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The Malaysian in Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman: Challenges towards Evolutionary Nationhood

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Abstract

In this research paper, the role and contributions to the Malaysian polity of Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman are appraised. The focus in this research paper is to draw on his values and principles as a Malaysian and a national leader, as requisite lessons today towards further concretization of Malaysian nationhood. Documentary approach analysis of secondary data was used in this study. Studies done by scholars and published materials on the above personality were evaluated in relation to the themes of this study and thenceforth relevant conclusions were drawn. This research paper essentially adopted a qualitative-evaluation approach. The historiographic tradition and conventions in step with giving prominence to 'apex' leaders of national entities at particular periods in a nation's historical evolution, have essentially resulted in the above Malaysian leader's stature to be generally sequestered. The 'education' of young Malaysian generations has not much benefitted from his marked contributions towards Malaysian nationhood. The positive traits and legacies of early national leaders, need to be given renewed attention in the nation's educational curriculum and the national media. Nationhood values- honesty, disciplined public service, civic virtue and so on, he personified, are crucial lessons for the nation's youth today, being faced, with the often deleterious impact of cyber social media.

Key Words: Malaysian nationhood values, public service and duty, Tun's life and personality, Malaysian youth, positive traits of leaders.

I. Introduction: Tun Dr. Ismail was Malaysia's second Minister of External Affairs, from February 1959 to August 1960. In this above position, although it was only for a period of eighteen months, Dr. Ismail has been credited as having played a formative role in shaping the then Malaya's foreign policy. This was the era in Malaysia's history when the nation was just emerging from the clutches of the colonial British power, as an independent and sovereign nation.

The nation's early statesman of particular leadership, organizational and ethical traits and skills, was in fact the nation's first ambassador to the United States, at Washington D.C., from 1957 to 1959. Undertaking an added responsibility, Dr. Ismail was also the nation's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York. The active role the above played in the United Nations, cognizant of the fact that Malaya was then just a new nation, getting to establish its mark on the world political scene, is indeed a measure of this son of the nation's particular drive to give his best to the nation. His contributions thus, both as a foreign minister and as a nationalist, is certainly worthy of record for the sake of the nation's posterity, that the nation's citizens, and particularly the current and future national leaders will be able to emulate the positive leadership

The Malaysian in Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman: Challenges... Naidu Suranthiran & Rajanthiran Sivaperegasam traits that he had well exhibited [Dr. Chandran Jeshurun 2009, Institute of Diplomatic and Foreign Relations (IDFR)].

After having completed his medical studies in Melbourne, Australia, and returning to Malaya after the World War II, he felt that Malay intellectuals could effectively contribute to the realization of Malaya's independence from the British colonial power, by joining an established mass movement. Thus, when Tunku Abdul Rahman took over the reins of leadership of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) in 1951, after Dato' Onn Jaafar, the founder of UMNO had failed in his attempt to open the doors of the above party to non-Malays, he then joined the political party. His entry into politics and involvement in the political affairs of the nation, was very much the result of the coaxing and persuasions by both the Tunku and Tun Razak Hussein, the then Deputy Prime Minister, requesting Dr. Ismail to join their government, and help in taking the nation forward. Thus, it is often said, as much as his conviction was prevalent that Malay intellectuals need to do more for the nation, he was himself essentially a 'reluctant politician' (K. Kesavapany in Ooi K. B. 2006, p.xii)

II. Background of Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman: Tun Dr. Ismail was born on the 4th of November 1915 to Abdul Rahman bin Yassin and Zahara binte Abu Bakar, in Johor Bahru. In 1922 he started his education at Sekolah Bukit Zaharah and later continued his education at the English College, both in Johor Bahru.

Continuing his education, particularly with the guidance and motivation of his parents who emphasized that the children in the family obtained the best education possible, he enrolled in Queen's College, Melbourne University, and completed his medical studies in 1945. His graduation signified for the nation that he was the first Malay doctor that the nation had produced.

After working with the Johor Medical Department for a short stint, he started a private practice, with the clinic being called Tawakkal (Trust in God). This was the name of his traditional family home, and clearly reflected the place of religion and spiritual principles as emphasized by his God, spirituality and justice, which would constantly be manifested in his character and work ethics throughout his life.

