

**MALAYA'S FIRST
YEAR AT THE
UNITED NATIONS**



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MALAYA'S FIRST YEAR AT THE UNITED NATIONS

As Reflected in Dr Ismail's Reports
Home to Tunku Abdul Rahman

Compiled by
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CHRONOLOGY OF TUN DR ISMAIL ALHAJ BIN DATUK ABDUL RAHMAN'S LIFE

1915 — Born 4 November in Johor Bahru to Abdul Rahman bin Yassin (1890–1970) and Zahara binte Abu Bakar (?–1936).

1922 — Starts his education at Sekolah Bukit Zaharah and later goes to English College, both in Johor Bahru.

1936–39 — Does medical studies at King Edward College of Medicine, Singapore.

1939–45 — Studies medicine at Queen's College, Melbourne University.

1945 — Becomes the first Malayan medical graduate from Melbourne University, and subsequently returns to Malaya in 1946. He joins the Medical Department in Johor, but leaves after a short stint.

1947–53 — Goes into private practice in Johor Bahru, and is moderately successful with a clinic called Tawakkal (Trust in God), named after his childhood home.

1948–54 — Nominated unofficial member of the Johor State Council, and then official member of the Johor Executive Council. He is elected into the Johor Bahru Town Council.

1950 — Marries Norashikin Seth (nickname Neno, born 17 January 1930 in Johor Bahru). The couple has six children, two girls and four boys (Mohd Tawfik Ismail, born 23 September 1951 in GH in JB; Zailah, born 2 May 1953 in GH in JB; Badariah, born 8 March 1957 in PJ; Mohamed Tarmizi, born 23 May

1960 in Bangsar KL; Zamakhshari, born 16 September 1964 at GH in KL, and Mohamed Ariff, born 25 October 1967 in KL).

1951 — Finally joins Umno after Onn Ja'afar resigned and Tunku Abdul Rahman had gained control of the party.

1953 — Appointed in September as unofficial member of the Federal Legislative Council under Sir Gerald Templar. He becomes Member of Lands, Mines and Communication upon Tunku Abdul Rahman's request. He moves with his family to Kuala Lumpur.

1954–55 — Becomes Member of Natural Resources.

1955 — Elected to the Federal Legislative Council for the Johore Timor constituency (to be re-elected in 1959, 1964 and 1969). Elected Minister for Natural Resources, and lays groundwork for Felda in May (see *The Star*, 26 March 2001).

1956 — Appointed Minister of Commerce and Industry by the new Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

1957 (September) – 1959 (February) — Becomes Minister Plenipotentiary (without portfolio), and is sent as Malaya's first ambassador to Washington D.C., USA, and Malaya's first Permanent Head of Federation to the United Nations in New York.

1959 — Returns from Washington and continues to serve as Minister of Commerce and Industry.

1959 — Elected member for Johore Timor to the Dewan Ra'ayat and is appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in August. He is Minister of Commerce and Trade from 20 September to 17 November.

1960 — Becomes Minister of Internal Security on 16 November, and also chairman of the Commission of the Enquiry into the Position of the Malayan Student Community in UK and the Republic of Ireland.

- 1961 — Given the additional post of Minister of Home Affairs on 22 February. Also appointed Federal Representative to the Internal Security Council in Singapore, until 16 September 1963.
- 1962 — Leads delegation to UN General Assembly 17th meeting.
- 1963 — Becomes chairman of Malaysian Security Board.
- 1964 — Re-elected member of Johore Timor Constituency in April. Appointed Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Justice. In September, he leads a Malaysian delegation to the UN Security Council to debate Indonesian aggression.
- 1965 — Makes trip to United Nations Headquarters in New York with his wife Neno, together with Philip Kuok and wife, then travels to Madrid, London and Beirut, before returning home end of November. In September he is made in absentia Grand Officer of the National Order of Vietnam, by the South Vietnamese government through a visiting delegation.
- 1966 — He starts the year by visiting Manila to attend the presidential inauguration of Ferdinand Marcos. In April, he accepts an invitation from the South Korean Central Intelligence Service to visit Seoul for eight days, and is awarded the Order of Merit (First Class). He flies to London in May 1966 to attend the Conference of Law Ministers from the Commonwealth. He becomes chairman of Malayan Banking after its financial collapse and subsequent nationalization. He becomes the first to be conferred the Seri Setia Mahkota (Grand Commander), which carries the title “Tun”.
- 1967 — In June, he resigns from the Cabinet — though not as MP — for health reasons, and returns to private medical practice. He joins the board of Malaysian Sugar Refineries, and Guthries.
- 1967 — Undergoes successful treatment at Royal Marsden Hospital in London for cancer of the naso-pharynx. Starts private practice in Kuala Lumpur with a group of doctors upon his return.

