

Noted for uncompromising stand

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In the darkest period of Malaysia's history, Tun Dr Ismail, recalled from retirement, would step in and make his greatest contribution — stabilising a nation torn apart in the aftermath of the May 13 racial clashes.

WITH the Alliance having suffered a string of setbacks in the May 1969 general election, and given the rising tension that followed wildly jubilant demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur organised by the opposition, a request was made by Razak (Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) to Ismail for the latter to return to his former post of home affairs minister.

Serious trouble was in the air. Ismail realised that the government faced a potential crisis and was therefore willing to grant Razak his request on condition that the Tunku agreed to it.

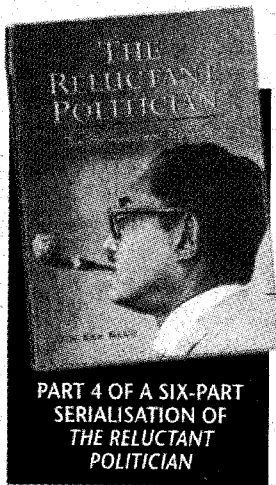
Many were assuming that a DAP-Gerakan coalition would replace the Alliance in the vital state of Selangor. Clarification came only in the afternoon of May 13 when Gerakan publicly stated that it would remain neutral in the Selangor State Assembly, thus allowing the Alliance to form a minority government. At 2pm that day, the president of the badly trounced MCA, Tan Siew Sin, after heavy criticism from Umno members, announced after an emergency meeting of the party's central working committee that the MCA, in accepting the election results, would no longer participate in the Alliance government, although it would nevertheless continue supporting it in Parliament.

Another letter to Philip Kuok provided further details about the series of events taking place that fateful day:

I did my best to convince Tun Tan Siew Sin that this decision of the MCA was irresponsible, it was childish and that it was letting down those Malays and Chinese who have elected the 12 successful MCA candidates and I warned him that this decision if not revoked would contribute to rioting and chaos in the country. I spent one and a half hours with Catherine (Tan's wife) trying to persuade her to persuade Siew Sin to revoke the decision but all my effort was in vain. So it was with this tension, with this irresponsible decision by the MCA that the riot started.

Ismail's eldest daughter Zailah watched the riots on TV on the 8pm news and informed her father, "who remained calm, but took out his pistol, put it into his pocket, and went out with my mother to dinner at his friend Sammy Senn's place at nearby Kenny Hills".

On the morning of May 14, Zailah answered the phone. It was a call from Razak. She passed the call to her father. Soon an escort of



armed policemen arrived and her father left with them. She recalls Ismail telling her later that he was going to rejoin the government.

Tunku Abdul Rahman had been recuperating from a gruelling campaign that had lasted 90 days. He rushed back to Kuala Lumpur to arrange a meeting with top aides such as Razak and Tan Siew Sin. Ismail and (Tun) Hussein Onn, although not in the Cabinet, were also summoned along with General Ibrahim Ismail, and the Inspector-General of Police. According to Kuok:

There was panic and near pandemonium among the ministers and officials, since they were not prepared for such an event. However Doc Ismail managed to keep calm. Tun Razak wanted to get into an official car and face the mob, but was dissuaded from doing so. Doc Ismail told him bluntly, "You will be torn to pieces." The Tunku was inclined towards declaring martial law, but General Ibrahim said he would not advise that course of action. "If you do that," he said, "I cannot provide any guarantee (that I will) be able to hold back the members of the armed forces who might take over control of the government."

A state of emergency was declared on Thursday May 15 and Parliament was suspended. The National Operations Council (NOC) was formed the following day, with Razak as director of operations.

Ismail then went on the air and declared: "Democracy is dead in this country. It died at the hands of the opposition parties who triggered off the event leading to this violence."

(Tun) Musa Hitam, later deputy prime minister, witnessed Ismail on television and recalls how "a sense of relief came over us; the



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Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah

sheer force of the man's reputation for fairness was magic".

The general understanding then was that the Tunku had lost authority within the party and among Malays, and was in no position to manage the crisis at hand.

