

# 'The Tunku never acknowledged my worth publicly...'

The story of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, a Malaysian giant whose role stretched from the struggle for Independence right through to the aftermath of May 13, has been largely unknown. In the following extracts from his upcoming biography, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time*, Dr Ismail provides a glimpse into how he felt about the two leaders he complemented, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, his faith in the Alliance, and his concerns for Malaysia, much of which is still relevant today.

BETWEEN March 30, 1970, and Oct 26 1972, Dr Ismail did not make any addition to his autobiography. He was literally too busy for words.

Fortunately, when he finally did have time to write down his private thoughts again, he allowed himself a calm and distanced look at recent Malaysian politics.

These observations are worth presenting in their entirety (*Drifting*, Oct 26, 1972):

*Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Father of the Nation, had finally agreed to retire and Tun Razak became the new Prime Minister and I, his Deputy; Parliament had been reconvened to pass the act amending the Constitution which had the effect of prohibiting sensitive issues being used in politics.*

*I had gone to the Holy Land, Mecca, with my wife; a Second Malaysian Development Plan had been passed by Parliament and is now being implemented. Tun Razak's health had not deteriorated and he enjoyed being Prime Minister.*

*Tunku's departure from the scene was a drawn-out affair. He used all the politician's skill to try to remain in power.*

*He said at first that he wanted to retire. When there was no reaction to this statement, he made another that he would retire if the people wanted him to.*

*Again, there was no public response, but secretly people were cursing him for holding on to office when he had outlived his usefulness.*

*Finally, an opportunity came which allowed him to retire gracefully. He was offered the position of secretary-general of the Islamic Conference.*

*The first act of Tun Razak as Prime Minister was to convene a meeting of divisional heads of Umno.*

*At this meeting, he announced his future policy and also named me as his deputy. This was the first time that my worth to the nation was admitted by a Prime Minister.*

*The Tunku never acknowledged my worth publicly, although to a few chosen friends he admitted that I was indispensable to the nation.*

*And he quoted especially my handling of the May 13 affair and my defence of him in the period following this incident, when he was subjected to attacks of such obscenity by the Malays that one felt ashamed of them as a race.*

*By calling a meeting of Um-*



Tun Dr Ismail (left) said that Tunku Abdul Rahman was reluctant to leave office.

*no and not the Alliance to make his first public stand, Tun Razak was serving notice to the Alliance and the country as a whole, that from then onwards the government of the country was in Umno's hands and the others were only supporters.*

*It was a bold move and was unchallenged. It also marked the emergence of a new personality.*

*Tun Razak had been Tunku's deputy since Independence. Tunku had used him recklessly, thereby enabling himself to live in style as a "happy Prime Minister".*

*However, Tun Razak has always been an astute and patient politician. He knew his ascension to the Prime Ministership was guaranteed so long as Tunku was Prime Minister.*

*His main task therefore during his period of office as Deputy Prime Minister was to consolidate his position among the Malays, leaving the Tunku to look after the non-Malays.*

*His political image during the period when he was deputy was that of a Malay leader, viewed with suspicion by some non-Malays and re-*

*garded as anti-Chinese, by others.*

*However, since becoming Prime Minister he has managed to change his image to that of a leader of a multi racial country.*

*The Malays accepted this new image and regarded it as a political strategy rather than a true change of personality and views; the Chinese sighed with relief at this metamorphosis.*

*This general acceptance of his new political image coupled with the general improvement of his health, which confounded his medical advisers,*

*including Dr McPherson, has given him self-confidence and enabled him to shed off those fears and worries that he lived with as Tunku's deputy.*

*Tun Razak is an able administrator and a shrewd politician. As an administrator, he manages to get things done with little fuss and argument.*

*He has laid down the infrastructure of Malay participation in the economic life of Malaysia and is now busy prodding them to take advantage of the facilities being made available to them.*

*As a politician, he is shrewd, cautious and has the ability to handle people. His main disability is his lack of charisma.*

*The three policies, which will determine the future of Malaysia are:*

1. *The implementation of Malay participation in the commercial and industrial fields;*

2. *The need to maintain and, if possible, to decrease the rate of unemployment;*

3. *The neutralisation of South-East Asia.*

**The implementation of Malay participation in commerce and industry.**

*This was discussed in the National Consultative Council in the days of the National Operations Council — May 13th 1969-1970.*

*Long debates on the policy of redressing economic imbalance between the Malays and other Bumiputras took place and many of the speeches were either inflammatory because they were racially based or academic.*

*I foresaw that if we were to get anywhere near to solving the problem, we must paint a clear picture of what was going to be done for the Malays without unduly frightening the non-Malays.*

*I suggested that there must be a target to aim at and that this target must be reasonable and what was more important, capable of being implemented.*

*I said that we should aim at a target period of 20 years within which 30 per cent of Malays would participate in commerce and industry and that it should be implemented in the context of a growing economy.*

*This proposal was unanimously accepted. At the time of writing, the implementation of this policy has been going on for almost two years.*



Prime Minister Abdul Razak seeking a clarification from then senior Culture, Youth and Sports Ministry officer Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (seated directly in front) during a visit to the ministry in July, 1971. On his right is his deputy Dr Ismail and on his left is Minister Hamzah Abu Samah, who gave the briefing. Other ministers present were Hussein Onn (education), Sardon Jubir (health), Abdul Ghafar Baba (national and rural development), and V. Manickavasagam (labour and manpower).

