

IN SEARCH OF NEW NATION-BUILDERS

Tun Dr Ismail's life stories, legacies provide a rare reference point



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AT Dataran Merdeka here on Aug 2, the government commemorated the 50th anniversary of former deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's death.

Of the many events I attended, this definitely counts as one of the most meaningful: the nation is in search of nation-builders, and Tun Dr Ismail's life stories and legacies provide a rare reference point.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim gave a passionate speech from the heart without referring to the prepared text.

For Anwar, Tun Dr Ismail's integrity, incorruptibility and towering personality loomed large over the nation.

As a student leader in the early 1970s, Anwar wasn't afraid to speak loudly and firmly in front of the then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and other leaders, but when it came to Tun Dr Ismail, he felt it was necessary to adjust his tone and be deferential.

Tun Dr Ismail put the nation above himself, returning to serve after the May 13 incident in 1969 when he had earlier quit ministerial positions due to health concerns in 1967.

His firm conviction that Malaysia is a multiethnic nation with people bound by shared purposes and common destiny is evident from his effort in drafting and promoting the Rukun Negara.

It is heartening to see the unity government and Anwar giving prominence to the remembrance of the statesman.

There are many well-known figures in Malaysian politics but not many are known for their integrity, multiethnic Malaysian outlook, effectiveness in governing, and I would add, a strategic mind about geopolitics and the world. Tun Dr Ismail had all



Students and visitors getting an insight into the life of former deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman at an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur recently. PIC BY AIZUDDIN SAAD

these qualities.

Malaya and Malaysia's nascent nationhood came into being at the height of the Cold War, and managing geopolitics was critical to the nation's survival.

Tun Dr Ismail was Malaya's first-ever ambassador to the United States and representative to the United Nations, simultaneously. Datuk Dr Ooi Kee Beng's Malaya's *First Year at the United Nations: As Reflected in Dr Ismail's Reports Home to Tunku Abdul Rahman* discussed that period well.

I have a great sense of affinity with Tun Dr Ismail's legacies in part due to my friendship with Kee Beng, the author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time*. Through him, I got to know Taufik, the eldest son of Tun Dr Ismail and a former member of parliament.

In 2005, not long after I returned from Australia from my studies, I was introduced to Kee Beng. He was in Kuala Lumpur to interview Tun Dr Ismail's friends and colleagues. In turn, through his introduction, I was offered a fellowship at the Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

I can still recall reading one of the first copies of *The Reluctant Politician* during the rainy last days of December 2006 and then marvelling at the sudden storms

the book generated in Malaysia and Singapore in the first week of January 2007.

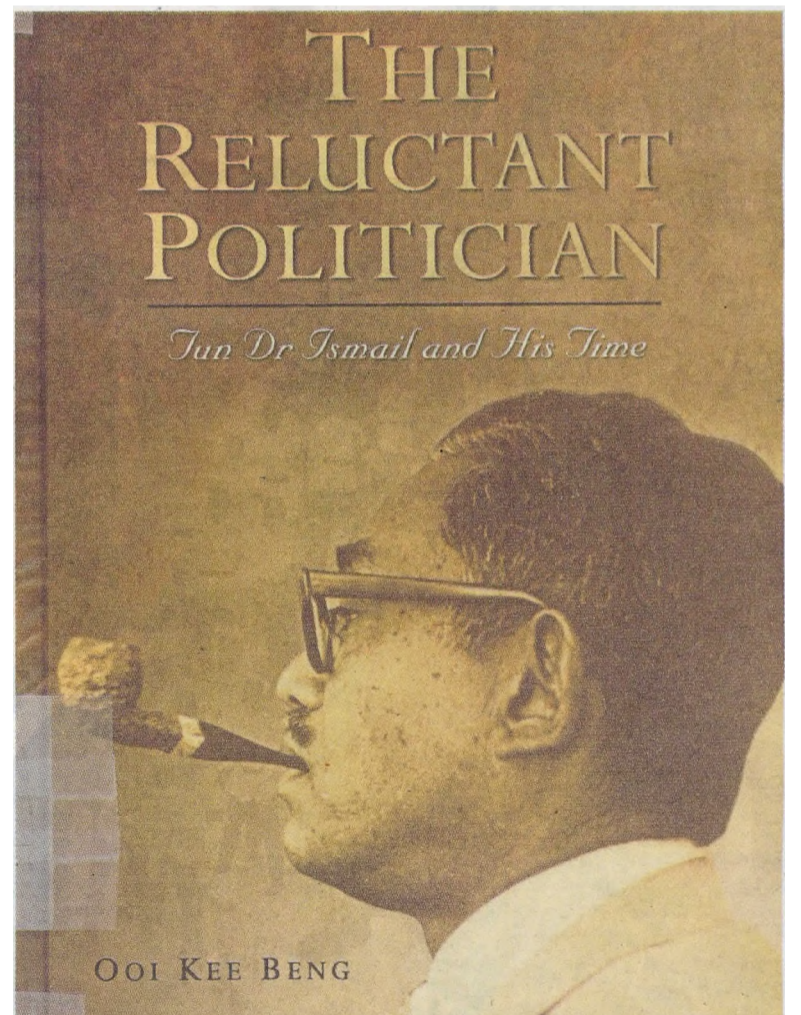
The *New Straits Times*, then under the leadership of Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan Masheerul Hassan, and Singapore's *Straits Times*, both published excerpts of the book for days. The book went into many reprints in the first months of 2007.

The legacies of Tun Dr Ismail filled a nation in a flux. The hope Malaysians placed on the then prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi faded and gave way to cynicism and disappointment.

Kee Beng's research brought the man's images vividly to those who only know about TTDI or Taman Tun Dr Ismail. It also reminded those who used to know him that there were indeed good men in politics, that politics could still be a calling, that nation building is still a worthy project in Malaysia.

Sixteen years after *The Reluctant Politician* was published, Malaysia is now given a chance to rebuild the nation through the unity government led by Anwar. Looking at Tun Dr Ismail as a role model, Anwar has signalled his intention to search and groom a new generation of nation-builders.

Hopefully the good men and women in politics can pull their weight together and build a better future for all Malaysians.



Datuk Dr Ooi Kee Beng's *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* went into many reprints in the first months of 2007.