

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman initially refused to join a fledgling Umno upon his return to Malaya after completing his medical studies in Australia, but the struggle for independence would soon prove impossible to resist.

N.S.G. p. 10 1.1.07

ISMAIL'S immaculately dressed elder brother Suleiman met him on his arrival, and quickly briefed him on the controversy over the Malayan Union. What immediately struck Ismail after being six years in Australia was how "political feeling engulfed Malaya as a fire engulfs a forest on a hot dry day".

Ismail's family was deeply involved in the resistance against the Malayan Union that the British, after the fall of Imperial Japan, were trying to impose on the whole peninsula. After the Sultan of Johor signed the MacMichael Agreement, a treaty with the British accepting the Malayan Union idea, seven men, led by (Ismail's father) Abdul Rahman Yassin and including his eldest son Suleiman as well as son-in-law Awang Hassan, issued a pamphlet criticising the move. These men, all government servants, were consequently suspended for six months.

As many Malays understood it, the Malayan Union aimed to abolish the sultanates and the special position of the Malays. The opposition to this was strongest in the Un-



Dr Ismail addressing a dinner gathering hosted by Perak MCA president Ong Chin Seong. The dinner was to honour Dr Ismail and Col H.S. Lee for their appointments as Member of Lands, Mines and Communications and Member of Railways and Ports respectively. On Dr Ismail's left are Tan Cheng Lock and Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Malayan Union brings Ismail to the crossroads

federated Malay States, especially Johor, where the elite was also most active. At a meeting of 41 Malay associations held in March 1946 in Kuala Lumpur, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) 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 Feb 1, 1948 by the Federation of Malaya Agreement.

This later polity allowed for all seats in the federal and state legislatures to be filled by nominees. Datuk Onn Jaafar, the Menteri Besar of Johor and the founder of Umno, offered Ismail a state seat, which he accepted. Onn also offered Ismail a position in the Federal Legislative Council but only on condition that the latter joined Umno. Ismail refused, telling Onn 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:

He was the idol of the Johor people. Handsome, dashing and fearless, he was the envy of all. He was a great man and the nation should be grateful to him for having mobilised Malay nationalism, which was the spearhead to Malaya's Independence.

Political consciousness among the Malays during this period was strongly configured by the fear of losing their special status, and Onn's popularity was built on his ability to defend that status.

Be that as it may, Onn seemed by this time to have realised that the British would not hand over power to a purely Malay organisation. The conflict that had broken out between the British and their erstwhile allies, the Malayan Communist Party, had also radically changed the political equation, and may have forced Onn to take desperate action to widen Umno's support base beyond the Malays.

His next move was to attempt to open Umno to non-Malay citizens of the federation who were at least 16 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 Aug 26, 1951 at the end of his term as party president. He formed the multiracial Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) on Sept 1 which, in effect, was to function like the reformed Umno that he had failed to achieve.

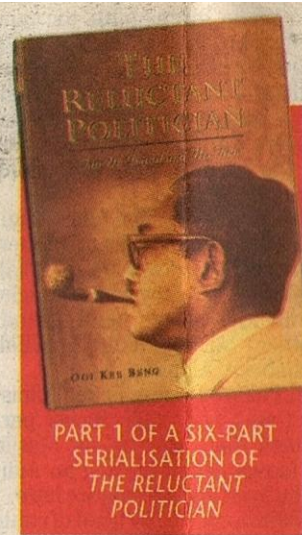
Onn's departure from Umno precipitated a crisis, as he had expected. But after his successor to the presidency, Tunku Abdul Rahman — reading the mood of the

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.

At the time Malaya was under siege from militant communism, which was exploiting Chinese dissatisfaction for its own ends. Under pressure from the British, Datuk Onn was at first forced to yield to Chinese demands on the issue of citizenship and language and later when this was not sufficient he was persuaded by the British to give in on the political field by opening the doors of Umno to the non-Malays, especially the Chinese. When he failed to succeed in this objective he resigned on the mistaken premise that without him Umno would fade away. He was also confident that with his stature he could form a non-racial party.

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.

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. He learned the following from discussions with his peers.