Tun Dr. Ismail was married with Toh Puan Norashikin Seth, and had six children, two girls and four boys, in his marriage.

The political fervor of the times in the 1950s compelled him, with also some persuasion by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the nation's first prime minister and confidante of the Tun, and also with advice from Tun Abdul Razak, to reluctantly join national politics. He undertook a major step in his life by joining UMNO in 1951, with Tunku at its helm, and after Dato' Onn Jaafar quite unceremoniously having to resign from the party's apex leadership position then.

After the Tunku was appointed as Malaya's Chief Minister in 1956, when the nation was at the advent of attaining its independence from the British, the Tunku appointed Dr. Ismail as his Minister of Commerce and Industry.

Observing and appreciating his strong leadership capabilities, the Tunku persuaded Dr. Ismail to take up the position as the Malaya's first ambassador to Washington D.C., in the United States. He was appointed as a Minister Plenipotentiary (without portfolio). In conjunction with the above position, he was also appointed as the country's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York in the same year.

After his return from the United States, he was given the Minister of Internal Security portfolio as his new responsibility in 1960. Further, in 1961 he was given the additional post of Minister of Home Affairs.

After having served the nation for a few years in the 1960s, helping to put various governmental departments and ministries on efficient and 'productive' pedestals, ensuring the society benefits to the utmost, he was forced to resign from the Cabinet owing to health reasons in 1967. He, however, returned to his private medical practice.

In the same year-1967, he underwent successful treatment for cancer of the nasso-pharynx, in London. On his return, exemplifying his zest to do one's best to lead a full life as such, he started private medical practice with a group of doctors.

At the young Malaysian nation's **epochal time in history**, after the 1969 general elections, when the nation was embroiled in inter-racial riots, particularly between the two major ethnic groups-the Malays and the Chinese communities, Tun Razak, the then head of the National Operations Council, established to govern and bring back normalcy to the nation, asked Tun Dr. Ismail to become his Deputy Director of Operations of the National Operations Council. In June, 1969 he was appointed the Minister of Home Affairs.

However, his hard and dedicated work had to come to an stop, as he had to leave for Europe and the United Kingdom for medical treatment for over three weeks in September.

In March, 1970 he had to again go for a heart consultation medical visit to London.

When Tun Razak became the nation's second Prime Minister, he appointed Dr. Ismail as his In Deputy Prime Minister in September 1970.

In 1973, he is again an additional responsibility, as the Minister of Trade and Industry. He received various honours and awards from foreign nations and institutions. In March 1973, he was bestowed the honorary degree of doctor of laws by his alma mater, Queen's College, University of Melbourne, Australia. In June of the same year, he was awarded a similar degree by University Sains Malaysia. Malaysia's Academy of Medicine honoured him as its Honorary Member in the same year.

On Thursday 2 August 1973, Tun Dr. Ismail passed away as a result of a heart attack at his home on Maxwell Road in Kuala Lumpur. The above road was renamed Jalan Tun Dr. Ismail in early 1974. The Tun was given a state funeral, and was the first national citizen, on the insistence of his mentor, Tun Razak, to be buried at the State Mausoleum.

III. Contributions: One can point out that his very highest contribution to the nation has been to nation-building. In 1967 the Straits Times wrote,

"It is difficult to think of a ministry he has not headed, a political role he has not played, a central event he has not influenced".

It is well noted by scholars and leaders of the nation that his legacy has indeed been immense. In domestic politics, his contributions have certainly been many. Being a person of high principles towards life, he believed strong administrative capabilities and a well-placed organizational infrastructure will help push the nation forward constructively and sustainably.

1. Fighting Corruption for National Development: The Anti-Corruption Agency, an institution very much in line with his national aspirations for Malaysia to evolve into a cohesive and developed nation, was created by Dr. Ismail in 1970.

Recognising corruption as a great social ill for all races who were employed in government service and became elected representatives, he felt it was,

“...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...I 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” (Kuok 1991, pp.217-18).