No doubt there were others who would have been willing to assist the leadership, but unlike them Ismail was broadly considered "a man of formidable reputation for integrity and talent in all communities", with views "more cautious and more sophisticated than those of his younger colleagues".

Wahab Majid, one of the few who had recently founded Bernama News Agency (on May 20, 1968), was Press secretary to Ismail after the latter's return to the Ministry of Home Affairs. He remembers that Razak did toy with the idea of "benevolent dictatorship", but was in effect discouraged from having such thoughts by Ismail's incessant push to restore Parliament as soon as possible.

(Datuk Seri) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who would later become prime minister, succeeded Abdul Rahman Hamidon as NOC secretary. He remembers that Razak chaired most of the meetings and

Ismail would act as his unofficial deputy. Razak would always look to Ismail for a cue whenever a new matter was introduced, and if Ismail should follow a reasoning that was not in agreement with what Razak had initially said, the meeting would become longer and Razak would try to accommodate Ismail's opinion. The two were never seen to disagree in public.

Abdullah remembers that when his father, Ahmad Badawi bin Abdullah Ibrahim, then assemblyman for Kepala Batas, heard on the radio that Ismail had returned to join the NOC, he banged the kitchen table and exclaimed: "Now the team is complete!"

In a letter to Philip Kuok in Holland, Ismail admitted that he had hesitated in rejoining the government. He also provided details about how he viewed the process that led to the riots:

I had just recovered from my recent illness and further I was just enjoying my new life, preparing for my future and also the future of my children. In the elections, it was obvious that the opposition parties were adamant to bring down the Alliance by every possible means they could think of. Finally they decided to play on communal politics. They therefore decided that the PMIP (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, later Pas) should play the extreme Malay nationalism type of politics, and the non-Malay parties like the DAP and Gerakan would play the Chinese type of communal politics. Since the Alliance's policy is based on compromise, it could not therefore please all the Malays or all the Chinese but could only please the moderate Malays and the understanding Chinese.

By the skin of its teeth and through a series of strategic manoeuvres, the regime managed to facilitate the country's "return to normalcy". In the event, the Father of Malaysia — Tunku Abdul Rahman — was left with little choice but to retire.

In the months following May 13,

Ismail adopted an uncompromising stand against all he considered to be endangering the return to social normalcy, be they rumour-mongers, perpetrators of violence, government servants or Malay ethno-nationalists within his own ruling party.

General Ibrahim believes it was Ismail's reputation for being uncompromising and tough that helped to restore order. Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, who was an under-secretary in the Ministry of Defence and later became defence minister, remembers Ismail declaring that he would arrest even his own mother if she did anything illegal.

Meanwhile, the struggle between Malay ethno-nationalists (the ultras) and moderates had expanded. Attempts were made to brand the Tunku "pro-Chinese" and to blame his regime for failing to safeguard Malay rights. Rumours were rife that the Tunku had been forced aside by Razak, and that Razak was in league with the "ultras". These were strongly denied both by the Tunku and Razak.

Maurice Baker, Singapore High Commissioner to Kuala Lumpur between 1969 and 1971, was a very close friend of Razak and through him of Ismail as well. He recalls:

Ismail loved the Tunku, he really loved the Tunku, for his human weakness and for his greatness. Razak too said Tunku was his political father. In the end they tried to keep him on as long as possible. Some said that Razak was impatient to become the prime minister, but this was not true, not true at all.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who was later finance minister, remembers Ismail as "a real Malaysian" and "a pillar of strength" during that period:

The Chinese did not have much confidence in Razak but they did in Ismail. Razak was always associated with Malay and rural affairs, et cetera. Ismail was a principled man — and was seen that way by the different races. He was the Rock of Gibraltar. Once he decided on something you could be sure that he had gone through the relevant details and studied them. What is confidence unless it is based on the people's belief in the leader?

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■ TOMORROW: Dr Ismail would learn not only that his own health was failing but that Tun Abdul Razak was suffering from a terminal illness.