

The inevitability of separation

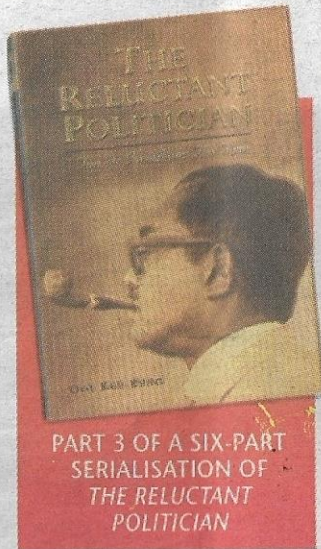
N.S.T p8 12 3.1.07

The formation of Malaysia was followed by Confrontation with Indonesia and the ejection of Singapore. These were hectic times for Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, and the toll on his worsening health led to his resignation.

ON May 27, 1961 Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman made the first public reference to the Federation of Malaysia at a Singapore Press luncheon, setting off speculation and criticism throughout the region.

While preparations for the founding of the Federation of Malaysia stymied communist ambitions, a serious confrontation with President Sukarno, who professed that the project was a neo-colonial idea designed to steal northern Borneo away from Indonesia, could not be avoided.

A referendum was carried out in Sabah and Sarawak to measure popular support for the idea, and to stave off Indonesian criticism. The findings could only be announced on Sept 14, 1963, and



PART 3 OF A SIX-PART
SERIALISATION OF
THE RELUCTANT
POLITICIAN



Dr Ismail (right) accompanying Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on his visit to the Royal Malaysia Police headquarters in Kuala Lumpur in March 1972.

showed that a great majority in the two states were positive about the merger. Sukarno rejected this result.

The Malaysian Cabinet decided to declare a state of emergency throughout the country on Sept 3, and demanded action by the United Nations "to relieve the tense situation". The Security Council agreed to a hearing on the matter.

Ismail had seven years earlier made history as the first man to enter the General Assembly armed, in a manner of speaking. He was then bearing a Malay dagger — the *kris* — as part of his full traditional Malay attire. This time around, at the 1,144th meeting of the Security Council of the United Nations, he meant to bring with him captured weapons to dramatise the cold fact of Indonesian aggression.

The evidence he wished to place on the Security Council table included a Danish-made Madsen mortar, a German-made automatic rifle, an equipment belt with a water bottle and medical packs with instructions for use in Indonesia, and an Indonesian air force parachute with the smock and trousers marked with the place name "Bandung", a military helmet of a type not used by Commonwealth forces, and other minor items.

The good relations that the Malaysians had with UN security guards made it possible for the arms to be brought by car into the compound and carried into the building. This was on Sept 9. The president of the Council was taken aback when the captured equipment was brought into the chamber. He declared in Russian:

I must say that in my many years of experience in the United

Nations, and if my memory serves me correctly, this is the first time that weapons, whether loaded or not, have been brought to the table where the members of the Security Council are actually sitting. They are not aimed at me so I am not worried, but I do not know how my colleagues on my right feel, as these weapons seem to be aimed directly at them. I would therefore request the representative of Malaysia, unless the Security Council decides otherwise, to have these weapons removed from the table. He has produced them without any kind of authority on my part and in spite of the explanations that I as president of the Security Council gave him yesterday.

Ismail then assured the assembly that the weapons pointed at them were not loaded, but just as certainly were they loaded "when they were pointed at us".

In his speech at the 1,145th council meeting the following day, Ismail again put his sense of irony to good use:

To put the record straight, may I point out that it was made clear beyond all doubt during the meetings in Bangkok and Tokyo that Indonesia insists on maintaining its military presence on Malaysian territory while the discussions or conciliation efforts take place. It is Indonesia's intention that, if a political solution is reached in stages, its troops will be withdrawn in stages; if Indonesia gets half of what it wants, it will withdraw half its troops; and progressively, when it gets all it wants, all its troops will be withdrawn.

No self-respecting nation could accept such a principle of negotia-

tion. This is neo-diplomacy, by way of analogy with the word "neo-colonialism" which has been used here. When I was representing my country in the First Committee and supporting Indonesia on the question of West Irian, I coined the phrase "vestigial colonialism". I said that West Irian should be given back to Indonesia because West Irian was a symbol of vestigial colonialism for the Indonesians. Today the representative of Indonesia used the word "neo-colonialism" in speaking about my country. I use the word "neo-diplomacy" to describe the manner in which Indonesia wants to crush my country.

On the domestic front, the leaders of five Opposition parties, including the People's Action Party (PAP), the Gerakan and the People's Progressive Party (PPP), came together on May 9, 1965 to form the Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC) to work for what Lee Kuan Yew now titled a "Malaysian Malaysia". Lee's enemies within Umno saw this as a clever concealment of his plan to remove Malay special privileges.

