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Fondly remembered

AS far as Tun Ismail was concerned, there were no two ways about right or wrong - only one. For him, the line between right and wrong was drawn more clearly and indelibly than it was for others. Below, various people recall that incomparable side of him:

* Ismail was holidaying in Fraser's Hill with his wife and as they strolled past the branch of a well-known bank, he noticed an Indian lady on the steps outside, peering into her bankbook. He approached her and asked what was wrong. The lady's bankbook showed a pension withdrawal of RM71 but she had received only RM17. He immediately went in and asked for the manager. The clerk did not recognise him and tried to brush him off. Eventually, the manager emerged, recognised the Bank Negara Governor, turned pale and got an earful from Ismail.

Datuk Paduka Saleha's account: "My brother told him that branches like these are supposed to serve the small people so they have to make the extra effort. My poor sister-in-law said he was so upset he was in a bad mood the rest of the day." They returned to Kuala Lumpur the next day. Then, it was the turn of the top gun of the bank to get an earful from the Governor.

* According to Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali: "When I returned from England, I asked him to stand guarantee for a loan I wanted from a bank. He not only said no but told me that as Governor of Bank Negara, he sent his bank statements to Tun Tan Siew Sin (then Finance Minister) every month. Siew Sin would initial it and send it back. That's what he was like."

* An anecdote from Datuk Jaffar Mohd Ali: "My Chinese friends used to say my brother was straight as a railway line. Once, when he was Comptroller of Trade, a company which imported rice wanted to give him a Raya cake. They sent two huge cakes to my parents' house - one for us, one for him.

"Stupid me, I agreed to deliver it to his house. And my God, the hue and cry that followed! He accepted the Raya card but ordered that the cake be sent back.

"Aei! Loss of face, you know, if I sent it back. So, what did I do? I scraped his name off the cake and, on Raya day, there were two big cakes in our house.

"When Ismail came, he asked: 'How come two of the same kind? Is this the cake I asked you to return?' Me, I acted innocent."

* Says one of his closest friends, Tan Sri Dr Lin See Yan: "One sure way to get on his bad side is to imply he was what he was because of his brother-in-law (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad). He gets very, very annoyed. "In Bank Negara, none of his relatives could tender for anything, no matter how transparent or above board. His argument was simple: People will always misconstrue it. The same integrity governed everything he did, whether stated in a memo or formal contract. It was second nature to him because if you asked him about it, he would say: 'What is so unusual?'"

"Till his death, he did not benefit directly or indirectly from Bumiputera shares issues. I know, he has been offered shares legitimately but never took them."

* He absolutely disallowed Bank Negara staff to play the stock market. One of them, who had been reprimanded by him, used to pester Jaffar: 'When is your brother going to retire?' Eventually, the chap quit ahead of Ismail.

* Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, who worked closely with Ismail in PNB, told this

writer two years ago: "He doesn't entertain flattery or social nicety. If you meet him in the lift and try to make small talk, you are asking for it. Also, he has the greatest distaste for ignorance and stupidity and many have suffered for it."

And there have been quite a number who suffered the sack for that. But, according to Khalid, sacking people, harsh as it may be, was for Ismail, a form of accountability.

* Lin has to add: "He never liked people trying to butter him up but, he liked it if you praised his staff. And don't think you'll please him by sending him off or receiving him at the airport, or visiting him in hospital during office hours. He will probably ask: 'What are you doing here? You should be working!'"

* Tunku Abdul Rahman once complained to Saleha that "Mail is so strict, won't move or budge." Apparently, the then Prime Minister had asked whether Bank Negara could set up a branch in Alor Setar so that a relative, married to an important Kedah politician, could be transferred there. Ismail's response: "Ask her to resign if she wants to work in Alor Setar."

* Early in his varied career, Jaffar was offered a job in one of the Kuok group of companies and he recalls: "When abang ngah learned about it, he called the company and asked them not to take me. He simply did not want people to think it was because of his friendship with Robert and Philip Kuok. Was I mad? You bet!"

* When Jaffar was with KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, he was handling invitations to a host of dignitaries for a dinner to mark KLM's inaugural flight to KL. Cabinet Ministers as well as Tun Razak had agreed to attend. "When I asked my brother whether he had received the invitation, he said: 'Why must I accept? Because you are my brother?'"

* Super woman entrepreneur Datuk Maznah Hamid had just returned from abroad with Ismail and Toh Puan Maimunah. At the Customs checkpoint, Ismail insisted that they declare all their shopping.

"Everything I bought - lipstick, handbag, baju - all had to declare. Customs recognised him and told us: 'Tak payahlah.' But he scolded them. 'Tak baca undang kah?' So, we paid for everything."

* Saleha could not resist this rather mischievous one: "Oh, my brother was very interested in politics in his younger days. Wrote all those letters to the papers... and he was one of the architects of the Malaysian Constitution. But my God, he and his principles ... he would have been a lousy politician!"

A compliment, actually.

(END)