

Remembering Onn Jaafar

Datuk Onn Jaafar founded Umno 60 years ago and the party has planned a major celebration to mark the event in Johor Baru tonight. SA'ODAH ELIAS talks to his descendants and party leaders about the sacrifices made by the party's first president.

WHEN Datuk Onn Jaafar together with several prominent Malay activists formed Umno 60 years ago, the main thrust of their struggle was to oppose the Malayan Union.

The strength of their unity as manifested by the coming together of over 80 Malay organisations under the leadership of Onn in May of 1946 finally forced the British to abandon the Union plan.

A federation was then formed, a concept of administration which was agreed upon by both Umno and the Malay Sultans.

Then the flames of Malay nationalism burned even brighter - they wanted full independence. This was a watershed period for Malay politics.

That was when Onn clashed with his fellow Malay leaders for daring to suggest that Umno open its door to non-Malays to pave the way for non-communal politics.

Onn, a journalist from 1930 to 1936, was a man ahead of his time.

But what he tried to promote did not go down well with the Malay leaders.

As a matter of principle, Onn resigned from Umno in August 1951 and that same year he also relinquished the post of Johor Mentri Besar.

But today, the spirit of cooperation and power sharing between all races that Onn so believed in has become a reality. First through the Alliance and then Barisan Nasional.

This is the basis that has enabled Umno to remain as one of the longest serving political parties in the world today.

Willingness to make sacrifices to defend and uphold his belief and struggle was the

trademark of Onn.

Onn, then aged 25, was bold enough to criticise the Johor Sultan in his article on "tyranny in Johor"; and for his trouble, he was expelled from the state administration.

Later, when he was ostracised by Umno, he had to leave his birth state for Terengganu.

"My grandfather died a poor man. He had to face tremendous challenges to the point of having to leave Johor for his beliefs. But the fruits of his struggle are now enjoyed by all Malaysians," said Umno Youth head Datuk Seri Hisham-



Onn Jaafar: The founder of Umno was a principled leader and a man clearly ahead of his time.

muddin Hussein.

According to his grand nephew Datuk Mohamed Abid, when Onn died, he had only RM300 in his bank account and RM30 in his pocket.

Now that Umno is all set to celebrate its 60th birthday at its founding place - Istana Besar Johor Baru - Hishammuddin said it was only apt that party members, especially the younger generation, take stock of the sacrifices made by former leaders.

Sincerity and not the expectation of material wealth should be the basis of any struggle, said Hishammuddin.

"The spirit of Onn Jaafar, that is, the willingness to make sacrifices, is even more relevant today. In the days of our forefathers, while the struggle was hard, they clearly knew what their objectives were, and who their enemies were, but that is not so now as the concept of enemy and friends has become blurred," he said.

"The greatest challenge facing us now is in upholding our identity in an ever changing and borderless world. This is not going to be easy and will require great sacrifices from members."

If members failed to remain true to the spirit of Umno, he warned, there remained a possibility that the Malays would be colonised again, at least mentally, culturally and economically.

Hishammuddin said he was

proud of the fact that his grandfather's sacrifices would always be remembered.

"That to me is the greatest reward, something that cannot be exchanged for the greatest wealth in the world," said Hishammuddin.

To mark the anniversary, Umno Youth is also holding a contest to name the party flag.

Some 60,000 people are expected to gather at the Istana Besar to mark the occasion which would also include the recreation of the "meeting" of Malay organisations that culminated in the formation of Umno in 1946.

Other events, according to party secretary-general Datuk Seri Mohd Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, include a musical at the Johor Baru City Council indoor stadium and a photo exhibition on Umno leaders at the Dewan Jubli Intan.

"Many of the photographs on display have never before been shown in public. They were contributed by families and friends of former leaders," he said.

The actual celebration is expected to start tonight with a special *Thalil* prayer to be held at the Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque.

"*InsyAllah* (God willing), there will also be a photography session of party leaders with the Sultan of Johor on the steps of the palace, just like the one taken 60 years ago," said Mohd Radzi.

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