

ROAD TO NATIONHOOD

The Building of Malaysia and Some of the Malaysians Who Played a Role ¹

By
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The article is written without skirting over bare facts. It is an account of what and who actually were responsible for the birth of this nation. It is written without a jaundiced view and is non-partisan in nature. The purpose is to remind ourselves that it was the joint effort of and the role played by Malaysians of various races and ethnic backgrounds in the formation of the nation. It is based entirely on a judicious appreciation of the aims and deeds of the role played by Malaysians of all races. The commonality of purpose was a unifying factor then. After all, we are all 99% the same and our differences lie in our physical features.

There was an interesting and rather disturbing letter which was published in the Star. The concerned Malaysian parent had written that his child had come home and said that his history teacher had stated that when the British granted Independence to Malaya and returned to Britain, the Chinese and the Indians had no where to go and that the Malays had taken pity on these communities and allowed them to stay on in Malaya.

It is strange and very sad when we tend to distort the path of history. It is pertinent to put events that happened in our nation in a proper perspective for us and for our young. We in our country shook off the yoke of colonial rule not through bloodshed and by resorting to violence, but by consultations, negotiations and discussions. This was through the concerted efforts and the role played by Malayans of all races and ethnicity. We have to search the recesses of

¹ This article was originally written on 19.10.2009 and published in *Managing Success in Unity*, Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister's Department in 2010. It is reproduced here, edited and amended accordingly.

our nation's history and harmonise ourselves and make ourselves authentic and not synthetic.

As Tan Sri Muhammad Ghazali bin Shafie stated, *'We return to history not to seek refuge in nostalgia, because retracing our steps into the world of yesteryear is a painful experience. We are not masochists. Neither should we look back in anger when we turn the pages of our nation's annals and see, in our mind's eye, cynical exploitation debauchery, hurt and humiliation. So let history be our guide and our tutor so that we may never again suffer the pangs, suffer the humiliation of a divided people.'*²

The Diversity of Life in Malaya in the 1900's

By taking a look at the diversity of life that existed in Malaya in the 1900's and refreshing our memory, we can appreciate the true situation as it existed then. The Japanese invasion imposed a political and economic impasse on Malaya and Southeast. A sense of nationalism and patriotism was instilled in all Malaysians who united and worked together for the nation.

In his book, *Born into War*, Hong Bee Lian who was born in 1917 on 8 July in Kg. Attap, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, whilst describing that he was born in a caul – a phenomenon hailed by the mid-wife as a good omen of the very first order gives praise to the Malay mid-wife, Che Aminah binte Ahmad.³ He writes:-

She was a remarkable person – an elderly barefoot Malay village midwife of tiny stature and frail appearance who peddled from village to village, whatever the time of day or night and whatever the weather, to deliver babies. She was dressed in the simple attire of a Malay peasant and all the equipment of her trade was carried in a cotton bag slung across her shoulders.

² Hansard

³ Hong Bee Lim ' *Born into War – Autobiography of a barefoot colonial boy who grew up to face the challenges of the modern world,* ' Excalibur Press of London 1992

Not that there was much equipment to carry. One bamboo knife and a handful of wooden implements of varying shapes and sizes and a bottle of herbal oil were the sum total of her portable 'surgery'. She relied mainly on the skill of her hands and barely used any of the implements – except to cut the umbilical cord. Che Aminah binte Ahmad, the worthy midwife would never touch, let alone use a metal implement. She believed that anything other than bamboo or wood was toxic and unnatural.

And she never asked for payment. Che Aminah deemed it impolite, even uncivil, to mention money in the course of her duty; it was always up to the client to ask: 'How shall I repay your kindness?' She always replied with a diffident smile: 'Sukah hati' (literally – as the heart pleases).

Such was the diversity of life, the cultural, religious and ethnic influences of village life in colonial Malaya in the first few decades of the last century.

It might be pertinent to mention that Kuala Lumpur, was during those years owned by three main families. There was the Haji Taib family who owned properties near the Royal Selangor Club along Gombak Lane to Jalan Ipoh and Kampong Batu. Lorong Haji Taib, a side road off Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman is named after him.

Then there was the Thamboosamy Pillai family who owned much of the area in Leboh Ampang (now Jalan Tun HS Lee) until the famous Sri Mariamman Temple (which has become a tourist attraction) in High Street (now Jalan Bandar), a major landmark in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. In fact the Sri Maraiamman Temple was an endowment from Mr. Thamboosamy Pillai himself. There is a Jalan Thamboosamy named after him which is one of the roads off Jalan Putra (formerly Lorong Chow Kit Satu) on the same side of the Legend Hotel. Many

anecdotes abound as to Mr. Thamboosamy's legendary personality, his curry tiffin parties, his penchant for the races and keen eye for the ladies.⁴

Other than the Haji Taib and Thamboosamy Pillai families, there was of course, the *towkay of towkays*, Loke Yew and his family who owned not only a large portion of Kuala Lumpur but a fair bit of Selangor and a fraction of Pahang, as well. Like the legendary Kapitan China (Chinese Leader) Yap Ah Loy and the other tycoons before him, Loke Yew's story is the usual rise from rags to riches.

