

Discovering Tun Dr Ismail

BY PAULINE PUAH

FOR Dr Ooi Kee Beng, writing the biography of former deputy prime minister and home minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, and for son Tawfik, helping the writer do his job, it was a voyage of discovery.

Ooi found in Ismail a man with a multi-cultural outlook, who fought off the demands of radical Malays following the May 13 incident, and Tawfik discovered that his strict father was a much-respected public servant.

In going through Ismail's unpublished memoir and private papers, the writer, among other things, found that the New Economic Policy (NEP) was meant to rectify the economic imbalance caused by colonial policies and was never meant to be permanent.

And in his book, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time*, he quoted extensively from the late politician's notes that the NEP was necessary to stop racial clashes like the ones that took place in May 1969 from ever happening again.

"The NEP was meant to solve (a problem) and not to be made permanent," Ooi said in a recent interview. "It was a socialist or a leftist solution."

The book, which hit the market last week, was written based on Ismail's private papers and interviews with his relatives, friends and colleagues.

Ismail - a passionate golfer - used a golfing metaphor to describe the NEP. He told his good friend Philip Kuok - brother of tycoon Robert Kuok - that the NEP was like a handicap in golf which "will enable them to be good players, as in golf, and in time the handicap

will be removed. The Malays must not think of these privileges as permanent: for then, they will not put effort into their tasks. In fact, it is an insult for Malays to be getting these privileges."

Tawfik, who assisted Ooi in arranging interviews with Ismail's old friends and colleagues and sat in during some of the interviews, said the process was a journey of discovery about his father.

"After 50 years, I think it's like a rediscovery. Things about him that I never dreamed of... by talking to his friends, you get the impression, 'Wow, these people can remember him after 50 years! Meaning he must have had an impact on their lives?'"

Ooi, who is a fellow of Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said the political impact of the book would shape how Malaysians rethink what Malaysia is about.

"Why did we fight for Merdeka? So that the different races can be divided? That can't be the way, right? That can't be why all these great Malay and Umno leaders fought for this... Something is wrong," Ismail had said.

"I hope the new discussions will start. Why are we building Malaysia? What Malaysia are we building? What kind of symbol is Malaysia supposed to be?" he asked.

Ooi said the book, hopefully, will remind readers of the dreams and the struggles of past leaders, for instance their vision of inter-ethnic relations.

"He (Ismail) was usually considered as a very good Malay leader. But Ismail knew that Malaysia is full of non-Malays. That's the fact of it.

"So if you want to build a

Malaysia, you cannot be a totally Malay country," he said. That was also the reason why Ismail believed in the concept of the Alliance.

Ooi, who called Ismail a "reluctant politician", said the former home minister also never cultivated a following. There were no "Ismail's men".

"He was there to build the country. That's it. He was actually a reluctant politician. So he wasn't a politician in the sense that he didn't cultivate 'my people'. He didn't care whether he made friends or not. That kind of person wasn't very popular," he said.

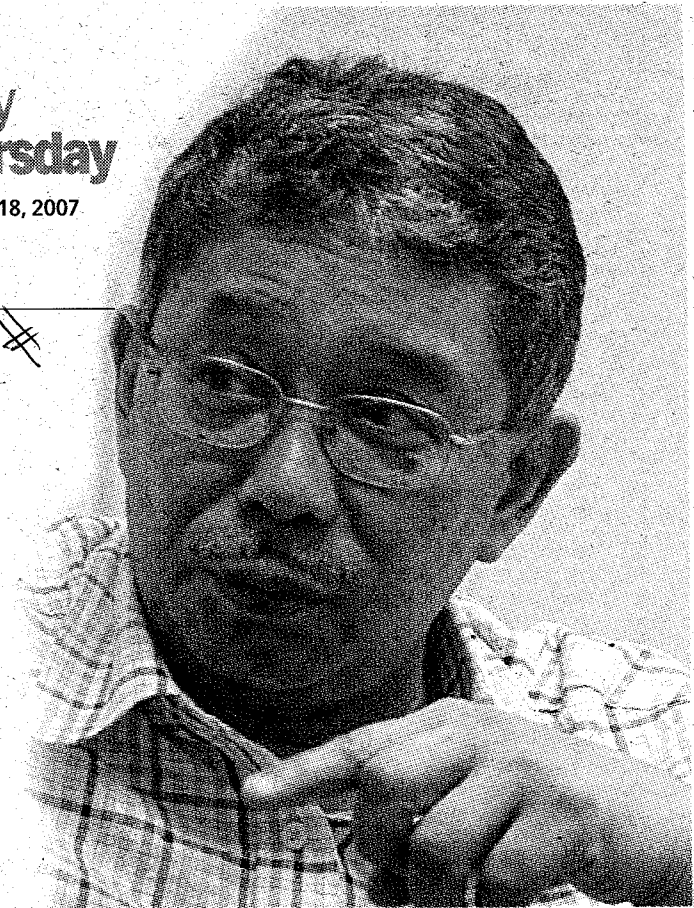
Another outcome of the book, Ooi said, was that it "would make former premier Tun Abdul Razak, who depended greatly on Ismail, more human".

