



By Tunku Abidin Muhriz and Sharyn Lisa Shufiyan

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IDEAS, which was launched recently by young people, hopes to restore the optimism of our great-grandfathers and bring freedom to each and every Malaysian.

THESE days it's normal for Malaysians to befriend and to form associations with one another abroad. In 1927, there were few Malaysians in London but several young Malaysians co-founded the Malay Students' Association of Great Britain.

They included two individuals by the name of Abdul Rahman. Their fathers were both monarchs of Malay States – independent Kedah and the Federated Malay State of Negri Sembilan – representing different traditions and experiences with modernity.

Kedah, with its history dating back to before the Siamese empire, was the most ancient and spiritual of the Malay States while Negri Sembilan, imbued with its Minangkabau traditions of constitutional democracy, federalism, female emancipation and individualist self-discovery (*merantau*), was one of the most progressive.

What both princes had in common was a yearning to see their countries develop and the lives of their people improved. Today, these two individuals are known as “Bapa Merdeka” and “the chap on our currency notes” respectively.

Symptomatic of the superficial way that history is taught in this country, there is little understanding of the ideological battles and numerous hardships they encountered. And there are those who would not care if this history was forgotten forever.

Being blood heirs of these two men who did so much to secure our free and independent nation, we were lucky to have unique access to their stories.

Sharyn on Tunku Abdul Rahman

I grew up as a complacent young girl. Only recently did I realise that I have some views of my own that are worth sharing with my fellow citizens. When I was given the opportunity to talk at the recent launch of the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), I realised that as Tunku Abdul Rahman's great-granddaughter, I could propagate and promote his views and values that so few of us still remember.

The blogosphere has united me with a great-grandson of my great-grandfather's close friend, the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Rahman. We not only share a bond through our great-grandfathers, but also through our vision of a better Malaysia where democracy is upheld, justice is preserved, and the well-being of the people is ensured.

Abidin and I were privileged to have been exposed to democracy during our years abroad, and these experiences have shaped our world views.

Studying in New Zealand, I saw how the police assisted in public marches rather than crackdowns, the public can question and pressure the government and that public opinion matters. When the public had enough of Labour, they voted National - without any dramatic legal proceedings! The media can play its independent role as the fourth estate, and public votes were not bought through bribery and business tenders.

Politics pre-Malaysia was not about race or power. It was about freedom and the people. May 13, 1969, has been allowed to become a tool of racist propaganda such that we forget the political motives behind the riots. Even the threat of communism was not one of race, as Malays were also involved. They framed their struggle as one against colonialism, even if some argue that their links with China represented a new imperialism. But this was an ideological, not a racial conflict – as is being claimed by some Malays now.

During my early years, my contact with my great-grandfather was limited. Alas, if I had been older, I would have rained upon him question upon question, and chatted with him about politics, society in general and religion.

My great-grandfather was a Malay nationalist, citing that Malaysia is a Malay country but “it is up to the Malays themselves to play an active and constructive part in every aspect of society, to take up the challenge that brighter future offers, bearing always in mind that it is the Constitution, its spirit and its application, which is and will be the safeguard of the security and progress of us all”.

I believe it has now come to a point where non-Malays have as much right to this country as Malays, that special privileges should be awarded to those in need - the poor, the oppressed, the stateless, the powerless - regardless of race and religion. Government policies that were drawn up to help uplift the status of the Malay have-nots have been abused, giving rise to cronyism and nepotism.

Racial exclusivity is also a growing problem where people are only helping their own community. It is also disheartening that non-racial political parties also practise exclusivity.

The Democratic Action Party widely speaks in Mandarin and is intimidating to non-speakers who share their ideals while the Human Rights Party is very much Indian-oriented. Political parties should be accessible to all Malaysians. Malaysians have to work towards recognising merit and character instead of playing race politics and preferring connections over capability for business opportunities.