The son of a Chinese peasant, apparently he arrived in Singapore on a junk vessel at the age of eleven with nothing in his pocket. After working for a few years, he was able to save a sum of 99 Malayan dollars which he used to open a shop.⁵

Malaya under the Japanese

We have heard and read of atrocities committed by the Japanese forces during their occupation of Malaya. There have been numerous reports of molestation of women by the soldiers. Narrated here are two such incidences:-

'...we were scared when two soldiers came to our house. There were three ladies at home. On seeing the soldiers approaching, the ladies locked themselves up in one room. The soldiers searched every nook and corner of the house before they came to the room where the ladies were hiding. They banged the door and demanded that the people inside come out. Terrified the ladies refused to open the door.

Huddled together in a corner were three frightened women. They had done a quick make-up to appear ugly, with their hair over their faces, their tongues out

⁴ Tan Sri Dato' Seri Haji 'Coco' Abdul Majid bin Ismail ' An Old Man Remembers – The Memoirs of Tan Sri Dato' Seri Haji 'Coco' Abdul Majid bin Ismail, The written Word, 2006

⁵ ibid

and their faces darkened with ash. They looked like mentally retarded women. The soldiers spat at them and shouted 'Baggero' (fools). After helping themselves to some fruits on the dining table, they left'.⁶

On another occasion, three soldiers in torn uniforms, walked into the house of a young widow who was sewing her children's clothes. Seeing this, without much ado, they stripped themselves naked and ordered the lady to mend their torn trousers. They then moved about the house in their birthday suits.⁷

There were open-air executions of robbers and looters at public parks as well. In one incident thousands watched as Lieutenant Nakagawa, the Garrison Commander of Ipoh, beheaded five people and placed the heads on spikes. It was about this time too that the Japanese Gestapo spread its hideous tentacles to every corner of the country and thousands of Malaysians became victims. With Japanese soldiers all over the country conducting searches and making arrests, they were closed in like prisoners.⁸

Fired by the inspiration of national pride and a common hatred for the Japanese, scores of sturdy young Malay, Chinese and some Indians made their way to the hills and jungles to form what became a powerful, well-organized resistance movement against the Japanese. This movement was called the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).

Datuk Yeop Mahidin, organized the first Malay resistance organization, known as Watania. Tun Abdul Razak, the second Prime Minister (father of Datuk Seri Najib, the current Prime Minister) and Tan Sri Ghazali Ibrahim b. Ismail, former Chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff, were Captains. The daring exploits of Watania in the jungles of Pahang won the admiration of thousands of people in this country.

⁶ J. Victor Morais 'Witness to History – Memoirs of an Editor,' Percetakan Abadi

⁷ ibid

⁸ Ibid

The Japanese Occupation taught the Malaysians a valuable lesson – to maintain their self-respect as free people. They also learned that Asians were second to none, not only during war but also during times of peace.

The Aftermath of the Japanese Occupation

In the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation, and during the run-up to independence, the British made proposals to unify the Straits Settlements with the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States. The proposals included a Malayan Union and the Federation of Malaya. The United Malaya National organization (UMNO) was born as a result of the protests to the Malayan Union. In 1948, the Malayan Union was dropped and replaced by the Federation of Malaya Agreement. Simultaneously, in the same year, the Chinese dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP) launched an armed insurrection which had a profound effect on the political climate of the country.⁹

The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) had a slower start, as the Chinese were busily rebuilding their lives economically in the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation. It was formed on 27 February 1949 mainly as an alternative to the Chinese dominated MCP and other leftist parties. The MCA was led by the wealthy business class of Chinese, obtained its principle support from clans and dialect-group associations, chambers of commerce and the secret societies. All of these could offer their finances as well as their influence to promote the interests of the party.

UMNO was dependent upon traditional Malay centres of authority including the Malay aristocracy and religious figures. The party also galvanized mass support

⁹ Neil Khor Jin Keong and Khoo Kay Peng, 'Non-Sectarian Politics in Malaysia – the case of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia' Trafalgar Publishing House, 2008

through Malay vernacular school teachers and their followers. Both these parties were vertically–organised with much of their effectiveness based upon the charisma of their leaders. UMNO’s president, Dato’ Onn Jaafar was closely related to the Johor Sultanate and was the Chief Minister of that State. His MCA counterpart, Sir Tan Cheng Lock was a former Legislative Councilor and wealthy rubber magnate, coming from an established Malacca Straits Chinese family.

