

Tun Dr Ismail's foreign policy legacy

THE 39th Asean Ministerial Meeting (AMM) was held last week in Kuala Lumpur, and among its successes was the agreement by the Europeans to sign the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAG) by next year.

So far, 10 non-Asean countries have signed the pact. No mention, however, was made of the spiritual father of that document. This was Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's deputy prime minister, who passed away prematurely on Aug 2, 1973, exactly 33 years ago today.

Tun Dr Ismail died of a sudden heart attack while he was acting prime minister. Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, who was in Ottawa for a Commonwealth meeting, was badly shaken by the news.

The loss to Tun Dr Ismail's family and to the country was no doubt great. For Tun Razak, Tun Dr Ismail's demise left a vacuum in the power structure that could not be effectively filled. His deputy was simply irreplaceable, both at the personal and political levels.

The two had since late 1969 known that Tun Razak was terminally ill. This meant that their policy-making was very much configured by the probability that Tun Dr Ismail would be the man to implement them. The spirit of active co-operation and mutual respect that this shared secret helped to foster between the prime minister and the deputy prime minister between 1970 and 1973 has never again appeared in Malaysia.

This generates questions about the importance of common ideals among politicians, and about the relation-



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ship between integrity and synergy. Trust was the active ingredient that allowed the two men to complement each other.

When national goals are no longer clear, and when ideals are no longer high, trust between politicians, whether incumbent or retired, wanes. Perhaps the reverse also holds true. Untruthful politicians are the initial cause of the downward spiral of national goals and ideals.

When at a loss for words and actions, or perhaps more correctly when words and actions bring confusion, Malaysians should look to the country's recent past and find solace and strength in the examples set by dead heroes with worthy legacies.

Tun Dr Ismail's role in nation-building has been enormous. In 1967, the *Straits Times* wrote: "It is difficult to think of a ministry he has not headed, a political role he has not played, a central event he has not influenced."

His legacy is extensive. In domestic politics, his contributions were countless. He fought corruption through institutional measures and personal example, and created the Anti-Corruption Agency, in 1970. The efficacy of his measures was so high that he claimed on April 12, 1971 that corruption in the civil service had been practically eradicated. A comparable evil, he warned civil ser-



Tun Dr Ismail was a strong advocate of Asean neutrality.

vants, was "indecision". It was because of pressure from him that the country decided as early as in January 1959 to form a national bank to encourage foreign investment.

He kept the police force loyal and on its toes through personnel housing projects and through a concept of extended responsibility, and was in charge of keeping ties between Malaysia and its closest neighbours manageable. Communist guerillas feared him.

It is in foreign policy matters, however, that his legacy is hardest to deny.

When he was a backbencher in January 1968, Tun Dr Ismail put forward his now famous plan for Southeast Asian security. It had three pillars. The first was that the region needed to undergo a process of polit-

ical neutralisation guaranteed by the Americans, the Russians and the Chinese. Second, Southeast Asian countries should declare a policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and, finally, non-aggression treaties must be signed between the countries in the region.

Today, after the Cold War, the third point has come to be representative of the whole plan, and is best expressed in the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation. Indeed, it was Tun Dr Ismail who attended Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos's inauguration in January 1966 and convinced him of the need to revive the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA).

When Malaysia and Indonesia decided to end hostilities in May that year, the way was open for ASA to be extended into Asean.

He stated then: "We look forward to a regional association embracing Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

"We have no choice. We, the nations and peoples of Southeast Asia, whatever our ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds might be, must pull together and create, with hand and brain, a new perspective and a new framework.

"And we must do it ourselves. We must create a deep, collective awareness that we cannot survive for long as independent peoples — as Burmese, Thais, Indonesians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Malaysians, Cambodians, Singaporeans and Filipinos — unless we also think and act as Southeast Asians."

Within three years of his proposal that a neutral Southeast Asia was the region's long-term solution to its security problems, the Razak Government adopted it as an ideological cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy.

One of the few things Malaysians still have to be proud about on the world stage at this point in time is the continuing influence this line of thought exerts on relations between Southeast Asian countries, and between the region and the rest of the world.

• The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas), Singapore. His book — *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* — is based on the private papers of Tun Dr Ismail, and is being published by Iseas.