

The dreamer, the planner and the doer

By PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR

The first three Prime Ministers who set the initial course of the nation were all lawyers but their personalities were as diverse as their leadership styles. Tunku dreamt, Tun Razak planned, and Tun Hussein carried through.

INDIVIDUAL idiosyncrasies and human qualities largely determine leadership styles. These were evident in the three lawyers who led the country in the early years of independence.

The nation's first leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman and its third, Tun Hussein Onn, stood at opposite ends of the spectrum. Tunku saw the big picture while Tun Hussein saw the details.



Tunku went straight to the heart of any matter. He relied on his intuition. Tun Hussein was cautious, and relied on detailed paper work.

As former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin put it: "Hussein's weakness was that he was too meticulous. He wanted to know everything." (Excerpt from *Daim the Man Behind the Enigma* by Chong Mei Sui).

A former Chief Secretary in Tun Hussein's administration commented that Cabinet meetings were too long, and that some matters could have been resolved at other levels.

Tun Abdul Razak Hussein stood somewhere in between Tunku and Tun Hussein. He was a good strategist, and had no problems keeping both the forest as well as the trees in view.

According to Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, his former political secretary and adviser, "Although Tun Razak lacked Tunku's charisma, humour and wicked charm, he had one attribute which Tunku lacked: the ability to manage."

This statement may need some qualification, for although wanting in administrative abilities, Tunku knew how to delegate responsibilities, and address more important matters that should concern a statesman.



Sharp mind: Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (right) stood somewhere in between Tunku and Tun Hussein (left). He was a good strategist, and had no problems keeping both the forest as well as the trees in view.

Said Tun Daim Zainuddin: “Tunku may have appeared to be jovial and have a *tidak apa* (laid-back) attitude, but he knew how to exercise power. At his peak, nobody could touch him. Razak was a great strategist. He knew how to get what he wanted”

In the words of Singapore’s Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, Tun Hussein was very careful in his work.

“At formal meetings, he would have his brief before him with important passages neatly underlined in colour, and would go through his brief methodically. He did not believe in trusting only to his memory.” (*Asia Week*, Sept 22, 2000)

Saving grace

Tunku’s lack of attention to details (characteristic of right brain orientation) may be attributed to the kind of princely life that Tunku led, shielded from the cares of ordinary life.

Despite strong long-term memory, Tunku was forgetful and frequently misplaced papers. The saving grace was that Tunku had the advantage of good listening skills which some attribute to his unusually large ears; and his mind was always alert, like a sponge, quick to absorb whatever was said.



Open book: The Tunku knew how to entertain and create laughter, but more importantly he was also able to laugh at himself.

Many amusing anecdotes have been told about Tunku's disinclination for details. The late Raja of Perlis, Tuanku Syed Putra used to narrate an anecdote when he was the country's 3rd Yang di-Pertuan Agong (1961-1965).

"On a Wednesday morning, the Tunku turned up as usual for a briefing at Istana Negara before the Cabinet meeting. This time, he brought Tun Razak along. The Tunku, in his usual cheerful mood, talked on almost everything, but when it came to the Cabinet briefing, he asked the reticent Tun Razak to do the talking."

Tun Hussein pored over papers with a thoroughness that was beyond Tunku, who had no patience with long-winded reports. Tunku would sometimes sign documents without reading the contents.

As J.M. Gullick, the former MCS officer noted, "Tunku avoided paperwork if he could. I once had to meet him to seek his signature of a paper that I had drafted for him to submit to the Executive Council.

'What's it about?' asked Tunku, and I told him. I said that I would return when he had had time to read it. 'Oh, that's all right', he said, signed it unread and handed it back. I have never had another such compliment. It was a privilege to have known him.

Unfortunately, however, Tunku's cavalier attitude to particulars made him overly dependent on the trust and loyalty of colleagues and fellow Ministers. Incidentally, Tun Hussein Onn was a fierce loyalist, a quality that has been attributed to his military training.

Had he been in Tunku's cabinet, this quality alone would have endeared him to the Tunku. If loyalty was an important consideration in Tunku's choice of leaders, merit and proven abilities had higher weightage in Tun Razak's estimation.

Tunku was human in his approach to problems, and Tun Razak was more administrative. As for Tun Hussein, his career as a civil servant, military man and lawyer made him rather impersonal, exacting, meticulous and legalistic at work. Unlike Tunku, he was a strict disciplinarian.

Tunku's human approach is attested by the late Dr Leonard Kenworthy who said that although Tunku was a prince, he lived most of his life with the people, and knew pretty well how they thought and felt.

“Some people refer to this as an intuitive ability, but it is certainly based on long years of association with the people” said the well-known Quaker educator and author.