"In this book, Razak was also weak. Until now, I think Razak is god (for many people). He's a symbol of something. This book will help make him human as well. People may even love him more," he said.

Ooi said the time after the May 13, 1969 racial clashes and the 1975-76 period were important years that needed to be

"In going through Ismail's unpublished memoir and private papers, the writer found that the New Economic Policy (NEP) was meant to rectify the economic imbalance caused by colonial policies and was never meant to be permanent."

Tawfik assisted Ooi in arranging interviews with Ismail's old friends and colleagues.



researched more seriously.

Razak was found to be suffering from leukaemia at the end of 1969, a fact which he kept from the public and even his family. He died in 1976.

Ooi said that since the health of the two prominent leaders, Razak and Ismail - who had a heart ailment - was at stake, they had to take a lot of shortcuts to ensure that parliamentary democracy would be restored as soon as possible following the Emergency declared after the riots.

Ismail's eldest son, Tawfik, in an interview with *theSun* said his father, who was the first Malay graduate from Melbourne University, Australia, obtained his medical degree without a government scholarship.

Tawfik, who was 22 when Ismail passed on in 1975, said his father learned from his good friends such as business tycoon Robert Kuok the global nature of business.

"(My father believed that) you have to be part of the bigger picture in order to succeed. How to upgrade the position of the Malays? I think it's a big question that requires a lot of soul-searching."

"But he (Ismail) had experience. He went to Australia and he was on his own. He studied and he didn't have any privilege," Tawfik said.

He said his father did not want them to rely on anybody and so Tawfik was on "my father's scholarship" when he took the under-

graduate programme in Australia. Ismail was then already the deputy premier.

As a son, he said it was an obligation to ensure that his father's legacy "is preserved and protected".

"But bear in mind that he's a national figure. His name and memory belong to the nation. Anybody can use his name... He was very honest about himself. He was very meticulous and he had nothing to hide," he said.

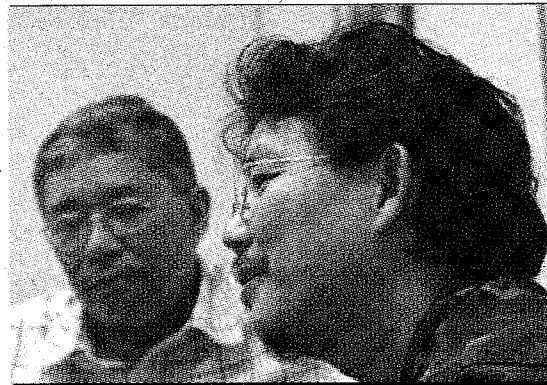
At home, Tawfik recalled, his father would indulge all his other younger siblings.

"He wasn't strict with them (younger brothers and sisters). He was only strict with me. He would whack me. You don't know the misery I went through," he said, without rancour. The book had a bigger impact on his younger siblings who were too young to remember their father.

Ooi, who was also at the interview, said although the book was complimentary of Ismail, he should not be cast either as an "idol" or "devil".

"The tendency in Malaysia is either to idolise someone or ignore the person... I hope this book won't make a god out of him," Ooi said. "It's not meant to do that. That's why we show him to be full of flaws and full of ethical problems."

He noted that the book was not Ismail's memoir but rather an analysis of his time. The Malay version of the book is expected to be out in March.



The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time

BY OOI KEE BENG

EXCERPTS

ISMAIL was born on Nov 4, 1915 into an already illustrious family. His father was Abdul Rahman bin Yassin. Abdul Rahman's sister, Anima, had died young, leaving him the only surviving child of Mohamed Yassin bin Ahat, a government officer and son of Orang Kaya Ahat of Padang Muar. Mohamed Yassin's wife was a daughter of Chinese convert Haji Mohamed Salleh bin Abdullah from Singapore, who was Johor State Treasurer and his Malay wife from Mersing. When Mohamed Yassin's wife passed away, he married her younger sister.

THE family lived in a huge house in Johor Bahru called Rumah Tawakkal. Abdul Rahman Yassin was employed by the Johor Land Office, and was married to his cousin Zahara binte Abu Bakar, "a vivacious woman, warm-hearted and great", who was also "generous and stylish".

