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The legacy of Tun Dr Ismail

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THE following is an abridged version of a speech delivered on my behalf at the Tun Dr Ismail Lecture at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang on Dec 19.

`TUN Dr Ismail bin Dato Haji Abdul Rahman died, at the age of 57, on the second of August 1973. Nearly 30 years have passed. An entire generation has grown up since then and is now producing the next, while his own, like the old warriors they were, is fading away.

Malaysians under 30 - which is to say, half the nation - can have no living memory of Dr Ismail. Most of them don't even know they know him, in the names of certain schools and colleges in the Klang Valley and Johor, and of a large middle-class suburb at the Sungai Penchala end of the Damansara Road in Kuala Lumpur.

Comparing this country today with what it was 30 years ago is almost like comparing two different countries. This one has twice the population of that one, and five times the per capita income.

And this country can look back on 30 years of racial peace and political stability, while that one was trying to juggle ideologies and race relations on the run.

In the 1969 elections, and what came after, lies the junction between the life and times of Tun Dr Ismail, and our own.

For while Tun Razak as Deputy Prime Minister attended to national defence and rural development, taking modern infrastructure and progressive ideas to the heartland, and while Tun Dr Ismail was representing our new nation as ambassador to Washington and the United Nations, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra's stewardship of the country's social contract failed.

The country's first generation of leaders, in their attention to economic development in search of the Good Life, had benignly neglected those who weren't sharing it.

After the riots of May 13, 1969, it fell to Tun Razak and Tun Dr Ismail to draw the map home for a lost and wounded nation. The road-map they drew was called the New Economic Policy.

This country of ours is rooted in the remains of theirs. They made this, even if this new generation has no notion of it - but even that is a hallmark of successful planning.

What Tun Razak and Tun Dr Ismail set in motion is what is Malaysia today. In a way, this is not what they imagined, but what they were. They were educated and globally aware, with a universal and inclusive world-view.

Tengku was a member of the Kedah ruling house, while Tun Razak was an aristocrat civil-servant-turned-politician. Tun Dr Ismail was an upper-middle-class professional, Malay in heart, blood and bone, but a multi-racialist through and through.

Tun Dr Ismail did not suffer fools, and those whom he considered fools - and treated as such - might be understood for not remembering him too kindly. He was aloof; respected more than liked. He was a medical doctor, and we know how they can be as leaders of government.

As a politician, Tun Dr Ismail was a realist. He didn't cultivate support. He never campaigned. He was distant and authoritative.

The British supremo in Malaya, General Sir Gerald Templer, in a ploy to make colonial rule look more palatable, offered Tengku Abdul Rahman, the

president of Umno, a 'ministerial' portfolio (actually called 'Member') but Tengku wisely declined it. Instead he nominated Dr Ismail bin Abdul Rahman, an Umno vice-president, whom he trusted and held in high regard, besides the then Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein.

Templer was pleased and said Dr Ismail was 'a really good brain and one of the top three in Umno'. Though the British were still wary of Umno, perhaps by incorporating Dr Ismail (also a representative of the MCA, an Indian, Ceylonese and several Malays), Templer had in 1952 accepted Umno for the first time as a future ruling party.

Dr Ismail, from all accounts, performed very well. He and Tun Razak had an excellent, if formal, relationship. He was like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is both methodical and meticulous.

His political career was managed by Tengku Abdul Rahman essentially to have Dr Ismail's intellectual clarity and personal authority fully at the nation's disposal. Even so, Dr Ismail did not hesitate when he fell out with Tengku over Tengku's 'Two Chinas' policy vis-a-vis China and Taiwan in 1967.

Dr Ismail's lifelong multi-racialism was born with him in Johor Baru in 1915, when Singapore was the island off his home beach. Already unhappy with the Singapore separation, Dr Ismail resigned from Tengku's Government, and stayed out until that weekend in May 1969.

Volunteering to return to the Government under Tun Razak, Tun Dr Ismail is still remembered for his address to the nation over radio and television on May 14, which he began sternly and unequivocally, with the three words: 'Democracy is dead'.