# Snag in policy implementation

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Although the policy is clear if it is seen in its entirety, in the course of implementation, various sectors of our society chose to see it only from a sectional angle.

It is obvious that participation must mainly depend on new activities in commerce and industry.

This should not be difficult to achieve in a developing country like Malaysia, because new industries and new trading opportunities are constantly being established and offered.

Instead of trying to identify and promote new industries for Malays to participate in government and government-sponsored agencies, officials use all sorts of strategy to inject Malays into existing established industries and businesses.

The Chinese, on the other hand, instead of accepting the fact that new fields in industries and commerce must benefit the Malays, use all commercial and business tactics to prevent this from taking place.

The implementation is further distrusted by the Malays when they refuse to see the picture of implementation as a whole and rather choose to see details of im-

plementation in isolation.

The present Malay interest in capital accumulation when compared to that possessed by non-Malays is one example.

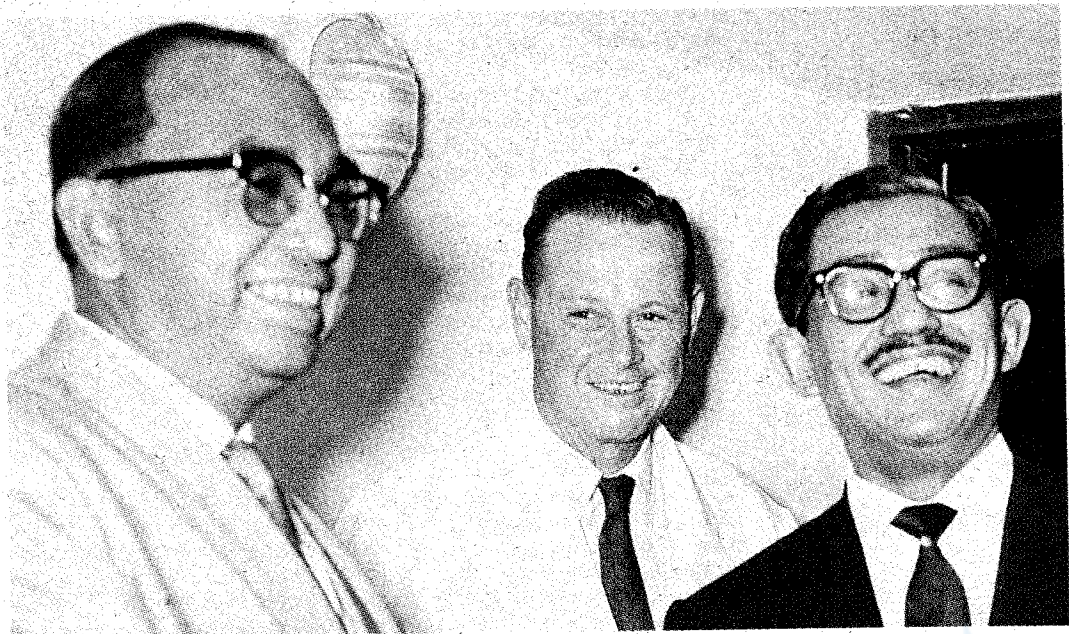
They argue that the present rate of government injection of capital into Malay commercial enterprises and trading institutions is so slow that in 20 years Malay capital accumulation will not only not achieve the target but the gap will widen.

They forget or choose to forget the fact that capital accumulation can be achieved not only by means of injection of fresh capital but rather by the multiplication of existing capital through normal business activities.

The Chinese, for example, achieved their present capital largely by business activities. Some of the big Chinese businesses achieve their success by this method.

The Malays want the government to restrict the business activities of the non-Malays while the Malays reach parity with them.

If this philosophy is accepted, then the whole concept of Malay participation in a growing economy is replaced by a policy of Malay participation in a standstill economy.



(From left) Tun Abdul Razak, American Ambassador Homer Byington Jr and Tun Dr Ismail.

This is neither politically possible nor is it practical from the government point of view.

Injection of capital into the Malay sector can only be done if government taxes keep on increasing as the economy expands.

Another problem that is cause

for concern is the manner by which the Malays want the government to improve the quality of Malay manpower.