ACCORDING to Ismail, Dato Abdul Rahman Yassin was never made Menteri Besar of Johor because he was a "lone wolf" and "refused to indulge in intrigues". Nevertheless, the Johor State Assembly later elected him to independent Malaya's Senate, where he became its first president. He also became the first chairman of Malayan Banking when this was formed in 1960.

When his wife Zahara passed away in 1956, Abdul Rahman was encouraged by Sultan Ibrahim, who as a rule sought to unite the aristocracy through marriage within the upper class, to take Kamariah, the daughter of the Menteri Besar of Johor and sister of Onn Ja'afar, as his new bride.

Ismail's mother had often been sick, and his early upbringing had largely been at the hands of his paternal step-grandmother, who loved visiting her many married daughters whose husbands were posted in different corners of the state of Johor.

The young Ismail was taken along on her many trips, "at the expense of my attendance at school". His earliest playmates were therefore his own distant relatives.

The friends he eventually made in his first school years were all Malays, and it was only after he started secondary education at the English College in Johor Bahru that he had companions from other cultures.

A "voracious reader", the teenage Ismail had a liking for "serious books" with philosophical content. His interests at this time were, however, not limited to these.

(In those days, the non-Malay girls especially the Chinese girls had more freedom than those of other races. I enjoy the company of the opposite sex and since it was not possible to find them among my own race, I began to get closer and closer to my

non-Malay friends. I am convinced that this early mingling with the other races during the most impressionable stage of my life had a lot to do with my non-racial outlook.)

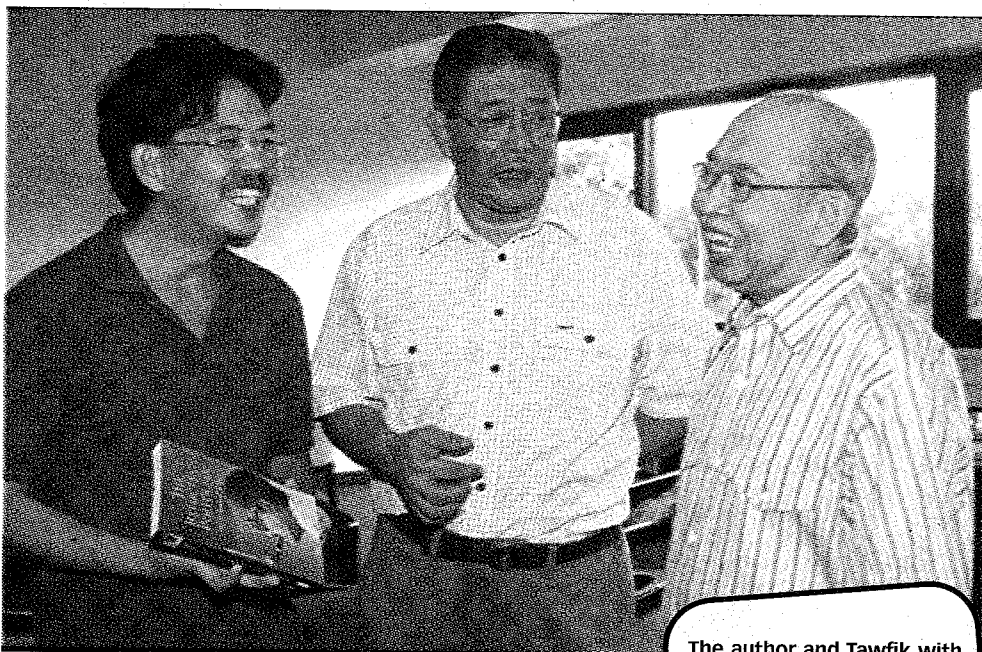
While at the college, he showed interest in sports and loved to read. He learned to admire English ways and he believed that it was the interpretations he formed about them that made him different from other Malays, "although I always got on well

the family of Cheah Tiang Earn, a golf-loving medical doctor who had practised in Foochow and Penang, and who moved his family and his practice to Johor Bahru in the mid-1920s. His wife was Emily Brockett, daughter of a successful English tea merchant based in Foochow, who was married to a Chinese lady. The Cheah family was therefore English-speaking and well trained in English manners.

Dr Cheah was a bosom

and the Abdul Rahmans was that of Joseph Chako Puthuchery. His origins were Keralite, and he and his wife had five daughters and five sons, James, George, Anthony, Dominic and Francis, several of whom would become significant actors in Malaysian and Singaporean politics.

