

'The best Prime Minister Malaysia never had'
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Almost two years ago, I asked a group of friends during one of our 'mamak' stall sessions whether they knew a man by the name of Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. I received some weird stares. And quite expectantly, none of these three friends of mine actually had a clue of who this man was.

This is a clear proof of the failure of our education system, so I thought. Or was there a deliberate policy not to publicly acknowledge Ismail's contribution to nation-building simply because his ideals, principles and sense of fairness were not in sync with our former prime minister of 22 years?

It is a shame to our country that Ismail's biography entitled 'The Reluctant Politician' was only published 33 long years after his eventful passing, and even then by Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas) which is based in Singapore. Why not a Malaysian publisher? Why the long wait?

The story goes that no Malaysian publishers dared to venture into the project lest it be seen that they were going against a certain almighty PM. At least, Malaysians should be grateful that the long-awaited biography was authored by a fellow Malaysian, the renowned Dr Ooi Kee Beng, with Ismail's eldest son, Tawfik, as consultant and adviser to the project.

To put it in historical perspective, Malaysia as a nation changed forever on that 'fateful' night of Aug 2, 1973. That night, Malaysia lost its most faithful and dependable son, Deputy Prime Minister Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, because of a fatal heart attack.

He was Malaya's 'third man' throughout the negotiation for independence and nationhood, the formative years after independence, the communist insurgency, the formation of a new country called Malaysia and during the Indonesian aggression thereafter, the eventual separation with Singapore and the formation of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

Up to then, he had held the posts of independent Malaya's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations cum the ambassador to the US, as well as the ministerial portfolios of external affairs, internal security and home affairs – the latter portfolios seeing him being put in charge of detaining people under the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA).

He defended the necessity of the act at that time of the communist insurgency, stating that 'abuse of the act can be prevented by vigilant public opinion via elections, a free press and above all, the Parliament.'

Ismail retired in May 1967 as Malaysia's respected and powerful home minister due to his worsening health. However, he was being hauled back (hence 'The Reluctant Politician') by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Abdul Razak Hussein, again as Home Minister and later as DPM, to restore stability to Malaysia during the aftermath of the May 13 racial riots. He was called 'the man who saved Malaysia'.

Robert Kuok, a close friend of Ismail describes him: 'He was a lovely man with strength of character, high principles and a great sense of fairness. In my opinion, he was probably the most non-racial, non-racist Malay I have met in my life.'

'And I have met a very wide range of Malays from all parts of Malaysia. Doc was a stickler for total fair play, for correctness; total anathema to him to be anything else. Every Malay colleague feared him because of this, including Mahathir.'

I recall that in March 2008, I read that the then Selangor Umno Information chief said that 'those who want the New Economic Policy scrapped are historically blind' and that 'the NEP is a time-tested policy'. I was furious. I would denounce him as the actual one who is historically blind!

Ismail, being the most influential racial policy-maker of his time, to the extent that Razak seldom disagreed with him, realised the danger of the preferential treatment in favour of the Malays but thought it necessary at that time given the uneven competition caused by colonial policy. He, a passionate golfer, often liked to describe the NEP using a golfing metaphor.

Quoting from his biography, he likened the NEP to a handicap which 'will enable them to be good players, as in golf, and in time the handicap will be removed. The Malays must not think of these privileges as permanent, for then they will not put effort into their tasks. In fact, it is an insult for the Malays to be getting these privileges.'

I was told that in the early 70s, many Malaysians believed that Malaysia would one day have a medically-trained PM in the name of Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (following on after our first two English-trained barrister PMs).

Never had they thought that it turned out not to be him but another medical doctor by the name of Mahathir Mohamad - the author of the infamous book 'The Malay Dilemma'.

Although I had yet to be born in the early 70s but after having learned about the man, I now feel a real sense of 'how it would have been' if Ismail were to helm the country during the years I innocently grew up. Given Ismail's distrust towards Mahathir's extremist Malay nationalism, the latter would never have become the PM who ruled Malaysia with an iron fist for 22 years.

As fate would have it, Mahathir was indeed a very lucky man just as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was, albeit with no happy ending for the latter. That's why I call Aug 2, 1973 a 'fateful date that changed Malaysia forever'.

To play an active role in shaping the destiny of our beloved country, one needs to know its history during those crucial years. History 'in fact', not the history presented by the ruling government. I have no doubt that we have been systematically put through those sweet (but mind-poisoning) school days to think the way Umno wants us to think.

Ismail often said, and showed by his deeds, 'I will do for my country what I will not do for myself or my family.' Whilst I admire the quote, I admire the man even more. He is indeed 'the best PM Malaysia never had'.

To the young people among my countrymen, while we learn and remember fondly our founding fathers like Tunku and Razak, there is another man who held the nation together during its most crucial times and by doing that, lost his life for the nation.

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