

An Asian Prime Minister's story

Mr. Prime Minister, we would like this conversation to be a warm, personal and frank one. Could you start by talking about your childhood, your family and those memories which still crowd the mind?

I am the twenty-first son of the Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Halim Shah. My mother, Makche Menjelara, was the daughter of Luang Mira a chieftain of one of the Siamese Shan states. I grew up in a palace in those spacious days when we had everything, for ours was a Royal family in every sense of the word. My Siamese mother's influence was always very strong, because my father had other wives and other children. He could not devote his attention to any particular son. It was my mother who guided me and to whom I went for comfort and the love children seek.

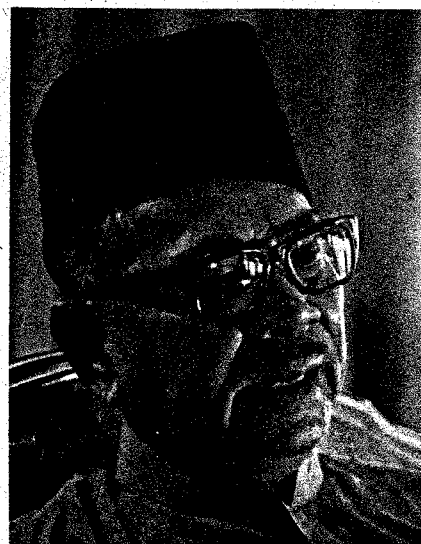
What kind of education did you have around this time?

I had to go to many schools, Malay schools and Siamese schools in Bangkok. Thereafter I went to the Penang Free School to study English and from here I was awarded the first Kedah scholarship to attend a British public school. I had only been in an English school for three years, but I was too old for admission to any good British public school. I was 16. Naturally, I had to try and get into a university. I was eventually admitted to Catherine College at Cambridge. Here I learnt my first lesson in patriotism.

It happened like this. I asked for the right to live in the College. The College is a small one, and students were permitted to live in rotation for a brief period. When it came to my third year I was still not given a room in the College. I made another request. The clergyman, who was the Dean, told me 'you know this College was built for English gentlemen, I can't let you stay here, because I know the Englishmen won't like it.' I said, 'this is very good, I wish you had told me earlier. Anyway, I am quite happy to know your mind and the mind of Englishmen.'

Were you terribly upset about this at the time?

I wrote back home and told them what had happened. The Kedah Government got very angry and sent the British Adviser to see



"I WOULD LIKE to retire right now," he says with the satisfaction which derives from achievement, "but they won't let me." Few men have endured in power without losing popularity; fewer still find themselves wedded to office because of popular pressure, as does Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, Prime Minister of Malaysia. At 64, the burdens of leadership are beginning to show. The diversions of life — cuddling his adopted children, boating, golfing, watching thrill-packed television shows, playing poker late night with friends — are what he seeks in the evening of his life. The Tengku is an uncomplicated person — warm, humane, and engagingly friendly. "I have achieved everything I set out to do," he concedes, seemingly in an attempt to rationalize his desire to step down from office. Toward this end, he has farmed out most of his authority, especially to his designated heir-apparent, Tun Abdul Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister. But patriotism, the ideals of service, burn fiercely within him. The Tengku realizes that his nation needs him now, more than it ever did. And while this conviction persists he will stay on, doing what he knows best.

the College authorities. After he had intervened, the Dean himself called me up and said 'I am very sorry, I did not know you were a prince, the son of the Sultan. Of course I will give you a room.' I turned him down. I told him I was not going to move in. I was not accepting it because I was the son of the Sultan. I wanted to get in like any other student. I have never told anyone that I was the son of the Sultan of Kedah. I never went into residence. That was for me a big lesson. From then on I became a worker for independence.

Of course I did not work very hard at it at the time. I was a bit slow. You see I was very fond of life; fond of sports, music, cars, horses and the skirts. But deep in my heart I was a patriotic man. In those quiet moments, those serious moments, I would think how we could be free, independent.

I was reading law and history at Cambridge. I graduated in 1926 and returned home for a holiday. I went back to London to study law. But London is no place to study. I was very young. There was no proper control. I was fooling around for three years. Got through only in three subjects in law.

What kind of allowance did you receive when you were in London, how did you spend it?

