

Testing times for the Alliance

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AFTER the Alliance won a landslide victory in the first federal election in 1955, winning 51 of the 52 seats in the Federal Legislative Council, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the one-time playboy, became chief minister.

The British were still masters but Tunku and his pre-Merdeka Alliance cabinet were able to exert a strong influence in the running of the government because they were also supported by 19 other members in the 98-seat council.

The other members of Tunku's cabinet consisted of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun H.S. Lee, Tun V.T. Sambanthan, Tun Sardon Jubir, Tun Ong Yoke Lin, Tun Leong Yew Koh and Abdul Aziz Ishak.

Tunku was 52 when he was sworn in as chief minister and home affairs minister. He later took on added responsibilities as minister for internal security and for defence. Razak became education minister and at 35, was the youngest cabinet member.

After their swearing in on Aug 9, the cabinet members met officially as heads of their respective ministries. There was much *bonhomie* and camaraderie as they sat down to discuss their agenda for the country to achieve nationhood and their plans to lift the state of emergency, which

over the seat allocation and the Malay demands. But mostly, they blamed MCA party officials for not working hard enough to register about 300,000 eligible Chinese voters.

Most of the Umno general assemblies in the early days were often stormy, and the leaders were openly criticised by delegates. But Tunku, Razak and Ismail prevailed over most issues including changing the party slogan from "*Malaya Untuk Melayu*" (Malaya for Malays) to Malaya for all.

But the assembly following the first meeting of the Alliance National Council was especially riotous and threatened to split the party. However, members quickly sobered up after Tunku threatened to resign if the demand for 90% seat allocation was not abandoned.

Gradually, however, most came around to his way of thinking. He won overwhelming support. And with that support, he returned to the Alliance National Council which reallocated the seats, giving 35 to Umno, 15 to MCA and two to MIC.

Razak had the toughest task of all as education minister to draft a national education policy. He chaired a committee which came out with what is known today as the "Razak Report".

The basic feature was that the existing separate language-medium schools would remain but their contents would be more oriented towards Malaya than China or India, and Malay and English would



The first Malayan Cabinet meeting in 1955 chaired by Tunku Abdul Rahman.

had been declared in 1948, before the country became independent.

But things almost became undone for the Alliance when its National Council met for the first time on April 10, 1955 to decide on seat allocation for the July 27 general election.

It was originally decided that Umno would contest in 40 constituencies and the MCA in 12. The MIC would not be allocated any seats because it had just joined the Alliance, and was one of the weakest of the Indian organisations at that time.

When word of the allocation got out, Tunku was sharply criticised by Umno members, who were powerful then, for not insisting on 90% of the seats seeing as out of the 1,280,865 voters, 84% were Malays, 11.2% Chinese, and the rest mostly Indians.

The Indians were most unhappy and blamed the MCA, which they said were anti-Indian, for the MIC not getting a single ticket to contest in the elections under the Alliance banner. Their newspaper of the time, *Tamil Murasu*, called for all Indians to boycott the MIC.

In public, the Chinese kept mute

be compulsory subjects in all schools.

Despite several compromises, the Chinese educationists remained dissatisfied till today. But this did not hinder close cooperation between Umno and MCA in other areas even though a potentially tense situation developed after the Reid Commission started its task of drafting the national charter or constitution because of the bargaining that took place.

There was close cooperation among the three communities to have the emergency lifted by independence. Several districts cleared of communist threats or free from "incidents" involving the communists were declared "white areas".

However by August 1957, some patches of "black areas" remained and the Alliance cabinet realised that its aspiration for the emergency to be lifted early could not be realised. The emergency was finally only lifted in 1960, three years after independence.

The Big Day

Finally, the eve of the big day for the young nation arrived.

Harry Miller, a journalist and the Tunku's first biographer wrote:

"Just before the stroke of midnight Abdul Rahman arrived. As the clock in the tower of the Secretariat (now Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad) began to boom the first strokes of the new day, the Union Jack was hauled down slowly from a mast.

