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Can Tun Dr Ismail help break the Impasse?

By **Ooi Kee Beng**

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MOHAMED Tawfik, the eldest son of the late Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, often wondered if the reasons he had for keeping his father's private papers to himself and away from official depositories in Malaysia were good enough.

Sometimes he was convinced he was right, and sometimes he was at a loss as to what he should do. Time went by, and the papers continued to remain more or less secret. This was despite family pressure on him to publish the papers.

Finally, he made a dramatic move. He handed over the papers to a research institute in Singapore. The consequences of his decision are now turning out to be larger than even he could have imagined.

His father was one of the founding fathers of Malaysia, who through his multifaceted abilities, honesty and capacity for hard work, served in all conceivable important ministerial positions throughout his 23 years or so in politics. He was in that sense a true nation builder in that his ideas had to be developed holistically.

However, since Tun Dr Ismail's death on August 2, 1973, Umno, the main Malaysian political party, has been plagued by endless infighting.

Along with the ceasefire in inter-ethnic discussion that resulted from the many measures taken to avoid a repeat of the May 13 racial riots of 1969, Tun Dr Ismail's contributions had been pushed aside and more or less forgotten.

He was reduced to a footnote in Malaysian history. And as we know, people do not read footnotes.

By handing his father's documents over to Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in February 2005, Tawfik intuitively found a way after three decades of doubt for the thoughts of his father to become relevant again. A time capsule has now been opened.

What's more, his timing could not have been more perfect. Fifty-year-old Malaysia is in crisis.

The effective ceasefire in inter-ethnic relations put into place after 1969 has after almost 40 years, led to an impasse in Malaysian political discussion.

Many feel it but are at a loss as to what can be done. This crisis is more than economic. It is systemic in the sense that a bankruptcy of ideas plagues both the regime and the opposition. For example, Malaysian journalists normally feel they have to fish for news by getting politicians to say something controversial which they then quickly ask other politicians to comment on, and so news is created. Such ad hoc news tends to be superficial, gossipy and is easily forgotten.

The hope for reforms and honest government that many felt after Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmed Badawi took over as premier in October 2003 has greatly waned over the last three years. Now, when the country starts out on a lackluster and faltering Ninth Malaysia Plan and prepares to acknowledge 50 years of independence, many are not certain about what it is they are to work for and what it is that they are to celebrate.

The floods that hit the country this year have dampened spirits even more.

Tawfik was merely 22 years old when he inherited his father's papers. Over the years, a few Malaysian writers did individually approach Tawfik, who was 22 years old when he inherited the papers, but none would take on the mammoth task of writing a proper biography about his great father based on those documents.

Political developments over the last 20 years made it more and more difficult for him to publish them. Luckily for him and for Malaysians in general, he came into contact with researchers at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. After being impressed by the research done there, and by the facilities available for preserving important documents, he decided to hand his father's papers over to the institute for safekeeping. He knew he would be criticised for it, but he also knew that his father's story would otherwise be forgotten. He was also convinced that that story still had a major role to play in Malaysia's nation-building process.

Looking back, what he succeeded in doing is nothing less than keeping out of official hands for over three decades documents that discuss Malaysian politics in ways that have been forgotten. Now when the contents of those papers, and the story of Tun Dr Ismail's life, are made available to the public through the publication of his father's biography *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS 2006), we may expect nothing less than a revival in public debate on Malaysia's history and nation building.

The hope that this book will help break the impasse explains why it has been unreservedly welcomed by Malaysians since its publication on December 22, 2006.

Even if the book had been inferior in quality to what is the case, and even if less facts were revealed than are revealed, it would still have had an impact. This is because the name of Tun Dr Ismail returning to vogue at this point in time when Malaysians are starved for new ideas promises to widen the badly shrunken public space.

May 13 was indeed a watershed for Malaysian nation building. The New Economic Policy was meant to break the socioeconomic structure of the country inherited from the British colonial system. However, this solution, once deprived of its vision, and its visionaries, evolved from being a solution to inter-ethnic tension into an inter-ethnic ceasefire that in time has worsened and perpetuated the inter-ethnic gap.

As this gap was accepted as being unavoidable, the possibilities for creating an advanced nation became increasingly limited. This is the crisis that Malaysia finds itself in after fifty years of independence.

Perhaps now that Malaysians are privy to what the late nation builder Tun Dr Ismail thought about Malaysia's early situation, a general overview may emerge that provides a wider and more objective understanding of, firstly, the diagnostic and tactical quality of concepts such as "Malay special position" or "Malay special rights", bumiputera and "sensitive issues", and secondly the historical context of political prescriptions such as the "New Economic Policy", "Bangsa Malaysia" and yes, even "Vision 2020".

Solutions are never goals in themselves. When they nevertheless become that, and remain so for too long, the only way to break away is to rediscover what they were supposed to be solutions to. What a good doctor does when his prescription does not help his patient is to do a new diagnosis and prescribe new medicine.

Ooi Kee Beng is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His latest book, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS, 2006) is available online at the ISEAS bookshop - <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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