I suppose I got more allowance than most students. My scholarship gave me £400 a year and my private income was £600. That was more than many students received, and those were the days when a penny was a penny. Naturally all this money spoilt me. When I was at Cambridge I had a Riley super sports car and other sports cars. Later I went in for slower cars like the Austin and Standard. My mother used to send money every time I wanted to buy a new car.

I also used to get into fights at the dance halls. Some Chinese restaurants, three of them in fact, barred me from going inside. You see when I used to be dancing or dining with my girl friends, the British and the Jews in those days, used to pass remarks. I used to give it back to them, particularly when I was dancing with pretty girls. So I used to get into fights. I lived extravagantly at that time.

Finally, I decided to return home. This was in 1931. On the boat to Malaya I met the ex-Chin-

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ese Foreign Minister, Eugene Chen. We got very pally. It was this man who really led me into politics. Not by what he said but the great feeling which he communicated. I was able to breathe and feel what he was talking about, I almost absorbed his enthusiasm and his idealism.

The enthusiasm which Eugene Chen kindled in me continued to burn fiercely. And, then I met the most important person who was to influence my political life. This was Mr. Nehru, the late Indian Prime Minister.

Can you tell us what happened during the Japanese occupation?

I got into trouble with the Japanese as well. It was over a Japanese order concerning the use of forced labour for planting cotton in areas far removed from the workers homes. As District Officer I refused to agree. I pointed out that with the men away there would be no means of support for the women and children. I refused to carry out the order.

I was transferred by the Japanese on 12 hours' notice and sent to Alor Star. Here I was given a job as state auditor. There was nothing for me to audit. There was no proper accounting. If I queried the Japanese who were running things I would have had my head chopped off.

Was it at this stage that the Malay nationalist movement began to evolve?

The Malay nationalist movement actually found its beginning at this time, and steadily gained momentum. At that time I counselled the other leaders of the movement to go slow. In Johore, Dato Onn had launched the Malaya Independent Movement. Dato Onn was chosen president of the movement at a meeting here in Kuala Lumpur. I led the Kedah group. I felt there was no point in fighting the British. We had no spirit left after the Japanese occupation. We had no arms to fight the victorious British Army. I failed to secure a compromise on my stand. So I decided to give up politics. I had fallen out of favour. I wanted to abandon everything. I went back to England in 1945 to pick up the academic pursuits which I had given up in the years before war.



"My handicap is 24. I am not a terribly good golfer. Putting is my forte", says the Tengku.

What were your feelings at this time. Was there a strong element of regret?

There was no possibility of securing agreement to my political views. I felt it was better to return to Britain and get through my law examinations at all cost. By the grace of God I did in 1948. It was while I was in England on this occasion that I met Tun Razak and a few of the top level officers serving in the administration now. Tun Razak was full 20 years younger, but we became very pally. We talked of politics and Malaya's future.

I returned to Kedah on completing my legal studies. My mind was already on Malayan independence. But no one gave me any thought. You know I am not one of those loud-mouthed politicians who try to advertise their know-

ledge. I was then like I am now. I just take things as they come. No one therefore gave me any thought at all.

Were you at the time trying to gather support and re-establish yourself as a political leader?

This was around 1951. At that time Dato Onn had formed the IMP, the Independence Malayan Party. Tun Razak who was in Pahang at the time wrote me and asked me to take over the leadership of UMNO — the United Malays National Organization. I agreed to accept, provided people would not play politics like a monkey up a post; up one moment down the next. I took over the leadership. I had to give up my job.

It was at this time that a significant development took place. We were running in the municipal elections, when the Malayan Chinese Association headed by men like H. S. Lee, Dato Yoke Lin asked whether they could join us in an alliance. I readily agreed and that was when the Alliance was first formed. After our victory at the municipal elections we decided to forge the Alliance on a country-wide basis.

How was this move received by your political opponents?

We were criticized. It was dubbed an alliance of convenience. We were branded as being tools in the hands of the Chinese. They accused us of being paid by the Chinese, of being bought over. I did not care. I realized that if we were to win independence for Malaya we had to get all nationalities to work together. I knew that we were not tools in anyone's hands. Soon after the Malay Indian Congress sought to join us. We welcomed them.

Our most interesting election was in 1954. We won 51 of the 52 seats to the Legislative Council. We were not independent then, but we had a measure of self-government.