Sir Tan Cheng Lock was a Baba, a Sino-Malay cultural hybrid speaking Baba Malay at home. Dato’ Onn with his Caucasian features, was of Turkish – Malay lineage. Both were Westernised and English-educated. This cultural affinity meant that they worked well in the Consultative Councils of 1949 – 51, organized by the British to procure Sino-Malay cooperation with a view to granting independence. In 1952, Dato’ Onn was replaced by Tunku Abdul Rahman and in 1958, Sir Tan Cheng Lock by Dr. Lim Chong Eu.

The early leaders of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), John Thivy and K.L. Devaser were urban-based. As the MIC expanded to include more Tamil members, its cosmopolitan leadership was ousted. In 1955, Devaser was replaced by the patrician Tun V.T. Sambanthan; the son of an Indian plantation owner, highly regarded by the Tamil majority. Whilst initially the MIC was supportive of the IMP (formed by Dato’ Onn when he left UMNO) it now began to move away. The party began to associate itself almost entirely with the Tamil majority thus losing much support from the remaining ethnically mixed urban Indian community including the Punjabis.

Beginning 1951, as part of the preparation toward self rule, the British decided to introduce district and municipal council elections. The first elections were held in Georgetown and Kuala Lumpur. One of the objectives was to prepare the citizens for the Federal Legislative Council Elections, which would lead to internal self-government. The post war period witnessed the formation of a unified Legislative Council for the whole country.

The post war period witnessed the formation of a unified Legislative Council for the whole country, the introduction of the Member system, whereby the Members were locals and sat as officials in the Legislative Council. Laws (Ordinances) were passed by the Straits Settlements Legislative Council after the settlements ceased to be a part of India. This was the period which saw the introduction of elections and the bicameral legislature in 1959.

Opposing the Malayan Union

Records indicate that the Malayan Union was opposed to by all Malaysians. Under the leadership of Dato' Onn (the grandfather of Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Onn), a country-wide non-cooperation movement was launched with the backing of all the Malay Rulers. On June 29, 1946 UMNO asked Dato' Onn to discuss the Federation Scheme with the Sultans and Britain.

It was during this period that the late Tun Tan Cheng Lock, the founder and first President of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and leaders of the other communities sent a telegram to London – to be exact, on 26 July 1946 – requesting Britain to consult all sections of the population of Malaya.

On 17 August 1947, Tun Cheng Lock organized a meeting of all Malayan Chinese Chambers of Commerce, trade unions, guilds and associations. It opposed the Federation Scheme. Fortunately Malaya was lucky to have leaders of the calibre of Dato Onn not only to guard the position of the Malays in particular and other Malaysians in general but to guide them along the right path. Eventually Britain acceded to the Malaysians demands when the Federation Agreement was signed.

The 1948 Agreement

The preamble to the 1948 Agreement stated that there should be a common form of citizenship in the Federation to be extended to all those who regard the said Federation or any part of it as their real home and the object of their loyalty.

Under the 1948 Agreement, a Federal Legislative Council was set up, consisting of the High Commissioner as President, three ex-officio members, the Chief Secretary, the Attorney – General and the Financial Secretary, the nine Chief Ministers of the Malay states and one representative from each of the Settlements Council, who would be unofficial members.

The remaining eleven officials and fifty unofficial members were allocated thus: six labour, six plantations: rubber and oil palms (three public companies and three small holdings); four mining; six commerce; six agriculture and husbandry; four professional, educational and cultural, nine states; two settlements; two Chinese and one each from the Indian, Ceylonese and Eurasian communities. This allocation was made mainly on a non-racial basis.

Parliament

On 11 September 2009 the Malaysian Parliament turned 50, half a century since the introduction of the bicameral legislature in Malaysia. That we as Malaysians are able to observe and enjoy peaceably the golden jubilee of the most august body of government simply shows that we have inherited the invaluable concept of parliamentary democracy from our founding fathers. **It is for us to appreciate and keep in mind constantly the role played by the many personalities.**



The Opening of the first Parliament of Malaya at the Legislative Building in 1959 Source: National Archives of Malaysia



Members of Parliament in 1959 Source: Parliament Malaysia

Suspension of Parliament

The development of the Malaysian Parliament was disrupted temporarily in 1969 when Parliament was suspended following the May 1969 general elections and the ensuing racial riots. The Emergency Ordinance declaring a state of Emergency was signed by His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The country was governed by a National Operations Council (NOC) headed by the Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, who was subsequently appointed Prime Minister on September 21, 1970.