On returning to Kuala Lumpur on May 11 to attend Umno's annual conference, the Tunku found strong resentment being expressed against Lee for questioning the special status of the Malays. Some members were demanding that Ismail arrest Lee immediately and ban the PAP.

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia became official fact on Aug 9, 1965 after just two hours of parliamentary debate.

Ismail's understanding of the troubled relationship between the Alliance and the PAP was that two basic ways of establishing

When Singapore joined Malaysia the government in Singapore tried to practice in Malaysia what is possible in Singapore but not in Malaysia.

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman

Malaysia were imaginable. While the PAP wanted the immediate imposition of non-communalism, the Alliance way required firstly the creation of harmony between racially organised groups — namely Umno, the MCA and MIC — and secondly the ultimate attainment of non-communalism. Reportedly, Ismail thought Lee's impatience was disrupting Malaysia's racial peace, and what was worse, the latter was instead putting the blame on Umno.

In a letter to *National Geographic* commenting on an article that the magazine was about to publish, Ismail provided his understanding of politics in, and between, Malaysia and Singapore:

When Singapore joined Malaysia the government in Singapore tried to practice in Malaysia what is possible in Singapore but not in Malaysia. For example, the People's Action Party, which is the ruling political

party in Singapore, tried to impose straightaway a non-racial political party on the people of Malaysia. It is not surprising that in doing so it stirred communal feelings. In addition to this, the People's Action Party insinuatingly ridiculed the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong. The approach to national language differs between the two territories. In Singapore, the approach is through multi-lingualism, i.e. making Chinese, Indian and Malay equal in status whereas in Malaysia the emphasis is on Malay. The other languages, while being allowed to be taught and spoken, are not made official languages in Malaysia.

Because of past colonial policy the Malays are far behind the Chinese in education and in the economic field. It is the policy of the present Alliance government to redress this imbalance and for this to materialise time and patience are required. Singapore was not willing to be patient and to bide time for this to occur. Because of these difficulties in fundamental approach, the separation of the state of Singapore from Malaysia was inevitable. Singapore and Malaysia are interdependent. Singapore has the finest port in the East and a large portion of her trade depends on Malaysia. At the moment both nations, comparatively speaking, are well off. If they can co-exist for some time, each understanding the other's point of view, the time will come when they will merge again. It is better to wait for this to come because if they do not do so they will sink together instead of coming together.

Ismail's fiery temper and

Ill health was his reason for resignation

N.S.F p8 14 3.1.07

□ FROM PAGE 12

readiness to debate were not conducive to his health. Philip Kuok described Ismail as one who "stood up in Parliament prepared to fight anyone with a bluntness that sometimes shocked his own supporters and colleagues, [...] a highly principled man, sometimes immovable and intolerant of another person's irrational views, and easily taking offence in something which he considered to be a matter of principle".

The Tunku had instituted in April 1966 a new order of chivalry, naming it the Darjah Yang Mulia Setia Mahkota Malaysia (The Most Esteemed Order of the Crown of Malaysia). Ismail became the first to be given the honour on June 8, when the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong conferred its First Class — the Seri Setia Mahkota (SSM, Grand Commander) — on him. This carried the title of "Tun", and the world thereafter addressed Ismail as "Tun Dr Ismail", and his wife as "Toh Puan".

In May, Ismail was in London to attend the Conference of Commonwealth Law Ministers. Fortunately, his long-time physician, Dr Stuart C. McPherson, was there on holiday at the same time. On being told by Ismail that he had had a mild heart attack in October 1965 while delivering a speech at the United Nations, McPherson took him to see a heart specialist.

A letter Ismail received from McPherson soon after informed him that it was most advisable for him to avoid stress. Since "you are more sensitive to personality stresses than most people", McPherson concurred with the view that Ismail should return to being a general practitioner and not continue as a politician.

By Sept 30, Ismail had made up his mind to retire.

If I were single or only had a wife to support, as when I first joined you years ago in politics to fight for our country's independence, I would have ignored this advice. Now, of course, I have five children, all very young and it is unfair to them if I were to ignore the advice. [...] I have worked for so long under you and as you know have the highest respect, regard and love for you both as a leader and as a friend. It tears my heart to have to write this to you because I know how much support you need in order to lead the party and the country.

This correspondence speaks against the persistent rumour that Ismail retired in protest against some Tunku policy. The loyalty he was to show the Tunku after the May 13, 1969 riots further supports the publicly announced reason for Ismail's retirement — ill health. The Tunku read the letter "with great sorrow because I will be losing a very close friend and loyal colleague", and replied on Oct 5:

I had before made Suleiman stay on against his own wishes and this I have regretted to this very day. So I feel I would not make the same mistake again. You definitely need this change and I am sure it will do you a lot of good, so I can always count on you for any help I shall need.

