

SECRETS AND ALL: A SON SHARES A LEGACY

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Mohamed Tawfik Ismail feels that with the publication of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's memoirs, he has fulfilled his responsibilities as his father's son 'to put his words out the way he planned to'.

When former deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman died in office in 1973, his private papers, including the manuscript of an incomplete autobiography, came into the safekeeping of his eldest son, Mohamed Tawfik. It took Tawfik 33 years, but those papers are now the genesis of arguably the most awaited memoirs in a long time. Tawfik, a former one-term Member of Parliament, speaks to ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD about why *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* has been long in the making, and of his father's legacy to his family and to the country.

Q: Now that this book is out, how do you feel?

A: The first feeling is, of course, relief, because there was always the question of when would be the right time. It was a burden carrying the secrets and comments.

Sometimes you want to talk about them, but you can only talk about them to certain people.

Second, I feel a sense of accomplishment. You feel that this is just as much your baby as it is the author's (Ooi Kee Beng). I also feel that I've fulfilled my responsibilities as my father's son, to put his words out the way he planned to.

Q: Why has it taken so long?

A: Initially he (Dr Ismail) wrote a piece (an incomplete autobiography), called "Drifting into Politics". Then I discovered after he died, he had other documents as well.

There were things I never thought I would know. I found out that Razak (former prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) was ill. How do you keep a secret like that?

My mother thought the papers would be safer with her friends — the people she trusted. But even they didn't know (about Razak's illness). So I felt I couldn't publish them in Razak's lifetime. Neither could I publish them in Hussein's lifetime (former prime minister Tun Hussein Onn).

Then, of course, along came Dr Mahathir (former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad), and then the '87 Umno crisis cropped up. It would have been a waste to publish the papers then when there were people who might have carried the contents the wrong way.

And all along, I had been giving hints to archives and newspapers. But nobody approached me from Malaysia to do the biography.

Q: Did you inherit your father's private papers, since you were the eldest son?

A: It so happened that I was the only one around when we found all those things, and mum said: "Well, you might as well keep them".

She's been pressing me to publish them earlier. It was traumatic for me but I knew what was in them. I didn't want to hurt her because she had friends among whom my father mentioned.

Q: The biography is published by Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas). Couldn't a local institution have undertaken the job?

A: Some people approached me to edit the letters. Some people knew about them but no one seriously said: "We want to do a book".

Q: You were concerned?

A: About credibility. The integrity of the documents had to be protected as well. But now that the book's out, anyone can write about it.

There will be critics of Tun Dr Ismail. I briefed Siew Sin's (former MCA president Tun Tan Siew Sin) daughter about what my father said about her father and she was quite open about it. She said: "Well, if Tun Ismail said that about my dad, then it must be true."

Q: What did you want this book to be about?

A: When the project started, my first concern was "how much do my children know about their grandfather"? I was nearly 50. My father died at 57, I'm 55 now and how many more years can I go without revealing any of this to my children?

And, my mother's getting old. Is

she going to wake up every day and say: "My son has failed me because I don't know what my husband wrote?"

The other consideration was, I'd felt that there was a lot of nonsense being talked about in the newspapers in the last two years.

People don't seem to understand history. Now, even though you're educated, it's become as though race is still an important thing. I don't think this is what the founding fathers were about. I'm not trying to be a politician here but those were some of my concerns.

Q: We seem to have either forgotten or know very little about Dr Ismail. Are you happy with the general level of knowledge and understanding of his contributions?

A: From 1973 onwards, people started talking less and less of him. Umno leaders had their own reasons. Razak didn't want people to know about his illness and he didn't need a prop like Dr Ismail.

He had to move out of Dr Ismail's shadow. My father didn't say he was controlling Razak, but people perceived he was doing so, including those who advised Razak.

So we have to put all these things into perspective. He was just totally not taken as a factor.

Many people have forgotten him but it's not my duty to remind them — he belongs to the nation.

My role as a son is to make sure that whatever he left behind, that whatever *hutang* (debts) he had, I will try to *selesai* (settle) them. That's my duty.

Q: You were a one-term MP. What prompted you to enter politics and why aren't you still active?

A: My father tried to dissuade me from politics. He wanted me to be a businessman. He felt you should be rich before you enter politics. The reason I went in was because people kept asking me: "Why aren't you in politics?"

And once I went into politics they said: "What are you doing here?"

And then they tried to get me out. And once I was out and enjoying life again, they said: "Why are you out?" (Laughs) Who wants to come back?

Not that I didn't try. I pay RM1 every year to be a member (of Umno) and I contest to be a delegate (at its annual assembly), and I always lose (laughs).

Q: Did Razak know that you knew about his illness?

A: He knew I had the memoirs but he didn't know what I knew. He never asked me.

Q: Do you think he suspected that you were aware of his illness?

