

Thinking through Tunku's thoughts

N. Sunday Times p8 23.8.07

Tunku's achievement in steering the country to independence may be attributed to his ability to think differently. And it may be a useful exercise for us to take a peek into Tunku's thinking style on this 50th anniversary of our independence, writes PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR

THERE are a lot of people out there giving advice. Don't just ignore them all.

There might be something to be gained by listening to them, and then doing the exact opposite.

This seems to have been the way of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the prince who pointed the way to independence 50 years ago.

Listen, and do what you have to do



Tunku Abdul Rahman with Datuk Sir Clough Thuraisingham, chairman of the Selangor Turf Club, in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, in 1956. Sharifah Rodziah and Datin Lady Thuraisingham are seen in the background. — Picture courtesy of Selangor Turf Club

Tunku always seemed to lose money by acting on tips given by Datuk Sir Clough Thuraisingham, his racing friend and political rival, a member of the Independence of Malaya Party led by Onn Jaafar.

So it came as a surprise when Tunku decided to seek Thuraisingham's advice on whether he should endorse the Umno-MCA electoral co-operation that was mooted in 1952 to fight the municipal elections.

Thuraisingham's advice to Tunku was a definite "no".

"If Thuraisingham doesn't like it, then it must really be a good idea," said Tunku, and did the opposite. And he succeeded in forging an inter-ethnic alliance that led the country to independence.

It must be remembered, in this connection, that inter-ethnic co-operation was one of the conditions for independence.

Another pre-requisite for independence was internal security. The British would not grant independence so long as the Emergency was in force.

The declaration to this effect was made by the Conservative government that was voted to power not long after the murder of Sir Henry Gurney in October 1951.

British opinion and popular perception was that without security, there can be no independence.

Tunku thought differently, and argued the opposite — without independence there can be no security.

He insisted that there can be no better way of ending the Emergency than by granting Malaya independence. Delay

would only play into the hands of the communists.

Tunku's use of the opposite logic worked. In December 1955, the High Commissioner to Malaya, Sir Donald MacGillivray, declared that the British government no longer regarded the Emergency as an obstacle to the federation's advance to self-government.

Even after the country obtained independence, Tunku never failed to express the opposite logic, very often in jest.

In referring to his Finance Minister, Tunku said: "Siew Sin has no understanding of the (situation), so if he has a political solution or proposal, we need to take it with a pinch of salt. When he advises you to go north, it is safer for you to go south instead."

Sometimes it got him in awkward situations. In December 1962, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister of Ceylon, visited Malaya.

After she left, Tunku was asked what he thought of Mrs Bandarnaiyeke.

Tunku said: "I like that lady. She gave me a lot of advice, but the funny thing is, whatever she told me, I tried the opposite and I found that it worked."

The Ceylon High Commission in Malaya was not amused. According to Tunku Nerang, the only son of Tunku, when Tunku landed in Ceylon on his way to India, only the minister of finance was sent to receive him.

In another instance, Tunku is reported to have said: "If Sukarno (the president of Indonesia) objected to the ASA (Association of Southeast Asia), it would be something worthwhile to consider."



Tunku bidding farewell to Ceylon Prime Minister Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike at the Sungai Besi airport. — Straits Times picture

Tunku went on to form ASA with Thailand and the Philippines.

The rhythm of the mind

According to Albert Einstein, "the only reason for time is that everything doesn't happen at once".

This accords well with the concept of gradualism — the belief that changes occur, or ought to occur slowly in the form of gradual steps.

Tunku was a firm believer in gradualism. As a person, he possessed a natural sense of rhythm, and this was evident not just on the dance floor, but in the way he looked at life.

He often spoke about the different seasons of life, and how one should be in tune with

each phase of the life cycle.

That did not mean he had no sense of urgency. We must remember Tunku's success in getting the country its independence two years in advance of his 1955 election pledge.

Tunku had a sense of the big picture, and was averse to imposing drastic changes to a way of life that had been in existence for many years under the British policy of divide and rule.

A few months after independence, Tunku was under pressure from the Malay school teachers who wanted immediate changes to the education system.

Tunku's response was: "For 100 years, there have been no Malay secondary schools in this country and yet now everyone wants them in a week or two.

"Malay alone is not enough... Malays have to learn English in order to be able to go for higher studies overseas.

"Malay teachers who have agitated for Malay secondary classes said I did not understand what they wanted. Let them say I am wrong.

"But my policy is to provide better education for Malay children and send them abroad for higher academic qualifications."

As a nation builder, Tunku always sought to look at issues in their historical perspective, and did not wish to rush the pace of change, despite political pressure.

When asked to state his stand on foreign policy Tunku said: "Give us a chance. We have just been born. Surely nobody can expect us to be able to run all at once.

"Some people think that as soon as you plant a tree it must bear fruit. We must allow it to grow a bit."

Undogmatic and flexible

Tunku was known to be a pragmatic leader who "would not commit himself to a definite statement of policy" (*Straits Times*, July 27, 1955).

In early 1959, Tunku said that the Alliance, which had won independence as a national party, was a mixture of feudalism, capitalism and socialism "so that we can work for the good of everyone in the country, rich and poor alike".

In 1960, he declared that "for us in the Alliance we have no dogma other than to ensure

happiness for the people, and peace and prosperity for the country".

Contrary to popular perception, Tunku was not against communism or any other ideology, so long as it was not imposed on the country.

"I am not anti-communist per se. I am only against those communist countries who try through subversive and militant means to export the ideology to our countries. In this way I am anti-communist.

"I am not against communism if they keep their ideology within their borders. They can export it elsewhere, but leave Malaya alone."

This is borne out by Tunku's statement in 1960: "Malaya would support China's admission to the United Nations. But we will not have diplomatic relations with her."

Said Dr Vogel, the West German ambassador to Malaya: "While Tunku says China must be recognised as a world power, he also makes the distinction that Malaya will not have diplomatic relations with her."

This shows Tunku to be a leader "who, while recognising facts, could also make distinctions".

His decisions might not always have gone down well with some of the people, but one thing is clear — he thought differently and succeeded most of the time.

You could start thinking differently, too, if you are thinking of making a mark in the next 50 years and beyond.

■ The writer is the director of Putaka Wira Negara of the National Archives Malaysia