Suleiman, Ismail's eldest brother, had been made high commissioner to Australia at his own request. He hoped that the posting would not be stressful and would not worsen his ill health. But on Nov 7, 1963 while delivering a speech in Melbourne, he collapsed and died. The Tunku and Suleiman had been close ever since their time together in England and when the latter's remains were

Student leader Annuar Zaini described the effect of Ismail's retirement on many young Malays at that time in the following terms:

We had not had enough of him, you see. For us, it was as if someone we were in love with was leaving the stage before we had had time to really enjoy his presence.

It was around the time of Ismail's retirement, after Philip Kuok and his wife Eileen Cheah had moved to The Hague, where Philip became Malaysia's ambassador that Ismail "transferred his friendship" to Robert Kuok and Joyce Cheah. Another couple close to Ismail and Neno (his wife, Toh Puan Norashikin Mohd Seth) at that time was Sammy Senn and his wife. Senn was attached to Nestle Malaysia and would later become its chairman, and also chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce. According to Robert Kuok, Ismail's closest Malay friends at that time were his old colleague from New York, Bank Negara president (Tun) Ismail Ali, and his wife Maimunah Latif.

Kuok supposed that the nature of Ismail's work was what caused him to be careful about whom he chose as his close friends: "Doc was a stickler for fair play and correctness and asking him to use his political power to help you was tantamount to asking to be put in jail."

Several of Ismail's children remember how a Chinese peasant woman once came to their house in a truck filled with vegetables as gifts for the minister. She was hoping that Ismail would help secure the release of her son who had recently been detained. Ismail told her to take her gifts away or get thrown into jail as well. This unwillingness to compromise on Ismail's part left a strong im-



Dr Ismail arriving at No 10, Downing Street, London, for the Commonwealth Law Ministers Conference in May 1966.

He wrote that day to Tunku asking to "resign in principle" as minister, based on the prognosis and the advice of his doctors:

transported back from Australia, Tunku and his Cabinet were in Singapore to receive his body and escort it to Johor Baru for burial.



Minister of Home Affairs Dr Ismail bidding farewell to Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak, who was leaving for a conference in Canberra in June, 1969. With them (from left) are chief of armed forces staff General Tunku Osman Tunku Mohd Jewa, Minister of Works, Posts and Telecommunications V.T. Sambanthan, Permanent Secretary to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ghazali Shafie and Minister with Social Duties Khaw Kai Boh.

pression on his colleagues, relatives and friends.

Ismail recognised corruption as a great ill but understood that for Malaysians of all races, going into the government "is one of the easiest ways to make money; and they know very well that some of them will be thrown out in the five-yearly elections... so they accept bribes and become corrupt". He discussed the matter with Philip Kuok:

I only wish that people will one day establish themselves in the professions and the business world and then enter politics like the British politicians. My message to the youth is that they should not go into politics until they are financially or professionally secure.

Ismail's retirement was far from tranquil in the beginning. The danger posed by his heart condition was surpassed by the recurrence of neck cancer. By the middle of June 1968, Ismail was back in London for radiotherapy — fighting for his life as he later told Philip Kuok — against a lumpy growth behind his ear that he had noticed in mid-May. For three months he stayed on his own. His wife, who was then in a stage of late pregnancy, could not accompany him.

The sudden change in social and political standing was something that Ismail had a hard time adjusting to during his short retirement, and on one occasion when he attended an event at Radio Television Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur and found no place had been reserved for him, he turned around in anger and left without a word.

(Tun) Musa Hitam recalls how much more light-hearted Ismail became during his retirement and how he was happy driving his own sports car and wearing colourful and youthful clothes. According to Abdullah Ali, Ismail would dress up fashionably probably according to flashy British designs of the time.

Though no longer a leader of the country, Ismail's interest in Malaysia's nation-building process did not wane. On Oct 19, 1968 he wrote to Philip Kuok about the country's state of affairs:

I remember advising (Tun Tan) Siew Sin after the first election after Independence that we should dissolve the parties which now constitute the Alliance and form a single multi-racial party. Now of course the

golden moment has passed and we have to make the best of the present set-up of the Alliance and trust that the leaders will continue to get the support of the moderates in the constituent parties which make up the Alliance.

In April 1969, when the electoral campaign was in full swing, Ismail made plans to attend Guthrie Corporation's Group Planting Conference in London scheduled for May 21-23. He was quite certain that his political commitments would be over and done with by then. This was not to be.

Malaysian politics wanted him back. This time, it would be for good.

■ 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 South-east Asian Studies, Singapore, <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

■ **TOMORROW:** Dr Ismail, who would be recalled from retirement, would go on to make his greatest contributions to Malaysia in the aftermath of the May 13 clashes.