

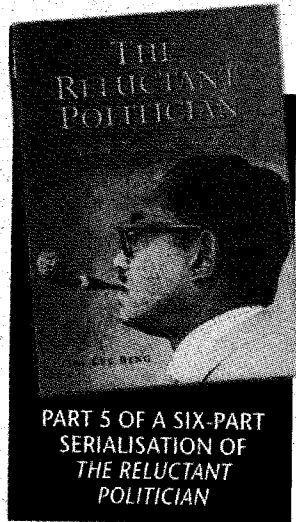
The keeper of many secrets

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Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman learns a terrible secret — the de facto prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein is dying. Dr Ismail is left with no option but to continue serving the country despite his own failing health.

THE Tunku perceived Ismail's return to politics on the eve of the May 13, 1969 riots as "Dr Ismail's last and final act of kindness to me":

Ismail had already retired from government service to be the head of the Guthrie Group of Companies, in which post he was earning a salary three times that of a minister... When he saw what was happening, and realising the attempts being made by young Umno extremists to embarrass me, and to oust me, to be more correct, he came and asked that he be taken back into the Cabinet. When he returned he used his own dynamic personality and strength to the full to rout these elements. On his own initiative, he went on the radio declaring that "anyone who had any design on the personal safety and dignity of Tunku Abdul Rahman would be arrested". That broadcast had a great effect on the extremists, who quietened down.



(Tun) Musa Hitam suggested later that the tension in Umno could perhaps be analysed as one between "leftists" and "rightists" where Razak (Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) himself, along with Mahathir (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) and Musa were the leftists, while the Tunku and his followers, such as (Tan Sri) Khir Johari, were the rightists.

Ismail, Musa added, could not be easily placed along this spectrum, mainly because as home affairs minister he tried his best to remain apolitical and to be the unrelenting chief executor of the laws of the country, and making many politicians uncomfortable in the process.

Ismail's adherence to rules was common knowledge both among those who worked under him and those who had official dealings with him.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi remembers how on one occasion, (Tan Sri) Syed Nasir Ismail and (Tan Sri) Syed Jaafar Albar had been granted a meeting with Ismail. Despite rushing desperately, they arrived late.

Ismail waited in his heavily air-conditioned office and as soon as the appointed time was up, he started to leave the office.

He happened to run into the two men in the corridor outside his office, but Ismail did not so much as look at them and continued to walk past them without breaking his stride.

The two stood by sweaty and alarmed and did not venture to stop the minister as he whisked by.

Sometime at the end of 1969 Razak and Ismail — and three medical personnel who were subsequently sworn to secrecy — learned that Razak, the de facto prime minister, was suffering from leukaemia.

Details about how Razak's ailment was diagnosed are indeed given in Ismail's autobiography:

Shortly after this incident of my heart (being found to be deteriorating in September 1969), 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 physi-

cian 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 Asians. 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 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 at one corner. It resulted in his 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. The only people who knew of this besides Tun Razak were Dr MacPherson, myself, the haematologist at the hospital and an expatriate research worker who was at the University of Malaya. All these people were sworn to top secrecy.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, head of the national oil company Petronas, was informed by Razak a week before the prime minister passed away in London in January 1976 that Razak used the pretext of having tea and discussing political matters to visit Ismail at his home at 22 Maxwell Road in order to be examined in secret by his doctors in a building situated behind the garage.

This building had in effect been turned into a clinic for his sake.

To make matters even worse for Ismail, in early February 1970, before leaving for London for treatment, he discovered definite signs that his neck cancer had recurred. He had happened to touch a lump behind his ear while shaving and asked his wife to describe it fully to him from behind.

He then drove to the hospital where the growth was confirmed to be cancerous. It was decided then "that no time must be lost



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and that I should straightaway fly to London".

Pressure was steadily building up within Ismail's family for him to slow down.

His father, Abdul Rahman Yassin, sent him a letter — written correspondence between father and son having been a lifelong tradition — asking him "seriously to resign your present post as soon as possible".

The father was of the view that Ismail had broken his vow to his family that he would leave politics, "and you must now repent".

He even expressed the hope that Ismail "had a will made in case anything happens to you":

No one is indispensable in the world. You have made enough sacrifices. Do not overdo it! You are now 50 (Ismail was in fact 55 then). Serve your God rather than the ungrateful cowards who flatter you and only make you carry on the donkey's burden!

Of course, Abdul Rahman Yassin was not privy to the fact that Razak was dying, and that Ismail, being his deputy, could see no option but to continue in his position.

At that point in time, Ismail was as indispensable as any deputy prime minister could be.

One regret his family said Ismail had was his failure to return to Johor Bahru to make peace with his father before the old man passed away in May 1970.

Robert Kuok remembers that Ismail had on one occasion had a face-to-face quarrel with Abdul Rahman Yassin — "it was the grandmother of quarrels".

Ismail's father tried to stop him from going for a heart operation, feeling that Ismail

would not survive it.

The chances of survival for a valve operation in those days were 50-50 and the longer one waited the worse one's chance became, and soon Doc could no longer go for any such operation. I could sense it in his behaviour that he had resigned himself to it.

As things turned out, Ismail's trip to London for throat cancer treatment had to be postponed for a month because of vital matters of state:

I was in the middle of launching an important legislative programme on anti-corruption and I was determined that should there be any blame, or what was worse, any demonstration taking place, I must be in Malaysia to face it.

Ismail's failure to have a heart operation proved fatal, and also showed that his decision in 1967 to retire for health reasons was a sound one. After re-entering politics, the knowledge that Razak did not have long to live made it difficult for him to contemplate going back into treasured retirement.

■ First published in *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* by Ooi Kee Beng (2006). Reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

■ **TOMORROW:** Dr Ismail's untimely death, and how it altered Malaysia's political landscape.