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Giving up medicine for Merdeka

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Only when Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman and his brother Suleiman assured Tunku Abdul Rahman of their support did the Tunku accept the post of Umno president in August 1951 following the resignation of Dato Onn Jaafar.

IN June 1945, Ismail Abdul Rahman of Johor Baru qualified as a doctor at the age of 30. He was the first Malay to graduate from Melbourne University.

It brought great satisfaction to his father Abdul Rahman Yassin – the first president of Dewan Negara – who believed in the family having to make sacrifices for the children's education.

Abdul Rahman's eldest son, Suleiman, had earlier graduated with a BA in law from Cambridge, fully financed by his father, as Ismail and his other siblings would be.

On returning home, Ismail helped found the Malay Graduates' Association together with Suleiman and Mohamed Suffian Mohamed Hashim, later the country's Chief Justice and Lord President. The main aim of this organisation was to discuss independence for Malaya.

When the Federation of Malaya was founded on Feb 1, 1948, Ismail accepted a seat in the Johor legislature offered him by Onn Jaafar, the founder of Umno.

Onn Jaafar wanted Ismail on the Federal Legislative Council too but on condition that he first became a party member. Ismail refused, saying that he would give up practising medicine only if the political goal was full independence. In his opinion, Umno under Onn Jaafar did not have that ambition.

It was only after Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra became party president on Aug 25, 1951, that the Rahman brothers joined Umno. The Tunku would later say that he would not have accepted the post if he had not been assured of support from Suleiman and Ismail.

Once he was president, the Tunku asked the Malay Graduates' Association to select one of its members, preferably Ismail, to sit on the Central Executive Committee (CEC).

In Umno, Ismail argued that the party faced a problem of split loyalty, and that those who remained loyal to Onn Jaafar would have to resign or be expelled.

The party had few resources over the next two years, and the Tunku financed its activities by selling his own property. On his trips to Johor, he would stay at his old schoolmate Suleiman's house, sleeping in the master bedroom at his host's insistence.

Ismail found the Tunku a fascinating leader who "evoked sympathy and loyalty wherever he went". Soon after High Commissioner Henry Gurney was ambushed and killed by communist insurgents on Oct 6, 1951, the British government reiterated its policy to help colonial territories "attain self-government within the British Commonwealth".

Member system

Where Malaya was concerned, it was decided that elections would be held "at the village pump level". According to Ismail, Umno could not avoid taking part despite suspicions that the British were using these elections to delay independence.

Meanwhile the British introduced the Member system, whereby non-government members of the Federal Legislative Council would be chosen to head departments to gain experience for eventual self-government.

The new High Commissioner, Gerald Templer, brought new vigour to the fight against the communists by disbanding the Federal War Council and making the Executive Council the sole policy-making body in the colony.

Elections were first held in Malacca in November 1951 but voter turnout was low. In municipal elections conducted in Penang the following month, the supposedly non-communal Radical Party won six of the nine available seats. Umno had teamed up with the Muslim League and secured only one seat.

At the elections in Kuala Lumpur on Feb 16, 1952, Umno and MCA decided to form a coalition. Ismail believed that it was H.S. Lee, the head of Selangor MCA, who approached the head of Kuala Lumpur Umno Yahya Abdul Razak with the suggestion.

This embryo of the Alliance won nine of 12 seats.

Elections to the Johor Baru Town Council were next. Ismail, who was Umno's top man in Johor Baru, suffered "a severe infection of the valves of the heart" at this time. He campaigned diligently despite his health, and as a final challenge to voters asked that they either elect all candidates on the Alliance ticket or none at all.

His ultimatum paid off, and the Alliance won all available seats.

Ismail was by now convinced that the Alliance should “press for the election to be held at the national level as a means to gain independence”.

The Tunku and Tan Cheng Lock decided on March 16, 1953, to set up Umno-MCA liaison committees throughout the land in anticipation of federal elections.

The British announced on July 15 that a Federal Elections Committee (FEC) would be formed. As it turned out, most of the members of this select committee were supporters of Onn Jaafar.

In response to the growing popularity of the Alliance, Templer offered the Tunku a post as Member. The Tunku suspected a trap to sideline him from his Merdeka agenda. Instead, he convinced Ismail and H.S. Lee to become Members.

Ismail thus became Member for Lands, Mines and Communications, and Lee the Member for Railways and Ports.

Road Transport and Natural Resources were soon added to Ismail’s responsibilities.

Alliance plan

In the evenings, Ismail worked with other party members on the details of a plan that the Alliance wished to suggest to the British, namely that an independent commission consisting of members from Commonwealth countries be formed to draft a Constitution for an independent Malaya.

The FEC’s report published in January 1954 resulted in one overriding controversial issue: What is to be the proportion of appointed elected members?

The committee suggested 48 appointed against 44 elected members, while the Alliance wished for 40 against 60 respectively, with elections being held by November 1954. The Conference of Rulers proposed that 46 be appointed and 52 elected. The Alliance refused to accept this compromise.

The Tunku and T.H. Tan left for London on April 21, 1954, to meet Oliver Lyttleton, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Abdul Razak Hussein joined them from New York.

