



PIX BY WAN IZHAR ABU BAKR

Tunku Shariman: Most of the civil servants then were a remarkable lot

A Witness

Tunku Tan Sri Shariman Tunku Sulaiman belonged to the generation when the brightest and the best chose to join the civil service to serve the country. He has been part of many pivotal events that have shaped the country, including the formation and implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). He tells *Sharmila Valli Narayanan* about some of these events.

TUNKU Tan Sri Shariman Tunku Sulaiman is soft-spoken so much so that sometimes one has to strain to hear him speak even when sitting near him. For someone who is 74, his face still looks youthful without any lines. It's his gentle, slow movements that give his age away. He says these days he takes things easy. It's a far cry from his former life when he was in the thick of everything.

Born into a branch of the Negeri Sembilan royal family, he had the honour of being taught English when he was young by Tuanku Abdul Rahman, who became the country's first King upon independence. 'Tuanku was one of the best-qualified Malays in the whole country at that time. He was very interested in education and took it upon himself to teach me and a couple of other boys English,' recalls Tunku Shariman. 'Those days, the Malay rulers were very close to the people. They would walk through the kampong to talk to the people,' he says with a laugh.

He did quite well in school. He went on to get a Second Class Upper degree in Bachelor of Arts in the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1958. His university mates included Tun Musa Hitam and Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam. He attributes his academic success to his mother. 'I worked very hard for mom's sake. My mom, Tunku Safia, who is now 93, was the headmistress of Sekolah Perempuan Melayu Sri Menanti. I was her only child and she raised me single-handedly after my dad left us when I was three months old. She was devoted to me. It's because of her that I have such great admiration for teachers until today,' says Tunku Shariman. 'Even my wife was a teacher,' he adds with a twinkle in his eye.

'At that time, if you did not work hard in school and university, you couldn't survive. There was no such thing as a free lunch back then,' he continues. He has many fond memories of his years in Singapore and the

friends he made there. He has good relations with many of his old Singapore course-mates till today.

Upon his return to Malaya, like most men of his generation, he opted to go into the civil service. His first post was as Deputy Assistant District Officer in Larut and Matang in Perak. Five months later, he was posted to Triang, Pahang in 1958. This was the last 'black area' that was still infested with communist guerrillas and was every civil servant's nightmare. But for Tunku Shariman, this posting would alter the course of his life because it was here that he first met the young Tun Abdul Razak, the-then Deputy Prime Minister.

While in Triang, Tunku Shariman came up with an ingenious way to combat the communist menace. He decided to distribute land to the people who were mainly Chinese by ballot to create new villages. 'When you give people land, they have a sense of belonging. And they will work very hard to clear the jungle and plant crops. I was told that Tun Razak was quite impressed with my idea,' he says.

Soon after the land deal, he was transferred to Kuala Rompin. Initially, Tunku Shariman thought the posting was a punishment. Later, he realised it was Tun Razak who had him transferred so that he could be nearer Tun Razak's constituency in Pekan. He has great admiration for Tun Razak. 'He was very fair. He transferred out inefficient people. Most of the civil servants then were a remarkable lot - men of integrity because of the leaders then who did not tolerate corruption.'

A year later, Tunku Shariman was working close to the halls of power as Tun Razak had him brought back to Kuala Lumpur as the Assistant Secretary in the Prime Minister's department. He had the opportunity to observe the close working relationship between Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Razak. 'Tunku and Tun made a great

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combination ... each complemented the other,' he recalls fondly. 'Tunku was a good leader who could bring all the men together despite their differences. He was very jovial and liked to look at the bigger picture, leaving the details to Tun Razak.' Tunku Shariman sees the same working synergy today between Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. 'When I see those two, I am reminded of Tunku and Tun,' he says with a fond smile.

He gives further insights into the workings of the government back then. 'The Cabinet meetings were very cordial. I took down the minutes during these meetings. The two people who spoke the most during the meetings were Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Sambanthan. Tunku would never approve of any expenditure unless it was approved by Tun Tan, who made sure there was money in the treasury before going ahead with any project.'