It was impossible to influence people to support the independence movement merely by writing articles because time was against it and in any case all the newspapers that enjoyed a wide circulation were not anxious to do the wrong thing against the government in power. It was also impractical for the intellectuals to form their own party because such a party would not get mass support. The only alternative was to join a political party that already had mass support and which could be directed to fight for the independence of the country.

Umno was therefore always an option for these young activists. The Tunku stated in one of his books that although many Malay leaders had asked him to be their leader, it was the promise of support from the Malay Graduates' Association, led by the brothers

Ismail 'at heart, a very loyal colleague'

N.S.7 p8 12 1.1.07

□ FROM PAGE 10

Suleiman and Ismail, that decided the matter for him. The Tunku would remember with fondness in later years how the three Rahman brothers, Suleiman, Ismail and Yassin, were the most dedicated workers in Umno. Ismail later said that it was after the Tunku had taken over Umno that he decided to go into politics:

Ismail and his wife Neno (Toh Puan Norashikin Mohd Seth) 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 Tunku remembered this first meeting with Ismail in an article he wrote for *The Star* on June 2, 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.

On July 2, 1954, pressed by an Alliance boycott of a British plan for local elections, the new High Commis-

and that he wanted to see us before we left. He said he was not at all happy at the turn of events and that the Alliance by its boycott of the government was playing into the hands of the communists who were already taking political advantage of it. He assured us that the six nominated seats reserved at the discretion of the High Commissioner would not be used to frustrate any political party which secured majority seats at the elections.

We had to think fast and although the three of us had no time to meet to discuss matters we knew that if we did not offer some sort of compromise we might be taken away and exiled. If that were to happen, we knew the movement for independence would pass from the hands of the moderates to the hands of the extremists who because of the methods which they might employ would never achieve their goals.

I therefore suggested that we were willing to show that we were responsible leaders by proposing that in exercising his discretion in nominating

“
We knew that if we did not offer (the British) some sort of compromise we might be taken away

the six, the High Commissioner should do so only after consulting with the leader of the majority party. Sir Donald at first rejected this compromise because he said that this would fetter the discretion reserved for the High Commissioner.

We said that was as far as we were prepared to concede and that we were prepared for the worst. Finally seeing that we could not be moved from our stand he agreed to think over our proposal during his voyage and would let us know his reply when he returned. It later turned out that the object of his voyage was to gauge the feelings of the East Coast Malays and if possible win them over to his side. When he found that the Malay support for Umno was absolute and that he had failed to persuade them in spite of everything he agreed to our compromise on his return to Kuala Lumpur.

The next day, MacGillivray made his report recommending that Ismail's suggestions be accepted.

With the decision of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) to join the Alliance in April 1954, the concept of racial parties subsumed under a coalition was completed and ready to be sold as such to the electorate.

The Tunku, who was highly appreciative of the vital role played by the Rahman brothers, would later recall:

Right through the toil of rebuilding



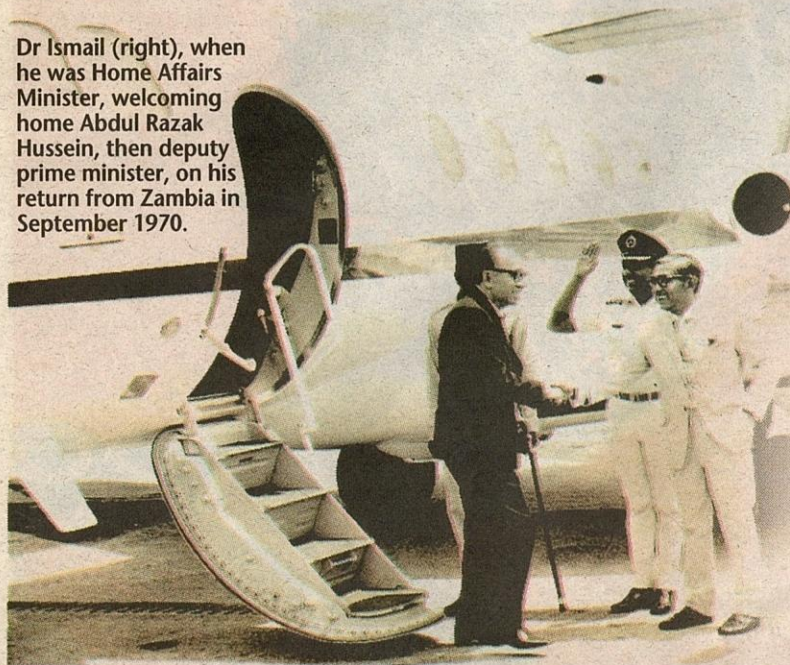
Dr Ismail with his wife Norashikin Mohd Seth, whom he married in 1950, and their children.