The government policy of doing this is, first of all, in the existing seats of learning — where there are more qualified Malays seeking to enter than there are places

for them — to reserve a quota for Malays.

This is a reasonable way because all qualified Malays will be accommodated, and if there are surplus places they should be given to non-Malays.

It is true that by this policy, the time taken to bridge the gap will

be slower than if the government were to deny surplus places to non-Malays. But this is a practical and just way of doing things in a multi-racial society like Malaysia.

DR Ismail was fascinated by the Tunku, and found that his personality evoked sympathy and loyalty wherever he went.

The prince toured the country tirelessly, and managed to revitalise Umno's journal, *Suara Merdeka*.

The struggle against communist insurgents was still going on and the Tunku would often draw attention to the plight of detainees.

Dr Ismail remembered: "He never approved of the violent methods adopted by those nationalists in their struggle for Independence but he never failed to fight for them because they were inspired by nationalism."

*The Tunku's greatest assets was that he managed to be himself under all circumstances no matter where he was, be it the palace or the kampong, in high or low society, whether among the rich or the poor.*

*This quality of his is still with him. People thus began to know him as a person with faults as well as virtues.*

*His blunders — of which there were many — used to shock people at first, but as time went on, people got used to him and they forgave him because he was great enough to admit his faults in public and make his apologies in public.*

*These lapses of his — the blunders and the mistakes — used to disarm many people who thought of him as a well-meaning leader with little brains.*

*I remember people saying that Malcolm MacDonald (the United Kingdom Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, 1948-1955) once thought of the Tunku as an unstable leader.*

*However, beneath the superficiality, the unimpressiveness, lies a subtle brain which approaches political problems differently from others, and whose answer to those problems appears so naive that at first, many people would laugh but which once acted upon proved effective and practical (Drifting c6).*

ON Jan 8, 1952, the Kuala Lumpur division of Umno and the Selangor branch of MCA announced that they would be contesting the Kuala Lumpur municipal election planned for Feb 16 as a coalition (Heng 1988, p.161).

This alliance had apparently been forged after discussions between Yahya Abdul Razak and H.S. Lee (the respective heads of the two organisations) in a meeting arranged by Ong Yoke Lin and S.M. Yong.

The fact that Ong and Yahya were both ex-pupils of Victoria Institution and that Ong was a classmate of Yahya's younger brothers, facilitated this unexpected initiative (Tjoa 1978). Dr Ismail, however, told an alternate story regarding the genesis of this fateful coalition:

*Dato Onn had by this time, started his IMP (Independence Malaya Party) and his timing was such*

*that it was in readiness for the Kuala Lumpur municipal election.*

*One of the persons who Dato Onn disliked and who in turn disliked Dato Onn was Mr H.S. Lee. Their dislike of each other was so bitter and so personal that each was bound to oppose whatever the other did.*

*Henry Lee, at that time, had control of the Chinese guilds in Selangor and as such he was in control of the MCA. Henry approached the local Umno leader, Dato Yahya, and after much discussion decided to form an alliance of Umno-MCA to contest the election to the Kuala Lumpur municipality (Drifting c7).*

*Whichever the case may have been, the Alliance trounced the IMP, winning nine of 12 contested seats. The IMP secured only two seats, putting central MCA leaders such as Tan Cheng Lock in a bind.*

*The close relationship between the MCA and the IMP could not continue and started unravelling from that point onwards.*

*By early 1954, Onn Ja'afar had disbanded his new party in disappointment and formed the effectually pro-Malay Parti Negara (Malayan National Party).*

*Elections for the Johor Baru Town Council immediately followed those held in Kuala Lumpur and the local committees of both Umno and the MCA adopted the proven Alliance formula.*

*Dr Ismail was the man responsible for Umno in Johor Baru. He was, however, suffering from a severe infection of the valves of the heart and had to give his consent to the coalition from his sick bed.*

*He refused the doctor's advice to relax over the next few months but instead campaigned for the Alliance, which nearly killed him (Abu Bakar Suleiman interview, March 29, 2006).*

*The reward for his dedication was a total victory and the style of politics that he exhibited at this early stage was to become typical of him. He recalled in 1967:*

*On the last day on which campaigning was allowed, I made a broadcast as leader of the Alliance, asking the electorate to elect either all the candidates on the Alliance ticket or none at all.*

*This naturally caused a lot of alarm and consternation among the Alliance candidates who did not expect all of us to be elected and the most vociferous of those who opposed my line of action was a candidate who is now a minister of the 1964 Alliance government.*

*The differences with the others reflect the attitude which we took with regard to the election. I saw the election as a means of measuring our strength and popularity with the voters, whereas some of my colleagues were more interested in securing seats in the council for themselves.*

*Luckily for me and for the party, we won all the contested seats (Drifting c7).*

*DR Ismail was by now convinced that the main tactics of the Alliance should be "to press for the election to be held at the national level as a means to gain Independence" (Drifting c7).*

*THE MCP (Malayan Communist Party) had been sending out feel-*



As a result of colonial rule, the only language that could guarantee a livelihood for those entering the government service was English.