In February 1971, Tun Razak restored parliamentary democracy by reconvening Parliament as soon as the political and security situation stabilised. There was a

gap of 2 years between 13 Februari 1969 (the last sitting of Parliament before the 1969 elections) and 20 Februari 1971 (the first session of Parliament after the Emergency was lifted).

It was a supreme test of maturity for Tun Abdul Razak, who could have continued to rule through the NOC, as many of his advisers wished him to do, but he overruled them. He said that it was unpleasant business for him to continue ruling the country as a dictator. He added that **“unless we restore power to where it properly belongs, and to the people through Parliament, all the struggle for independence, the struggle against Communism, all that will have been in vain.”**

War against the Communists

It was the war against the Communists which resulted in the forced resettlement of over half a million Chinese into military-guarded ‘new villages’. This ‘Briggs Plan’ constituted greatly to the defeat of the communists and also enlarged the urban-based Chinese population. This emptied the countryside of non-Malays and filled the towns with Chinese.

The crimes of banditry and murder, which were reported in the papers every day, were really manifestations of a foul plot to disrupt peace and order as a prelude to the imposition by terrorism of Communist rule on the people of this country.

Formation of Malaysia

Three years after Malaya obtained independence from Britain in 1957, Tunku put forward the idea of Malaysia. An inter-governmental committee was formed. On 6 January 1962, the Government of Britain and Malaysia set up the Cobbold Commission to determine how the people of Sabah and Sarawak felt about joining Malaysia.

The Philippines and Indonesia disagreed with the idea to form Malaysia. Brunei decided not to join. On 9 July 1963, Malaysia was formed consisting of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Singapore left Malaysia on 9 August 1965.

Mr. R. Ramani, a partner in the law firm of Braddel and Ramani stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. He represented Malaysia at the United Nations where he distinguished himself with his speeches and actions. Not many seem to remember that he was the one who argued at the United Nations for the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak for the formation of Malaysia. He stood and argued his case non-stop for hours.

When Mr. De Beus of the Netherlands took over from Mr. Ramani as the President of the Security Council on June 3, 1965, he paid this tribute to Mr. Ramani:-

'I think we can say with confidence that rarely in the history of the UN has the Security Council had more reason to honour its past President than we have today to honour Mr. Ramani for the way in which he conducted our debates with the legal clarity of an experienced lawyer, the impartiality of a judge and with a sense of humour such as only wise men possess'.

'Furthermore, those of us who have cooperated closely with you in informal discussions outside this chamber have had an opportunity to admire your solutions in almost insoluble problems and your gift in drafting formulas for that purpose'.

That was the calibre of people we had then who represented Malaysia at international forums. The people who represented the country were appointed based on their abilities and merit to represent Malaysia in the international arena. Mr. Ramani was also regarded as one of the outstanding members of the legal profession.

General Elections

Credit is due to the leaders of our nation for the fact that between 1974 and up until 2008 a total of eight general elections have been held peacefully (in 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999 and 2004). The supreme virtue of the democratic system is that it makes possible the transfer of power to younger and more effective hands without a *coup d'état* and without civil war. This indicates a maturation of the country's electoral politics and the strengthening of parliamentary democracy in the country.

The fact that Malaysia has effectively moved relatively peacefully so far, to a genuine two-party or multi-party democracy should be perceived positively and not negatively. The presence of a strong opposition in the House of Representatives is but a reflection of the existence of a matured, vibrant democracy.

Attachment to the Place of Birth

There is no denying that everyone has a fond attachment for the place where he or she is born and for many of us that attachment is very passionate. One such passionate man who loved Malaya (especially Penang) was Dr. Ong Chong Keng. Dr. Ong was an influential voice in Penang politics, and Chairman of the delegate to UNESCO and the unofficial ambassador to China.¹⁰ He was a strong opponent of the Communists and spoke out against them on numerous occasions.

¹⁰ Pamela Ong Siew in '*Blood and the Soil – A Portrait of Dr. Ong Chong Keng*'

Dr. Ong's passion about the country is evident from the following passage:-

Many of us are born and bred in this country. We want to live our own lives in our own way, and we want to work in harmony with the other communities who, like us, are domiciled in this country. We are Chinese by race; but Malaya is not part of China, and no right-thinking Chinese will ever dream of disturbing the peace of this happy land by extending to this country the internecine strife between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party which is being fought out in China. I would strongly advise those of my Chinese friends who feel the urge to take active sides to this conflict, either for the Kuomintang or for the Communist Party, to curb their enthusiasm until they have returned to China, for it is in China that they can be of real use to the cause which they espouse.