- 1969 — Asked to return to government by Tun Razak after 10 May elections. Becomes Deputy Director of Operations of the National Operations Council. On 12 June, he is appointed Minister of Home Affairs. In September, he makes a trip to Europe and the United Kingdom for medical treatment over three weeks. A medical check-up in 23–24 September gives him “a clean bill of health”. His official golf handicap is certified by the Royal Selangor Golf Club, on 21 October, as 15.
- 1970 — Leaves for London on March 3 for heart consultation, and stays for nine weeks. In his absence, he is awarded the Republic of Indonesia Medal Second Class when President Suharto visited Kuala Lumpur. In September, the new premier Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein appoints him deputy. He visits London between October 4 and 11 for a medical check-up on the way to New York for 25th anniversary celebrations of the United Nations.
- 1971 — Visits Dubrovnik, in September, he travels to Singapore to study Singapore’s low-cost housing schemes. While visiting Sabah in May, he is awarded the Sri Panglima Darjah Kinabalu. He stays in London from 24 Oct–28 Nov for a medical check-up, returning to Malaysia *via* Paris, Belgrade and Cairo.
- 1972 — He receives the Honorary Fellowship Award from the Malaysian Institute of Management (MIM).
- 1973 — He takes on the portfolio of Minister of Trade and Industry on 3 January, and in March, visits Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Armidale, with his wife and daughter Zailah, for talks regarding investments in Malaysia. He pays a visit to his alma mater, Queen’s College, University of Melbourne, where he is conferred an honorary degree of doctor of laws. He also visits the University of New England in Armidale to see his son Tawfik Ismail. On 9 June, he is awarded a similar degree by Universiti Sains Malaysia. Malaysia’s Academy of Medicine makes him Honorary Member. On Thursday 2 August, he passes away of a heart attack at his home on Maxwell Road (renamed Jalan Tun Dr Ismail in early 1974) in Kuala Lumpur. On Sunday 4 August, after the country’s state funeral, he becomes the first to be buried at the State Mausoleum.

FOREWORD

I feel very honoured to be given the opportunity by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies of Singapore to write a Foreword for its second publication on Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. I wish to congratulate the Institute for publishing this edition on the late Tun Dr Ismail, this time confined to his contributions to the evolution of the nation's foreign policy, based on his personal records, speeches, letters etc. The Institute, through its first publication — *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (2006) — has made all Malaysians aware of the role that Dr Ismail played in nation building. Now, with this volume — *Malaya's First Year at the United Nations, as Reflected in Dr Ismail's Reports Home to the Tunku* — the Institute gives the reader a complete profile of Dr Ismail as an astute diplomat and the formulator of foreign affairs who chartered the nation's course in international relations in the early years of its independence.

When I was appointed Foreign Minister in 1975 by Tun Razak, Malaysia's foreign policy continued to be built on the foundation and direction set by Dr Ismail. His writings and speeches, and his letters to the Tunku, covering a variety of foreign policy issues, are a valuable asset in understanding the unique role he played in the nation's history. He was without doubt the primary architect of Malayan (Malaysian) Foreign Policy.

As I read this manuscript, I am amazed by Dr Ismail's ability to transform himself very confidently into a successful diplomat at the United Nations when he was there as our first Permanent Representative. He was never trained as a diplomat. He was a politician and a medical doctor by

training. He was also the Malayan diplomat to first address the United Nations when Malaya was admitted into the world body. During his tenure at the United Nations and as Ambassador to the United States, Dr Ismail succeeded in introducing the Federation of Malaya to the world in a dignified manner. The Tunku and his Cabinet colleagues were proud of his service to the nation.