Ismail’s ‘heart-felt’ concern for the nation’s well-being and progress was well demonstrated by his **conviction to introduce proper legislation against corruption so that the nation will possess a steady trajectory towards national development**, when he had to postpone his trip to London for treatment for throat cancer. The legislature that was to be debated in Parliament was the crucial Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance No. 22. The **Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA)** then in 1970, under its director **Harun Hashim** was given further extensive powers than that provided by the earlier legislation-the Prevention of Corruption Act 1961, which had mainly concerned itself with problem of bribery,

Ismail had personally worked on the preparation of the contents of this new legislation when he conferred with the Tunku and Razak and obtained their support to cover the ‘loop holes’ with regards the then existing laws, for ensuring a ‘clean’ government and society. As the country was then ruled by the National Operations Council (NOC), and without a functioning parliament, ‘corrupt practices’ could increase and retrograde the government’s efforts to bring about stability and development. Because Ismail particularly, took an **unequivocal stand** on ‘corruption’, the government’s efforts bore positive results when two chief ministers, of Perak and Trengganu were both removed from office for corrupt practices.

2. The Nation’s Democratic Progress: With regards in to Malaya’s venture into the international political arena, clearly signaled by the opening of our embassy in Washington D.C., and the position accorded to Malaya in the United Nations, New York in the 1950s, Dr. Ismail worked to literally and politically put Malaya on the world political map, by working very hard. And he is quoted to have reminisced, that he had to work with the staff involved, “...seven days a week on an average of 15 hours a day...to start our Embassy in Washington from scratch and at the same time, attend to our affairs at the UN”.

Malaya, in the early years of its independence, with the British having expended the nation’s resources and wealth extensively, to benefit from the nation’s natural resources wealth, to circumvent the communist threat as much as it possibly could, and to concurrently bring about economic and social development in Malaya, was essentially in dire straits in terms of its financial capacity to undertake its much-expected development programmes. As such, by the middle of 1958, Ismail’s primary task as the young nation’s ambassador to the powerful and wealthy American nation was to persuade the Americans to favourably consider the Federal Government’s application for a loan to fund its annual Development Plan. With the Tunku’s advice and ‘guidance’, Ismail was able to make an application for a considerably large loan of \$450 million with the then American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. This application was thenceforth given due attention by the

American government, with Dulles stating that "...his Government would sympathetically consider our application". The American government had commended the Malayan government for our efforts in containing the communist influence in the nation.

The role played by Ismail to help strengthen Malaya's political links and cordial relationship and thereby establish a lasting bond between the two sovereign nations, is indicated in the Aide Memoire document prepared by Ismail and his embassy to put forward the above loan application (Entry for 26 May 1958, *Malaya's First Year at the United Nations*, pp. 75-76., *Aide Memoire* to Secretary of State Dulles, *Ibid*, pp. 113-115).

The document had emphasized that the "...campaign against the Communists is fought on two fronts- the economic and the military". The Communists had realized that they could only overthrow the independent Malayan Government by "...resorting to a new tactic, that of pinning down the Government" to a huge military expenditure so that "...it cannot continue its Development Plan". Further, the above document clearly noted that with the next general Elections due by the end of 1959, there "...certainly will be pressure for recognition of the Communist Party....as a condition for giving up the fight".

With **Dr. Ismail's convictions that the then ruling Alliance party leaders' "...belief in democracy and the democratic process, they know they cannot cling to power forever"**, the model of democracy then, at that period of world history as such, was, to an extent, the United States, for the Malayan government. Thus, the leaning towards the United States which Ismail advocated is clearly indicated in the above document when it strongly stated that, "Help by the United States Government at this crucial time in the history of Malaya is urgent and imperative".

As a matter of fact, the groundwork that Ismail helped to lay with the United States, and thereby with the European democracies, helped to establish the ideological pinnings that the nation would consistently hold steadfastly through its on-going nation-building efforts. Although it can be said that the nation has faced some disruptions and inconsistencies in its democratic journey, generally its constitutional, monarchical, parliamentary democratic system of governance has stood the tests of time. This, it can be said was the outcome of the leadership qualities and efforts of the Tunku, Tun Razak and the indefatigable Tun Ismail.

