democrat, though he was a politician, he was a gentlemen and a statesmen – and history will forever record his great contribution towards his country and people"

4. AND SO HOW DO WE REMEMBER THE TUNKU?

Firstly, we all remember him fondly as a true Malay Malaysian. He did not have qualms about being, first a Malay and then a Malaysian. Indeed he was both at the same time.

Secondly, he was as he described himself – “the happiest prime minister in the world”. Indeed I doubt any Malaysian pm can honestly claim that position? He is regarded by many as the “first and greatest PM of Malaysia”. He did not have a mean bone in him. That cannot be said so easily of many politicians today.

Thirdly, while he felt strongly about uplifting the poor and the underprivileged – he was never racial as I can recall. It’s difficult to attribute this rare quality to most of our politicians, on either side, today.

Fourthly, the Tunku was greatly loved by all Malaysians regardless of race and religion, despite his love for everything “fast ie. Fast cars, horses and ladies.” Today we have definitely slowed down – we have far more hang-ups. For instance he loved joget, like the late Tun Razak. I for one miss it today, especially the joget dances with ministers of health Khir Johari and Bahaman at the nurses’ hostels.

Fifthly, because he was a modern Muslim, he was not parochial and narrow minded and he boldly encouraged great religious freedom. He was not bigoted like many leaders today!

Sixthly, he regarded all of us as Malaysians, first and foremost. He therefore promoted and practiced the fundamental principles of egalitarianism and justice, even before the NEP was officially adopted after the May 13th riots. In other words he always stood up for fairness to all. This was because of his basic and intrinsic goodness of heart and his rich inner spirituality. He was not a “pretender” and showed much humanity to all including to bartenders!

Seventhly, he upheld the principles of meritocracy and competition while caring for the poor and the underprivileged. That is why we enjoyed immense confidence, both at home and abroad in our socio-economic management. That is how he laid firm foundations for political stability, national unity and economic progress and great religious understanding and tolerance.

Eighthly, he enjoyed enormous international goodwill and stature. He was admired both in the developing south nations, as well as the rich north or western nations – without stirring rancour or being regarded as recalcitrant.

5. So what would the Tunku say to us today?

55 years after the Merdeka that he on so graciously and grandly and heroically achieved, for our beloved country and all of us?

I honestly believe that he would have “mixed feelings” for the following reasons:

(i) On the positive side

Firstly, as ‘Bapa Kemerdekaan’ he would be happy and proud that, his Malaya of 1957, and then Malaysia in 1963, is still here and alive and kicking. I say this because many people and nations at the time of Merdeka in 1957, thought we would go down the tube on many occasions in the past. Even now there are many serious doubters – who have considerable misgivings about our future.

(for example, my own late dear father although a loyal civil servant, would not allow me to go to the Merdeka stadium for the declaration of Merdeka on August 31st 1957. He advised me that there might be riots! It was my late dear mother who persuaded my father to let me, as an adult university student, to walk just across from our government house at Hose Road, next to Dewan Bahasa and Tunku’s old residence at Hose Road, to the Merdeka stadium.)

1. Then there were doubts in 1963. Many countries and people felt that Malaysia would be overrun by Indonesia during confrontation.
2. Then again when Singapore was expelled by the Tunku's government in 1965.
3. Then again during the racial riots in May 13th 1969 and later.
4. Then again during the severe financial crisis in 1968 and 1997!
5. And now we are facing significant challenges in our race and religious relations, as we have become increasingly polarised since the time of Tunku.

So we have gone through several acute challenges in our relatively short history. That is why I believe that Malaysia is, a very complex and complicated country, that Tunku put together with a relatively pragmatic and workable federal constitution, has been greatly blessed. Not only has it survived all these challenges, but Malaysia has prospered considerably – despite its inherent fragility.

So I think the Tunku would be proud to witness Malaysia's intrinsic resilience and vibrancy. He would see us as a country like a fast car that has negotiated tricky bends in spite of having some careless drivers!

Secondly, the Tunku would be proud of our socio economic development. We have to accept that we have done remarkably well by the standards of most other developing countries, despite our unique internal problems of race and religion and geographical diversity and increasing income disparities – and polarisation. However, I accept that with greater adoption of the Tunku's socio economic policies and the better implementation of the original philosophy of Tun Razak's the NEP, (without the abuses), Malaysia would have achieved much more than hitherto.

And the Tunku's aspirations would have been realized to a much greater extent!

But that is now in the realm of historic speculation and regrets but nevertheless with still some high hopes. Unfortunately too much water has flowed under the bridge of destiny.

Our present situation has evolved from that history lots of achievements but some serious weaknesses, which would make Tunku unhappy. Unless we change course and go back to basics, it is now unlikely that the Tunku's dreams of a happy Malaysia for all Malaysians I will be fulfilled!