Tunku Abidin on Tuanku Abdul Rahman

Unlike Sharyn, I never met my great-grandfather. My father was only 12 years old when Tuanku Abdul Rahman passed away in the early morning of April 1, 1960. When the news was announced, some assumed it was an April Fool's Day joke, but the mood quickly turned sombre as the Federation of Malaya prepared for its first State Funeral. He had lived a full life, witnessing war and celebration, misery and splendour, ancient rites and modern industry.

As a boy he walked to school barefoot every day, picking his breakfast from fruit trees along the way. This humble attitude was later evident when, as King, he personally switched off all the lights in Istana Negara every night.

He was proclaimed the eighth Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan in 1933, and administered the state with the generally cordial British advice. This was all to change after World War II.

During the Japanese Occupation, my great-grandfather was confined by the Japanese, forced to publicly approve of the replacement of one imperial power with another. When the British returned, he put his legal training - he was the first Malay Ruler to be qualified as a barrister - to good use as he fought the Malayan Union which was proposed by the new British Government.

Together with his brother Rulers, politicians and friends in the Malayan Civil Service from before the war, he fought the awful plan for centralisation until it was defeated. Indeed, Negri Sembilan provided the inspiration not only for the system of federation that replaced the Malayan Union, but also the system of elective monarchy that we continue to uphold.

Tunku Abdul Rahman wrote that he based this unique practice from Negri Sembilan's system of election and, in fact, the Reid Commission's minutes show that the proposed title for the Federal Head of State was Yang di-Pertuan Besar, changed only later to avoid confusion.

During the Emergency, my great-grandfather had a brush with death as communist terrorists attempted to murder him after derailing a train he was travelling in. If only I had the chance to ask him what was going through his mind at this and so many other pivotal points in history which he witnessed first hand.

I was, however, fortunate to know Tuanku Abdul Rahman's wife, the first Raja Permaisuri Agong Tunku Puan Besar Kurshiah. I did not appreciate her stature until her dying days: I remember clearly the doctor at the hospital where she was warded telling me his memories of her as Queen. And only recently did I find out that she was one of the ladies who donated her jewellery to support Tunku Abdul Rahman's mission to London to negotiate for Merdeka.

Thirty years after our great-grandfathers met in London, they shared a podium in the Merdeka Stadium as the first Head of Government read out the Proclamation of Independence which had been endorsed by the first Head of State and his brother Rulers.

If they were alive today, we are sure that they would be surprised and deeply disappointed at how Malaysia is evolving. The language and tenor of politics has changed. Politicians no longer invoke the word "freedom", as citizens endure restrictions in freedom of expression, controls on the media, limitations in peaceful activism and books disappearing from shelves.

The quest for unity is still languishing, 52 years after our ancestors adopted “Unity is Strength” as the federal motto. Optimism has been replaced by a strained hope that things will not degenerate further, as the government of the day battles to liberalise the economy and stem the emigration of increasing numbers of those it designates as “Malay”.

Hyperbolic statements of the threat of racial and religious violence have emboldened the exclusivist diatribes of one set of racists and extremists, and the once great institutions of our country have been hijacked, infiltrated and subdued to obey politicians who have achieved their positions through bribery, patronage and intimidation. The few good eggs that have survived the maelstrom are routinely sidelined, co-opted or threatened, even if their names are adorned by prefixes and post-nominals.

IDEAS

IDEAS seeks to reverse this trend, to restore the optimism of our great-grandfathers and above all to bring freedom Merdeka to each and every Malaysian. We have been accused of unrealistic romanticism, striving to recreate a time long gone and irrelevant to today's generation. But if the vision of the future is that of extremists, inspiration from the past is necessary and timely.

This mission is not exclusive to IDEAS. There are many other organisations striving to achieve the same vision in their own ways: through charities and social enterprises, building schools and hospitals, empowering the marginalised and, yes, environmental conservation. After all, differences in methods and opinions must flourish in a healthy democracy.

And our ancestors believed in such differences because they valued parliamentary democracy, constitutional federalism, rule of law and individual liberty. They opposed global communism in favour of the free market and they understood the limitations of government. While we are proud to carry their blood, we are delighted to invite you to join us on a journey of rediscovery for, after all is said and done, every Malaysian is an heir of their legacies.

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