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FEB 8 – Tunku Abdul Rahman was the founder of Malaysia. That has been obscured by an intervening period in which his memory has been brushed out of our national consciousness.

He brought together a Malaysia that had come together “through our own free will and desire in the true spirit of brotherhood and love of freedom”, in a union arrived at “by mutual consent by debate and discussion...through friendly argument and compromise,” and “in the spirit of co-operation and concord.”

This was the basis for Malaysia he worked for and established, and that his life embodied. That basis has been replaced by something alien to it, his memory has been suppressed, and our history revised.

Part of the reason our collective memory of Tunku has faded, and that Tunku would not recognise today's Malaysia, is that Tunku and his generation built institutions that empowered the people rather than cults of personality to concentrate power and wealth in themselves. They reached instinctively for democratic decision-making. The concepts and precepts of constitutional democracy were part of their natural vocabulary and instinctive reactions. They knew who the country belonged to, and that they lived to serve.

The day of Tunku's funeral was not even declared a public holiday. It is no accident that the erasure of his memory has gone hand in hand with the erosion of our institutions. Tunku built up a system of good civil service in which ordinary citizens did not need to see so-and-so to get things done. This has been replaced by a domineering style of leadership in which what you get done depends on who you know. Of course the rich and powerful have better connections.

In place of the protection for ordinary citizens guaranteed by popular representation, rule of law

and the checks and balances of independent institutions, we have the cult of the great leader.

In place of a system which designed to assure the rights of the ordinary citizen we have a system re-designed around the interests of corporate and political bosses.

Ordinary Malaysians are disenfranchised of their rights to health, education and security. They are then patronised by leaders whose idea of public service is to go around like Father Christmas doling out gifts of resources which are really the property of the people. This turns citizens into supplicants. Our properties are converted into gifts from the great leader. Our rights are converted into permissions. Our country has become his country.

There has been, over the years since his passing, a quite deliberate erasure of our memory of Tunku. This should come as no surprise. He saw the wrong turn we were taking and he opposed it. He and several other leaders were excluded from UMNO Baru. He led a movement called Semangat 46. His conception of our politics and system of government had no place for corrupt practices, arbitrary executive power and the manipulation of racial and religious identity for political gain.

Tunku Abdul Rahman did not help us achieve independence and then the merger, alone. He led

and worked with an entire class of individuals schooled in the culture and practice of parliamentary democracy. In politics and the civil service they thrived in a time before the machine politics of patronage and lowbrow identity politics had sucked the life and talent out of the ruling party and left it filled with people who quite simply don't have the ability to hold this country together anymore.

The average age of our first cabinet was under thirty. Tun Razak was 28. Tun Dr Ismail was barely 30 years old. Men of their calibre would not have made it up the ladder of the party that has succeeded theirs. They would have been too untainted, too young to do so.

The IDEAS project looks back, then, not just to an individual but to an era in Malaysia's brief history. It will promote the values and principles on which we were formed.

Over the course of that history we have not trodden a continuous path to the present day. There have been two regimes, or political dispensations, in the life of this country, young as she is.

The first began in the fifties and ended in 1970. The dispensation that followed came to a mortal crisis in 1997 and limped on to 2008. Against the background of those changes, what has followed the elections of March 2008 is hard to describe as anything but the detritus of a once-functioning political system.

If any one of us was tempted to imagine that Malaysia had outgrown the sordid events of 1997, the government's newspapers bring to our breakfast tables each day Sodomy 2, to remind us that after another decade of sloganeering, as Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin pointed out, we have come full circle to find ourselves back at the doorstep of our debased institutions and a Constitution that is increasingly inoperative.

The progress of the trial of the leader of the Opposition, the government's apparent ignorance of the sovereign rights of the states and the way in which we have allowed religious issues to be manipulated, point to that conclusion. The constitutional crisis in Perak, in which a government has been installed by illegal means, the failure to implement two royal commissions of inquiry findings, point to that conclusion.

The barbarous political culture promoted by the establishment media brings us full circle, and drives home the point: our system of government is still in 1997. We are still in the after-wash of a wave of bad taste, authoritarianism and arbitrary power that destroyed our practice of parliamentary democracy, compromised our judiciary and police, and disenfranchised our people.

To modify Tunku's words, we now have a democracy "existing in name, but grievously compromised in substance, reality and fact."

Our penchant for slogans is a reflection of our dislocation from the living reality of constitutional and parliamentary democracy. We don't need slogans. We need our Constitution back.

This, then, is the context in which IDEAS has adopted its noble purpose. The efforts of idealistic young people, attuned to the principles of parliamentary democracy and to our real history, and equipped with a plan to effect that purpose, are exactly what we need at this time. We need this and other such efforts from the young. They should not let their repugnance at the ugliness of our political system turn them away from it. It is precisely because we have a broken political system that it is so ugly. It is precisely because our main political parties are bound to infantile ethnic politics that we are now stagnant and declining as a country. Instead, I hope they see the mindlessness and ugliness of our present politics as a call to service.

I urge young people to rise to the task of changing our political system. We have left it to “the deranged” for too long as Tunku Zain Al-‘Abidin calls them. To expect change from the incumbents is to expect, in the Malay saying, the mice to repair the gourd... “Bagai tikus baiki labu-labu.”

It is time for us to understand, discuss, organise and act together.

Tunku was a true Malaysian. As we have forgotten him, we have also forgotten how to be Malaysians. We must learn again how to be free and equal citizens of a constitutional democracy. In our national life we must learn again how to be a Federation of sovereign states governed by the rule of law.

We have been robbed of our memory, and have had it replaced with slogans, but we have also been robbed of our country. Let us come together to recover both.

** This article is the personal opinion of the writer or publication. The Malaysian Insider does not endorse the view unless specified.*