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Tun Ismail – Up close and personal

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TUN Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's life in politics has in two previous books been deeply analysed by academic Ooi Kee Beng (in *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time and Malaya's First Year in the United Nations*), and the latest edition *Drifting into Politics: The Unfinished Memoirs of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman* continues the discourse but this time delves into the personal life and motivations of this great man, published 100 years after his birth in 1915.

Written from a first person point of view based on his personal writings (and edited by his son Tawfik Tun Dr Ismail and Ooi Kee Beng), the book offers insights into the reasons he left the medical profession to join politics at the persuasion of Tunku Abdul Rahman. Ismail's writings are frank (sometimes shockingly so), succinct in weaving through the complex politics of his time and importantly, provides the reader with interesting background of the events and subtle negotiations leading to Malaya's independence in 1957.

In his personal life, it is no secret that Ismail enjoyed women, which he admits in several entries such as the fact that "there were three girls in my life in Australia", with details of each relationship and how he enjoyed interacting with people of the opposite sex, resulting in his friendship with non-Malays at a young age. Such admissions would certainly be frowned upon in today's relatively more conservative society, but these interactions seem to have been warm and genuine.

Ismail writes extensively about the Tunku, whom he loved dearly. The Tunku had a "subtle brain which approaches political problems differently from others" and whose actions were "effective and practical". He seemed fascinated by the Tunku wanting to recognise the Communists, at least on the grounds that they were "inspired by nationalism" (since he himself was not convinced), and how he

was adamant to meet Chin Peng (an "unorthodox step") to have a frank dialogue in order to end the state of emergency, although later realising it was impossible to find any mutual agreement. He later also writes about Tun Razak, whom he considered "an able administrator and a shrewd politician, ... cautious and has the ability to handle people".

The early formation of the Alliance (made up of Umno and MCA) is given a lot of attention. In fact, Ismail writes that it was local council elections that led to the Alliance's success – an irony since it is the Barisan Nasional (which the Alliance morphed into) that now considers local council elections the most barbaric thing – and he emphasises this: "It would do well to remember that the formation of the Alliance at the national level took place after the success of the Alliance at the local council elections and that no prior conditions were laid down by either Umno or the MCA." This would then lead to elections at the national level to push for independence. Local council elections were therefore formative to our nation's independence, something so conveniently forgotten in today's political discourse.

Ismail elaborates on the troubles of the Alliance, including Datuk Onn's exit from Umno, which reflects upon Ismail's multiracial politics. He seemed to despise Datuk Onn's "inflammatory communal speeches in public" and in Parliament, predicting that "a racial clash was bound to occur" if this continued. It was clear that in the early years, Malaya was already dealing with racial conflict between the Malays and non-Malays, an issue that has unfortunately not been resolved.

The Alliance back then sought the help of the Commonwealth to set up an independent commission to draw up Malaya's Constitution, namely since "the complexities of a multiracial society... could only be solved by an independent (and unbiased) commission". The three main problems were essentially "citizenship, the national language, and the special position of the Malays".

It is interesting to note that to Ismail, it was not the special position of Malays that

the non-Malays had to be convinced about, but on the Malay language. For instance, "if the Chinese... were to be persuaded into accepting Malay as the national language, they should be granted citizenship as a quid pro quo", which seems rather odd in today's world in which Malay is universally accepted as our national language. It seems almost silly that this was a sore point of contention, since in present day it is the special position that is most hotly contested. National language, he argues, "was the real basis of the agreement... between the Malays and the Chinese".

Ismail's position on human rights may seem harsh to today's activist, where despite his otherwise liberal views on democracy, he maintained that "the Internal Security Act is essential to the security of this country" and was convinced it was not contrary to the fundamentals of democracy. A caveat of course is that the Act would not have been abused if we had "vigilant public opinion via elections, a free press, and above all, by parliament"; the independence of these three institutions have been so heavily eroded today that one wonders if Ismail would still consider detention without trial necessary. Today of course, the ISA has since been abolished, but it is argued by many legal experts that the newly instated Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (Sosma) is being equally misused for preventive detention.

He writes surprisingly little of the 1969 racial clashes, perhaps because he was suffering from both cancer and a heart condition, for which he had to seek medical treatment. Nevertheless in reference to the bumiputra policy that was put into place, he strongly opined, "we should aim at a target period of 20 years". It was his hope to see

Malays participating in the commercial and industrial fields; a policy that he felt would determine the future of Malaysia, but it was important that this should be done "without unduly frightening the non-Malays". Ismail understood the nuances and sentiments between the races, and it is unfortunate he had an early demise before the policy took on an ugly turn many decades later.

As a memoir of his colourful life and personality, it seems to be lacking in content and depth; this could not have been helped since he himself seems to have been a brief writer, not having extensive elaborations upon key incidents. But the little that we do have is surely precious. We see of the man once again his reluctance to enter politics, preferring his medical profession, his love for people (both family and colleagues, especially the Tunku), his concern for his country (he spends most time

writing about the issues of Malaya and what is needed to sort out its complex problems) and we wonder what the nation would have been had he survived longer.

It is not clear how Ismail would have interpreted the conditions of today's society and the various racial and religious tensions, or what his practical solutions would have been. But what is evident is that Malaysia would have had the leadership of a thoughtful and careful politician who would dissect issues for the many layers we have. We would have had the privilege of being under a statesman who ultimately believed in a "just way of doing things in a multiracial society like Malaysia".

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Tun Ismail... Second deputy prime minister of Malaysia (1970-1973)