Around this time there was another interesting episode in my life. As Chief Minister of Malaya the then British Government never even gave me a car which should have come with my office. I had to buy my own car, a small Austin 40. Afterwards I bought an A-70. They never even gave me a house.

The first one they offered me was a two-room thing. I don't know

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"There is no other life I would like, except the life I have led so for. I am a happy premier"

Prime Minister's story

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what class it is in. This is the type we make available to clerks. I refused to accept that house. They then gave me a big house, a very old house. Every time it rained my wife and I had to push the bed from one corner of the room to another. It leaked like mad. This helped to accelerate Malayan independence. One night, I was wet through the heavy rain which leaked through. I swore that I would kick the British out as soon as I could. We made up our mind. Where this house stood then, today stands the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where I have my office.

What steps did you take from then on to speed the course of Malayan independence?

I brought the question of independence up at the Legislative Council. This was when the communist war was on in our country. I pointed out that the British were unable to contain the communists after 10 years of bitter fighting. I asked the British, almost demanded of them, independence, so that we could deal with the communists. Finally they agreed to negotiate and we were invited to London. It was decided that the State Rulers should send their representatives and that the Alliance should also send their representatives. Now I thought to myself, if the Rulers' representatives were to go on their own to London and we were to go on our own, in discussing terms with the British we would have three-cornered talks. It would not be favourable for us. So I suggested to the Rulers' representatives that we should go by boat to London, as I myself enjoyed a sea journey. They agreed. We got on the boat and decided to have talks every morning. After these morning sessions we began to talk with one mind. We stopped at Karachi and continued our journey by plane to London. We were all firmly of one mind.

We returned from London with a firm promise that we would be given our independence in 1957, on the 31st of August if possible. At a mammoth rally in Malacca, attended by hundreds of thousands, we declared that we were going to be independent on August 31, 1957. You will remember that I told you that the original decision was "August 31 if possible." But when I saw that big crowd I could not say "if possible." I omitted the qualifying phrase and said we would have independence on August 31. By the grace of God that is the way it finally worked out.

What were your own feelings at the time. Were you deeply moved by the thought that you had secured freedom for your country?

I did not get excited. I did not get emotional. It came as a matter of course, after all I had been working toward this end for many years. I will tell you the moment in my life when I was overcome with emotion was when I passed my Bar examinations in 1948. I was not a young man then. I was over 40. When the results came and I had passed, I wept. Yes, I wept for joy. Then again in 1949 when we won the elections, when I knew that the task of running our country was finally moving in our direction, I was overcome with emotion and I cried. When I got independence, when this country got independence, there was nothing new. It was an inevitable event in our history. Winning the elections in '49 and '51 was the key to independence. It was then that I wept tears of joy; when I was overcome with emotion; when I was deeply touched.

How did your wife react to these developments. Did she display the same emotional responses?

My wife is a simple woman. She never really knew much about politics. She attended to the home. When I was playing politics I could not afford a servant. I had to make the best of my income. I was not being paid by the party. I had to sell one house after another, sell all my properties. My wife used to cook, sweep, wash for me in those days. She never interfered with my political life, with my public life. She attended to the domestic side. Even now you see her looking after her orchids, or going into the kitchen. That is why we have got on so well. That is the best I can tell you.

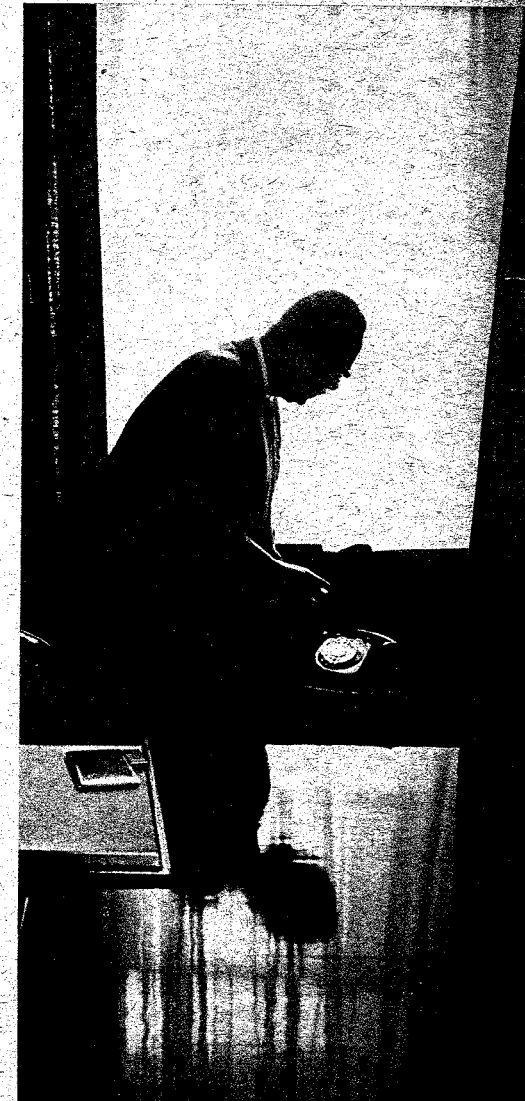
This brings us now to the stage when you first mooted the Malaysia concept. Obviously you felt that the situation in Malaya itself was stable enough to warrant such a move. Would you now tell us about this phase of your leadership, the making of Malaysia, the parting with Singapore?