*We, Malaysians want to live and die in this country as our fathers and fathers' fathers have lived and died before us, and as our children and children's children will live and die after us. **Malaya is not our second home: it is our only home.** To-day, we have no alternative but to contribute our full share towards the restoration and preservation of law and order in order that we can continue to live and work in peace and harmony with the other races who, like us, regard Malaya as an object of their **undivided loyalty.***

We have been asked to enroll in the Auxiliary Police and in the Special Constabulary: but no official information has been published giving details of the Auxiliary Police.

I have never missed any opportunity to ask for equal privileges. Some people may feel that, as they are not given the same privileges as, for example, in the upper ranks of the State Civil Services, they should not be expected to give the same measure of co-operation as those who are more privileged. These people should realize that if they hold back now, not only will they lose all hope of ever

*getting any more privileges, but even those which they have now may be taken away from them. If they prove their use in this hour of need, they will establish their right to more privileges.*¹¹

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise two points: firstly, privileges and responsibilities go together – there cannot be privileges without responsibilities, there cannot be responsibilities without privileges; secondly, whether we are Malaysians born and bred in this country or immigrants who have come here to earn a living, whether we are capitalists or labourers, employers or employees, we must do all we can to re-establish and to maintain normal and settled conditions if we want to continue to play our important part in the industrial and commercial life of this land of our birth or adoption.

The sentiments expressed above are in fact a reflection of what goes on in the minds of many of us. No community, however virtuous, can honestly assert that it does not harbour any black sheep in its fold; no community, however exclusive and however small it may be, can hold itself up as a paragon of unadulterated moral rectitude without exciting the scorn and ridicule of less conceited communities. If we turn back and look at the pages of history, we shall find that the immigrant Chinese and Indians who came to Malaya to earn a living, were attracted here by the peace and tranquility.

Unfortunately, in 1948 Dr. Ong was assassinated at age 44. To quote Malcolm MacDonald:-

Dr. Ong Chong Keong was a man of rare distinction. He was more than a leader of the Chinese community: he was a leader of the peoples of Malaya. To the service of this country he dedicated a brilliant array of gifts. He had the

¹¹ B 387 Paper 194

*courageous heart of a soldier, the cultured mind of a scholar and the noble vision of a statesman. He was a memorable Malayan patriot.*¹²

Tan Sri Dr. Tan Chee Khoon aka Mr. Opposition, is another Malaysian politician who is widely regarded for his efforts to avoid the politics of ethnic chauvinism through the promotion of multiracialism. In his book, he narrates many interesting events that happened in Parliament.

One of the reminiscences worth repeating is the occasion when, Tan Sri Dr. Tan Chee Khoon demanded in Parliament that our then High Commissioner in Australia be stripped of his title and his post for going missing for two weeks in the bosom of some sultry Australian siren. Tunku Abdul Rahman challenged, *'Let any one amongst us who is without sin, stand up and cast the first stone.'* Tan Chee Koon was the only one who stood and remained standing. After a pregnant silence, Tunku, who at first seemed at a loss for words, looked between Tan Chee Khoon's eyes and said, *'David Tan Chee Khoon, I really pity you.'*

Remembering the Six Prime Ministers

Every Prime Minister had/has his own leadership style because each has his own personality. Nevertheless, the objectives of their premierships remain similar. When the euphoria of Independence perfumed the air of Kuala Lumpur and throughout the minds of the population for many days after 31 August 1957, euphoria of a mellower variety recurred on Wednesday 10 September 1957, in the hearts of the twelve men who assembled to attend the first meeting of the Malayan Cabinet.

Tunku's first Cabinet had twelve members, all of them stalwarts who had worked closely with him to achieve Independence by peaceful means. Dato' (later Tun) Abdul Razak held the portfolios of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of

¹² Ibid

Defence, Colonel H.S. Lee was Minister of Finance, Encik Sulaiman bin Abdul Rahman of Johore was Minister of the Interior and Justice, Mr. V.T. Sambanthan was Minister of Health, Encik Sardon Haji Jubir was Minister of Works, Posts and Telecommunications, Mr. Ong Yoke Lin was Minister of Labour and Social Welfare. Mr. Tan Siew Sin was Minister of Commerce and Industry, Encik Abdul Aziz Ishak was Minister of Agriculture, Encik Mohd. Khir bin Johari was Minister of Education, Encik Bahaman bin Samsudin was Minister of Natural Resources and Encik Abdul Rahman bin Haji Talib was Minister of Transport.

