

Bound by duty to his last day

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Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's death would alter the course of Malaysian politics. His untimely demise would also mean that his full legacy would, for a long time, remain undiscovered.

AS Razak (Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) and Ismail saw it, a serious problem of continuity now threatened the country's leadership and its reform policies. Ismail scribbled down some thoughts after learning of Razak's illness:

With Tun Razak a doomed man, my heart operation became vitally important not only to myself and my family, but to the whole nation. Between the Tunku, Tun Razak and myself on the one hand, and all the other politicians on the other, there was a wide gap in leadership. With Tunku past his prime, Tun Razak a doomed man although unknown to the nation, everything seemed to depend on me.

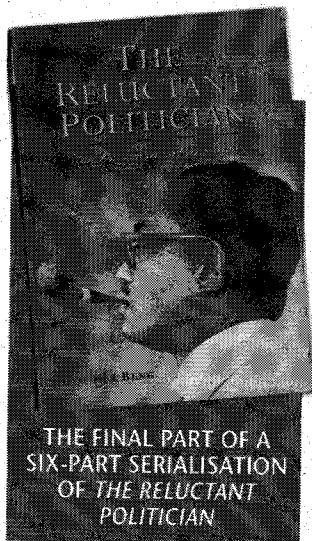
Robert Kuok recalls that about three weeks before Ismail's death on Aug 2, 1973, "Doc" (Ismail) asked him to come over to Maxwell Road (renamed since to Jalan Tun Dr Ismail, in Kuala Lumpur). He had an earlier engagement and arrived late that evening. The house was in darkness and the door was unlocked. He hesitantly went in, whispering "Doc? Neno?" Neno (Dr Ismail's wife, Toh Puan Norashikin Mohd Seth) appeared out of the darkness, welcomed him and directed him to the back of the house:

Doc was by the pool, sitting in the patio. Something was bothering him that he would not burden his wife with. That was the kind of considerate person he was. He then said: "I had three heart attacks in the last two weeks, Robert, quite serious ones. I have young children, and Neno is expecting. If anything happens to me..."

I quickly replied: "No, no, no, Doc. Don't talk like that. I promise you, to put your mind at ease, that should anything happen to you, God forbid, my people and I will look after your family, and make sure that they get a good education. Let's tackle the problem at hand first. Can you hand in your resignation tomorrow?"

Doc said: "No, I can't. I do want to resign, but Razak is leaving for the Commonwealth meeting in Ottawa soon, and I have promised him that I would act in his absence. I will resign when he comes back."

What could I say to that? Duty bound him. Then he let off one of those sighs that we Chinese advise against: Aaaaaaaahh. One of those deep sounds of dejection that the dying emit. The Chinese forbid it because it is supposedly injurious to one's health. Doc then said: "You know us Malays. If the prime minister wants things his way, no one tries to turn him around. Nothing has changed. I told Razak to use Musa (Tun Musa Hitam), and not Mahathir (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad), but he



will not listen."

According to lawyer Dominic Puthuchery, his brother, James, was asked by Razak to speak to Mahathir about rejoining Umno. Razak was hoping that Mahathir would counterbalance the opposition that existed within the party. Ismail was the only one who opposed Mahathir's return, but said he would not stand in the way if Razak really wished it.