ON 26 July, 1946, Ismail the 31-year-old doctor, the first Malay to graduate from



The author and Tawfik with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (right) at the launch of the book in Kuala Lumpur last week.

Melbourne University, arrived back in Singapore.

with the latter".

However, the uniqueness that he noticed about himself also had another cause. His family was different from those of most other Malays in those days in that his father was totally convinced that great financial sacrifices were worth making for one's children's education. This left each of them "possessing an insatiable ambition to get on in life".

Two of the four boys became lawyers, one became an economist and Ismail qualified as a medical doctor. In fact, in 1959, the British General Adviser W.E. Peppys publicly lamented that as far as he knew, "the only Johore Malay who has got a university degree is Inche Suleiman bin Abdul Rahman, the son of Dato Abdul Rahman, State Treasurer, Johore. He is a BA (Cantab) and has been supported entirely by his father without a scholarship".

What the daughters lacked in education, their father compensated for with gifts of land. Abdul Rahman Yassin owned a medium-sized rubber estate, and managed to give almost all his children a tertiary education. The two eldest daughters grew up at a time when it was not customary for Malay girls to be sent to school, let alone to an English institution. The third daughter was less lucky, and had her education cut short by the Japanese Occupation. She never went abroad for higher studies.

AMONG the Chinese families in the culturally unique atmosphere of Johor Bahru were two that would play a central role in Ismail's life. One was

friend of Abdul Rahman Yassin, and when it was time for the latter's eldest son Suleiman to be sent to England for law studies, it was decided that the boy should spend an hour or two each week at the Cheah house, having meals and learning etiquette appropriate to life in England.

The two families were therefore very close, and Ismail had an especial fondness for the Cheah children that would last throughout his life. The two youngest Cheah daughters - Eileen and Joyce - were to marry two of the Kuok brothers, Philip and Robert, respectively. Through the Cheah sisters, Ismail would later also become intimate friends with their husbands. Leslie Cheah, the son in the family, remained a close friend of Ismail and his family throughout his life.

The second Chinese family in Johor Bahru with strong ties to Ismail's family was the Kuoks. The patriarch was Kuok Keng Kang, also from Foochow, a late immigrant to Johor Bahru, who had to face fierce competition from the dominant Teochews, and who attributed his subsequent success to the help he received from the Malay community. By 1920, Kuok's fortune was already made, and he was among the very few who could afford the new luxury of motorcars. He and his wife, Tang Mong Lan, a devout Buddhist whom Ismail would sometimes go to for advice in later years, had three sons - Philip, William and Robert. William later joined the communist insurgency, and perished in an ambush in Pahang on Sept 8, 1953.

Another family with close ties to the Kuoks, the Cheahs

was born. UMNO's opposition to the Malayan Union proved highly successful, and the plan in effect never got off the ground, and was instead replaced on 1 February, 1948 by the Federation of Malaya Agreement.

This later polity allowed for all seats in the federal and state legislature to be filled by nominees. Onn Ja'afar, the Menteri Besar of Johor and the founder of UMNO, offered Ismail a state seat, which he accepted. One of the first things Ismail did as Johor state councillor was to demand that his opposition to the establishment of the federation itself be duly recorded. He considered the federation illegal, especially with regard to the Johor constitution.

Onn Ja'afar also offered Ismail a position in the Federal Legislative Council but only on condition that the latter joined UMNO. Ismail refused, telling Onn Ja'afar that he would give up his medical practice to go into politics only if the party was fighting for independence, which it was not doing. Despite his stand, Ismail did harbour respect for UMNO's official founder.

POLITICAL consciousness among the Malays during this period was strongly configured by the fear of losing their special status, and Onn Ja'afar's popularity was built on his ability to defend that status. However, this agenda - best expressed by the slogan *Hidup Melayu* (Long Live the Malays) - existed in a tense relationship with the idea of independence - Merdeka.

BE THAT as it may, Onn Ja'afar seemed to have realised that the British would not hand over power to a purely Malay organisation.

HIS NEXT move was to open UMNO to non-Malay citizens of the federation who were at least sixteen years old and who were willing to work for Malayan independence.

RESISTANCE within the party to the change suggested by him proved too strong even for him, and he left UMNO on 26 August, 1951 at the end of his term as party president. He formed the multi-racial Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) on 17 September, which in effect was to function like the reformed UMNO that he had failed to achieve.

Onn's departure from UMNO precipitated a crisis, as he had expected. But after his successor to the presidency, Tunku Abdul Rahman - reading the mood of the Malays correctly - adopted a platform for immediate and full independence, the party slowly gained new life and members.