His first speech to the United Nations is a testimony to his commitment to a multiracial Malaya, and it reveals the joy he felt over the fact that the nation had gained “the right and good fortune to live as a free, independent and united nation among the free nations of the world”. His life-long service to the nation was recognized when he was later bestowed a “Tunship” by His Majesty, the Yang Di Pertuan Agong. The story of this illustrious son of Malaysia stands as a model for all Malaysians to emulate. As former Foreign Minister of Malaysia, I too am guided by his principles.

Tengku Tan Sri Dato' Seri Ahmad Rithauddeen
Former Foreign Minister of Malaysia
January 2008

PROLOGUE

Malaysia's first Permanent Head of Federation to the United Nations and first ambassador to the United States of America, Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, kept relatively detailed notes about his experiences and thoughts during his 17 months in New York and Washington. This was done on his own initiative as he thought that it would provide Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Malaya's first Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister, with what could be useful information.

Just before Malaya gained independence from Great Britain on 31 August 1957, the Tunku had decided to send his faithful colleague Dr Ismail to the United States. He was convinced that the latter would provide the new state with competent representation at the world body, and in the most powerful nation in the world. Dr Ismail was excited by what he considered an honour, despite suspicions voiced by friends and relatives that he was being effectively "exiled" from the centre of Malayan politics. An understanding was apparently reached between Dr Ismail and the Tunku that the posting to the USA would be only for a year.

In July 1957, slightly over a month before Malaya's independence, he flew to the United States to secure three buildings for the embassy, and a lease for an office in New York. He returned in time for the celebration of independence, and left again on 5 September with his party which included Ismail Mohamed Ali — who was to be the economic minister at Malaya's Washington embassy — and "four women, nine children and thirty-one pieces of luggage". Three of these children — six-year-old son Tawfik Ismail,

four-year-old daughter Zailah, and six-month-old daughter Badariah — belonged to the 42-year-old Dr Ismail and his 27-year-old wife, Norashikin (Neno) Seth.

Malaya became the 82nd member of the United Nations on 17 September 1957. The country's delegation was welcomed the following afternoon at the General Assembly's 678th meeting by the President of the 12th Session, Leslie Munro of New Zealand:

It is very proper, on this happy occasion, that we should recall the record of the Federation of Malaya's uninterrupted progress towards independence, the great responsibility and statesmanship exercised by the Malayan leaders, and the harmony and co-operation existing between the Federation of Malaya and the United Kingdom, with whose guidance and help, the new State has taken its place in the community of nations.

John Selwyn Brooke Lloyd, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the United Kingdom, Malaya's former colonial master, made the following point on that auspicious occasion:

Some people have congratulated the Federation of Malaya on having won its fight for independence. Well, that fight was not against us, the British. We have, as a matter of deliberate policy, sought to guide the peoples of the British Empire to self-government and independence. We have not always agreed with them upon the timing or the precise methods, but it has been, and is, our declared and deliberate course of policy — a policy not forced upon us but voluntarily undertaken, and we are proud of it.

From what can be gathered from other sources, leading Malaya's delegation into the United Nations General Assembly Hall for the first time was one of Dr Ismail's proudest moments.

Our admission to the United Nations was spectacular. We all dressed in the national costume — or at least those of us who had them. In addition, I had a kris tucked into my waist. This was the first time that a weapon of any kind had been brought into the General Assembly of the United Nations (Drifting c13).

His inaugural speech (Appendix 1) was relatively short. There were 40 foreign ministers present at that general debate, which, according to him,

“certainly provided a wonderful opportunity for a foreign minister to gather facts with which to evolve a foreign policy for his Government”. He later wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) that he thought it a pity that the Tunku was unable to be among them (Letter 18 December 1957).

Already the following week, more precisely on 24 and 25 September, Dr Ismail participated in the general debate during the General Assembly’s 686th and 687th meeting (Appendix 2a and 2b). Busy as he was, he did not have cause or occasion to participate again until 26 September 1958 at the 761st meeting of the 13th Session (Appendix 4).