Further, it can be noted that the government's leanings towards the western, democratic nations, although Ismail himself had subsequently developed a certain measure of distrust for the super powers mainly because of their growing geo-political manoeuvres then, had nevertheless shown the communist insurgency in Malaya the door out. Communism could thus not establish a strangle-hold in the 1950s and 1960s, in Malaya as it had attempted in North Korea, North Vietnam, Indonesia and in the Eastern European states. This was mainly because of the determined efforts by Ismail as the Minister of External Affairs, in keeping the **national and constitutional vision alive, that Malaya as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, would be well-endowed for its future, with democratic principles in place for equitable and representative governance.**

3. The Indonesian Factor in the 1960s: It has been well recognized by the Alliance and the Barisan Nasional governments to this day, that Ismail played a **significant and constructive role in foreign politics and in establishing meaningful inter-governmental relations on behalf of the Malayan government.** His opposition to the Indonesian leader, Sukarno's rather abrasive and patronizing regard for nations in the South East Asian region, prompted him to name him as "the Fuehrer of Jakarta", after the notorious German leader, Hitler. Further, showing strong opposition to communism, he had expressed concerns that for the future and progress of the Southeast Asian

nations, that Indonesia needed to recover from the **excesses of the Sukarno rule**. Pointing out Malaysia's close links with Indonesia and expressing his thoughts that the two nations are not only physically close to each other, he stressed that the two nations are also historically and culturally linked to one another. Projecting that the future of Southeast Asia depended on Indonesia's recovery, being the largest Muslim nation in the region, he envisioned that, "**it is in our enlightened self-interest that Malaysia should go forward with Indonesia towards greater freedom and prosperity for both our peoples**" [Tun Ismail's speech to Foreign Correspondents' Association, *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, quarterly publication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. I, No. 3, 1966 (hereafter referred to as *FAM*), pp. 62-70].

4. Expanding and Growing with the Region: Indeed, Tun Ismail was **forward-looking** when he proposed in 1966 that the Association of Southeast Asian nations (**ASA**), comprising of the Phillipines, Thailand and Malaysia, that the Tunku was instrumental in forming in 1963, should be **expanded into a larger and more cohesive regional association** embracing Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. His pro-active and future-oriented thinking eventually led to the birth of the Association of South East Asian Nations (**ASEAN**), with a view towards the **neutralization of the region to pre-empt a costly arms race among the regional nations**.

As the Tun elaborated further,

"...We have no choice. We, the nations and peoples of South-East 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, Singaporeans and Filipinos- unless we also think and act as South-East Asians" (Straits Times 24 June 1966, in Ooi K.B. 2006, p.169).

His contributions to regional and the international political scenario were reflected in the keen interest he had shown in the developments in the Afro-Asian nations. He attempted to play an active part in some of its crucial policy initiatives. However, the combined region being a potpourri of ethnicities, as was Malaya, and still is today, he **exhibited his political acumen and diplomatic expertise in not wantonly committing the Malayan government to sensitive areas of particular governmental policies**. On the question of the problem of *apartheid* in South Africa, he however indicated the Malayan government's disapproval in principle of such a policy, when he agreed to support the Indian government in tabling the above issue for debate in the then United Nations General Assembly. **Being a learned and pragmatic politician**, Ismail made a clear stand for the Malayan government when he informed the Indian representative that the above stand taken "would not imply that we would be committed to future steps on the subject" (Entry for 10 July 1958, *Malaya's First Year at the United Nations*, pp.82-83) This showed that Ismail was well cognizant of the local '**inter-communal bargainings**', political compromises and political arrangements that were on-going in Malaya, for him to be in a position to take a definitive stand on certain social issues. As such, the pathway Malaya had taken in international relations then, had put the nation in a position of good international regard, and it can be said that the **groundwork laid by Ismail and the early national representatives to the United Nations has enabled the nation to move forward in enhancing its international standing**.

5. Combatting Social Turbulence: The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the occurrence of **social turbulence in Malaysia**. These revolved around the questions of economic inequalities social

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mobility involving the majority Malay community vis-a-vis the immigrant Chinese and Indian communities. After the 1969 General Elections inter-racial riots, involving mainly the Malays and the Chinese communities, violently and tragically took place. In this period of national uncertainty, the Tunku and Tun Razak felt the **firm hand of Ismail as a strong, just and equitable Malaysian**, was most required to bring order back to the nation. As **Kesavapany K.**, the former Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia aptly observed that,

“Tun Ismail was a **source of moderation and comfort to all Malaysians** in the aftermath of the racial tragedy in 1969. It was he who gave confidence and hope to Malaysians to embark on a new phase in race relations. In Malaysian political circles, there is a unanimous view that Tun Ismail’s **greatest contribution was in ensuring that the country emerged intact and stable from the turbulence caused by the May 13 racial riots**” (K.Kesavapany, in Ooi K.B.2006, p. xii).