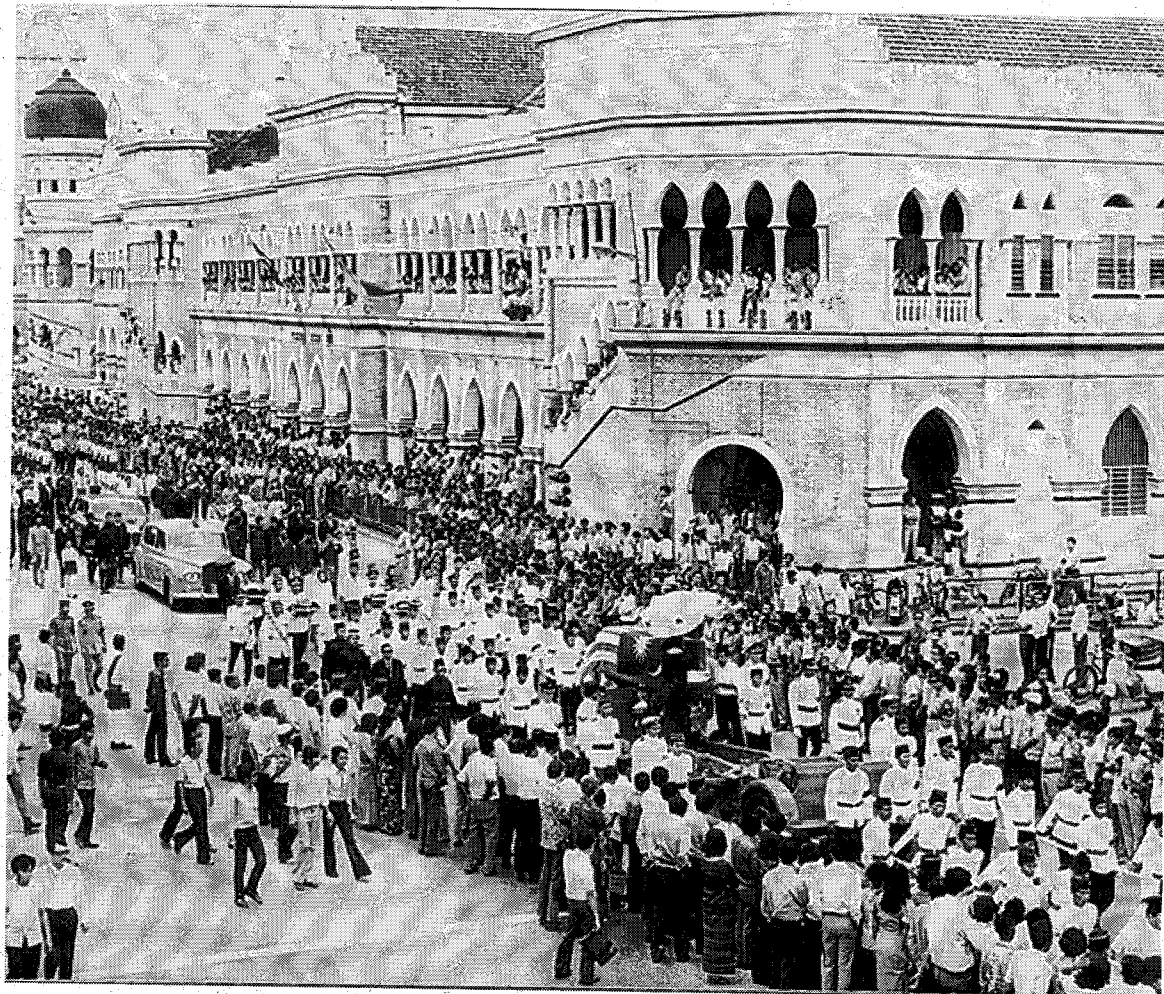
Ismail did not play golf on Aug 2, being busy with the Peninsular Malaysia Malay Students Foundation (GPMS) celebrations in Kampung Baru.

Once that was over, he went to the Lady Templer Hospital to visit his wife, who was recovering from an operation. He then went home for dinner. After seeing that all was well with his young sons, he went upstairs to rest. Soon after that, a massive heart attack killed him.

Tarmizi (Dr Ismail's son) remembers being woken up by the maid and catching a glimpse of hectic activity upstairs in his father's room. Cabinet ministers started dropping in, and the atmosphere in the main room became somewhat chaotic. The prime minister was on the other side of the world, and the acting prime minister had just passed away. The country was leaderless for a moment.

