

A man of uncompromising perfection

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MY introduction to Tan Sri Ismail Mohamed Ali, as he then was, began in a curious way in 1971.

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, who had resigned from the government in the late 1960s, was invited to become chairman of Guthrie Ropel (Rubber Oil Palm Estates Limited), comprising largely second-class estates of the Guthrie Group.

As a "second tour" agent, I was looking after a number of companies, including some of which he was chairman. One day when I was briefing him, Tun Dr Ismail said: "Tunku, go and see Ismail at the bank. I have spoken to him about you. You are wasting your time in a plantation company."

My first meeting with Tan Sri Ismail was a totally new experience.

He talked about his vision for Bank Negara Malaysia: He hoped BNM would in time rival the Bank of England, whose integrity he greatly admired, just as he did the quality of economic and financial advice rendered to the British government.

He saw the bank's role as an important one in promoting and developing a sound financial system and in order to achieve this vision, "BNM must be efficient to the point of ruthlessness".

He thought I would be the right person to implement the Canadian consultants' recommendations on the management and operational reorganisation of the bank. I was naturally flattered.

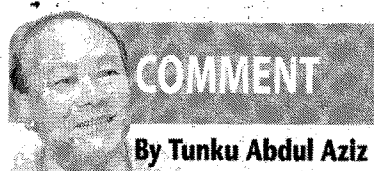
He then went on to talk about the recent May 13 racial clash. It became quite clear to me that although he wanted the best for his own race, he was no racist. To me, he was a nationalist, such as Tunku Abdul Rahman and others of their ilk, in the best possible sense.

I came away from that meeting completely bowled over by his integrity, dignity and vision. I promised I would give serious consideration to his offer of employment.

In the event, I felt constrained to decline his kind offer as I had some unfinished work at Guthrie, which had just spent a large sum of money on a nine-month industrial training programme for me in Britain.

I thought that would be the end of the matter until later that year, when I received a telephone call from Tunku Ahmad Yahaya, now Tan Sri, who was on the board of BNM.

He said the governor had asked him to talk to me to see if I would



COMMENT

By Tunku Abdul Aziz

change my mind, adding somewhat ominously: "Tunku, you just cannot turn the governor down like that."

My joining the bank as adviser (assistant governor in today's terms) coincided with its move from the Straits Trading Building to the new Bank Negara headquarters building.

Not long after, Kuala Lumpur suffered one of its worst floods. My driver and I just could not find a road from Jalan Gurney to the bank that was passable.

In the end, I asked the driver to drop me off at the Odeon Cinema on Batu Road (now Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) and waded through waist-deep water to the bank.

As I started to climb the steps, I realised that the great man was standing on the landing leading to the main entrance, surveying the flood damage to the surrounding areas.

The governor, always a natty dresser, was in his dark blue suit, looking, for all the world, as if he had just stepped out of No 1, Savile Row, London. On seeing me, he said in his usual serious tone: "Tunku, you are late!"

I was in a sorry state, soaked to the skin, completely drenched like a drowning rat and it took a great deal of self-control to remain calm.

I replied: "I just could not get through in my car. There is flooding everywhere." I had thought of adding, but on mature reflection, did not, that it was all right for him, living on top of Kenny Hill!

Seeing that I was in no mood for further provocation, however harmless, with just a trace of a smile on his face, he said with a great deal of charm: "I was just pulling your leg. You needn't have bothered to come. I have declared today a holiday."

The preparation for the official opening of the new bank headquarters was to be my responsibility.

The governor had decided that it should be a grand affair befitting a national institution, under his unmistakable brand of strong and ethical leadership that had earned the unstinting respect of other, longer established central banks around the globe.

It was during this time that I saw the side of the man that I have ad-



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mired ever since — uncompromising perfection. Everything was planned in great detail and carried out with the assistance of two of the bank's brightest young officers, Din Merican and Tang Weng Chiew.

I cannot now remember the number of times the governor and I had the distance measured, between where the Yang di-Pertuan Agong would alight from his powder blue Rolls Royce and the lift. Every step was measured and timed.

For three solid months, Din, Weng Chiew and I breathed, ate, slept and dreamed the opening ceremony. I swear I must have leapt out of bed several times in the middle of my sleep, breaking out in cold sweat, imagining the worst.

The big day finally arrived with a bang. The governor went over the programme for the last time.

There was a sense of blessed relief, of quiet confidence that after innumerable rehearsals, we were as close to attaining his high standards as it was possible to achieve in the cir-

cumstances.

The opening went like clockwork and so did the banquet. Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard went to a lot of trouble to put together a *Makyong* performance by the Terengganu Royal Court Dancers.

There was a scene that called for the use of gold coins and to lend authenticity, Tan Sri Mubin insisted on using real gold coins from the bank's vaults.

As I had feared, some coins, in the excitement of the performance, dropped to the floor and rolled all over the place. We spent hours after the banquet trying to find the missing gold coins.

As chairman of the bank's budget committee, I also saw a side of the governor that taught a great deal about "trusteeship" and "stewardship." Unlike many powerful people whom I had known before and since, he had never once in the three years I spent at the bank asked for any item of expenditure to be included for his own benefit.

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His Daimler Major official car was 11 years old and had seen better days. No other governor of Bank Negara has ever used a car as old as that Daimler.

He was very careful with public funds, something that has rubbed off on some of us. Tan Sri Aziz Taha, his successor, was a "cloned" version of his mentor, Tun Ismail, and utterly scrupulous in his stewardship of the affairs of the bank.

It brings some comfort to reflect that there was a time in our history when there were people such as Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali who put stewardship above other considerations.

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