They met in the same room in the headquarters building of the Public Works Department, where a similar body had deliberated on so many previous Wednesdays, but now the British High Commissioner had returned to his country, and Tunku sat in his place. Tunku brought to that meeting and to those which followed a spirit of mutual understanding and confidence which had been absent in the days of MacGillivray.¹³

Tunku had adopted the old Selangor Residency, on a low hill overlooking the town, as his official headquarters at the beginning of 1957 and he continued to live there until he retired thirteen years later. Before the end of this first Cabinet meeting, Tunku invited all those present to lunch at his house and in the weeks that followed, other ministers took it in turns to host post-Cabinet lunches. It was Tunku's intention that these lunches should provide an opportunity for Ministers to discuss informally matters or problems which had not yet been resolved during the morning, and they served a valuable purpose. These Cabinet meetings ushered in a new era in the life and history of this country.

Under the stewardship of Tun Razak Hussein, our second Prime Minister, three million adults were equipped with reading and writing skills. Tun Razak is said to have built 3,000 schools in 10 years. It was during his time too that the country's

¹³ Mubin Sheppard 'TUNKU – A Pictorial Biography 1957-1987' Volume Two 1988

socio-economic development of the country thrived. It was Tun Razak who introduced the '*Red Book*' which developed the policy for rural development.

Although Tun Abdul Razak was a son of an aristocrat he was brought up in a village and remained humble throughout his life. His devotion to work resulted from his desire to uplift the living conditions of the people. Despite his illustrious rise to power, he never forgot his roots. He was happiest when amongst the common man.

During the Japanese Occupation he had to give up his studies, and start eking a living in the fields and catching fish. Although that kind of life led to a healthy body, it also stifled his spirit that wanted to excel and move forward. His father could not help him secure employment as all jobs, especially those in the public sector were under the care of the Japanese army.

It was his experience of hardship and adversity under the hands of the Japanese that subsequently ingrained in him the determination to continue his studies to the highest level. He was haunted by the hardship that he had witnessed in his childhood years, and was determined to wipe the tears of the downtrodden.

He lived a life of exemplary service that defines the true measure of one's love for the nation. He had once said, "*The true measure of a nation is not found in such cold facts as its size, wealth or population but in the warmth of the service which its citizens give on their own free will to their fellow men*".

As the principle architect of rural development, Tun Razak tramped miles through mud and rain for days on end, and showed no sign of fatigue. Through sheer determination and hard work he transformed the rural landscape. He changed the simple kampong by introducing modern methods of farming, building roads and community centres, and providing it with water and electricity.

Though Tun Razak is said to have lacked flair with words, he nevertheless was tactful. He never raised his voice. He offered the people a message of hope, but

more importantly, he delivered. Always a pragmatist, Tun Razak discouraged longwinded arguments and nipped petty bickerings in the bud. At the height of the Confrontation with Indonesia he said, *“We are tired of silly speeches of those who like political parasites, are perpetually picking at the corpse of colonialism.”* If not for leaders like Tun Razak, the country might have fallen into the hands of those whom Tun Suffian once described as *“starry-eyed visionaries, strong on theory and oratory, but weak in administrative ability and common sense, as indeed happened in Ghana and several other countries.”*

Even in his last days, Tun Razak proved himself to be a beacon of integrity. His concern about use of public funds was legendary. He struck a chord with Tun Tan Siew Sin, the Finance Minister for his high standards of financial integrity. Both of them abhorred profligacy, and found displays of extravagance and lavish lifestyle distasteful. Tun Razak died a relatively poor man, as he did not succumb to the temptations of wealth.

When requesting money for his last journey to London, he was concerned about cost; he decided that his wife was not to accompany him on that journey. He had once abandoned the plan to build a swimming pool at his official residence. The idea had been mooted in order to spare the public of the inconvenience of having to vacate the pool whenever he wanted to have a swim at the Lake Club. After one month of deliberations, he felt that the estimated cost of RM60, 000 could be better spent on building three rural health clinics.

His uprightness and integrity was evident even during the early part of his political career as Deputy Prime Minister. During the 1959 elections campaign, Tun Razak had spoken out against the abuse of the Information Department by political parties, including the Alliance Party. He had refused to use government machinery and facilities including the Public Address system, for electioneering purposes.

His thrift and respect for public funds was legendary. After becoming Prime Minister, Tun Razak refused to move out of Sri Taman. Nor did he allow his wife to change the curtains and re-upholster the furniture. The country's third Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Hishammudin Hussein's father) upheld the rule of law and never compromised on matters affecting the nation's security. However great the odds against him, he would still defend and strive for truth and justice. It was for his attributes of honesty and courage that he was highly respected by the people, yet feared by those who compromised on matters of principles. His quote: *'I am not important. What I do is important. I would rather be unpopular in politics than to fail in carrying out my responsibilities. What is the political future of a person compared to his responsibility?'*