Faithful follower: Tun Hussein Onn (left) was a fierce loyalist. Had he been in Tunku's cabinet, this quality alone would have endeared him to the Tunku.

According to Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, none came close to having Tunku's personal warmth, and Tun Razak had more of it than Tun Hussein. Unlike Tunku, Tun Razak seldom smiled, spoke less and kept his sorrows to himself.

In comparing Tun Razak with Tunku, Lee said, “Tun Abdul Razak, who took over as Prime Minister in September 1970, was a different leader from the Tunku. He did not have the Tunku's warm personality or his large and commanding presence. By comparison he appeared less decisive.

“Razak had been my contemporary at Raffles College from 1940 to 1942. He was bright and hardworking. He was also a good hockey player, but ill at ease with people unless he knew them well.”

Tunku once mentioned that being a sportsman was different from possessing sportsmanship. It is difficult to say if it was an indirect reference to his deputy.

Tunku's human approach influenced national policies, including foreign policy. "No former Asian colony ever started life with fewer grudges against its erstwhile master", wrote Danis Warner in the *Melbourne Herald*.

Referring to foreign relations, Tunku said, "It is not possible to build prosperity on rancour. We have to broaden our minds to think clearly of the tasks ahead of us".

While Tunku and Tun Razak were slow to anger, Tun Hussein Onn inherited the fierce temper of his father Dato Onn Jaafar. Incidentally, other great leaders like Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun Dr Ismail were also noted for their tempers.

Datuk Wan Mansor Abdullah, who served as private secretary to Tunku, used to recall an anecdote that demonstrated Tunku's ability to "feel the big picture", which left no room for temper. One day, when he was wading in his swimming pool, Tunku had a sudden flash of inspiration. He wanted his thoughts written down for a speech.

His bodyguard Pak Chat was the only person around at that time. Tunku spouted away his thoughts, while poor Pak Chat scribbled away furiously. At the end of it, Tunku asked him to read what he had written. The bodyguard was at a loss because he was unable to read his own handwriting.

After spending almost half an hour dictating a speech only to find it gone, anyone else could have easily lost his cool, but not the Tunku. He sat there and laughed heartily.

The sudden inspiration and ability to laugh are typical of a person with right brain orientation. Tunku was able to see everything clearly, as one is best able to when standing right on top of a hill, or recollecting events long after they have happened.

Tunku was able to laugh at Pak Chat's innocence, because he saw the entire incident in a bigger perspective. Pak Chat was not the right man, the timing was wrong, the entire thing was unplanned, and on a more positive note, these thoughts will return at the right time.

Common weaknesses

Tunku knew how to entertain and create laughter, but more importantly he was also able to laugh at himself. He was an open book. Although he shared common weaknesses with Tun Razak as far as certain indulgences were concerned, the latter was much more discreet.

Tunku dreamt, Razak planned, and Tun Hussein carried through. Of the three, Tun Hussein was the least political, and by implication most sincere and straightforward. As described by Lee, "Tun Hussein was open and direct when he dealt with me, coming straight to the point, unlike Razak. I liked him." In Tun Daim's words, Tun Hussein "was very sincere and dedicated, honest and strong-willed."

Tun Hussein's leadership style could easily have resulted in decisions that were not politically correct for the times. But political expediency was not a consideration for Tun Hussein, and the country was all the better for it.

Although all three Prime Ministers were recognised for their uprightness and sense of justice, ultimately it is Tun Hussein alone who is best remembered for moral courage and integrity.

Tunku was generally more regarded as pleasure seeking, in contrast to Tun Hussein Onn, and Tun Razak to a lesser extent. Tunku failed to see why anyone should grudge him the little time that he reserved for the simple pleasures of life. Tunku was seen as less hardworking compared to Tun Razak and Tun Hussein.

Despite his deep commitment to the advancement of Islam, Tunku was inclined to be open-minded when it came to religious matters. Besides the Thai-Buddhist influence of his early childhood days, his flexibility could also be attributed to his right brain thinking, which placed man right at the heart of religion.

In his words, "I think that religion, if it is not too unbending, can play a great part in keeping people on a steady course and preventing them from losing their bearings." This is opposite to the more left-brain thinking that religion (read as laws) must be strictly enforced to achieve order in society.

Tun Hussein Onn is said to have been interested in the philosophy of all religions. Tun Razak, unlike the Tunku, was not known for his personal commitment to religion. However, all three of them shared the belief that religion should be sensible, flexible and uncomplicated.

These three lawyers who led the nation in the early years of our independence may not be with us today. But the story of their lives and the history that they have left behind will warm our hearts as we observe the 51st anniversary of our independence.

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