ISMAIL'S reading of the times was that Malaya was undeniably bound for independence, with "the pace (being) dictated

by the national leaders while the British would try their level best to thwart them". He also thought that Onn feared for the Malays should (the) British simply withdraw and felt the "wealth and the intellectual power" of the Chinese "would submerge the Malays" if independence was achieved too soon.

ISMAIL thought that Onn Ja'afar, though "the man of the moment", was unsuccessful "because he did not believe in what he was doing". Onn's failure convinced most other parties for a long time to come, that the country was not ready for anything other than race-based politics. The Alliance formula created in 1952 - where parties representing all the major races formed a coalition - would prove to be the workable solution, at least in gaining independence.

For Ismail, the direction that his life was taking was not what he had intended for himself. As he would state later in life, he was a doctor who had "looked forward to being a millionaire" in his line of work, but who became a politician only reluctantly. Between 1947 and 1953, he ran a moderately successful private practice in Johor Bahru, calling his clinic Tawakkal (Trust in God), after his childhood home. Robert Kuok recalls that Ismail had his practice opposite the Kuok shop on Jalan Trus.

SOON after coming back from Melbourne, Ismail joined about half a dozen other returned students in forming a political discussion group called the Malay Graduates' Association.

ISMAIL later said that it was after the Tunku had taken over UMNO that he decided to go into politics.

I remember that one of my pastimes then was swimming and one day after swimming, Dato Sardon came to the beach in his sports car. We talked and he asked me to join UMNO. But I did not join UMNO until UMNO adopted Independence as its platform. I knew at that time the thinking of the Malays (was) that if Independence (were) achieved without Malay participation then there would be no meaningful place for the Malays after Independence. Thus when UMNO changed its stand and decided to fight for Independence, and with persuasion from Tunku Abdul Rahman, I drifted into politics.

ISMAIL and his wife Neno first met the Tunku when they were on their way to Penang for their honeymoon in 1950 - their respective families had paired them for marriage. A mutual friend of the Tunku and Ismail, Eugene Seow, had them both over at his flat in Kuala Lumpur. The first time Ismail saw the Tunku, the prince was sitting in a corner, sipping gin: "I was struck by his friendliness, charm and unassuming ways." The older man invited the couple to the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club for the evening. However, he later shooed them out on discovering that they were in fact newlyweds: "In typical fashion he bundled us off telling us that we had no business being on the dance

floor so late when we should be in bed enjoying our honeymoon."

Tunku remembered this first meeting with Ismail, and in an article he wrote for *The Star* newspaper on 2 June 1975, he recalled how his friendship with Ismail grew from that moment on, "becoming very staunch indeed".

(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.

After becoming UMNO president on 25 August 1951, the Tunku asked the Malay Graduates' Association to nominate one of its members, preferably Ismail, to the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC). This was done, although Ismail cheekily suggested that the support he received from the group was given only because "the other members of the Association were not prepared to sacrifice their careers". Ghafar Baba from Malacca UMNO, who later became deputy prime minister, remembered that the Tunku was in fact overjoyed at getting Ismail over to his side.

ISMAIL was by now convinced that the main tactic of the Alliance should be "to press for the election to be held at the national level as a means to gain independence". The MCA, because of the restrictive citizenship laws at the time, had not been especially enthusiastic about elections, fearing that such a process would merely make the Chinese political subordinates to the Malays. However, since the Alliance was proving to be highly successful, the Tunku and Tan Cheng Lock decided on 16 March 1953 to set up UMNO-MCA liaison committees throughout the federation in anticipation of federal elections. Onn Ja'afar continued showing his antagonism towards the MCA, which helped to strengthen Chinese support for the Alliance solution.

Ismail recalled once making a scathing attack on Onn, "dissecting him into four parts, all of which were anything but complimentary to him", and encouraging Tan Siew Sin to withstand pressure from his peers and instead push ahead with a motion on 6 May to censure Onn Ja'afar from making more "very inflammatory communal speeches attacking the Chinese".

WITH the decision of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) to join the Alliance in April 1954 - after Parti Negara had demanded its disbandment as a condition for cooperation with its members - the concept of racial parties subsumed under a coalition party was completed and ready to be sold as such to the electorate.

IN MARCH 1955, nomination day for the federal elections was fixed for 15 July and election day was to be two weeks after that. The campaigning period was to be rather short.

The government of the day, in the form of High Commissioner MacGillivray, was unofficially backing Onn

Ja'afar, and according to Ismail, telephone contact between the two men was continuous.

As far as the Alliance was concerned, the main question was who was to challenge Dato Onn, who was standing in a Johor constituency. Tunku characteristically put up a trial balloon by spreading the rumour that Dato Sardon, the UMNO Youth Leader, was willing to sacrifice himself by taking on Dato Onn! When Sardon heard of it, he promptly denied the rumour because the fear of Onn was terrible and the shadow of Onn was dark. There remained only my brother Suleiman and I, members of my family were the only ones who could possibly take on Dato Onn - and so finally Suleiman offered to take on the challenge.

Suleiman felt that he should be the one to accept the challenge since he was a Johor man himself. He also wanted the Tunku to return to Kedah and throughout the country. The Tunku considered this "the most noble and selfless action" that Suleiman ever did. Suleiman could have contested in Batu Pahat and won hands down, and did not have to risk everything by taking on Onn Ja'afar. On 27 July, the coalition challenged all fifty-two electoral seats - thirty-five by UMNO, fifteen by the MCA and two by the MIC - and won fifty-one of these, losing only to a candidate from the

minister for natural resources, Razak as minister of education, Leong Yew Koh as minister for health and social welfare, V.T. Sambanthan as labour minister, Suleiman as minister for local government, housing and town planning, Sardon Jubir as works minister, and Ong Yoke Lin as minister for posts and telecommunications. The portfolios of economic affairs and defence were reserved for nominated members.

ISSUES immediately facing the Alliance included the continued struggle against the communists, and the future school system and language use. But most important of all was Merdeka. The UMNO general assembly that year decided to accept UMNO Youth's suggestion that independence be achieved within two years and not four, as had been proclaimed during the electoral campaign. Another hurdle to be overcome was the Sultans' apprehension about their own future after independence, especially with regard to the abolition of British advisers.

At the end of August, Alan Lennox-Boyd, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, paid an official visit to Malaya. The Tunku's newly elected government quickly took the chance to ask for immediate top-level discussions about independence. This

and could not be dissuaded so the next best thing was to ensure that when the meeting took place, the Tunku was well briefed and his security not endangered. Tunku himself was adamant that a safe passage be guaranteed for Chin Peng and his aides. It says much for the trust that Chin Peng had in the Tunku that he accepted the invitation to meet the Tunku knowing full well that he was throwing himself at the mercy of the Tunku and the British.

THE ALLIANCE was now fully armed for the talks in London and a strong optimism was in the air. The next hurdle on the road to Merdeka was the attitude of the rulers. Although the nine Sultans were unsure about their future role, the Alliance finally managed to convince them to send representatives to London. According to Ismail, the representatives who were chosen were all sympathetic to the Alliance cause, except for the Menteri Besar of Perak, Dato Panglima Bukit Gantang. On New Year's Day 1956, two Malayan delegations - one consisting of four Alliance men and the other of four representatives of the Sultans - set off for London to talk their way to independence. These included the Tunku, Razak, Ismail and Colonel H.S. Lee, as well as the deputy state secretary of

including Dato Panglima Bukit Gantang, were agreed on the lines of discussion with the British government.

The eight men thus arrived in London as one single delegation with common goals to hold talks with the British colonialists. These lasted from 18 January to 6 February. It was Ismail's first trip to London, and the Tunku and Razak guided him and other first-timers in the group around the city.

From the time that we landed in London airport it was obvious that our mission was going to be a success because a certain high official of the Colonial Office (Permanent Under-Secretary Sir John Martin) told us that what we came for would be handed over to us on a gold platter.

AFTER the major issue of independence had been settled, the internal resilience of the Alliance system was put to the test. Ismail recollected that a strong team of MCA intellectuals held a debate with UMNO on critical issues. Most of these men were new, and "while they sensed that there was trust and confidence which had been built in the Alliance ... they had not themselves experienced it and their approach at the meetings was at first critical. Ismail felt that all parties soon came to agree that whatever the problem was, the Alliance format would provide an appropriate answer.

As I saw this spirit emerge and expand during the rest of the conference, I was convinced that whatever happened in the future, this spirit of the Alliance would triumph over all obstacles. As a result of this new consciousness, the solution to many communal problems became possible.

The major dilemmas that were being faced were those of citizenship, the national language and the special position of the Malays. The following text by Ismail reveals his understanding of Malaya's post-colonial situation:

Citizenship

Under colonial rule there was a cumulative increase in the population of immigrant races, especially those of Chinese origin and to a lesser extent the Indians, the latter brought in mainly to work in the rubber estates owned by the British. No attempt was made to make these immigrants loyal citizens of Malaya. The British were content to see that so long as they obey the laws of the country, they could come and leave as they please. As a result of this policy, when more and more of them settled in Malaya, the result was an increasing number of aliens in the country who, on the whole, were richer and more vigorous than the Malays. When the Malays seized political power after the Second World War, their main defence against their more virile and richer neighbours was to deny them the right of citizenship.

The Language Issue

As a result of colonial rule, the only language that could guarantee a livelihood for those entering the government service was English. Otherwise, the various races were left to themselves with regard to education. There was a feeble attempt to give the Malays an education in their own language but as this ceased at the primary level and was implemented in a half-hearted

manner, it gave no benefit to the Malays. The Chinese were left to themselves and to run their own schools, which were financed through levies that they imposed on themselves, on their rubber production and their businesses. Their education was orientated towards China. As a result, only the English-educated in the multi-racial population of Malaya enjoyed a common language. The leaders of the Alliance concluded that in an independent Malaya, there should be one language to unify the various races into one nation. The obvious choice was Malay. It was imperative that if the Chinese - the real political problem since the other races were not dominant - were to be persuaded into accepting Malay as the national language, they should be granted citizenship as a quid pro quo. This was the real basis of the agreement between the three partners, particularly between the Malays and the Chinese.

The special position of the Malays

This proved a less intractable problem because the leaders of the Alliance realised the practical necessity of giving the Malays a handicap if they were to compete on equal terms with the other races. The only point of controversy was the duration of the "special position" - should there be a time limit or should it be permanent? I made a suggestion which was accepted, that the question be left to the Malays themselves, because I felt that as more and more Malays became educated and gained self-confidence, they themselves would do away with this "special position" because in itself this "special position" is a slur on the ability of the Malays and only to be tolerated because it is necessary as a temporary measure to ensure their survival in modern competitive world: a world to which only those in the urban areas had been exposed.

This analysis provides insight into how Ismail perceived the Malayan situation. What is striking is Ismail's belief that the Malays would do the right thing in the long run, as well as his faith in the Alliance as a model of government capable of meeting these challenges taken as a whole.

THE Merdeka Compact that UMNO and the MCA worked out touched on many issues but the most time was devoted to the issues of citizenship, Malay special rights and language. UMNO had been withstanding pressure from the Chinese, especially from Tan Cheng Lock, but finally agreed to adopt the principle of *ius soli* in citizenship questions. This compromise was made in the face of opposition from influential Malay personalities such as Onn Ja'afar and second-level UMNO leaders... Besides pressure from Whitehall, the need to relent for the sake of national stability and the wish to gain concessions on issues of special rights and language helped change UMNO's mind. When the commission released its report, Onn Ja'afar organised what he chose to call the Second Malay Congress to protest the suggested time limit on Malay special rights and the idea that Chinese and Tamil would be given temporary sta-



The Tunku (left), Tun Sardon Jubir (second from right) and Tun Razak (right) at Tun Ismail's funeral.

Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP). Its main opponent, Parti Negara, which fielded thirty contenders, adopting a strong pro-Malay stance and demanding independence by 1960, a year later than the Alliance deadline, did not win a single seat. Suleiman - the "giant-killer" - won a landslide victory.

IN short, the Alliance formula proved a tremendous success. The Tunku could now form his own government. He was highly appreciative of the vital role played by the Rahman brothers, (and) would later recall: "Right through the toil of rebuilding UMNO, forming the Alliance, and finally in the struggle for independence, (Ismail), like his brother, Datuk Suleiman, went all out to fight the rival party led by his step-mother's brother, Datuk Onn bin Ja'afar. Neither of them would give way; they went for one another hammer and tongs; and in the end Datuk Onn had to give in."

The new cabinet comprised of the Tunku as chief minister as well as holder of the home affairs portfolio, H.S. Lee as transport minister, Ismail as

proved to be the right move, and the British government later that year agreed to meet two delegations - one representing the elected Malayan government and one appointed by the Malay rulers - in January the following year.

Before that, however, the communist problem needed to be curtailed. The MCP had been sending out feelers since June for negotiations to end the Emergency. These had been rebuked. On 8 September, an amnesty offer was announced - first by the director of operations and then by the Tunku - and meetings between representatives on both sides on 17 October and 19 November were secretly held to iron out details for a final rendezvous. The Tunku left it to Chin Peng, the secretary-general of the MCP, to decide the venue. Ismail was against the meeting, as were many other leaders within the Alliance.

We were worried that in his anxiety to end the state of emergency, he might compromise himself to the extent that he might endanger the security of the country when Independence was achieved. He was steadfast in his desire to talk with (the Communists)

An accurate portrayal

FINALLY, a near-definitive book on Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, one of the nation's founding fathers, one of its "Big Three" when it was struggling to survive and to lay the foundation of present-day Malaysia and also one who served as its ideologue, is out – and about time, too.

Too much liberty had already been taken in interpreting those defining moments of the nation's past that many people are beginning to question the accuracy of some aspects of the official history and on which present policies are based.

Thus, the need for more memoirs and autobiographies – primary sources – and even biographies of the nation's founding fathers to surface to help those writing its history to do so as accurately as possible and as faithful to accounts of how the events unfolded.

And, therefore, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* is a much-awaited book. While it is a biography, it is close to being an autobiography as it is generously peppered with lengthy quotes from the statesman's unpublished memoir, *Drifting into Politics*.

Furthermore, it was written with a lot of help from his eldest

son Tawfik, who was the custodian of his memoir and his private papers and who, aware that a biography of his illustrious father would subsequently be written, spent a lot of time and effort to collect documents and letters which are in other peoples' keeping.

But it is to the author, academician Dr Ooi Kee Beng, that credit must go for putting together an easy-to-read book about the difficult early years of the nation and Ismail's role in guiding it, considering the daunting piles of documents he had to contend with.

More could have been written about the childhood days of Ismail as it could have provided interesting glimpses into the social life of the times but it would have distracted the effort away from the real objective of the book – Ismail the politician and his defining role in early Malaysia.

Also to attempt that would have made the biography into a huge and intimidating tome instead of the easy-to-handle 311 pages. But it does open the door to a more exhaustive effort and research into the life and times of Ismail.

However, the author had not

Book Review

by Zainon Ahmad

More could have been written about the childhood days of Ismail as it could have provided interesting glimpses into the social life of the times but it would have distracted the effort away from the real objective of the book – Ismail the politician and his defining role in early Malaysia.

totally ignored the uniqueness that young Ismail noticed in himself. As noted by the author: "The family was different from those of most other Malays in those days in that his father was totally convinced that great financial sacrifices were worth making for one's children's education."

While teenager Ismail was a "voracious reader" of "serious books" with philosophical content, his interest then was not limited to these. About this, Ismail himself wrote:

In those days, the non-Malay girls especially the Chinese girls had more freedom than those of the other races. I enjoy the company of the opposite sex and since it was not possible to find them among my own race, I began to get closer and closer to my non-Malay friends. I am convinced that this early mingling with the other races during the most impressionable stage of my life had a lot to do with my non-racial outlook.

This is further augmented by his family having as close friends the Cheahs, the Kuoks and the Puthuchearys. And that was why, according to Robert Kuok, between him and Ismail and between Ismail and their other non-Malay friends there was no feeling of race and religion. They were friends and they were Malaysians.

The first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had a biography written long before he died. He did not write his autobiography but compilations of his long-running weekly columns – he lived for about three decades after he stepped

down as prime minister – in *Star* – almost constituted a biography of T Razak Hussein as prime minister completed when he died on Jan 16, 1976, in London. It was out in the bookshops a few months later.

Almost three decades later, another book – a collection of testimonials by his son, friends and colleagues – was put together by a foundation named after him. But more work and research need to be done for a more definitive biography of the country's second prime minister.

When the "Third Man" of national politics died on Aug 2, 1973, he was Razak's deputy and the country's powerful home affairs minister and because the prime minister was away in Canada, Ismail was acting prime minister.

The Reluctant Politician went to the printers during the last days of 2006 and it is now available in bookshops in Singapore and Malaysia.

Renowned Southeast Asian historian Professor Wang Gungwu, who is currently director of East Asia Institute at the National University of Singapore, in writing about the book said the "drama of Malaysia's formation and independence is yet to be fully told".

He said *The Reluctant Politician* is "a key part of

that history".

Those who remember Ismail agree that the book successfully portrayed the man as a strict parent, a shrewd politician and a dedicated nationalist and public servant. They all agree that he was as "clean as a whistle" and "lived within his means".

He was against all forms of extremism and fought the Malay radicals in ensuring the stability of multi-racial Malaysia to which he was totally committed. That he was a much-respected Malaysian leader was clear from the testimonies of politicians and civil servants which are quoted in the book.

Robert Kuok, his close friend, describes Ismail thus:

He was a lovely man with strength of character, high principles, and a great sense of fairness. In my opinion, he was probably the most non-racial,

non-racist Malay I have met in my life. And I have met a very wide range of Malays from all parts of Malaysia. Doc was a stickler for total fair play, for correctness; total anathema to him to be anything else. Every Malay colleague feared him because of this, including Mahathir.

It is, however, unfortunate that *The Reluctant Politician*, the book on one of Malaysia's foremost and respected sons, had to be written by a former Malaysian and published by Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

