

THE RELUCTANT POLITICIAN

Tun Dr Ismail and His Time



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OOI KEE BENG



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FOREWORD

I feel greatly honoured to write a Foreword for this very long awaited book on the life of the very famous son of Malaysia, the late Tun Dr Ismail bin Dato' Haji Abdul Rahman Yassin.

Undoubtedly this volume will become good source material for students of the modern history of Malaysia. I do not wish to repeat what is already written about the late Tun in this book — about his education, his well-known character as a man of integrity, his common sense approach to problems be they big or small, easy or difficult, and above all, his sacrifice, especially of his health for the country. All these are set out in details that leave no one with any doubt that the late Tun was not only a pragmatic and wise person but also one who was very meticulous, especially when it came to questions of law and politics.

I had the privilege of coming into contact with him when I joined the Attorney General's Chamber in Kuala Lumpur in 1963. I must have gradually won his confidence because he later constantly consulted me whenever law and politics came into conflict. He would want to know what the law was on any given problem that he had to deal with. The Attorney General then, the late Tan Sri Abdul Kadir bin Yusof, being a political Attorney General with membership in the Cabinet, was a very busy person. That was why the job of advising the late Tun fell on me as the Solicitor General for the country. Through constant interactions

between me, him and Tan Sri Abdul Kadir, I came to enjoy the confidence of these two wonderful persons.

Subsequent to the May 13 riots, the late Tun Abdul Razak, the then Deputy Prime Minister, called me and my colleague the late Tan Sri Hashim Yeop Sani, to the Prime Minister's Office, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra's residence at Jalan Dato' Onn. There were a few senior Ministers present. I need not repeat who they were, because these are mentioned in this book. The Ministers were discussing how to deal with the riots. From the top of Jalan Dato' Onn, we could hear gun shots being fired and we could see smoke billowing from selected spots in the city and nearby suburban areas. The late Tun Dr Ismail, who had already retired from the Cabinet two years earlier, soon arrived wearing an expression of great concern on his face. He immediately joined in the discussion, and I still remember his words of caution to those present against the idea of a permanent suspension of the Constitution. He said, "If you should fail, then it will be like in many other coup d'états, you will all end up being shot one by one." Because of this stern warning, the discussion changed direction and focussed instead on a declaration of emergency and on the establishment of the National Operation Council to run the country until normality had returned and Parliament could be recalled.

Another incident that showed the late Tun to be a pragmatic politician who would fight for what he thought to be the best solution irrespective of what happened to him personally was during the creation of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The idea was conceived by him for stabilizing parliamentary democracy in Malaysia. He was convinced that with the new status for Kuala Lumpur, Malays and non-Malays would no longer have to be jealous of, and compete with, each other for control over the Selangor State Government, which then included the Federal