

Welcome Remarks

By Tan Sri Ramon Navaratman

Duli Yang Teramat Mulia, Raja Muda Perak Darul Ridzuan Raja Nazrin Shah; H.E James Keith, U.S Ambassador; H.E Ambassador K. Kesavapani, Director of ISEAS; Excellencies, Tan Sri-Tan Sri, Datuk-Datuk, saudara saudari sekalian. Selamat pagi dan Salam sejahtera.

Let me, on behalf of ASLI-CPPS; warmly welcome you all to the launch of this outstanding book entitled, “Malaya’s First Year at the U.N”. This special launch is undertaken jointly with the foremost think tanks – the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI) and its Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS).

I wish some think tanks in Malaysia had also done as much publishing on Malaysian Leaders and topics, as the more active ASEAS in Singapore.

For this publication, “Malaya’s First Year at the UN” and the earlier “The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr. Ismail and His Time” – we want to thank Ambassador Kesavapani, the Director of ISEAS. We also warmly congratulate the authors or compilers of this book. They are two fine persons – Saudara Tawfik Ismail, the illustrious son of our Malaysian luminary, the late Tun Dr. Ismail, and author and scholar Dr. Ooi Kee Beng.

This book is a compilation of Tun Ismail’s almost daily letters to our first Prime Minister, the great Father of our Independence (our Bapa Merdeka) from September 1957 – January 1959. He wrote as our first ambassador to Washington and first permanent head of the Federation of Malaya to the United Nations. Holding two appointments so well at the same time was in itself a remarkable feat.

The book is invaluable as it gives us deep insight into his thinking, his values, his aspirations and the challenges facing our newly born independent country, and its unique leaders of that era.

We therefore wish to salute the life and memories of the late Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman. He was a real pioneer leader.

But what lessons can we learn from this book? Firstly, to me, as a former civil servant, I find it quite extraordinary that a minister could have written so diligently and in such great detail to his beloved Prime Minister. (I don’t think we can expect this same sense of duty and dedication, to say nothing of transparency and accountability from any minister anywhere, in Malaysia or overseas in these times. He was dedicated and committed.

Secondly, Tun Dr. Ismail’s pace of work was formidable. He practically drove himself, often working up to 20 hours a day! It must have caused him stress and later ill health. How many of us can claim to work so hard and so consistently, for so long? I believe he

had a selfless love and devotion to Malaya/Malaysia and our people. I wish more of our leaders are blessed with that sacrificial sense of duty to serve God, king and country!

Thirdly, Tun Dr Ismail was obviously a leader of great integrity. He was totally honest. I wonder how many leaders would report faithfully on what they did everyday to their boss. He even reported back that some of his senior staff were “mediocre”, that they were late for the Agong’s Birthday celebration in New York and that he himself missed sending off an Ambassador at the Railway Station since his old watch was losing time! No one has ever said that he ever abused his power for financial gains.

Fourthly, Tun Dr Ismail revealed his very nationalistic Malayan/Malaysian thinking. He wrote on April 25th, 1958, that he was impressed with the “American sense of judging foreign culture on its merits, divorced from political prejudice” He had attended the Roman Ballet in New York.

I wish his inclusive and liberal views are shared by our leaders today, where official cultural shows are often devoid of multiculturalism.

Fifthly, As Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, our former distinguished Foreign Minister mentioned in his fine Foreword, Tun Dr Ismail was committed to multi-Malaysia. Tun Dr Ismail’s foresight on Globalisation and competition was impressive. At a meeting with Mr John Rockefeller III, on May 1st 1958, he urged invited US capital involvement with Malaya as he said, “British investment in Malaya is not meeting much competition, and that as a result, the British have a monopoly” in the Federation. That was shrewd economies! Even today we need to diversify our investments. We need more investment from the Middle East, China, India and Europe.

Then again, at the same meeting when Mr Rockefeller enquired if more American investments would widen the economic gap between the Malays and Chinese, he replied, “that it was unanimously agreed by all races in Malaya, that in the long term interest of the prosperity and peace in Malaya, that Malays should be given a footing in the economy of the country”.

I think Tun Dr Ismail will be happy to see the vast progress made in social engineering in the fields of poverty and share of corporate ownership in Malaysia.

He must have been referring to the concept of the social contract. However, many economists believe that the equity share target of 30% has indeed been achieved. But if there is still doubt, perhaps some independent think tanks should study this important issue professionally and not politically.

As one of the officials who helped formulate the NEP, I would draw inspirations from YM Raja Nazrin’s wise observation that it’s not the NEP that is at fault, but its wrong implementation. This has caused much distress and even disunity. This issue too must be resolved soon to realize the National Unity, promoted and exemplified by our founding fathers such as our own heroic leader Tun Dr Ismail

Looking Forward – What can we learn from Tun Dr Ismail?

In the epilogue written so well by authors Saudara Tawfik and Ooi Kee Beng, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak wrote to Tun Dr Ismail on 19th November 1958, “No political leader in this country can expect to get support of all members of every race, but we must always stick to principles, and known policies. So long as we are sincere and play a straight game, we should be alright.”

I believe that Tun Dr Ismail was very sincere in his service to our country and always played a straight game according to the best principles and practices that we all respect.

That is why we were “alright”. Now we hope and pray that Tun Dr Ismail’s legacy and high ideals and exemplary standards of service to our nation; and Tun Razak’s advice, will be followed closely by our future Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Najib Tun Razak – so that our beloved country will be “alright” in the future!

On behalf of ASLI – Welcome again, congratulations to the authors and thanks to ISEAS and all of you, for your support and patience.

Tun Dr Ismail was a true Malaysian Patriot and a remarkable leader. May Tun Dr Ismail’s Legacy continue to inspire us always.

Terima Kasih