A: Razak didn't *kacau* (interfere) in that sense. He just didn't want people to know there was something wrong with him and he didn't want us to publish the book in his lifetime. We appreciated that.

Q: What was Dr Ismail like as a father?

A: He was very, very strict. He wanted me to understand that just



Tun Dr Ismail and his wife, Toh Puan Norashikin Mohd Seth (right), arriving at the Methodist Secondary Girls' School, Kuala Lumpur, in December 1972 for a seminar organised by the National Council of Women's Organisations.

because he was a minister, that didn't give me the right to ask people for favours.

He tried to beat me into perfection, the way you beat tin alloy and shape it to what you want.

Up till now, my family doesn't know how to ask for favours. That's why we are where we are.

Everyone thinks we're alright, but I wish I were rich. I wish my father was rich. I wish he'd been that millionaire doctor that he wanted to be!

Q: Were you aware of your father's own failing health?

A: We were made aware of it, because Dr MacPherson (Dr Ismail's physician) was our neighbour and he used to come over every day. One day, I had an argument with my father and my mother pulled me aside and said: "You can't talk to your father like that, you know he's not well."

Q: Did he tell you explicitly that he probably wouldn't live long because of his failing health?

A: He did write to me when I was in Australia and said: "If anything happens to me, there's going to be enough money for your education, I don't want you to worry about me because you're going through your exams."

He didn't try to conceal it. He said a doctor should not lie to his patients.

Q: The book gives a fuller picture of historical events.

A: When you look at Malaysian history from what you know, what you were told — multiracialism, multiculturalism — our big problems have always been (as stated in the book) communism and communalism.

Even now, these are all still the issues. I hope that now, there will be a bit more understanding among the readers as to why exactly we are where we are now.

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Q: Do you think, on hindsight, your father was too far ahead of his time?

A: No, I don't think so, because at the time, everybody who was trained in universities in the British Commonwealth all felt the same way. I think we are falling back to something else.

Q: How does your family feel about this book?

A: They just got their copies last week. I didn't give them any chance to read the draft because, obviously, if you let them read the draft, it's never going to be published!

So I said: "I'm going to take the responsibility. This is the way it is. You like it, good. If you don't like it, blame me."

Q: How did your association with the book's author, Ooi Kee Beng, begin?

A: Through Iseas. I know some people in Iseas like Verghese (Mathews), and I said: "Look, I've got these papers here, and if I don't store them properly they're going to deteriorate. What kind of facilities do you have in the library?" So they told me.

I said: "Well, since the (National) Archives doesn't seem interested, why don't I just leave it with you?"

Our Archives have so much... but who knows? The last time anyone did anything big on this was Universiti Sains Malaysia and they have read the material.

I think if USM had asked me "would you like to donate the papers to us?", the first thing I'd ask is "do you have the facilities to store them?"

There's no point giving the papers to them if they are going to rot 10 years later.

Q: None of our institutions has the facilities to preserve documents?

A: I don't want to ask.

Q: Did you remove things you felt were still too sensitive?

A: I said: "Look, my father was a man who believed in God. Whatever he confessed to God is what he put down on paper. If he didn't put it on paper, he doesn't want you to publish it."

Q: The book records your interest in history, which your father encouraged. By some strange twist of fate, it's served you well in undertaking this project.

A: It could have been different. (Dr) Mahathir could have liked me so much I could have become a senior member of his Cabinet and my interest in history would have died a natural death. Maybe it's fated that Dr Mahathir decided: "Ah, this fellow..."

Dr Mahathir called me to his office and told me that not every son can be like his father. I walked out and never turned back. This was after 1986, just before the 1990 election.

Q: Did you make a point of finding out your children's understanding of Tun Dr Ismail?

A: That's the other reason why this book was published. They're at an age where they're curious and want to know their heritage. It's the reason I moved to Johor Baru.

I can point out "that's where your grandfather's house was" (now Pusat Islam). There's Johor cuisine, which was what your grandfather liked to eat. I can show them *Baju Melayu Johor*, which shows we are different from people in the north.

They get to know their culture by experience and I needed to tell them about their grandfather's values.

Look, I'm not worthy of my father in the sense that I'm not as straight as he was or as honest as he was in some ways. I tend to "bend" a bit and my father would not have done what I would do. But I have to because it's the only way to survive. Sometimes.

I tell my sons, you want to be perfect leaders, you have to look at this example, that example, at your grandfather, and compare. What people perceive you to be is the value you should strive for.

Q: What is Tun Dr Ismail's legacy to the country?

A: His gift to the country is the ability to think wider than oneself. You have to think outside your immediate environment and see yourself as part of a mixed society. And to make sure that people always have a consideration for others' views.

He was educated in Australia. He was on his own and a member of a minority there. He didn't have other Malays to prop him up and he had a sense of loneliness. He felt that he was treated as an equal and that this was the way he would want to treat other people as well.

■ *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* by Ooi Kee Beng, is published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and will be available in major bookstores soon.