

Reflections on Tun Hussein Onn

By Dato' Dr Muthiah Alagappa

Dato' Dr Muthiah Alagappa, the first Tun Hussein Onn Chair, reflects on Tun Hussein, the leader who, as Prime Minister, placed the making of a strong and united Malaysian nation high on his agenda.

The late Tun Hussein Onn was a man of great honesty, integrity, conviction, and steely courage, who put service to country ahead of self. He is a leader to be admired and emulated. Coming from a family that played central administrative and political roles in Johor and in the formation of Malaya, Tun was deeply interested in the unity of the Malaysian nation.

Recognizing the complexities of building a multi-ethnic nation, the late Tun Hussein took firm action on key issues such as in education, finance, trade, and industry. His warnings and actions against corruption in public life, however stern and unpopular they may have been at the time, were prophetic. They reflected his deep conviction that uplifting the Malay community and building a united Malaysian nation would be undermined by the lack of integrity and rise of corruption in public institutions.

Believing that a stable and secure regional environment was crucial for the attainment of domestic goals, Tun was actively engaged as well on the regional and international stages, such as in seeking a settlement of the Cambodian conflict. Concerned about the national security of the country, Tun Hussein authorized a big buildup of the Malaysian Armed Forces during his tenure as Prime Minister. At that time I was a serving military officer, working in the defence planning department in the Ministry of Defence. In that capacity I had the privilege of interacting with and observing first-hand Tun's methodological and meticulous approach to problems, that have become his hallmark.

Subsequently I also had the pleasure of working with Tun Hussein when he became Chairman of ISIS Malaysia. Having taken early retirement from the Malaysian Armed Forces, I was then a Senior Fellow at ISIS.

While authorizing a big military build-up, Tun recognized that Malaysia's national security hinged even more on national unity and resilience at home. Building a united and strong Malaysian nation was very much at the heart of the endeavours of Tun Hussein Onn and his father Dato' Onn.

The topic of my inaugural lecture on nation making stems from that concern of Tun's. Tun Hussein's deep commitment to the nation and his selflessness were reflected both in his decision to rejoin UMNO over the objections of some of his family members, and by his decision to hand over power as soon as he realized that the state of his health would not permit him to carry the burden of the duties of Prime Minister.