Malaya had been so successful that we have won a certain amount of admiration from our neighbours. At the same time of course we got undeservedly the envy of some of our neighbours. Because of success we have made of our independence there was a desire, the urge on the part of the Borneo States and Singapore to join Malaysia. But



"There is much we can achieve together, because we are of the same stock", says the Tengku to visiting Indonesian KAMI youths. Below, the premier cuts a lonesome figure in his office.

before we accepted them, we asked them to work out the ways and means of bringing about the merger of all the states with Malaysia. We left it entirely to the leaders of these states to work it out together with our men. Therefore when they indicated they wanted to join Malaysia we accepted them. The Constitution was agreed on whereby these people joined us as our equals, as our brothers, with no less disadvantages than anybody else or with equal advantage to all. That's how we have got on. But when Malaysia was formed these Borneo states who still had faith in the British Administration asked that they should be allowed to depend on British administrators for some years. At the time, I didn't realize what the implication was going to be. I agreed. But now I see that while they have British administrators in those states they



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can never be one with us. There is always the influence of these British administrators. They will make them lean to the British rather than to us. It is very hard to break down the colonial mentality while the British are there.

Now the reason for the break-away of Singapore was because the Prime Minister of Singapore wanted to be a Prime Minister. There can never be two Prime Ministers in one nation. Therefore the break had to come about sooner or later. The reason for the split, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia was because of the danger of communal differences which was being encouraged by the Prime Minister of Singapore. It was being worked up to the extent that I feared that unless Singapore separated from Malaysia, there might in fact be real racial trouble between the Chinese and Malays.

Can you recall for us the background, the events which eventually led to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia?

Well at that time Singapore was talking about the various differences among the races; the advantages the one enjoyed over the other. Things were really getting bad. I was in England at the time in hospital. I had a lot of time to think. My mind was clear. I gave all my thoughts to the prob-

lems facing this country. After long consideration I felt there was really no alternative. Singapore could not be in Malaysia. I wrote to Tun Razak. I told him the only alternative was to break with Singapore.

When I came back from London I called a meeting of the Cabinet. I gave them the reasons behind my thinking, the need to break away. They agreed with me. I informed Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore. I don't think it came as a surprise to him. He knew almost a year before that. When he made many requests and demands, I told him things could not go on like this. I pointed out to him that the only way out was for Singapore to be independent. In fact I did mention earlier to Mr. Goh Keng Swee, who was acting as Mr. Lee's agent, that separation was the only alternative. We had all these discussions either on the golf course, or here in my drawing room. So in fact, the final decision did not come as a surprise to the Prime Minister of Singapore. He was ready and willing to accept separation.

There is a fairly common libel uttered against my own countrymen (I am from Ceylon) which I gather is also directed at Malays, namely, that we are a lazy, indolent people. In your view is there any justification for this judgement?

Well, I personally feel that all the nicest people are regarded as the lazy people. Like your people or mine, we are extremely kind, warm and friendly. But others have taken undue advantage of our kindness, hospitality and our good, easy going nature. But to my mind, this so-called laziness, which is in fact kindness, is the thing which makes people happy, which perhaps conditions them to sit back and let others do the work, enjoy the benefits of their labour. But in the final analysis, when it comes to the time when our people or yours must push themselves forward, they are capable of extreme sacrifice, extreme hard work.

Having been in the position of leadership, you must quite often think of laying down the burden and handing it over to someone else. Has this occupied your mind?