Tun Dr Ismail

ers since June for negotiations to end the Emergency.

These had been rebuked. On Sept 8, an amnesty offer was announced — first by the director of operations and then by the Tunku (Tunku 1986, p.64) — and meetings between the representatives on both sides on Oct 17 and Nov 19 were secretly held to iron out details for a final rendezvous.

The Tunku left it to Chin Peng, the secretary-general of the MCP, to decide the venue.

Dr Ismail was against the meeting, as were many other leaders within the Alliance.

*We were worried that in his anxiety to end the state of emergency, he might compromise himself to the extent that he might endanger the security of the country when Independence was achieved.*

*He was steadfast in his desire to talk with (the Communists) and could not be dissuaded; so the next best thing was to ensure that when the meeting took place, the Tunku*

*was well briefed and his security not endangered.*

*Tunku himself was adamant that a safe passage be guaranteed for Chin Peng and his aides.*

*It says much for the trust that Chin Peng had in the Tunku that he accepted the invitation to meet the Tunku, knowing full well that he was throwing himself at the mercy of the Tunku and the British (Drifting c11).*

AFTER the major issue of Independence had been settled, the internal resilience of the Alliance system was put to the test.

Dr Ismail recollected that a strong team of MCA intellectuals held a debate with Umno on critical issues.

Most of these men were new, and "while they sensed that there was trust and confidence which had been built in the Alliance... they had not themselves experienced it and their approach at the meetings was, at first, critical".

Dr Ismail felt that all parties soon came to agree that whatever the problem was, the Alliance format would provide an appropriate answer:

*As I saw this spirit emerge and expand during the rest of the conference, I was convinced that whatever happened in the future, this spirit of the Alliance would triumph over all obstacles.*

*As a result of this new consciousness, the solution to many communal problems became possible (Drifting c12).*

The major dilemmas that were being faced were those of citizenship, the national language and the special position of the Malays.

The following text by Dr Ismail reveals his understanding of Malaya's post-colonial situation (Drifting c12):

#### Citizenship

*Under colonial rule, there was a cumulative increase in the population of immigrant races, especially those of Chinese origin and to a lesser extent the Indians, the latter brought in mainly to work in the rubber estates owned by the British.*

*No attempt was made to make these immigrants loyal citizens of Malaya.*

*The British were content to see that so long as they obey the laws of the country, they could come and leave as they please.*

*As a result of this policy, when more and more of them settled in Malaya, the result was an increasing number of aliens in the country who, on the whole, were richer and more vigorous than the Malays.*

*When the Malays seized political power after the Second World War, their main defence against their more virile and richer neighbours was to deny them the right of citizenship.*

#### The Language Issue

*As a result of colonial rule, the only language that could guarantee a livelihood for those entering the government service was English.*

*Otherwise the various races were left to themselves with regard to education.*

*There was a feeble attempt to*

*give the Malays an education in their own language but as this ceased at the primary level and was implemented in a half-hearted manner, it gave no benefit to the Malays.*

*The Chinese were left to themselves and to run their own schools, which were financed through levies that they imposed on themselves, on their rubber production and their businesses.*

*Their education was orientated towards China.*

*As a result, only the English-educated in the multi-racial population of Malaya enjoyed a common language.*

*The leaders of the Alliance concluded that in an independent Malaya, there should be one language to unify the various races into one nation.*

*The obvious choice was Malay. It was imperative that if the Chinese — the real political problem since the other races were not dominant — were to be persuaded into accepting Malay as the national language they should be granted citizenship as a quid pro quo.*

*This was the real basis of the agreement between the three partners, particularly between the Malay and the Chinese.*

#### The Special Position of the Malays

*This proved a less intractable problem because the leaders of the Alliance realised the practical necessity of giving the Malays a handicap if they were to compete on equal terms with the other races.*

*The only point of controversy was the duration of the 'special position' — should there be a time limit or should it be permanent?*

*I made a suggestion which was accepted, that the question be left to the Malays themselves because I felt that as more and more Malays became educated and gained self-confidence, they themselves would do away with this 'special position'.*

*In itself, this 'special position' is a slur on the ability of the Malays and only to be tolerated because it is necessary as a temporary measure to ensure their survival in the modern competitive world: a world to which only those in the urban areas had been exposed.*

*This analysis provides insight into how Dr Ismail perceived the Malayan situation.*

*What is striking is Dr Ismail's belief that the Malays would do the right thing in the long run, as well as his faith in the Alliance as a model of government capable of meeting these challenges taken as a whole.*

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