On returning home later that evening, Dr Ismail's daughter, Zailah, was surprised to find that all the lights in the building were on. Shocked by the news of her father's death, she set about making sure her younger brothers were all right. She remembers that one of the ministers called the Malaysian embassy in Ottawa from the house, and she overheard Razak shouting at the distant end to remind his ministers that he was still the prime minister.

Razak found on rushing home from Ottawa that his instructions for Ismail's funeral had not been followed. In despair, he exclaimed to Is-



A huge crowd gathers to watch the procession bearing Tun Ismail's body passing through Kuala Lumpur on its way to Masjid Negara.

mail's widow, Neno: "Who am I to trust now?"

When Ismail passed away, his eldest son, Tawfik, 22, inherited the memoirs, and learned the terrible truth that Razak was dying.

He had to bear that adult secret in silence and with trepidation for the next three years. Razak suspected that Tawfik had access to the state secret and on one occasion he despondently told Tawfik that he knew about Ismail's memoirs, "but I don't want to know what is in them".

The death of Ismail inevitably altered Malaysian politics. Razak's choice of (Tun) Hussein Onn, a recent addition to the Cabinet, to succeed Ismail as his deputy, surprised many. Hussein also took over Ismail's position as minister of trade and industry. (Tun) Ghazali Shafie became the new minister of home affairs on Aug 13.

Shahriman Sulaiman (Tan Sri Tunku Shahriman Sulaiman), Razak's aide, recalls how (Tun) Tan Siew Sin was deeply disappointed on being told on Aug 12 that Hussein Onn was to be Razak's new deputy. He asked in disbelief: "What about me?"

The MCA continued to push for its president to be appointed second deputy prime minister but met strong resistance from Umno.

In disappointment over this failure, Tan considered resigning as finance minister. He was persuaded to stay on by Philip Kuok, with some prodding from behind the scenes by Razak. Nevertheless, ill health forced Tan to resign in February 1974, and to take on the specially created post

of financial adviser to the government instead.

With Tan's departure, Razak's regime evolved further. It left Tunku Abdul Rahman's brand of inter-communal politics behind and critics of Tunku, such as Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Musa Hitam, were placed in positions of power.

The latter had already been appointed, apparently with Ismail's blessing, as deputy minister of trade and industry in January 1973, and the former, whose attempt to rejoin Umno was rejected in 1971 but who became a member of the party's supreme council on March 7, 1972, was appointed senator in 1973.

After an uncontested victory at the general election on Aug 24, 1974, Dr Mahathir was immediately made minister of education, a portfolio that, given the traditional teachers-based support structure of Umno, tended to propel the holder to higher political positions.

Shahriman Sulaiman remembers discussing the future of Umno with Razak, and getting the distinct impression that the prime minister considered Dr Mahathir as having the most leadership potential ahead of other contenders such as Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Musa Hitam and Ghazali Shafie.

A thorough understanding of Ismail's contributions has traditionally been made difficult by the fact that he was always the third or the second most powerful man in the country. Historiographic convention has always allowed the Tunku and Razak to

overshadow Ismail's achievements, and his name is often mentioned in combination with the other two, and with Tan Siew Sin.

This has meant that latter-day Malaysians have not learned to know him, and what is worse, they have not had the opportunity to understand the ideas behind the deeds. His legacy has yet to be discovered.

But for now, perhaps the proudest heritage that he left behind is his reputation.

According to his children, the mention of the second part of their name — bin or hinte Tun Dr Ismail — so many years after his death, still brings forth expressions of respect and gratefulness, especially from older Malaysians and Singaporeans.

For those who worked with or under Ismail, he is remembered for his deep dislike of incompetence and bigotry, his strict adherence to the virtues of hard work and honesty, and his belief in the principles of national independence and multi-racialism.

That is a legacy for his children, and for Malaysians in general, to contemplate with pride.

■ 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>. The book will be available in major bookstores soon.