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Ghafar on money politics, musketeers

By Ooi Kee Beng

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FORMER Malaysian deputy prime minister Tun Ghafar Baba, who died last Sunday, had been in and out of hospital for the last six years of his life. By last September, most people had given up hope that he would get well enough to participate actively in the public sphere.

He granted me an interview a few weeks before he fell seriously ill for the last time. He was in a chatty mood that afternoon on June 16 last year. We had met to talk about the late Tun Dr Ismail for a book I was writing. The discussion led to him expressing some opinions about Malaysian politics.

The following, paraphrased to a degree, is a selection of comments he made. Hopefully, they provide insight into his leadership ideals and his worries close to the end of his life. He said:

'I remember three truly extraordinary men from the early days of Malaysia. There was Tunku Abdul Rahman, a jovial and insightful chap; there was Tun Abdul Razak, a quiet but stern type; and there was Tun Dr Ismail, a serious man who only talked about important things. The Tunku was very happy to get Tun Dr Ismail to join him in the early 1950s as he thought of him as a strong type of leader. The mutual respect between these three men was vital to Malaysia in the early days. These were our three musketeers, the men to emulate.

You never heard people say that they were making money. The Tunku was a straightforward man. He once said to religious leaders wishing to join Umno: 'Before you consider joining my party, I want to tell you that I am a gambler, I go horse-racing every week, I am a drinker. I want to let you know this before you consider joining my party. You might otherwise find out only later and run off.'

I once organised a meeting for Tun Dr Ismail with some religious leaders. He came in but he never shook hands with these people. He walked straight to the table, sat down, made his speech and then left. He went straight to business. I thought it strange at that time. Why did he behave that way? We needed to gain support. Here we were trying to win votes and he wouldn't even shake hands with people. But today, I understand him. People came to listen to him. If they wanted to follow him, then it was because of what he said, not because he had shaken hands with them.

He was a no-nonsense kind of person who did not tolerate unpunctuality; he was always strict, brave and demanding. The Tunku made him the first representative at the United Nations

because he considered that position vitally important to the country at that time. After serving Malaysia for 10 years after independence, Tun Dr Ismail was worn out and suffering from bad health. He decided to retire. But when rioting broke out on May 13, 1969, he decided to come back into government.

I was close to fellow Malaccan Tun Tan Siew Sin (the former Malaysian finance minister and head of the Malaysian Chinese Association), and I remember that Tun Tan was very disappointed with the weak support his party had received in the May 1969 general election. Siew Sin and I discussed what he should do. I was much younger than he, but I actually suggested that he should stay out of the Cabinet and so make the Chinese community realise that they would be without representation if they did not support him. Whether that was clever or foolish on my part, I don't know, but Tun Dr Ismail rushed to his house and gave him a scolding. I don't think Tun Dr Ismail knew the idea came from me.

In those days, we looked at things pragmatically, even Malay special rights. For example, once, an Umno man complained that despite Malay rights, the Olympics contingent was mainly made up of Chinese - 'Where are the Malay rights there?' It fell on Tun Dr Ismail to answer him: 'Special rights are only in economics, not in sports. Do you mean that in high jump, we should use strings to pull the Malays across the bar and make them competitive?' He then burst out into a hearty laugh. That was one of the few times I saw him really laugh.

Umno has changed a lot since then. When I decided to step down after eight years as then-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's deputy in 1993, it was because there was no longer any way for me to compete in party elections, what with the huge amounts of money floating around. Money politics has only grown worse since then.

(In May last year, Tun Ghafar led a group of 50 Umno veterans in signing a memorandum that was then handed over to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, calling for reforms to curb money politics and to revive the party spirit. The Prime Minister replied that he was in agreement with the reforms.)

Umno had always been the pillar of Malaysia and if that pillar is allowed to decay, the nation as a whole will suffer. Chinese friends ask me how Umno is doing. Now, why do they worry about Umno? They are not members. The thing is, even they know that Umno must remain strong and sound if the national economy is to continue growing. If anything bad happens to Umno, the country will collapse and businesses will collapse.

That is why we must stop money politics. There is no doubt that if it continues, Umno will be in crisis. Corruption will become even more rampant. I am sad, indeed, that this is happening to my country, to my party.

The Prime Minister may not realise how bad things really are, and yes-men around him may be feeding him the false idea that things are rolling along at a satisfactory and effective pace. More direct and interrogative methods are needed. We have to advise and criticise the government. That is the least we can do.'

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