Thirdly, although the Barisan national government is now a far cry from the Tunku's alliance party and his brand of the BN, he must be smiling from up there and looking down upon us all, with some surprise, to witness the BN's strength for 55 years so far, especially with its 2/3rd majority up to 2008. I seriously doubt that even dear Tunku would have envisaged the quite unique BN experience of longevity and resilience so far.

Fourthly, as a leading Muslim leader he would be very proud to see that the organisation of Islamic countries that the Tunku himself helped to establish and advance, has progressed so much in size, stature and influence with its great impact on the world scene. He would be proud of his leadership in fighting against apartheid in South Africa. He would be I presume, be exchanging views with president Mandela on what went right and what went wrong in our countries and in the world at large. There is no doubt that we need leaders of their calibre today more than ever personally I wish god will bless our PM Najib with more of their qualities – so he can become as great a leader himself!

5(ii) What would make the Tunku unhappy, to see in his beloved Malaysia today?

Let me answer loudly what many of you may want to agree with me silently.

Firstly, he would be unhappy to see that there is much more doubt and pessimism amongst a higher proportion of Malaysians today, as compared to the time of the Tunku's premiership?

Secondly, he would be sad to see the excessive and unnecessary and wasteful and unproductive politicking, dirty politics, racism and religious bigotry and polarization in our society.

Thirdly, the polarisation and disunity would trouble him, as he was always for harmony and national unity, from the very beginning of our nationhood.

Fourthly, he would see a Malaysia that is declining rather than ascending compared to other countries in the middle income group. In fact, we are now caught in – “the middle income trap” and are struggling to get out!

Fifthly, the Tunku would want to see us all more united in moving to greater national unity and progress.

6. So how could we realise the Tunku's dream for a more happy and united Malaysia?

Firstly, the government has to be fairer to all Malaysians! The government has to follow the Tunku's policy and principles of being more fair all races, ethnic and religious groups and especially to the poor of all races and religions.

Secondly, help the poor develop to be more independent through more relevant education. And training and let them not become dependent on pampering/*manja manja*. Subsidies only create greater dependency on the powers that be!

Thirdly, remove the ketuananship and protection to the rich of all races, the elitist and crony groups in all aspects of our daily living.

Fourthly, combat cronyism and corruption – let there be more competition especially amongst Malays, once they get employment. Or we will deprive them of the competitive edge in the long term in a world of globalisation, which we cannot escape. But at the same time reward the thousands of competitive Malaysians, of all races, to prevent the massive brain drain we are facing, including the Malays.

Fifthly, let's go for more meritocracy and strengthen the national institutions – the judiciary, the MACC, the education system, the police, the civil service, etc.

7. Now, what could we as Malaysian citizens do, to make Malaysia a better country – as envisaged by the Tunku?

Firstly, we must determine to strive for a “better Malaysia”. Don't give up fighting extremists and their persecution. Isolate them. Condemn all extremists from all quarters and prevent them from being elected as our leaders. Only true people/rakyat themselves can support the Tunku's philosophy for a truly moderate Malaysia.

Secondly, we must reduce our grumbling and griping and sense of pessimism. If you have to grumble – then do something about it. Instead of expecting others to do the hard and dirty work and to sacrifice for you, while some of us you enjoy the fruits of the land. Let's do our share to get Malaysia moving forward, more strongly once again!

Thirdly, work with “moderates” of all races and religions, to reject corruption and inefficiency and protectionist policies that safeguard narrow vested political and economic and religious interests. I personally support the concept of moderation that Tunku had always stood and which our PM YAB Dato’ Seri Najib Tun Razak is trying hard, against many odds, to actively promote! But he is perceived to be resisted by ultra conservative forces that can only bring disharmony and disenchantment to a wonderfully blessed country.

Fifthly, look positively ahead and try harder to make this unique and blessed land, with all its beauty and bounty, to become an example to the world for “unity and progress in diversity”.

8. CONCLUSION

Finally, in commemorating Tunku’s memory let us all pledge to -

Reject racists, religious bigots and corrupt political leaders at all levels of government and business, now and in the next elections!

In this context, I’d like to end with a quotation from the Tunku himself in his great speech on Merdeka day -

”High confidence has been reposed in us. Let us unitedly face the challenges of the years ahead and so, with remembrance for the past and with confidence in the future, under the providence of god – we shall succeed!”

We can pay tribute to our beloved Tunku’s memory – only by remembering his high ideals and noble aspirations for our beloved Malaysia and doing our best to realise his dreams for a more united, peaceful and progressive and happy Malaysia.

May God bless Malaysia and the Tunku’s soul and great legacy – and may God bless us all fulfill his ideals.

Terima kasih.

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam

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