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ONE of the first things that the late former deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman did after he was appointed in 1970 was to amend the rules to parliamentary debates to prevent discussions of sensitive issues from being politicised.

Granted, Dr Ismail did so in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969, racial riots, but his son Tawfik Ismail believes the move helped to change the political and social landscape of the country to become more inclusive.

Looking at the current political goings on, however, the former parliamentarian wonders if everything his father had worked for has been in vain.

"My father was a statesman who would not sit still or remain silent when the country was in chaos.

"The first contribution made by my father [as DPM] was to make sure that the rules of debate or rules of engagement [in Parliament] were more disciplined, especially after May 13, 1969.

"And I think over time, people accepted that as a fact in this country and they try to maintain their political decorum, to suit the nature of the country," says the former Sungai Benut member of Parliament.

The lack of decorum among many politicians today during Parliament sittings as well as the unbridled stirring of racial and religious issues is disheartening, he adds.

Tawfik believes strongly that the political situation would be different if the country's leaders today remember the aspirations behind the efforts of not only his father, but also all the other forefathers of the nation, to bring independence to the country.

#### Committed leadership

The Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Shah, describes Dr Ismail as a man who had set aside personal ambitions to answer a greater call.

Dr Ismail was one of the key negotiators for the Malaysia's independence; he was part of the Malayan government delegation sent to London to iron out terms with the British.

"He worked hard to achieve his personal ambition of being a medical doctor, but just when he was in a position to reap the rewards, he yielded to the call of a cause bigger than himself - first, independence, and then nation-building.

"This may seem quaint and old-fashioned by the values of today but nothing could be further from the truth. Nation-building has always required recognition of the superordinate goal of creating a real home of all races, cultures and classes," writes His Majesty in the preface of *Drifting Into Politics: The Unfinished Memoirs of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman* (2015).

When asked about the current state of the people's unity and existing pockets of extremism among some segments, Tawfik says there is a need for leaders and the people to look into history to determine the country's direction.

Alluding to his father's contributions as one of the figures who outlined the five principles of the



**National spirit:** Tunku Abdul Rahman (second right) with the Alliance Party team during independence talks in London in January 1956. Tun Dr Ismail is on the far right. From left are Tun Abdul Razak, Tun HS Lee and Tan Sri TH Tan. - Filepic/The Star

# 'He did what must be done'

This National Day, we need to remember the legacy of Malaysia's founding fathers, including Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, lest it is forgotten.

Rukun Negara, Tawfik implores people to delve into the essence of nation-building.

"For us to get good leadership, we must remind ourselves of the direction that we were supposed to have taken since independence until now. We are celebrating 60 years of Malaysia and [66 years] of independence."

He says current issues concerning race and religion stem from the misinformation relayed to the people.

"Because a lot of the problems about race and religion are a matter of knowledge; a matter of what we are told and what information we are processing in our mind.

"The context of today's politics centres on the economic environment. So with all the years we had since independence, we still have a lot to learn.

"What kind of legacy are we leaving to our children?"

#### Thinking forward

Tawfik says the country's founding fathers desired for Malaysia to be governed by democracy and Dr Ismail saw the need for everyone, regardless of race or religion, to have their voices heard.

This is evident, according to Tawfik, through the resilience of Malaysian politics.

"We are very fortunate, every time there is a change in the government, you will not get a violent reaction from the armed forces as seen in Thailand or Indonesia.

"First of all, I believe the founding fathers did not agree to a militarised environment. They believed in democracy. But even

more important is that due to the federal nature of our country, every level has its respective representation.

"So if you are not happy with the government, you can always go to the polls. This shows that Malaysian politics has resilience. We do not need to go to the streets to settle our problems."

Nevertheless, Tawfik, a staunch advocate of a multiracial country, laments policies that have created divisiveness between the people.

"But what they are doing now is creating two different classes, such as Muslims and non-Muslims, bumiputra and non-bumiputra.

"You are creating divisiveness that is not there in the first place when you should be trying to break down barriers.

"The founding fathers had worked hard uniting the nation in 1957. And in 1963, they brought in other states to join Malaysia, to create diversity."

To detractors who question the "sanctity" of the Federal Constitution, Tawfik says there is nothing "un-Islamic" about it.

"And if anybody believes that the Constitution reflects whatever is good in Islam and for the country, then what you should do is abide by it and adhere to the provisions such as equality in embracing religion, good governance, good education, law and order, peace - all those things that a good Muslim strives for."

#### A different path

In *Drifting into Politics: The Unfinished Memoirs of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman* - edited by Tawfik and Singapore's ISEAS-



(Above) Dr Ismail was a man who set aside personal ambitions to answer a greater call for the country. - Filepic/The Star

(Left) Dr Ismail taking a break from politics with his family: wife Toh Puan Norashikim Mohd Seth and one of their children. - TAWFIK ISMAIL

Yusof Ishak Institute deputy director Ooi Kee Beng - Dr Ismail voices different ideals and intentions behind several policies that are seen as controversial today.

For instance, while he expresses the importance of the now-repealed Internal Security Act, Dr Ismail emphasises the need for checks and balances.

"Abuse of the Act can be prevented by vigilant public opinion via elections, a free press and above all, by Parliament," wrote Dr Ismail in the memoir.

Tawfik believes should his father have lived longer to review the Malaysian Agreement 1963 (MA63), "things might have been different".

Dr Ismail died on Aug 2, 1973, at the age of 57 after a fight with cancer.

"My father was tasked with

reviewing MA63. But he was not able to look into it [due to his health].

"But if he did, perhaps things would be different now. The relationship between Sabah, Sarawak and the peninsula would have been stronger."

Dr Ismail's death was a shock to the nation, and even more so to his boss and confidante, then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

"Tun Razak was in Canada at the time when my father died. A lot of policies they had worked together on were meant for my father's succession as the next prime minister.

"This is especially true when Tun Razak had already told my father about his illness [leukaemia]. And when my father died, Tun Razak said: 'So who can I trust now?'"