The former Lord President Tun Mohd. Suffian remembers Tun Ismail as someone who was pivotal in bringing back the public’s trust for the government led by Tun Razak henceforth.

“It was during the agonising days that his outstanding qualities came to the fore. Perhaps it can be said that more than anybody else the Tun (Dr Ismail) contributed substantially to the **restoration of public confidence in the Government’s determination to restore law and order** after the 13 May incidents.”
(<http://bigdogdotcom.wordpress.com/2012/08/02/remembering...>)

After the tragic and most unheralded May 1969 event in Malaysia, the new Malaysian parliament in early 1971, had the crucial role of instituting laws for inclusion in the Federal Constitution, that would ensure that sensitive, inter-communal issues were never to become the thorn in the nation’s stability, for the trajectory towards national unity and prosperity.

Thus, the Constitutional (Amendment) Bill, geared towards the political restructuring of the nation, was passed with a comfortable majority vote in the House of Representatives in March 1971.

With Ismail and Razak delving into the ramifications of the above bill in its preparations, it materialized that the bill henceforth helped to place certain dangerously sensitive issues in the country, above political debate and dispute. These were citizenship, the national language and the use of other languages, the sovereignty of the state rulers, the special position status accorded to Malays, and the legitimate interests of the non-Malays.

6. The Nation’s New Economic Policy (NEP): Tun Razak, together with Ismail’s ‘balanced’ administrative acumen, were instrumental in the formulation of the **New Economic Policy (NEP)**. In understanding his philosophical perspective towards the NEP which essentially advocated preferential affirmative treatment for the economically backward Malays, he responded to the simple explanation put forward by students that the 13 May incident was the result of purely economic grievances, saying,

“I told them that if it was purely an economic factor, people would not have killed one another. It was something deeper than that” (ibid, p.215).

The significance of this above thought cognition of this Malaysian personality, which holds sway up to the present day, can be gleaned from a speech he had given a little earlier on national media, than when he expressed the above thoughts. He had stressed that,

“[The Malays] must be the judges to determine whether or not the special position is no longer necessary for their survival. Any other course would certainly provoke internal disorder- perhaps of a much bigger dimension than the disturbances of May the 13th” (ibid).

As Dr. Ooi Kee Beng observes, Ismail was however cognizant of the **pitfalls of particular preferential treatment programmes** as later ensconced in the New Economic Policy (NEP). Together with the then cabinet minister, **Ghazali Shafie**, he advocated the imposition of a twenty-year period for the implementation of the above policy. Ismail used a common golf metaphor, as a means to bring about an acceptance of the policy among the other Malaysians, and particularly to imbue a clear understanding among the indigenous Malay community that they have the **opportunities as such, provided by the ruling government, to work diligently and concertededly to improve and upgrade their economic and social status** in the time period provided.

“The special privilege or position accorded to the Malays under the Constitution is mainly intended to enable them – to borrow an expression from the game of golf- ‘to have a handicap’, which would place them in a position for a fair competition with better players. Therefore, **like a golfer, it should not be the aim of the Malays to perpetuate this handicap but to strive to improve their game, and thereby reducing, and finally removing their handicap completely**” (Siaran Akhbar PEN. 8/69/22, as in Ooi K.B. ibid, p.217).

The 1969 socio-political developments in Malaysia marked a crucial watershed phase in the evolving national character and identity of the nation. The economic and social conditions existent in the nation then- with the Malays and Indians generally poor and the Chinese economically vibrant, needed to be addressed with the fullest and the utmost attention possible. The Razak-Ismail administration sought the lawyer and social activist, James Puthuchearay’s help. The latter had written a book entitled, *‘Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy’*, which directed a particular emphasis on the **political economy of Malaya**. Puthuchearay had argued in his book that the approach that was inevitably required to resolve the socio-economic imbalances and the unhealthy inter-ethnic relations that Malaysia had come to be endowed with from the British colonial rule, was one that involved state intervention through public corporations.

