

15/01/2003

Their deaths diminished us

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IN any age, their intelligence, talent, drive and devotion would have made them remarkable. Both packed two successful careers into their lives. I am referring to Tun Razak and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. As I peered into my shaving mirror yesterday morning, I saw a face that has noticeably aged, and recalled that Tun Razak died exactly 27 years ago.

I was then a young man of verve and authority, at least perceived to be so by both friends and opponents. They thought I had an insider's perspective on men and power.

Tun Razak's sudden and premature death was a great misfortune. He left us on the cusp of the greatest undertaking in our history, the New Economic Policy. Had he and Dr Ismail lived longer, Malaysian politics would have been different.

I am not assessing their formidable lives although many probably agree that they indisputably played crucial parts in laying the foundations of today's Malaysia which Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad unquestionably pushed to the New Frontiers, perhaps even beyond their dreams.

I am publishing here an entry from Dr Ismail's diary (with his family's permission), written irregularly, dated March 30, 1970. He was then in London, recording his own dire medical condition (cancer) and Tun Razak's (leukaemia), which were soon to doom them.

Their terminal illnesses were the best-kept secret, especially Tun Razak's deteriorating situation. I have often said and written that no one knew how gravely ill the prime minister was, not even his wife Toh Puan Rahah (now Tun), except Dr Ismail and a few others.

The diary entry, written in Dr Ismail's elegant but sometimes hurried cursive, confirms what I have been saying.

Tun Razak and Dr Ismail fished in the same waters. The diary was as much about the one as the other.

Dr Ismail's selective diary was made available to me in 1982 by his son Tawfik when I was writing my Masters thesis on Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra's foreign policy at Cambridge. Though short, less than a hundred foolscap pages, it contains much about his life and work and I believe it is a major source for any study of the political history of Malaysia and Umno before Merdeka and immediately after Independence.

In any event, it is a candid disclosure of many things, including the two statesmen's medical problems.

Dr Ismail's diary should be published because it describes Umno's and Malaysian politics of his time and his peers - information of incalculable value.

I have been in London since March 10 to undergo another tedious medical treatment. This time, however, my wife accompanied me and her company lessened an otherwise intolerable boredom.

Like all my trips abroad, this one was planned well ahead. However, at the last moment the purpose of the trip was suddenly changed due to certain circumstances beyond my control. Shortly after my return to Kuala Lumpur from my trip to London in the autumn of 1969, my health took a sudden turn for the worse.

"Before that, I was assured that there was no evidence of recurrence of the cancer of the neck, and that I had at least two years to make a decision on whether to go for an operation on my heart. I was, therefore, able on my return from that autumn visit to London to announce publicly

that my medical advisers had given me a clean bill of health.

"However, in September 1969, my heart gave signs of deterioration and after consultation with medical advisers both in Malaysia and London, arrangements were made for me to have a heart operation in the spring of 1970. If this operation were successful, I would be able to lead an active life (for) a man of my age, which was 54, on my birthday on Nov 4, 1969.

Shortly after the incident of my heart, an unexpected and far-reaching occurrence, if it were made known publicly, occurred. For a long, long time, Tun Razak's personal physician was Dr MacPherson, who has been and still is my personal physician and close friend for a much longer time.

However, for political reasons, Tun Razak dropped Dr MacPherson and used the medical services of Government doctors, who were all Malaysians.

Lately, Tun Razak's appearance gradually began to change. He began to lose weight and his face has a sickly, unpleasant pallor and the total effect made him look really an old man, although he was only 47 years old. It was, of course, a common joke among Tun Razak's friends that he always liked to look like an old man and tried his best to achieve this in his college days, but this time he did look old.

One day at a party in my house, both he and Dr MacPherson were among the guests, and they started talking together, sat in a corner. It resulted in Tun Razak asking Dr MacPherson to examine him medically, which the latter did the next day.

The results were a shock to Dr MacPherson and myself. I had been taken into confidence by the expressed wish of Tun Razak himself. The results gave clear indications that he was suffering from an incurable blood disease, akin to cancer (leukaemia).

The only people who knew of this were, besides Tun Razak, Dr MacPherson, myself, the haematologist at the hospital and a research worker, who was at the University of Malaya hospital. All these people were sworn to top secrecy. It was necessary to get confirmation of this and an eminent haematologist, Dr (Wile?), was secretly flown from London and he confirmed the diagnosis.

With Tun Razak a doomed man, my heart operation became vitally important not only to myself and my family but the whole nation. Between the Tengku, Tun Razak and myself on the one hand, and all the other politicians on the other, there was a wide gap in leadership.

With Tengku past his prime, Tun Razak a doomed man, although unknown to the nation, everything seemed to depend on me. Again Fate played a trick.

In early (8) February 1970, while I was dressing after a game of golf and a shower, I accidentally discovered a small lump on the right side of my neck - the same side where in 1967 I discovered a lump which proved to be cancerous. There was no doubt in my mind and Dr MacPherson's that this was a recurrence of the old disease and that no time must be lost and that I should straightaway fly to London.

However, I was in the midst of launching an important legislation programme on anti-corruption measures, and I was determined that should there be any blame and any demonstrations taking place, I must be in Malaysia to face it. I did not, therefore, leave for London until almost a month later.

During the nine weeks that I was in London, I discovered many things. The first is that my life is planned for me and many of the important events in my life happened without any conscious effort on my part. Such being the case, I must accept it for the remainder of my life and must try to adapt myself to it, rather than resent it.

I was therefore not worried when told by the specialists that I had a recurrence of cancer, nor disappointed when told by them that the operation on the heart had to be postponed because of this.

The treatment itself took nine weeks, when it was estimated that it would take only five. During the period, I had plenty of time to reflect on the future of my country.'