

## BOOK REVIEW

Ismail, Tawfik and Ooi Kee Beng (compilers). *Malaysia's First Year at the United Nations as Reflected in Dr Ismail's Reports Home to Tunku Abdul Rahman*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2009 (130 pgs.).

This book, which consists solely of notes penned by Tun Dr. Ismail Alhaj bin Datuk Abdul Rahman, the first Permanent Representative to the United Nations and the first ambassador to the United States of America, communicates, as the title indicates, about his first year at the UN. The honour of "first" did not begin or end here for Tun Dr. Ismail. His series of "firsts" in the history of the country included graduating "as the first Malayan medical graduate from Melbourne University" in 1945, receiving "the [then] newly instituted Order of Chivalry (Darjah Yang Mulia Setia Mahkota Malaysia: The Most Esteemed Order of the Crown of Malaysia)" and the "Order's First Class (Seri Setia Mahkota: Grand Commander)," after which he was known to the world as 'Tun Dr Ismail' and continued even with his demise when he was the first to be given a state funeral on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1973, and the first "to be laid to rest in the Heroes Mausoleum on the grounds of the [National] mosque."

Apart from a chronology, a foreword, a prologue and an epilogue, appendices and memorable pictures, the book is a compilation of notes, ranging from a line to several pages of Tun Dr. Ismail's comments on various and sundry matters. From the notes we come to know his positions on a variety of issues and, on occasions, the statesman's personality and how he embraced work and despised incompetency. We learn all this from the "Notes by the Ambassador" which covers the period between 30 December 1957 to 21 August 1958 in the United States. We learn that Tun Dr. Ismail worked 20-hour weekdays and commuted between his two offices from New York and Washington and intermittently complained about his mediocre staff. The strenuous regiment that he had set for himself placed a great toll on his health, but we also know that though he saw a sense of urgency in everything he did or wanted done, he always carried out his task with tact, patience and efficiency.

Much can be learned from this book. It provides interesting anecdotes about protocol and politics at the UN and a historical account of an important period in the heydays of Malayan politics. The book also relates the extensive travels of a Malay man in the United States. Tun Dr. Ismail met people, gave speeches, and clarified Malaya's position to Americans wherever he went. However, unfortunately, these notes do not reveal his position on what he saw of the country or the segregationist policies that he witnessed in the United States. However, as it stands, this is an important document of facts. We know, to a certain degree, how "the primary architect of Malayan (Malaysian) Foreign Policy" thought about shaping the new democracy that was Malaya. We learn that Malaya was the 82<sup>nd</sup> member of the United Nations and became a member on September 17, 1957 at the 678<sup>th</sup> meeting and was welcomed by the President of the 12<sup>th</sup> session, Leslie Munro of New Zealand. We read with a smile when he states that on this auspicious occasion, he had a *keris* with him and that it "was the first time that a weapon of any kind had been brought into the General Assembly of the United Nations".

From the notes, we are also made aware of how early our relationship with the United States began. "Where relations with the United States were concerned, he sought technological support and financial aid and investments from what he termed America's 'new capitalism'." His meetings with several prominent dignitaries, including Secretary of State Dulles, about loans for the country and the setting up a central bank are noteworthy. As for international affairs, Tun Ismail adopted "an independent line" by which he means that "our stand on international problems should not be influenced by the policies of other countries, big or small." Such refreshing reassurances about the sovereignty of the nation, especially in the early days, is backed by evidences of the speeches he gave against communism, communism in Malaya, disarmament, apartheid in South Africa and a host of other matters. This book is unique in that, through the notes of Tun Dr. Ismail, we get a close look at one of our most decorated and remarkable politicians and personalities. Since it is not a biography or an autobiography of the man, this review cannot evaluate the merit of the book in terms of style, shortcomings or organization. Since it is a compilation of the notes of a man, we