Thus, **Ismail was one of the important architects of the NEP, which essentially in spirit, the researcher would venture to point out, was to correct the ‘injustices’ which over the many decades of British rule particularly, had become a serious, national socio-economic phenomenon. It aimed to provide an equitable and level playing field for all Malaysians, which today may have taken various positive and negative forms.** The NEP however, it is acknowledged, has contributed positively to bring marked changes in the class structure of the Malay population, “...and to that extent it did succeed” (ibid).

7. The Language Question: On the question of granting citizenship to the non-Malays, a group of Chinese guild leaders raised the issue in 1965, of the recognition of the Chinese language as an official language in Malaysia. Ismail reminded them behind closed doors, tactfully but firmly that their claim was not possible. He explained to them in the best possible manner, all the time aware that the **oneness and unity of the peoples was paramount for the future stability of the nation**, that the independence agreement among the communal groups was that citizenship would be granted to non-Malays, with the implementation of Malay and English as the only official languages. The English language would continue to be in use in education and for official purposes until 1967, after which it would be phased out, he clearly put to the above community leaders.

Ismail, in taking the above action, was prescient that inter-communal tensions in Malaysia was running high and of its destructive consequences if it was not addressed. The tensions were possibly exacerbated by the position Singapore had taken with regards its role in Malaysia. Singapore had asked for a more definitive and authoritative position in the central government, and further, asked for a restructuring of the positions of the diverse communal groups resident in Malaysia within a broad 'Malaysian Malaysia' framework. This was not acceptable to then ruling government, and Tunku Abdul Rahman was particularly concerned of the possibility of the break-out of inter-communal conflict in Malaysia. He, most pragmatically, was concerned that with the tensions brewing between Malaysia and Singapore, the Malaysian government would not have been able to deal effectively with the Indonesian confrontation, had not decisive action to expel Singapore not taken, as the latter "...had not agreed to an amicable arrangement" with regards its constitutional position in the total Malaysian entity [quoting the Tunku, Tom Critchley, the then Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, as in Dee, M. 2005, p.458).

8. Malaysian Citizenship: In his unfinished and **unpublished autobiography named 'Drifting into Politics'** which Ismail started to write after he had resigned from government service in mid-1967, he reveals his plain and deeply felt views on the citizenship question and other national issues, thereby underlining his stand with regards to the future of Malaya's post-colonial situation.

On citizenship, he notes,

"Under colonial rule there was a cumulative increase in the population of immigrant races especially those of Chinese origin and to a lesser extent the Indians, the latter brought in mainly to work in the rubber estates owned by the British. No attempt was made to make these immigrants loyal citizens of Malaya. The British were content to see that so long as they obey the laws of the country, they could come and leave as they please. As a result of this policy, when more and more of them settled in Malaya, the result was an increasing number of aliens in the country who on the whole were richer and more vigorous than the Malays. When the Malays seized political power after the Second World War, their main defense against their more virile and richer neighbours was to deny them the right of citizenship" (op cit. Ooi K.B., pp. 82,3).

As reflected in his stand-points on the **special position of the Malays accorded by the Federal Constitution, the Malay language issue, the NEP** and so on, his primary drive was to create a sense of Malaysian oneness, especially in the immigrant communities. With the Chinese being the dominant community, in all his political wisdom and pragmatism, with the Tunku and Tun Razak, he moved to persuade the Chinese, and the others, to accept Malay as the **national language**. The immigrants were thereby to be granted citizenship as a **quid pro quo**.

Even in the independence agreement discussions in London in 1957, with reference being made to the Reid Commission set up by the British government, to study the possibility of granting independence to Malaya in the 1950s, it was noted that **loyalty to King and country** taken together with the principle of *jus soli*, will be the determining factors in the granting of citizenship. These developments earlier were not too distant from the stand Ismail was convicted about in relation to the **crucial issue of national citizenship**.

IV. Tun Ismail the Statesman, and as others saw him: The confidence and trust for Ismail by Razak was immense. As A.S. Talalla who was then in 1970 the principal assistant secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has observed, that Razak did not at all go against any suggestions

coming from Ismail. The former would go along with them (suggestions by Ismail) without any reservations. Talalla described the government of the day as the Razak-Ismail administration. Ismail's directness for action to resolve problems facing the government and the nation then, was aptly described by Maurice Baker, which essentially reflected Ismail's statesmanship and leadership qualities. He was firm and essentially unemotional about the form of decisions and actions that he felt were necessary for the good of the people.