"As it was gathered gently by Malay hands and placed on a tray, the Federation of Malaya flag was slowly hoisted to the top of a second mast. The thousands screamed 'Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!' Britons watching from the Selangor Club led the applause, taken up by the Malays standing outside.

"A pledge was honoured and a nation was born. Unshamedly, Abdul Rahman was gripped with the ecstasy and the emotion of the moment. As the shout of 'Merdeka!' died, another rent the air – that of 'Bapa Merdeka!' (Father of Independence) – as the president of the powerful Youth section of the Umno, Inche Sardon bin Haji Jubir, placed a gold medallion on Abdul Rahman's neck. On it was inscribed 'Bapa Merdeka'."

Shortly after that, the Tunku left the Padang, as the Merdeka Square was known then, but because of the traffic jam, he had to walk all the way to his hotel, Hotel Majestic, to wait the few hours before he proclaimed Merdeka at the recently completed Merdeka Stadium.

Also completed just days before the historic event was the country's first five-star hotel, Federal Hotel in Bukit Bintang. It was where foreign dignitaries invited for the occasion were billeted.

One of the first criticisms the Tunku received as Prime Minister was the official headgear he and his cabinet colleagues – Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Tun Razak, Finance Minister Tun H.S. Lee and the rest – had to wear.

The headgear consisted of helmets plumed with red, white, and blue ostrich feathers – so reminiscent of British colonial governors. It was said that many at the stadium had difficulty keeping a straight face when the Tunku and his cabinet colleagues trooped in. Some opposition party members even booed.

The prime minister's reaction was

unconcealed displeasure. But he later agreed that the uniform, especially the headgear, was a little outlandish. The plumed helmets were soon replaced by a gold-braided Malay *songkok* and made in time for the first anniversary of Merdeka.

Early days of government

In appointing members of his cabinet, Tunku based his selection, first and foremost, on his confidence and trust in them, instead of following any party quota. A case in point was when H.S. Lee lost his position as leader of Selangor MCA, which asked for the finance portfolio to go to someone else. Tunku refused.

One of the many problems the new cabinet had to deal with was the question of Malayisation. Many expatriate officers soon had to give up their positions to their local subordinates.

The cabinet did not realise the situation was going to be a problem until it happened. Within a year, the country lost about 30% of its most experienced officers, causing a drop in government efficiency.

The situation even threatened the implementation of the first five-year development programme which was planned with the administration remaining intact. New local officers were recruited and trained by the expatriate officers before they left the country.

There were also instances when British heads of department refused to take orders from cabinet members. Sambanthan, who was health minister, complained to the Tunku that one of his head of departments refused to take his instruction.

Tunku was angry and exclaimed, "What? Who does he think he is? Does he think Britain still rules this country? This cannot go on and we must make an example of him."

Shortly after that, the officer was sacked.

But the greatest problem the government had to face was communalism. If it was not about education, it was about citizenship. And this sometimes affected the government's performance because it comprised representatives of three communal parties.

Within Umno, many members still chafed at the various compromises the party, and the Malays in general, had been committed to and they continued to berate and criticise their top leaders at every opportunity.

The MIC was divided between those who realised that the party was a weak Alliance partner and so had to work closely with the coalition leaders, and those who felt that the MIC should be more independent and vocal in demanding more Indian rights.

Generally, however, the party united behind its national leaders as Sambanthan, through his close personal association with Tunku, was able to get many concessions for the Indians.

It was the infighting in the MCA which once again threatened the Alliance's solidarity, and saw the departure of party founder Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

The situation was not unlike what was happening in the MIC, between the old guards who were loyal to the Alliance's way of doing things through compromise and accommodation, and the young Turks who wanted to use the party to voice their point of view and who cared less for harmony within the coalition.

But as some observers have noted, the process of alignment and re-alignment within the party has become such a permanent feature that mature attempts have and are being made to prevent party affairs from influencing the MCA's position in the government.