

## **Biographical Notes**

### **Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (4 November 1915 - 2 August 1973) – Medical doctor/ politician**

Ismail was born in Johor Bahru on 4 November 1915. His father Abdul Rahman bin Yassin, was a top civil servant and first President of the Malayan Senate (Dewan Negara). Dr Ismail's older brother Dato Sulaiman was a former Cabinet Minister, and Malaysian High Commissioner to Australia.<sup>1</sup>

After completing his basic education in Johor, Ismail pursued medical studies at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. Unable to cope with the pace of study, Ismail dropped out of College in 1939. He was later admitted to Queen's College at Melbourne University, Australia and eventually graduated in 1945.<sup>2</sup>

Ismail returned to Malaya in 1946, and soon after started a clinic, *Tawakkal*, in Johor Bahru.<sup>3</sup> At this time, Ismail's family was involved in resisting the Malayan Union plan which the British were trying to impose on the Malayan states. Similarly, Ismail became interested in politics and fighting for Malayan independence. He joined several other returned students to form a political discussion group known as the Malay Graduates' Association.<sup>4</sup>

After Tunku Abdul Rahman became president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1951, Ismail joined the party. Subsequently Tunku nominated Ismail to serve as an unofficial member of the Federal Legislative Council in 1953. Ismail was charged with oversight of lands, mines and communication. In 1954, Ismail, together with other local representatives, resigned from this Council in protest of the recommendations of the Federal Elections Committee.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1955 federal elections, the Alliance won a majority of votes and formed government. Ismail was appointed Minister for Natural Resources. Although there were several issues facing the Alliance government, their priority was independence, or *Merdeka*, which they hoped to achieve in two years.<sup>6</sup> After negotiations with the British, Malaya was granted self-government in 1956. Ismail's portfolio changed to Commerce and Industry, and he declared his priorities to be attracting investment to Malaya, and improving the economic lot of the Malays.<sup>7</sup>

Malaya gained independence on 31 August 1957, and Ismail was appointed Malaya's first ambassador to the USA as well as permanent representative to the United Nations. During his 16 months in this position Ismail gained experience that shaped him into a confident diplomat and expert on foreign affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Upon return to Malaya in 1959, Dr Ismail was initially tasked with External Affairs, and subsequently made responsible for Internal Security and Home Affairs. The 1960s was a tumultuous period in Malaya with the country dealing with the threats of communism, communalism and difficulties with the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. In addition to issues of national security, Ismail was also responsible for housing.<sup>9</sup> In 1967, Ismail resigned from government due to health reasons.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Tun Ismail, a leader who cared", *The Straits Times*, 4 August 1973; Ooi Kee Beng, *The reluctant politician: Tun Dr Ismail and his time* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007), pp. 14, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 20-21, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 44, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 45, 50-51.

<sup>5</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. xxiv, 61-66.

<sup>6</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> "Minister's first 2 jobs", *The Straits Times*, 23 Mar 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 85-86; 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, p. 123, 130, 131.

<sup>10</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 166-167.

After leaving government, Dr Ismail kept busy running various business corporations. He became Chairman of Guthrie Corporation, Malayan Banking, British Petroleum and other corporations. He also established the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation (MISC) which is presently a subsidiary of Petronas.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the Alliance Party was losing popular support and Malaysia suffered one of its worse riots on 13 May 1969. On 14 May, Ismail returned to government to help stabilise the situation.<sup>12</sup> In 1970, Tun Razak succeeded Tunku Abdul Rahman as Prime Minister, and appointed Ismail Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>13</sup>

On 2 August 1973, Dr Ismail died of a heart attack.<sup>14</sup> He left behind a wife, Toh Puan Norashikin Seth (Neno) and six children: Mohd Tawfik (b.1951), Zailah (b. 1953), Badariah (b. 1957), Mohd Tarmizi (b. 1960), Zamakhshari (b. 1964) and Mhd Ariff (b. 1967).<sup>15</sup>

Link to [Tun Ismail Private Papers Index List](#)

---

<sup>11</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 171, 178-179.

<sup>12</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, pp. 186-189.

<sup>13</sup> "Tun Ismail, a leader who cared", *The Straits Times*, 4 August 1973; Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> "Tun Ismail dies of heart attack", *The Straits Times*, 3 August 1973.

<sup>15</sup> Ooi, *The reluctant politician*, p. xxiv.