

TRULY A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

His extraordinary calibre left an indelible mark on the nation's academic fabric



DZULKIFLI
ABDUL
RAZAK

MOHd Rashdan Baba is a household name among the academic and intellectual fraternity. But not only limited to it because Rashdan himself was as much as a people person especially in the agricultural sector.

Coming from an agricultural background, he was fully committed to making the agricultural sector excel be it as a student, educator and practitioner in the discipline. He was the first Malay to graduate with a PhD in agronomy and contributed much to develop the field of agriculture, at a time when Malaya was very much dependent on agricultural commodities for prosperity.

Yet there was a dire lack of trained human resource to take the field forward, especially involving those in the rural areas, and the Malays who were left far behind, academically. While there was an agriculture faculty at University of Malaya, its accessibility was limited. It was later moved to Serdang in the 1930s, and merged with the then Sekolah Pertanian as the centre of excellence with agriculture as its focus.

This later became Kolej Pertanian Malaya (in 1947), and then Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) in 1971. For almost two decades, Rashdan toiled to lay down a strong foundation for agricultural education as the bedrock of the country's economic prosperity. UPM's motto "Berilmu Berbakti", speaks volumes of what Rashdan has admirably accomplished.

In all these, Rashdan clearly left his fingerprints and legacies unchallenged. He was the first principal of the college in 1965, at the age of 30; and then the founding vice-chancellor of UPM from 1971 until 1982. He was instrumental in enriching the discipline by sending students to



Tan Sri Dr Mohd Rashdan Baba inspired and challenged colleagues and students to do their best for the betterment of the country. FILE PIC

study overseas so that they become academics and lecturers on their return.

He resourcefully looked for scholarships opportunities, for example from Ford Foundation, Australian Development Agency, Public Service Department and grants from Canada and elsewhere in order to allow Malaysian candidates to obtain their post-graduate training and doctorates. This in turn enabled UPM to churn out graduates who went on to serve the various agriculture development sectors such as Felcra, Felcra, Kada, Kesedar, Mada; and research organisations such as Mardi, Porim (now MPOB) and RRI. All these paid off well as Malaysia increasingly became recognised as major exporter of several agricultural commodities that are highly sought after globally.

Meanwhile, the fondness of his gestures remains until today, when Rashdan is regarded as an inspiration by many of his students and colleagues way back in their college days. He not only inspired, but challenged them to

do their best when undertaking the tasks or chores assigned to them for the betterment of the country at large.

But, this is not all. In the midst of all these, Rashdan was given another task: to establish Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) as its first Vice Chancellor from 1969 until 1971, before taking on UPM, by the second Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak.

The position was initially earmarked for the then director of Institute of Medical Research, Datuk (Dr) Ungku Omar Ungku Ahmad. As fate would have it, he died, leaving Rashdan to be the next person in line to assume the responsibility.

This feat alone tells us about the extraordinary calibre of the person. He was mandated to ensure that UKM used Bahasa Melayu as the sole medium of instruction with the aim to elevate the language on a par with the knowledge of the day.

Unlike the two others before UKM, namely UM and USM, English language was then the main medium of instruction.

No doubt, this was another unprecedented challenge that Rashdan had to shoulder. He took it head on by recruiting academics from a number of reputable Indonesian universities, at the same time providing schemes for locals to pursue their education.

That UKM stands proud today, in many ways are living testimonies of what Rashdan had anchored in the initial years.

Still, there are other circumstances where Rashdan left indelible marks in his lifetime journey: his leap from the world of agriculture to that of information communication technology; from the academia to the corporate sector, like duck to water.

Significantly, he contributed greatly to the growth of telecommunications industry in particular, and to the economy in general. As the chairman of Telekom Malaysia Bhd (TM) for 12 years from 1985, three years after retiring from UPM, until 1997, Rashdan showed what other talents he had to share.

To quote TM, he "played a pivotal role in building the founda-

tion for making TM as a conglomerate in the telecommunications industry." And being regarded as "truly a TM man when he led the company in the early days of its privatisation as the executive chairman."

These words, no doubt, best described who Mohd Rashdan Baba is, imbued with the undying spirit to uplift the (rural) poor driven by an unassuming leadership packed with unsurpassed ability, humility, trustworthiness as well as a high level of commitment, making him a beacon for younger generation of Malaysian leaders to emulate and aspire to.

Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Mohd Rashdan Baba, who passed away recently at 85, will be fondly remembered by all, especially in facing the unprecedented future challenges, much like how he had to grapple with during his days.

May his soul be forever blessed. *Al-fatihah.*

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector