

Ismail's struggle

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Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's stint as a diplomat in the first year of independence saw him laying down important foundations in foreign policy, including a vision that culminated in the setting up of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). He returns to the country and cultivates the seeds that would lead to the establishment of Malaysia.

SHORTLY before Independence Day, the Tunku asked Ismail to become Malaya's first ambassador to the United States.

He also wished him to double as Malaya's first permanent representative to the United Nations. Ismail agreed to go, but only if it was for a year.

As is usual with me, when I took on the assignment I threw my heart and soul into the job. It was a tough assignment and not made any easier by the lack of prior government preparation. In fact, I had to set up the two missions from scratch.

Ismail left on July 15, 1957 for the US to acquire accommodation for the Washington embassy as well as the New York mission. In a letter on Dec 18, he wrote:

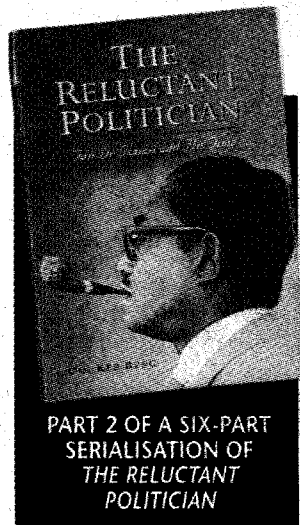
For the last three months my staff in Washington had to work in a building in which the work of renovation was going on at the same time, and I and my family had literally to camp with hired furniture in our embassy, while waiting for it to be painted and furnished.

Ismail's very first appearance before the UN General Assembly was a proud and memorable moment for him.

Our admission to the Nations was spectacular. We all dressed in the national costume — or at least those of us who had them. In addition, I had a kris tucked into my waist. This was the first time that a weapon of any kind had been brought into the General Assembly of the United Nations.

His day lasted 18 to 20 hours, and included commuting three to four times a week between Washington and New York. It was also during this time that he evolved from being an inexperienced but enthusiastic international diplomat into a confident and polished expert on foreign affairs. Although he would later blame his early retirement in 1967 on the profound exhaustion he suffered during this period, he believed at the same time that much of what he learned then sharpened his ability to argue Malaysia's case against Indonesia in 1965 at the UN.

On his return to Kuala Lumpur in February 1959, Ismail took over a new portfolio (as external affairs minister) as the Tunku went on leave to campaign for the coming general election. As external affairs minister, Ismail immediately decided that Malaya should keep to "an independent line, by which I mean that our stand on interna-



tional problems should not be influenced by the policies of other countries, big or small".

I learned when I was in the United Nations — where in addition to being a member of the Commonwealth group we belonged also to the Afro-Asian group — that the surest way to get into trouble was not to have a definite policy of our own on foreign issues because then we would be at the mercy of others. Although our policy of moderation in the United Nations did not get the approval of many members of the Afro-Asian group, we were respected because our policy was definite, logical and consistent.

Some of Ismail's most lasting contributions were in foreign politics. His strong opposition to communism, his battles against Sukarno — "the Fuehrer of Jakarta", as Ismail titled him — along with his distrust of superpowers, helped him conceptualise a region free of power politics. His support for the revival of the ASA (Association of Southeast Asia) as well as the long campaign he embarked upon later in life to "neutralise" Southeast Asia, would testify to this.

He told the Foreign Correspondents' Association of Southeast Asia on June 23, 1966 in Johor Bahru that Malaysia hoped for "the early realisation of the widest participation possible". This optimism was driven by the agreement reached between Indonesia and Malaysia on May 28 to end their three-year-old Confrontation and by the normalisation of ties between the Philippines and Malaysia:

We look forward to a regional association embracing Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia,



Sir Leslie Munroe of New Zealand (right), president of the United Nations General Assembly, congratulating Ismail after the flag of the newly independent Malayan Federation was raised in a ceremony at the UN headquarters in New York on Oct 15, 1957.

Laos and Vietnam. We have no choice. We, the nations and peoples of Southeast Asia, whatever our ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds might be, must pull together and create, with hand and brain, a new perspective and a new framework. And we must do it ourselves. We must create a deep, collective awareness that we cannot survive for long as independent peoples — as Burmese, Thais, Indonesians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Malaysians, Cambodians, Singaporeans and Filipinos — unless we also think and act as Southeast Asians.

Interestingly, when speaking to a group of college officials the following month, US President Lyndon B. Johnson quoted the above words, together with an expression used earlier by Singapore Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam on the

need to build "a world civilisation in the Pacific through co-operation and peaceful competition". In the event, the ASA was transformed into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

The general election of 1959 was, as Ismail put it, "a test of whether the Alliance would survive as a party of coalition of the three races in the country — the Malays, Chinese and Indians".

One of the biggest challenges it faced came from within. This was posed by the MCA's new leader, Dr Lim Chong Eu, a doctor from Penang who had shown up to that time a degree of brilliance in politics. Razak (Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) had earlier touched on the issue in a letter to Ismail, expressing worries that while Umno still retained rural support, the MCA was

losing its popularity in the towns:

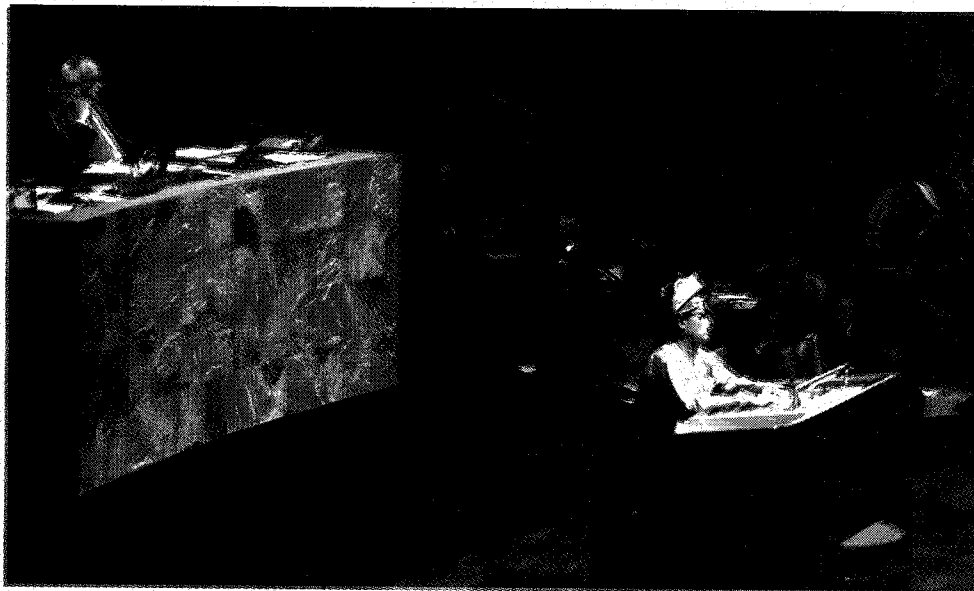
I do not know what the results of all this will be but if the MCA is to get the support of the good Chinese the leaders must come down to earth. As I advised Dr Lim Chong Eu, we should not cast the net too wide but should close the ranks. No political leader in this country can expect to get the support of all members of every race but we must always stick to principles and know policies. So long as we are sincere and play a straight game we should be all right.

Lim had managed in March 1958 to replace party founder (Tun) Tan Cheng Lock as party president.

This change in leadership reflected a strong desire within the MCA for change in the agreements that the Alliance was based upon,

to form Malaysia and Asean

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Ismail, chairman of the delegation of Malaya, addressing the Assembly after the admission of Malaya to the United Nations on Sept 17, 1957.

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including support for the education policy and the recognition of Malay rights and privileges.

The Alliance National Council was planning to allocate 30-31 places to the MCA in the general election, while Lim Chong Eu was pushing for 35, which was one-third of the parliamentary seats available.

Apparently, the MCA's aim was to safeguard the Chinese against any unfavourable changes to the Constitution given that a two-thirds majority was required for constitutional amendments.

The status of Chinese education was central to these considerations.

Major changes in the demographic constitution of the electorate were also a factor in the political equation. The Chinese electorate, which had amounted to 11.2 per cent back in 1955, had under the new citizenship laws grown to 35.6 per cent by 1959.

Lim's explanation of the MCA position given in a private letter to the Tunku dated June 24 was publicly released on July 10. This upset the prime minister, who experienced the letter's release as a hidden ultimatum and retaliated by announcing that Umno was prepared to go ahead without the MCA.

On July 12, the MCA retreated to avoid a crisis and accepted the Tunku's conditions, which were that 31 seats would be allocated to the MCA, all MCA candidates would be chosen by the Tunku and the issue of Chinese education would not be included in the Alliance election manifesto.

The consequences of this failed challenge on the part of the MCA were profound. Lim and a row of major leaders re-

signed, and MCA members not acceptable to the Tunku were denied the chance of running under the Alliance banner. This further encouraged Chinese voters to seek political leadership outside the Alliance.

When the Tunku was in The Netherlands in 1960 he happened to state that Malaya would sooner or later have to recognise the People's Republic of China.