Startling even now, on that frightful morning they shook the nation sober. Yes, democracy was dead see how it had nearly killed everything we cherished. See how democracy had been used to express the worst of our natures.

But now democracy was dead, and the country under Emergency Powers and Rules would shut up and do as it was told by the Mageran - Majlis Gerakan Nasional or National Operations Council - until it was back on track and in order.

Dr Ismail's message remains an essential truth for this nation, to be forgotten at our mortal peril. Accept multi-culturalism as an unbreakable social contract, or democracy may die again.

But democracy did not truly die that day. It went into intensive care. In the 18 months of Emergency rule that followed, the National Operations Council of Tun Razak, Tun Dr Ismail, Tun Tan Siew Sin, Tun V.T. Sambanthan and the chiefs of police and the Armed Forces were the absolute rulers of this country.

Tengku considered letting the Army take control. It was an obvious option. Tun Dr Ismail told him that if he did, he would never get it back. And so we have entered history as the only country in the region that has never been under the rule of the military, or of a general in a civilian suit.

At that point, when this nation's destiny was in the hands of a handful of men, they used that power to repair our political system, revive the Government and restore our nation.

This transformation was managed in the 20 months between May 1969 and the institution of the new Barisan Nasional Government in 1971, headed by Tun Razak as Prime Minister with Tun Dr Ismail as his Deputy, and Minister for Home Affairs.

It was so monumental a task - to reassemble a broken nation, redefining it in the process - that we might only wonder if the pressures contributed to the relatively early deaths of both men. Tun Razak was already frail with leukaemia in 1973.

(He told me it was jaundice. It was the best-kept secret. Not even his wife knew that he was dying of leukaemia, which would take his life on January 14, 1976, in London.)

But no one thought that Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman would be called first.

Tun Razak would survive him by only three years, and also die in office, to be interred with Tun Dr Ismail in the National Heroes' Mausoleum in the Masjid Negara precinct. Such were the men who hauled this nation out of the deepest abyss it had ever fallen into.

In some ways, they still take responsibility. For they were the ones who identified and empowered Malaysia's leadership today.

Tun Dr Ismail was a mentor to the 'Young Turks' of Umno in the Sixties, who would be associated with the leadership of the Barisan Nasional as much as he and Tun Razak were with the Alliance.

Looking up from the wreckage of Malaysia's race relations, they saw that recreating this country called for looking to the younger generation for those with the Right Stuff to do the Right Thing, and see their fellow citizens through to a more equitable, peaceful and prosperous Malaysia.

Insofar as Malaysia today matches what they wanted, they and we have succeeded. But where the Malaysian model does not work, where chauvinism, extremism and intolerance prevail in our society, as much as where there remain hardship and poverty, we have failed them.

For they were fated to live only long enough to pick things up and get things going. It was down to us, the subsequent generations, to see things through. Where we miss the mark or fall short, we fail them.

There are things about us today that Tun Dr Ismail would not have liked. He would have been dismayed by families divided by religion; by brothers fighting one another. He had kept extremism at bay, and embodied the philosophy of moderation spelled out in the Rukunegara.

One thing I know is that he would have been intolerant of religious bigotry, language fascists and racial fanatics.

Racial polarisation would have upset him. He would probably have been appalled by the decline of English literacy, and the stubborn closed-mindedness of some of our people - of all races and religions.

But he would also find some things about us heartening. Malaysia continues to be a paragon of multi-racial co-operation in a world torn by sectarian conflicts. Malaysia remains integral to Asean, and continues to rank among the developing world's best-managed economies, and most stable political systems.

Frankly, that we've survived at all is already a success. That we've done so in relative peace, security and prosperity is almost miraculous. But miracles are the work of God Almighty, whereas what we call our country today was the work (with God's help, no doubt) of men like Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman.

He is one of the few leaders I miss. I enjoyed working with him and for him. He and Tun Razak were two Malay leaders taken away from us at their peak - and when we needed them most.'