sioner Sir Donald MacGillivray sent Sir Michael Hogan, who was chairman of the Federal Elections Committee as well as Attorney-General, to Johor Bahru to see the Tunku. The Tunku, Ismail and H.S. Lee met him at the residence of the British Adviser. The message Hogan brought was that MacGillivray wished to meet them on board the warship HMS *Alert*, which was then anchored off Singapore's Seletar Naval Base.

They were driven off at dusk in the Adviser's car, arriving at Seletar Jetty at 11 pm that night.

Sir Donald was there, waiting for us in the captain's cabin. He told us that he was going on a cruise for a fortnight up the east coast of Malaya

Dr Ismail (right), when he was Home Affairs Minister, welcoming home Abdul Razak Hussein, then deputy prime minister, on his return from Zambia in September 1970.



and exiled. If that were to happen, we knew the movement for independence would pass to the hands of the extremists who because of the methods which they might employ would never achieve their goals.

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman



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 Jaafar. Neither would give way; they went for one another hammer and tongs; and in the end Datuk Onn had to give in.

A month after the July 1955 federal elections, 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 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.

A difficult issue to handle was whether or not a definite date for independence should be set.

The British were reluctant to fix any target date. The members of Umno in the delegation especially the Tunku, Razak (Tun Abdul Razak Hussein) and myself were committed to a target date because at the Umno general assembly in Malacca held before the delegation departed for London, a resolution had been passed that Merdeka must be achieved by Aug 31, 1957. After a lengthy discussion, the conference finally agreed to add the words "if possible" after the words "August 31, 1957".

The feat of achieving unity for the gaining of independence from the British had now to be paralleled by

success in concrete inter-ethnic negotiations on internal matters. The hottest issues were education and language use.

Immediately after the 1955 Alliance electoral victory, a 15-member education committee was formed under Razak to study the future structure of schooling, and the question of the language of instruction in schools. By May 1956, it published what was known as the Razak Report. This then became, on subsequent approval by the Federal Legislative Council, the Education Ordinance of 1957.

In the event, the only opposition came from Umno councillors — reportedly "mostly from the east coast" — who were dissatisfied with the fact that Malay was not to be the sole medium of instruction in all schools.

When the council debated the issue, Ismail gave a vigorous speech in defence of the report, charging that the critics who were trying to suppress the languages of all the people in the country excepting their own, and showing "no considerations for the Chinese and Indians who are already in this country" were, in fact, taking the imperialist line that they were usually so ready to condemn. It was enough, he argued, that non-Malays accepted the fact that Malaya was a Malay country and that the national language was Malay.

Another hurdle to be cleared on the road to independence was the formation of a Commonwealth commission to help formulate a constitution for the country. Some time before the trip to London, Razak was put in charge of a committee to work out a proposal for how such a commission could be formed, and to have it ready for presentation in London.

This was the pivotal Reid Commission set up in March 1956. 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 (Tun) Tan Cheng Lock, but finally agreed to adopt the principle of *ius soli* in citizenship questions.

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.

A constitutional conference was held on May 13, 1957 in London to discuss and amend the recommendations of the Reid Commission.

With the compromises secured, the struggle for independence was won. The Tunku declared the founding of Malaya at the Selangor Padang in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 31, 1957, and the Union Jack was lowered over its soil forever.

■ First published in *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* by Ooi Kee Beng (2006). Reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

■ **TOMORROW:** Dr Ismail, Malaya's first ambassador to the United States and permanent representative to the United Nations, lays down lasting foundations on foreign policy and begins work leading to an expanded federation — Malaysia.