Oh, it is very difficult for me to express this because I don't think words are sufficient to express my feeling. I have been a very happy Prime Minister. The people make me happy and I have had certain successes. I have had very good innings if we talk in terms of cricket. I can't say anything except

that I am grateful to all my fellowmen, my colleagues, my supporters, and above all to God, for giving me all this health which I enjoy. At my age I can still play golf, I can still enjoy life, I can still enjoy my food and my drink. One thing I might perhaps disclose here, I am not strictly what you might call the orthodox Muslim, but I am a very devout Muslim, I have so much faith in God. I have said it very many times, that without this faith I would never be able to carry out the work which I am doing today. I give thanks to Him for whatever I have done which might contribute to success and well-being of this country. I say I give thanks to God and also to my fellowmen. But like all men I would like of course to have a little bit of a family life. I am very fond of my family, but doing the work which I am doing today as Prime Minister, I have got to travel very extensively, and there are times when I hardly ever see my family.

And if you do get the opportunity to retire to devote more time to your personal affairs what would you largely interest yourself in?

I like country life. I like outdoor life. I like water, seaports and so on. I am very fond of the sea and I am a real country man. I come from the state which is strictly speaking an agricultural state, and of course if I retire I'd go back there. However even if I retire I would always devote a lot of my time to party work.

If the wheel of life was to turn again for you would you choose to do the same things you have done or is there some other ambition you would rather pursue?

I suppose I'd do the same thing. I don't know any other way of life except the present life I have led. When I was a young man I had a very good time, too good a time I think. Even as Prime Minister with all the burdens of state, with all the burdens of party work, I am really enjoying my life. But of course I would like to have a little time for myself for my family, but if I can't have that I'll carry on as I am. But there is no other life I would have liked, except the life I have led so far. If I were allowed to choose to be a millionaire or a poor prime minister, I would be a poor prime minister any time.

Would you describe yourself as a poor prime minister?

Well that's what I am supposed to be. Nothing to call my own except

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Prime Minister's story

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what I got from my family. As Prime Minister the amount of money I get in pay and allowances I can't even make ends meet. It is not a paying job. I would rather

be a poor Prime Minister and a good one, than a rich Prime Minister and a bad one.

What would you say are your principal failures, things which you didn't really achieve, have been the cause of anguish?

That's the point. I have achieved all that I have set out to do. When I went to England I went to study law and when I graduated from Cambridge I made a mess of my career at the Bar academically and I failed. But I went back 25 years later and got through the Bar and

became a Barrister. And then when I set my mind on independence for this country, we got independence. When we thought of bringing the others like Sabah and Sarawak they came in. And so I don't think there is anything that I have set my mind upon and which I have not achieved. That's what I thank God for, the blessing which I have received from him and I must thank all the people whose support I have got. I can't say that I have had a bad time at all.

One final question. You have a lot of adopted children and your own two children. Are you happy in the way they have developed, the kind of vocation that some of them have chosen. Have they been a constant source of satisfaction for you?

I have only two children of my own. They are both grown up, married, with their own families. I have a son, the only son. Of course it was my wish and ambition to see that my son serves his country as I have served my country, because it will be he who will carry my name after I am gone. He and his children will carry on our family tradition. But as I said I won't stand in the way of his life. He chose to give up a career in the army serving his country in order to serve himself. He has now given up service to his country and serves himself. He has gone into business. I was disappointed naturally to see that he had given up service to his country and to go into business. And I am more disappointed that he had done so because he has no capital and I have no capital to give him. To begin business without capital is not quite the right thing to do. My daughter is married. My son-in-law is in Government Service. He is also doing quite well. I am happy as far as that goes. They all have children who help to make my life rich. Then my first adopted son Abdullah, he is now with television and doing well as a cameraman. I am quite happy about that. He too has his own family. He is living with me here. And there are other little younger kids. There are three of them of Chinese origin. The girl Mariam is very famous by now and she is very affectionate. She is not very clever. However, one cannot have everything. Suleiman the boy is very naughty, but I think he can grow out of it when he becomes a bit mature. Little Farida was given to me for my last birthday. She is a real lovable child. I think as you see my wife is fat with happiness and we have got on together because we never interfere with one another's life, and never get into one another's way. I hope that we can continue to go on as we are. Everything is all right. ■