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## Unearthing the unvisited tombs

THIS newspaper has published an entry from the diary of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, which we believe is a major source for any study of the political history of Malaysia and Umno.

It has also, on numerous occasions, published its group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad's (who was privy to a huge amount of what was in the prime ministerial in-tray and inner thoughts of Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) first-hand account on some of the riveting events in the nation's political history.

The writing of a life, be it in the form of a diary or autobiography, is a branch of history. But with the exception of a few such as Dr Ismail, our national leaders neglect the need to keep personal records or a diary, which serves as a repository of their perceptions, paeans and puzzlements. This is a pity. As leaders, their sensibilities have affected the course of the nation and our lives. Their lives are really the story of the nation. How the Prime Ministers or ministers played into that story, how they came across the stage and how they developed it, how they took it forward, how they contributed and how history brought them in and history took them out - such information will add to our understanding of the past, today's events and possibly help take us forward.

Such revelations, personal as they may be, are crucial not only for the sake of history but for understanding what we, this nation, was all about and where we are going. Otherwise upon the demise of the leaders, they become "unvisited tombs" for they left behind them nothing of their former presence (except for news reports and official documents) but a hackneyed scratch on a tombstone.

In contrast with a biography, an autobiography is a life writing its own life. In writing of past experiences, we discover what they were. In the writing of it all, we create the patterns we seem to have lived. Be it a diary or a journal, the act of writing is a monologue of our life, governed by internal emotional tides, intimations, observations, motives, resolutions, temptations, fears, secrecy, doubts and, yes, even pride. The emotional nakedness of Dr Ismail, for example, when he wrote that "Fate played a trick" indicates a vulnerability of a man in whose hands the fate of the nation lay.

There may be omissions and twists to the plot by the play of the pen. Some writings may be tainted with conceit, desire for revenge or to halo a sinner's head and puff an inflated ego but then, in giving our viewpoints, don't we all flush before examining our stools? Intelligently and honestly written, the written word is a revelation of the writer's conception of the life he has lived. The copulation of facts and thoughts yield a certain subjectivity that is necessary to make history human, personal and full of details, including the salacious gossip, amusing anecdotes and the suspense of backroom negotiations.

Whether it is a diary, journal or folders in a computer programme, these records are the celebration of a life and the building of a nation. They may only reveal a slice of life, half a life or whole-loaf lives but, ultimately, they are invaluable sources of history. Whatever, write, publish and be damned.

Whether one is a young politician waiting for greatness to be thrust upon him, it is worthwhile to begin to write - if not for posterity but for one's perspective, sense of history and, more important in the rough

and tumble of politics, sanity. In the writing, we are saying we matter to ourselves even when no one else says so. In any event, we are looking forward to serialising Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's memoirs.