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Born into the furnace of the Cold War

By OOI KEE BENG

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MALAYSIAN political culture has generally not cared much about the complexity and diversity of its short history. While this may be a phenomenon that is common to new countries unsure of their identity and their place in the world, it is nevertheless a bad habit that needs breaking.

Simplified national narratives impoverish the nation.

Now, when Malaysia has reached middle age, it has a family duty to perform.

It must tell stories to its grandchildren, and tell them in ways that are more meaty and credible than the censored and sanitized ones told to earlier generations.

Many good stories have of course been forgotten and erased forever from the national memory bank. But many remain to be rediscovered.

Malaysia is lucky indeed that the late Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (1915-1973), though not a prolific writer, did think it important to articulate his thoughts, and to write them down whenever he could.

From September 1957 to January 1959, when he was Malaya's first ambassador to Washington DC and first permanent representative to the United Nations in New York, he authored regular reports on his experiences.

These notes were meant only for the eyes of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister. However, Dr Ismail kept a copy for himself.

These private copies have now been put together, annotated for clarity, and published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore (ISEAS).

The story they tell is of great importance to the grandchildren of middle-aged Malaysia and Malaysians in many interesting ways.

First, the young ones are given a rare glimpse of what global politics was like back in 1958.

Nations were arrayed against nations, wars were being fought through unfortunate proxies, old superpowers were retreating grudgingly and were in damage control mode, and new superpowers pushed into their new roles felt at a loss and were playing things by ear.

Into this world, Malaya was born on Aug 31, 1957.

To a large extent, domestic politics cannot be properly understood without being analytically related to international affairs at the time.

Without understanding the need for the British to withdraw from Asia after India's independence, along with the Dutch and the French, and without considering their desire to secure as much as possible of their economic interests in scattered soon-to-be-former colonies in the face of global communism, it would be difficult to explain why Malaya would soon and so hurriedly expand to become Malaysia; and also why Singapore was included when the chances of that being a success were so slim.

Without reflecting on the political effervescence produced by Maoist nation-building experiments and the global consequences of Communist China's attempts to solve its domestic problems, and without mulling over the uncertainty surrounding the sudden granting of independence to, and gaining of independence by, colonies throughout Asia and Africa, it would be hard to understand the complicated relationship between nationalism, socialism, communism and capitalism.

The alliances then were odd, and often cut across ethnic, cultural, religious or ideological lines. The left was not always the left, and the right not always the right.

Socialists could just as easily act like racists as capitalists could act like communists.

One basic message of this book is that not only was Malaya born into the furnace of the Cold War, its foundational policies were very much forged by the global stress generated by empires in free fall, nationalism at a loss and communism in ascendance.

Domestic conflicts involving communist guerillas and political tension between ethnic groups in Malaya were informed as much by how mainland Chinese reassertion of sovereignty had happened to develop as by the historic failure of the British to stop Japanese imperialism.

Second, young Malaysians may learn to know the late Acting Prime Minister Tun Dr Ismail more intimately than they have done since *The Reluctant Politician* (ISEAS) was published in December 2006.

Presently, Malaysia understands its history through vague notions about how Tunku Abdul Rahman managed to coax the British to grant independence to Malaya, how he then relied on the Alliance to keep inter-ethnic peace, and how he was well-served by loyal supporters such as Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Dr Ismail, among others.

A more complete narrative that can inspire young readers has to illustrate where the ideas involved came from, how they were developed, and who it was who thought them up.

Despite being best remembered as an effective home affairs minister (1961-1967, 1969-1973), Dr Ismail's contribution to the country's foreign policy was tremendous, not to mention critical. If nothing else, this book bears testimony to that one important fact.

Third, the notes provide insights into how Dr Ismail's mind worked, and how his ideas about nation building were formed.

This will perhaps help latter-day leaders regain perspectives lost along the way, and inspire young Malaysians of all races to give more thought to the nation-building process that they are inescapably part of.

Fourth, it is hoped that this book will encourage scholars and authors to write more widely, and make more use of primary material, about the formative years of the country.

Understanding oneself is very much about understanding one's youth.

If there is greater acceptance – especially among present-day politicians – that policies we take for granted today came into being as medication for a definite ailment, then perhaps they will dare to study present problems in new ways and adapt the medication accordingly.

No political solution is a goal in itself, and all solutions have a best-before date.

Whatever the case, nothing stimulates the mind as much as diversity of narrative does.

What I hope Malaysians will understand through this book, and I believe many did when reading *The Reluctant Politician*, is how ideas were produced in the head of one of the founding fathers of the country.

Dr Ismail was definitely a hard man to work for if you were not as impassioned about your work as he was about his.

But he was always rational, and one can always see where his ideas came from, what inspired them, and to what end.

But there is a noticeable difference in how he was at 43 years old in 1958 and how he was after May 13, 1969. After 1969, the burden of being Home Affairs Minister was heavier than ever before.

His health was far from good, and he was constantly worried about his family. He was no doubt as thorough and decisive as always in carrying out his duties, but he showed little optimism about national affairs.

He was in damage-control mode, a mode that the country seems incapable of breaking out of even today.

In 1958, on the other hand, we see a very eager and curious man in love with his family and his life, and excited about his country's place in the world. That place, we should remind ourselves, was no given thing.

In New York and Washington, Dr Ismail met representatives from all over the world, heard their views, felt their partisanship, their brilliance, their limitations, their hates, their joys, their hopes, their fears and their dreams.

While growing up in Johor, and living in Australia during the Second World War, he had developed many ideas about how the future Malaya would be – multiracial, independent, moderate in all ways, and filled with educated, healthy and principled but fun-loving Malaysians.

Later, when working at the UN and traveling throughout the USA, he learned in more concrete terms about the economics of nation building, and about the importance of international trade, international investments, international aid, and international politics.

It was almost certainly because of these reports sent home to Tunku Abdul Rahman that Dr Ismail was made External Affairs Minister on his return to Malaya on 1 February 1959.

By that time, the Tunku was convinced that no one among his supporters was better suited to handle a world torn by Cold War tensions.

Dr Ismail's experiences at the United Nations provided him with the necessary skills to argue Malaysia's case in 1964 against Soekarno's aggression against the newly extended federation, and he succeeded to the extent of smuggling captured Indonesian weapons into the general assembly for display before the delegates.

Although a ferocious enemy of communism until his retirement in 1967 as Home Affairs Minister, he did not allow his dislike of that ideology to stop him from seeking Beijing's participation in realizing his vision of a neutral Malaysia and a Southeast Asia that could think as one independent entity vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

The policy of neutralization of Southeast Asia that later became known as the Razak Doctrine was propounded by Dr Ismail when he was a backbencher on Jan 23 1968.

Dr Ismail's crucial contribution to Malaysia's policy of neutrality is irrefutable, and it is a testimony to his wisdom that the country has found his choice of direction feasible till this day.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and coordinator of its Malaysia Study Programme. He co-edited Malaya's First Year at the United Nations with Tawfik Ismail.