Maurice Baker reminisced of the post 1969 conflict period,

“Razak was very troubled by the situation at the time. You see, he was a good man for long-term planning and so forth, but when immediate action was required, he was known to hesitate and to think twice. Tun Ismail, on the other hand, was one who would act as soon as his mind was made up. He would just act. That was the difference between them, but the combination was perfect” (as in Ooi K.B. 2006, p.229).

At the testing period in Malaysia's history, with the entry of Singapore, a predominantly Chinese majority nation, into Malaysia, for geographical, regional and geopolitical reasons, and with the eventual departure of Singapore from the Malaysia merger, Ismail sharply noted the different outlooks, and lamented the loss to both nations.

“...Because of the past colonial policy, the Malays are far behind the Chinese in education and in the economic field. It is the policy of the Alliance Government to redress this imbalance and for this to materialize 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. ...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” (ibid, p.160).

Let us look at what the then Chief Justice Suffian had to say of Ismail in relation to the Singapore question,

“He was a **realist**, aware of the prejudices of every community. **He agreed with Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's slogan, “Malaysia for Malaysians”, but he did not agree with the way that slogan was to be translated into reality.** He did not agree that it could be done overnight, **he knew that the inborn prejudice and resistance of millions have to be worn down patiently**, that the millions from every community have to be convinced slowly, that they have to be persuaded steadily in the delicate process of uniting the various races in Malaysia” (Suffian 1974, p.12, as in Ooi K. B. ibid, p.160).

Ismail, it can be noted, clearly was a **rationalist**. However, he did not allow his liberal, modern education to cloud his thinking as to the urgent socio-economic issues facing the nation and the different communal groups in the country. He thus aspired for open, universalistic principles in the 'life' of the nation, but that which will not leave any pressing question pertaining to any particular communal groups, unanswered.

In 1969, after the **tragic May 13 riots**, there were calls by university students and politicians, mainly from within the UMNO party, for the resignation of the **Tunku**. In that state of affairs, the latter remembers Ismail's return to national politics as something of personal value, and also that his

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eventual role reflected his **commitment to the strength and force of the rule of law and justice, in order for the nation to ‘reinvent’ itself towards national resilience.**

“(His return to politics was) Dr. Ismail’s **last and final act of kindness to me.** (Ismail) had already retired from Government service to be the head of the Guthrie Group of Companies, in which post he was earning a salary three times that of a Minister....When he saw what was happening, and realizing the attempts being made by young UMNO extremists to embarrass me, and to oust me, to be more correct, he came and asked that he be taken back into the Cabinet. When he returned, he used his own dynamic personality and strength to the full to rout these elements....On his own initiative, he went on the Radio declaring that ‘anyone who had any design on the personal safety and dignity of Tunku Abdul Rahman would be arrested’. That broadcast had a great effect on the extremists who quietened down” (Tunku 1977, p.171, in Ooi K.B. *ibid*, p. 210).

In a similar vein of thought and brevity of the values Ismail stood for, **Musa Hitam**, at one time the nation’s Deputy Prime Minister, remembers a time when Ismail responded to him in a meeting of high-ranking UNMO officials. Musa voiced his views on **Malay education**, and Ismail who even when silent had commanded high respect from his colleagues, then spoke. Musa reminisces,

“Ismail spoke in Malay, which is very significant: ‘Adakah ini bermakna bahawa Che’ Musa kata Pemuda UMNO itu *pressure group*?’ (Does this mean that Mr. Musa is saying that UMNO Youth is a pressure group?). Complete silence. You could hear a pin drop. So I took a deep breath and said that that was true from a political-scientific perspective, but we represent **the young**, so we have to voice the views of the young. After a while, he replied in English: ‘You’ve got a point there’. You could hear sighs of relief in the room. **There was always an element of fear when one dealt with him, but commanding fear alone does not make a great leader. This man was both feared and much respected, and that was for the fairness of his views. That was why he was a great leader**” (Ooi K.B., *ibid*, p.208).

Then a dominant force, the opposition Peoples Progressive Party (PPP), whose president, the iconic D. R. Seenivasagam, a lawyer and one who was multi-racial in his approach together with his brother, in the 1960s in Ipoh and Perak particularly, remembered Ismail as one who was,

“...no doubt a hard man, but his greatest attribute is his **frankness and honest belief in his actions. In dealing with him as a Minister, one knows exactly where one stands**” (ST 25 February 1967).