He says the system then had its own checks and balances to ensure there was no abuse from the highest to the lowest levels of the government. 'For example, a District Officer had to be very careful. He could be sacked or arrested if there was any wrongdoing, with no politician protecting him.' Tunku Shariman adds that some of the excesses seen today would not have been tolerated during Tun Razak's time.

One of the pivotal events in his life was the May 13 riots. He was the State Secretary of Pahang when it happened. 'It was quite a shock for me when I heard about the riots. I thought the best way to handle the crisis in Pahang was to have our lives go on as though everything was normal.'

The next day, he went to play golf as usual. 'I got a call from someone in the National Operations Council. He had heard I was out playing golf and he scolded me as to how I could be doing that when the country was in turmoil. When I explained my reasons for it, he calmed down.'

He was summoned to a tense meeting at the Parliament House on May 15th. 'My impression from the meeting was that the generals were very angry because they felt state leaders did not do enough to quell the tense situation. I was genuinely worried that the military might take over. But thank God it did not happen because Tun Razak, General (now Tun) Ibrahim Ismail and Tun Dr Ismail really believed in democracy.'



Tunku Shariman: Non-Malays should understand the problems of Malays and vice-versa

In 1971, Tunku Shariman was entrusted with one of the most important positions in his career – he was made the first Director-General of the Implementation, Coordination and Evaluation Unit (ICEU) reporting directly to the Prime Minister, which eventually came out with the groundwork for the National Economic Policy (NEP). As one of the architects of the NEP, what does he think of it now?

'The ultimate aim of the NEP was national unity. Tun Razak wanted to increase the Malay stake in the economy but not at the expense of the non-Malays. The economic pie should be big enough so that everyone got their dues. Tun Razak was a nationalist; he believed Malays must have a share in the economy. But he was also fair. Many of his advisors were Chinese and Indians. He got a balanced view from everyone,' reveals Tunku Shariman.

Whatever shortcomings in the NEP today are due to implementation, he insists. The fact that there are still many poor Malays and non-Malays is an indication that somewhere along the line, the true spirit of NEP has been lost, he says. 'There is no transparency; the government should explain its plans to the people more. Had Tun Razak lived longer, he would have implemented the NEP with more transparency and he would have seen to it that it was fairer.'

He reveals that Tun Razak had a weekly meeting with Tun Sambanthan and Tun Tan to hear the views of the other races and their

grouses. The leaders could speak freely and hear Tun Razak's views. They would then go and explain to the grassroots. Many problems were settled this way, he says. He thinks this is a practice that should be brought back. 'Ultimately, national unity is most important. Non-Malays should understand the problems of Malays and vice-versa.'

One of his former university mates Navaratnam says Tunku Shariman played a very important role during the Tun Razak era. 'He was a very effective and dedicated administrator who led quietly and effectively. He did most of his work behind the scenes; he was not a man who wanted to be in the centre of attention. He was humble, gracious and an intellectual. The government should call him back to advise them on how to implement the new economic plans more effectively.'

Tunku Shariman eventually left the civil service to go into the corporate sector. Among the most well-known position he has held is as the chairman and chief executive of Pemas. He does not dwell on his corporate past because of painful memories. He was supposed to do a management buyout (MBO) of Pemas but could not come up with the funds. All he will say of the period is that it was a very difficult time for him professionally and personally and declines to say anything more on the matter.

These days, he spends a lot of time at the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS) of which he is the chairman. 'It is a society that helps everyone in the world. MRCS has sent aid to other parts of the world as well,' he says proudly. He used to be an avid golfer but has given it up because of a back problem. 'I take things easy these days. I rise early for my prayers and then I go off for my morning walk at the KLCC park.' On weekends, the house is full of his children (he has one boy and five girls) and his numerous grandchildren. 'I have 15 grandchildren!' he says with a hint of pride.

He also takes time to write. He has written a few articles for the Malaysian branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Asked if he has contemplated writing his memoirs, he says he tried but has not gotten very far. It would be a pity if Tunku Shariman does not complete his memoirs because he is a treasure trove of information on the early days of the country and of the dedicated men and women who served it. He was the witness to history in the making. 