Soft though he may have appeared on the exterior, he was extremely strict and held steadfastly to his principles. One of Hussein Onn's directives to all Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers in their respective states were to refer all requests from the Sultans, whether about acquiring land, logging rights, business licences or any other matters to the Prime Minister. ***'Let there be no-one, however big, however rich, however influential, belittle the people's determination in upholding the integrity of the law. The power entrusted to us is not to be used against others, not to improve our position and not to make us rich. The power is to be used in the interest of the people.'***

On national unity, he had this to say:- *'National Unity will not happen by itself, we must work hard to achieve it'* – July 1981

Few other national leaders have sat in the seat of power so long, or enjoyed such undisputed supremacy and respect as Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, our fourth Prime Minister. Few combine so many impressive qualities. Under Tun Mahathir, the ruling National Front Coalition (Barisan Nasional), led by UMNO won landslide victories in the 1982 general elections and again in 1986, 1990, 1995 and 1999. Tun Mahathir had the qualities needed for leadership – a sense of

majesty, dignity, perfection and an eye for detail – ‘*no patience with muddling through*’ and courage. Unlike the previous three Prime Ministers who were all lawyers and accustomed to debate and compromise, Tun Mahathir was a medical doctor, believing in scientific precision and unaccustomed to having his patients dispute his diagnosis.¹⁴

On assuming office as the Prime Minister in 1981, Tun Mahathir set about putting his ideas into practice and transforming Malaysia from an exporter of rubber and tin, into an Asian tiger producing electronic equipment, steel and cars; his Look East Policy and Malaysia Incorporated.

In the 1986 general elections, he pulled off UMNO’s biggest victory since 1959. His reaction is best described by a foreign journalist, who recalls being astonished by Mahathir on that morning in August 1986:-

It was 4 a.m. in the Putra World Trade Centre and it had become plain that the Barisan National, and especially UMNO, had won massively in the 1986 general election. Says the reporter:-

Here was a guy who should have felt vindicated after all the speculation that the Barisan might lose. I mean, he could have at least looked happy. Not so Mahathir.¹⁵

The former Deputy Home Minister, Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, was picked by Mahathir personally to become a parliamentary secretary. Datuk Radzi, remembered his first meeting with Tun Mahathir thus:-

He told all of us to set examples. That we couldn’t go around tinting our (car) windshields, for instance. That we shouldn’t flaunt our wealth, even if it was

¹⁴ Hassan Hj. Hamzah ‘Mahathir: Great Malaysian Hero’ Mediaprint Publications 1990

¹⁵ *ibid*

legitimate. That our wives shouldn't be seen draped with diamonds. He told us...you can accept the odd hamper or two but not the three of five per cent cut. He warned us that he would know. I have tried to live my life according to that speech. It was the most inspiring thing I had ever heard.

It was during Tun Mahathir's premiership in 1991 that the UMNO General Assembly was allowed to debate the issue of the violation of constitutional monarchy. It was agreed that a Code of Ethics for the Sultans be laid down and clarify the do's and do not's for the rulers with regards to business, intervention in administration and the use of the media. The Code was later accepted as the Declaration of the Principles of the Constitution.

Tun Mahathir has this to say on success: - *Success doesn't come easily. You've got to batter your head against the wall quite a number of times before the wall breaks ...or your head. I suppose you've got to do that. I don't believe in giving up.*

His best quote on rumors:- *I have no say in these rumours. People love rumours in this country. We tell them repeatedly that it's not true... because most of the rumours are simply untrue. But that does not prevent people from creating more. It's a sort of entertainment, I suppose.*

On Tun Mahathir's personality, a friend stated:- *'It's very difficult to read the PM's mind. He looks and sounds exactly the same whether he's bored, indifferent, excited or pleased. And he's never been known to compliment anybody. So it's very frustrating not knowing whether he likes your idea or not. But, I've never seen him, lose his temper either, although he can be very sarcastic. That's part of his make-up. So people don't know what he wants or how he feels and so, I guess, they feel uncomfortable.*¹⁶

¹⁶ ibid

Arguably, the most apparent strengths of our fifth Prime Minister Tun Abdullah are his amiability and his affability – his natural penchant to help others, with his positive good thoughts (*sangka baik*) towards people and events, his desire to be in the right before he commits himself to a decision; his integrity, reflected by the tenet often attributed to his character – ‘my word is my bond’ (*kata di kota, janji dilaksana*) and his firm grasp of international affairs especially espousing the primacy and dignity of the UN in setting problems on a multi-lateral basis.¹⁷

He has an even temperament and does not rebuke people or raise his voice in anger. His instructions, even when appearing harried, are always punctuated with a ‘*please*’.¹⁸ He is always cordial and congenial to everyone he meets. His oft-quoted words, upon assuming premiership was:- ‘*Don’t work for me, work with me*’.

As Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah invested in human capital. As he stated:-

People are our most important natural resource. The full potential of every individual has never been more in demand than now. The scale of the challenge we face makes it essential that together, we find a way to release this potential. We have to be able to capitalize on the talents and abilities of every Malaysian..

*Each of us here today, by our decisions and actions, will influence to some degree, the future and the kind of world our children will live in... Let us pledge that together, we will work to build a nation where there is individual accountability and where justice and equality prevail.*¹⁹

Seeing the need for professionalism, he worked closely with senior civil servants – like the Chief Secretary and the Director-General of the Public Services

¹⁷ Ismail Noor, ‘Pak Lah: A Sense of Accountability’ Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn Bhd, 2003

¹⁸ Ibid p. 127

¹⁹ Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi at the launch of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1999 on 31 March 1999

Department in order to get the best of the bureaucracy. The Judicial Appointments Commission and the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission will undoubtedly remain the legacies of Tun Abdullah to our nation.

The *1Malaysia* concept propagated by our current and sixth Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, is nothing new- as he himself has said. He is merely reiterating and reminding us of what the other Prime Ministers have said all along. The PM said the country had opted for the integration of its people even from the early days of the country's birth instead of assimilating them. As he stated, *'it is the best path because we portray a strength that is based on unity...Everyone has a place under the 1Malaysia roof'*.²⁰

It is Datuk Seri Najib who has finally made the dream of many Sabahans and Sarawakians come true when he declared on 19.10.2003 that henceforth, 16 September of every year would be a holiday to mark Malaysia Day – the day Sabah and Sarawak united with Malaya and the nation came to be known as Malaysia.

One cannot deny that he has a knack for doing things on the spot. He would be well remembered for his slogan of 'People First, Performance Now'. Whilst certain government agencies allegedly have a 'laid-back' attitude, the PM seems to have a knack for doing things instantly. It is indeed very refreshing to see the PM himself put the need for expeditious attendance to matters in perspective. It is hoped that red tape and words like *'Tengkok dulu'* (See first), *"Nanti"* (Wait) *"Datuk belum sign"* (Datuk has not signed yet), will soon be long gone, as a new culture of fast-track performance unfolds.

From being the country's youngest Member of Parliament, Datuk Seri Najib graduated to become its youngest Deputy Minister when he was tapped for the Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Ministry and finally Prime Minister.

²⁰ The Star, Tuesday, 20 October 2009

In 1984, Datuk Seri Najib, aged 30, had said:-

*My rise in politics has been beyond my expectations. I am under a microscope. I have to live up to certain expectations. I am conscious of this even today.*²¹

One tends to believe that this microscope has not been removed till today. Fortunately, the current Prime Minister is a most accommodating of personalities and is able to overlook the weaknesses of others. His unperturbed disposition when untruths are conjured; his sharp wit and sense of humour; his humility and his desire to work out policies that move the country forward instead of regressing – in consultation with all parties, endears him to the ‘rakyat’.

He is a diplomat par excellence when it comes to the country’s relationship with other nations of the world. It is during his tenure as Prime Minister that we have seen the repeal/and or amendments to many archaic legislations. He obviously listens to sound advice. Whilst many leaders will be reluctant to thank those on the opposite side of the fence, the Prime Minister’s sincere appreciation of the Opposition’s adherence to holding a peaceful assembly speaks volumes about the country’s sixth Prime Minister.

The PM’s best quote however is, *‘the mark of a successful city is not just how many skyscrapers, highways, flyovers and other facilities it had, but the level of comfort enjoyed by the people.’*²²

²¹ ASIAWEEK, April 27, 1984

²² New Sunday Times, 11 October 2009

Conclusion

The strong characters and personalities described in this article united and has stood firm to provide for a more stable and efficient government for our country. History makes men and men too make history – we should continue to remember this. A salutary view of all these men and the role they played has been given to see for ourselves what kind of qualities are needed to continue to work in a united manner to bring our beloved nation to greater heights.

In our pursuit of a Malaysia for all Malaysians, let us conserve our huge stock of inter-communal goodwill, and let us be careful not to deplete it by wholesale suspicions and insults leveled at any one community or personality.

This is mentioned as a strong argument for close and concerted co-operation with all parties who make up the Government and not as a convenient excuse for any unseemly pusillanimity.

Let us celebrate the achievements of our country and not drive the populace into depression with ill-feelings and bad news everyday, in particular in the classroom. When ‘happy’ events are narrated and honestly at that, it emanates positive feelings.

Let us stop being negative. Let us recognize our strengths and achievements. We are a great nation with so many amazing success stories to tell. We need to acknowledge them. To quote the Prime Minister, ‘**Let us roll up our sleeves and harness the strengths of this great nation so that we can ensure continuous progress and prosperity.**’

17.1.2013