Apparently because of talks he had held with French President Charles De Gaulle, the Tunku decided to announce on his return to Kuala Lumpur "a sudden change in our policy towards Communist China" in accordance with his statement.

Ismail hit the roof. He had not been consulted on the matter, and since the official stand then was that no relationship could be maintained with the Beijing regime as long as it supported the Malayan Communist Party, he was certain the Tunku's statement would lead to further confusion in an already delicate matter.

At the following Cabinet meeting the Tunku tried in

vain to explain himself, but Ismail hurled documents across the table and stormed out. He also threatened to resign, which shocked the Tunku:

At once I realised my mistake but when I made the Press statement I had done so on the spur of the moment. I had no chance to warn him previously, nor did I think such a slight departure from policy could cause such an upset. After this explanation, Tun Dr Ismail left the house in a huff. He came again to tender his resignation officially but I had told my houseboy earlier that if Dr Ismail arrived he was to inform him that I was out. And this he did. After three or four visits, Tun Dr Ismail came no more, so I realised that he had cooled down. I was very pleased to see him in the Cabinet again as if nothing had happened.

In fact this event led to a considerable change in Ismail's political career.

He was determined to resign, but as stated in his private papers, his brother and some colleagues persuaded him to move to another min-

istry instead. Meanwhile, the Cabinet arranged for Ismail to lead a commission to inquire into the position of students in England and Ireland.

This was apparently to give him a chance to calm down.

On his return to Malaya, he took over the internal security portfolio created for him, which he considered a "controversial" position "with all the aches but none of the pleasantness of the other ministries".

This was the start of another weary period in his political career:

I am sure that this posting, together with my stint as ambassador to the United States, had a lot to do with my failing health.

Ismail was also appointed minister of home affairs in February 1962. The decisions on internal security that he had to make in his new position caused him no end of worry. When he retired in 1967 he would remark that he was amazed that he had managed to stay appreciated for his services:

I had expected that the last six years which I spent as minister of the most difficult of portfolios would have made me the most hated man in Malaya.

The moral dilemma he found himself in is best expressed in his own words:

As Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security I had wide powers and also had to deal on security matters with Singapore and Thailand. The most controversial law is the Internal Security Act. Great controversy went on and is still going on about this Act. Its

opponents have argued that the Act is inconsistent with democracy, especially those provisions which give power to the police to exercise arbitrary arrest and detention without trial.

I maintained then and I maintain now the view that the Internal Security Act is essential to the security of this country especially when democracy is interpreted the way it is interpreted in this country. To those in opposition to the government democracy is interpreted to mean absolute freedom, even the freedom to subvert the nation. When cornered by the argument that democracy in the Western sense means freedom in an ordered society and an ordered society is one in which the rule of law prevails, they seek refuge in the slogan that we should imitate Western democracy one hundred per cent.

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Ismail was acutely aware of the risks involved in the controversial ISA and did not relish having to administer it.

As a guarantee against abuses and mistakes, he demanded of his subordinates a stringent adherence to due bureaucratic process and exercised extreme caution in choosing senior personnel:

I went through each case carefully and when in doubt I always slept over it. It really took a lot out of me to approve cases for detention because some of the people detained were well known to me. My only consolation is that on my retirement nobody could accuse me of sending anybody to detention camp out of malice.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, Lim Yew Hock's ruling Singapore People's Alliance (SPA) had been unexpectedly trounced

by Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP) in the May 30, 1959 elections.

The victors, having secured 43 of 51 seats, decided to release detained communist suspects on June 4.

The British protested, and Ismail "was instructed to raise our objection to the release".

It was to no avail because Lee Kuan Yew knew that having won the elections by a large majority he now held the whip in his hand while the British and we were not prepared for a showdown.

Ismail, already loaded with work, saw that it was to be his inevitable lot to "carry the burden of representing Malaya on the Singapore Security Council".

Ismail decided to introduce golf as a part of the meetings.

Not only did this make Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee good golfers, he said, the games also "proved productive in our deliberations on the security of Singapore".

Ismail was the older man and thought that if Lee could

be "more tolerant and more patient of human failings, he would do not only himself but Singapore and the whole of Southeast Asia much good".

Despite the mutual respect, the two men would disagree on many issues in the years ahead, when the painful process of regional liberation and nation-building dictated unpredictable and divergent paths.

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■ **TOMORROW:** The formation of Malaysia was followed by two major challenges — Confrontation with Indonesia and the separation of Singapore. Their toll on Dr Ismail's worsening health leads to his resignation from the Cabinet.



The Malayan delegation at the opening session of the 12th General Assembly in New York on Sept 17, 1957. Ismail is at left.