The vocal, late M.G.G. Pillai, in his obituary on Tun Ismail’s passing away, stated that Tun Razak, when he was the nation’s prime minister, came to rely heavily on Ismail for his administrative and leadership capabilities. Razak had grown, in Pillai’s views, to become ‘confident’ as such, in effectively bringing order to the nation at its most crucial period of ‘evolution’, with Ismail at his side. The latter, Pillai described as **‘Razak’s Razak**. Thus, with Razak himself having risen as the Tunku’s strong and reliable deputy, as the then trying circumstances evolved, ‘progressing’ the nation forward, the **trio-team of the Tunku, Razak and Ismail became a stable and cohesive leadership helming the nation** (op cit. Chandran Jeshurun 2009).

When Ismail made a decision to resign from government service, a student leader, Annuar Zaini, expressed his views that the many young Malays were rather dismayed. As he said in his words,

“**We have 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 time to really enjoy his presence” (as in Ooi K.B. *ibid*, p. 170). The above narration reflects, to an extent the faith and hope the **young Malays** in the nation were growing to have in Ismail. It can be noted that in the current of the times in the 1970s, with the Malays being generally weak socio-economically, Ismail’s educated and professional persona and his no-nonsense approach to public administration, could well have been **a powerful beacon of hope**, which the young, educated Malays felt would lead the and the nation forward.

The **legacy** of Ismail, conjoined with that of the Tunku and Razak, is certainly most pertinent to the post 1969 historical growth of Malaysia. In this regard, Professor Barbara Watson Andaya of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii, has noted that,

“...the **very humane portrait of a man (Ismail) intensely committed to a racially tolerant Malaysia** will be of immense interest not merely to those who lived through this formative period of Malaysian history (the post May 13, 1969 period), but to the **next generation of Malaysians whose fortune Tun Ismail helped secure**” (*ibid*).

V. Conclusion: Tun Ismail left behind a reputation which can be said to be unsurpassable, as a Malaysian son and public servant. Dr. Ooi (op cit. 2006 pp. 275,6), in his research on the Tun, reports that his children have informed him that the second part of their names-‘bin, binte Tun Dr, Ismail, have always and continuously, after even decades since his passing, brought respect and a sense of gratefulness by older people, both Malaysians and Singaporeans.

In Malaysian history, the historiographic tradition and conventions that have been adhered to, also the writing of history keeping in step with the general international trends to give prominence to the ‘apex’ leaders of the political entities as such, Ismail’s achievements for the Malayan-and-Malaysian nation have been considerably downplayed. The work of the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, his successor, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein and also Tan Siew Sin, are often ‘at the top’. This, naturally has resulted in the younger Malaysian generations, to have become ignorant of his marked contributions as per the Tunku-Razak team. The significance of and that behind his work for the nation, have not been well explored by history writers, for the ‘education’ of the young Malaysians today.

Of particular social and national import for Malaysia of Ismail’s work is that, Ismail was a man who **personified ‘competence’, hard work and honesty**. As the current ruler of the Perak state in the Malaysian Federation has reminisced succinctly, with respect to the values and the former’s contribution to Malaysian nation-building, that,

...the formation of the Federation of Malaya and Malaysia, and post-May 1969. ...things could have so easily gone down a different path and gone badly wrong were it not for a handful of men who thought nothing of putting their careers, families, and ultimately their lives on the line. Tun Dr. Ismail was such a man. ...*he yielded to the call of a cause bigger than himself: first, independence, and then nation-building. .. Nation-building has always required recognition of the superordinate goal of creating a real home for all races, cultures, and classes...Values, beliefs and principles are equally critical, as are the conviction and firmness in holding on to them. ...If the nation-building process is not always apparent, their results most definitely are.* (Tawfik Tun Dr Ismail, Ooi kee Beng, 2015, p. vii-viii).

His educational and home background embedded in him, an **aversion for incompetence, self-aggrandizement and bigotry**. He knew well from the examples in world history, of the national folly that the latter negative values would lead the nation into. He thus believed and lived for the **principles of national sovereignty and multi-culturalism**.

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