Except for a show of support from certain British MPs, the three men did not gain any headway despite meeting Lyttleton.

That month, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) officially joined the Alliance after it failed to enter into a coalition with Onn Jaafar’s Parti Negara, which had demanded that the MIC disbanded itself in the process.

The antipathy between Onn Jaafar and the Umno leadership had by now become highly infected. Ismail stated later that during a debate, he “dissected (Onn) into four parts, all of which were anything but complimentary to him”.

Ismail gave moral support to Tan Siew Sin and advised him to push through a motion to stop Onn from making more “inflammatory communal speeches”.

On May 25, the Alliance issued a warning that its members would withdraw from the government should the FEC’s recommendations be accepted. Two weeks later, it also made public its request for an independent constitutional committee to be formed.

On June 18, all the leaders of the Alliance resigned from the Federal Legislative Council. In their absence, the Federation of Malaya Agreement (Amendment) Bill was nevertheless passed. This was based on the compromise suggested by the Conference of Rulers, with the added clause that the High Commissioner could appoint five reserve members and two official members at his discretion.

Fearing that the impasse would benefit the communists, new High Commissioner Donald MacGillivray called for a meeting with the Tunku, Ismail and H.S. Lee at Singapore’s Seletar Naval Base where the British warship *HMS Alert* was docked. The three men arrived at the jetty at 11pm on July 2.

At that meeting, Ismail suggested that the High Commissioner consult with the majority party before appointing the reserve members. After thinking it over for a day, MacGillivray accepted this idea and the Alliance called off its boycott.

In March 1955, the colonial administration announced that federal and state elections would be held on July 27. The Alliance leaders felt that the critical seat was Johor Baru. Who was to take on Onn Jaafar? Ismail thought it had to be either him or his brother Suleiman.

The latter volunteered in what the Tunku considered Suleiman’s “most noble and selfless action”, and went on to win the most number of votes in the whole election. The Alliance was victorious in 51 of the 52 seats contested.

Target date

In Tunku’s first Cabinet, Ismail was Minister of Natural Resources while Suleiman was Minister of Local Government, Housing and Town Planning.

At the end of August 1955, when new Secretary of State for the Colonies Alan Lennox-Boyd paid an official visit to Malaya, the Tunku called on him to hold top-level discussions on independence. To his surprise, the British agreed to meet two delegations – one representing the elected Alliance government and the other appointed by the Malay Rulers – in January the following year.

In the meantime, a meeting was arranged between the elected government and the communist insurgents on Dec 28 and 29, a week after Umno’s general assembly declared that Aug 31, 1957, would be the target date for independence.

Although the Baling Talks held with communist leader Chin Peng – and which Ismail advised against – failed to end the Emergency, it strengthened the Tunku's position in negotiations in London. He had, after all, publicly refused to give in to the communists.

Three days later, two four-man delegations – one representing the elected government and the other the sultans – boarded the Italian cruise ship *Asia* bound for Karachi. Tunku's idea that the men should spend time with each other and reach some mutual understanding before meeting the British proved a masterstroke.

By the time they flew from Karachi to London, they were in broad agreement about “the lines of discussion with the British”.

A series of negotiations on the transfer of power followed. Issues concerning state finances and security were easily concluded to Ismail's surprise. Compensation for civil servants took more time but with results that satisfied all parties.

Final agreement was reached on Feb 8, incidentally the Tunku's 53rd birthday, and it was celebrated with “a sumptuous dinner”.

In April 1955, self-government became a reality and Ismail was made Minister of Commerce and Industry. He said in an interview that his priorities were to woo big industry to invest in Malaya and to improve the economic situation of the Malays.

The issue of education remained a hot potato for the Alliance and Umno itself. The Razak Report released in May 1956 was opposed by a group of Umno councillors, who wanted Malay to be the sole medium of instruction.

When the party council debated the issue, Ismail attacked the critics for trying to suppress the languages of all the peoples of the country and not giving consideration to the Chinese and Indians. It was enough, he argued, that the Chinese and Indians recognised Malaya to be a Malay country and that the national language was Malay.

Ismail also believed that once the Malays became educated and had gained confidence, they would voluntarily ask that their special rights to be taken away.

Singapore was negotiating for self-government at this time, and the British wanted a council to be formed with representatives from Singapore, Britain and Malaya to handle security matters. The British were relying on Kuala Lumpur's anti-communism to curb leftist tendencies in Singapore.

Ismail objected, saying that an independent Malaya should not meddle in the internal affairs of another country. He was overruled. However, he would become Malaya's representative when that council was formed in 1959.

About two months before independence, Ismail was asked by the Tunku to become Malaya's ambassador to Washington and also first permanent representative to the United Nations. Ismail felt honoured but some of his relatives and friends feared that he was being sidelined. The Tunku had told him that the choice was between Abdul Razak and him and he could not really spare his deputy.

Thus, in the weeks before independence, Ismail was fully engaged with setting up base in both Washington and New York, managing to buy three buildings there in a short time, and fighting to get approval from the Cabinet.

Merely five days after independence, Ismail and his family, along with Ismail Ali who would later become the head of Bank Negara, left for the United States to stake out Malaya's place in the world.

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