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# The reluctant politician

After initially baulking at a career in politics, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman finally joined Umno in 1951 and found himself swept up the ranks of government.

By SUHAINI AZNAM

HE would have been the country's third prime minister, but it was not to be.

Even when suffering from a congenital heart condition, plus recurrent throat cancer, he stoically carried on – “just one more, before calling it a day” – and he died in the saddle.

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman was acting prime minister when he collapsed of a massive heart attack, alone in his upstairs study after a solitary dinner of steak on the night of Aug 2, 1973. He was 57.

Ismail was born on Nov 4, 1915 to a well-known Johor family. His father, Datuk Abdul Rahman Yassin, Johor state treasurer, was a disciplinarian and was partly responsible for shaping Ismail's iron backbone.

Ismail was only 12 when his mother Zaharah died and his paternal step-grandmother brought him up.

In between dragging him from Muar to Mersing to visit various clansmen, she imbued Ismail with a sense of family responsibility, of being *Melayu lama*, tracing his ancestry back to the *bendahara* line that served the Malacca sultanate.

“One line provided the civil servants

and another line provided the consorts who would be married off to the sultans,” said Ismail's eldest son Tawfik.

The young Ismail grew up in a large household, the second of nine children and an equal number of adopted sisters – Chinese by birth and brought up no differently from his own biological sisters.

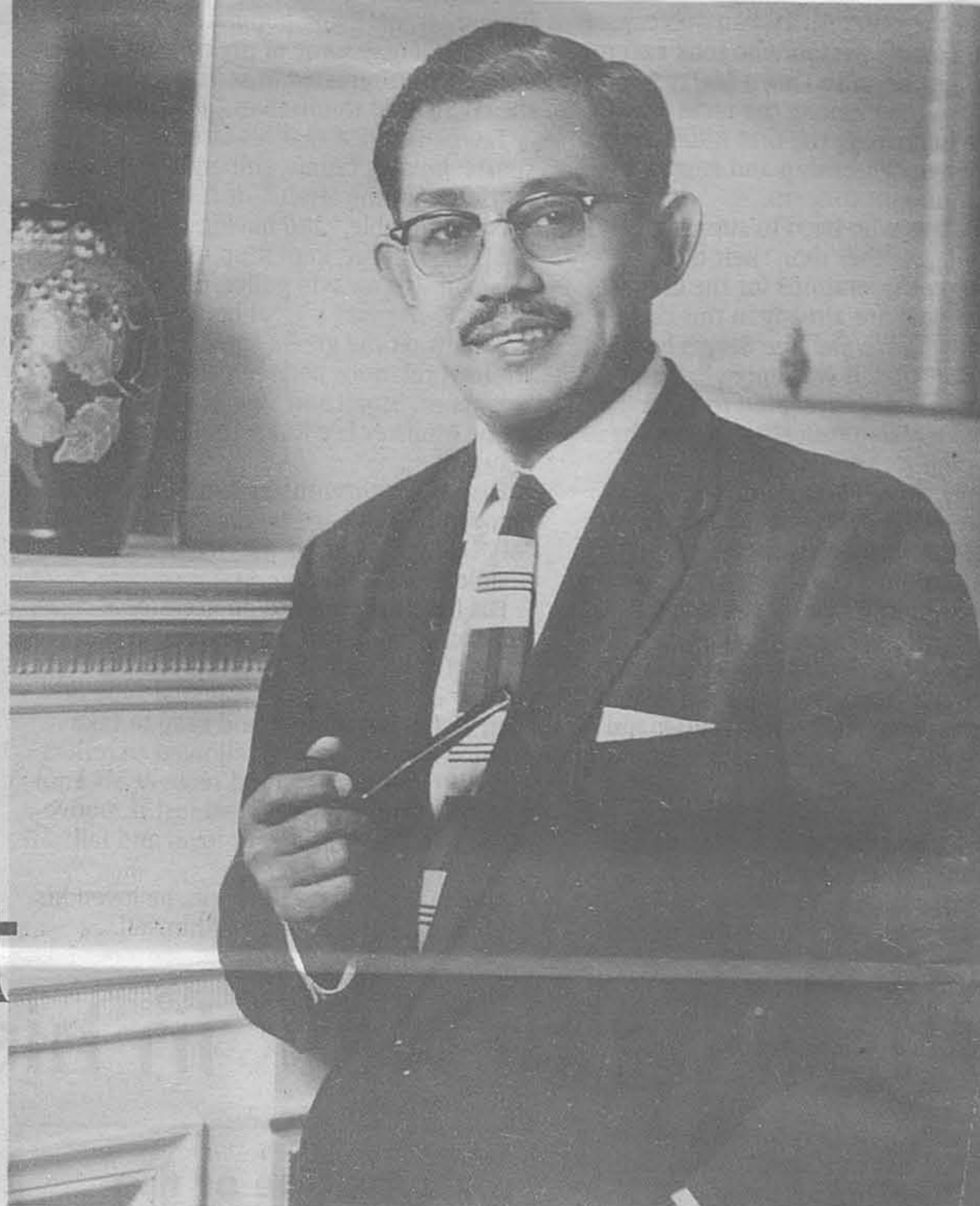
Ismail listened to the women, recalled Tawfik. “He thought Malay society was matriarchal, believing that they were the backbone of Umno. Thus he always got on well with the women, speaking more easily with them than most other men of his society and age.”

Of his siblings, Ismail was particularly close to his eldest brother Suleiman, who later became Minister of the Interior when he held the portfolio of external affairs.

The brothers enjoyed arguing points of principle to sharpen their minds, said Tawfik.

The impeccably-dressed Suleiman was the first and at one time the only Malay graduate in Johor, and Ismail was the first Malay doctor to have graduated from Australia. Both were financed by their father.

Given his “sacrifice” for his sons, Abdul Rahman was understandably furi-



**Brimming with ideas:** Ismail generously gave of his development ideas without wanting the glory of recognition. Left: Ismail signing a guest book. — Arkib Negara

ous when Ismail “abandoned his profession” to enter politics.

He had trained as a doctor and had “looked forward to being a millionaire”, having run a successful practice at the Klinik Tawakkal, opposite the Kuok shop on Jalan Trus in Johor Baru from 1947 to 1953.

“His brother-in-law Tun Awang said he was more likeable before he joined politics, people found him less aloof and more affable,” recalled Tawfik.

Politics was simply not Ismail's natural calling. But Malay nationalism was sweeping the country and neither Suleiman nor Ismail could resist the tide.

Upon returning from Melbourne, Ismail joined the Malay Graduates' Association, a political discussion group whose thoughts proved seminal to the independence movement.

Eventually, the two brothers headed this movement and Tunku Abdul Rahman was in fact persuaded to run for Umno president only when assured of its support.

The Abdul Rahman family was an Umno family – another brother, Yassin, served as Umno secretary-general until independence.

After initially baulking at a career in politics, Ismail finally joined Umno in 1951. Its founder Onn Ja'afar had resigned and the Tunku, whom Ismail held in high regard, had accepted the party helm.

Most importantly to Ismail, Umno had crystallised its goal from a vague Malay nationalism to *merdeka*.

Ismail quickly found himself swept up the ranks of government. He first stood for the Johore Timor constituency in 1955, won, and went on to be re-elected in 1959, 1964 and 1969.

In a political career spanning two decades, Ismail was entrusted with the greatest range of portfolios in Cabinet – Lands, Mines and Communication (1953-54), Natural Resources (1954-55), Commerce and Industry (1956-57; 1959), Foreign Affairs (1959), Internal Security (1960), Home Affairs (1961; 1964; 1969), Justice (1964-67), and Deputy Prime Minister (1970-73).

On the heels of *merdeka*, he was appointed Malaya's first ambassador to Washington DC and its first permanent representative to the United Nations.

Ismail's contribution to the politics of the day was recognised: he was awarded the title of Tun in 1966, the first recipient of the august title.

He was a man of definite opinions and his sense of racial equality, his acceptance of races other than Malay, traced back to his own boyhood. Apart from his own adopted sisters, Ismail counted among his best friends the Kuok brothers, Leslie Cheah and the Puthuchery brothers.

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# A man who put the country first

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And as a medical student in Australia, he wrote to his father in early 1946: “My colleagues treat me as an equal. Never by deeds or words have they ever discriminated me from the other Australian doctors ... I never met a single person who took exception to me just because I am a Malay.”

This innate trust among the races was imperative in forming the first Alliance government, when citizenship and language were of paramount concern.

Those Malays who tried to suppress all other languages other than their own showed “no considerations for the Chinese and Indians who are already in this country”, noted Ismail in Ooi Kee Beng's book *The Reluctant Politician*. It was enough, Ismail felt, that non-Malays accepted the fact that Malaya was a Malay country and that the national language was Malay.

Not surprisingly, all races turned up to pay their respects before his body was buried – the first to be given the honour – in the National Mausoleum.

Ismail generously gave of his development ideas without “wanting the glory” of recognition. The Federal Territory idea was his; he laid the groundwork for the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda); and he believed that China should guarantee South-East Asia's neutrality.

He was staunchly anti-communist, dubbed Sukarno “the Fuehrer of Jakarta”, and supported the revival of the Association of South-East Asia.

But Ismail's tenacious aspiration to high

standards also alarmed his peers.

In his unpublished memoirs titled *Drifting*, he recalled in 1967 having asked the electorate “to elect either all the candidates on the Alliance ticket or none at all”.

“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,” he noted.

Tawfik recalled that his father enjoyed sports: boxing, tennis, golf and swimming. “He swam the Straits (of Tebrau) when it was swimmable,” and having built a modest pool in his home, kept it up until he died.

Ismail was an avid golfer, playing a handicap of 15. He was a great believer in solving problems on the green. Later, faced with strained relations between Malaya and Singapore, Ismail and Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew continued to play golf.

His health notwithstanding, Ismail enjoyed his food and he loved Laksa Johor. “My Dad would grind the rice to make the noodle,” Tawfik said.

His habitual pipe and an occasional cigarette only made matters worse.

The Tunku said of Ismail in the *The Star* of June 2, 1975: “Ismail was that type of man – short in temper and easy to take offence – but if he were allowed to reflect and calm down, he would recover his equilibrium as quickly as he had lost it. Above all, at heart he was a very loyal and faithful colleague.”

Like many of his generation, he loved his country more than he loved himself.



**Family man:** Ismail enjoying family time with wife Norashikin Seth and Tawfik, then a toddler.