Dr Ismail thus “threw heart and soul” into his new job, but soon found out how much the double posting would demand of him and his young family. The lack of governmental preparation for the two missions, financially or otherwise, made things exceedingly stressful. He pointed out time and again to the Treasury that other newly independent countries were spending much more man-hours and money on their Washington and New York missions (Drifting c3).

About four months after arriving in the USA, Dr Ismail wrote to Oscar A. Spencer, economic adviser at the PMO, briefly informing him about working conditions at the embassy and of the mission in the first few months. He was also upset that the Treasury was giving him trouble over expenditure spent on setting up the two offices.

My task is rendered the more difficult by the presence of, with the exception of Ismail [Ali], inexperienced, and in the case of our UN office in New York, mediocre staff. For the last three months my staff in Washington had to work in a building in which the work of renovating was going on at the same time, and I and my family had literally to camp with hired furniture in our Embassy, while waiting for it to be painted and furnished (Letters 18 December 1957).

His working day could last as long as 20 hours, and he had to commute between New York and Washington three to four times a week. Despite the workload, he conscientiously jotted down his experiences and thoughts whenever he could.

These “Notes by the Ambassador” starts from 30 December 1957 and ends on 21 August 1958. None exists from the first four months. This was

probably due to the fact that Dr Ismail's party had difficulties settling in because of construction work at the residence. His "American diary" ends on 21 August 1958, and nothing seems to have been preserved beyond a few letters sent to the Tunku between then and 8 January 1959, when Dr Ismail's family sailed for home via Italy on the *Guilio Cesare*.

The accounts of his time in the USA were sent regularly "on a personal basis" to the Tunku. In a cover letter accompanying the first collection of remarks, dated 27 January 1958, Dr Ismail cautiously said that he would stop sending his "diary" if it did not prove useful to the prime minister. According to him, Ismail Ali was jotting down his own comments separately, and sending them to Ghazali Shafie, the permanent secretary at the External Affairs Ministry (Letters).

Ismail Ali was three years younger than Dr Ismail, and was known for his writing skills. Both were among the Malayan scholars cut off from all contact with Malaya during the Japanese occupation. Dr Ismail was doing his medical studies at Queen's College, Melbourne University, and did not return to Malaya until 26 July 1946. Ismail Ali studied economics at Cambridge on a Queen's Scholarship, and then went over to law studies, acted as firewatcher during German raids, worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation's Far Eastern Service, and finally taught the Malay language to military personnel at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He returned to Malaya in late 1948 (Chung 2002).

The relationship between these two men — both highly exacting in their working style — was marked by mutual respect and mutual irritation (Interview, Lim Taik Choon, 13 May 2006). They both had a fondness for the fine arts and for literature, and it was Ismail Ali who pushed Dr Ismail to become a life-long member of the Book of the Month Club. During their stay in the USA, Ismail and his wife Neno paid frequent visits to art exhibitions, and their residence would acquire and display works by famous Malayan artists such as Yong Mun Seng and Arif. These remain among the more valuable items in the embassy's possession.

Dr Ismail's two missions worked with a twelve-hour time difference in relation to Kuala Lumpur, and he would send off coded and ciphered documents by 9pm so that the External Affairs Ministry would have them before 9am, Kuala Lumpur time. Replies from Kuala Lumpur were sent off

before 5pm that same day, arriving at 5am, New York time (Interview, Zakaria Ali, 12 April 2006).

Dr Ismail demanded of his staff that the major American newspapers be made available to him every morning, and would hold night meetings with them at the end of long days at the office (Interview, Lim Taik Choon, 13 May 2006).

Malaya, which had agreed to attaining independence within the Commonwealth of Nations, joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as its 37th member on 24 October 1957 (Sodhy 1991: 191). The bilateral Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) was signed by the Tunku six weeks before independence to provide a security umbrella for the infant nation. However, he abstained from applying for membership for Malaya in the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), in what was perceived as a cautious tactical choice.

The sense of security provided through the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement — with which Australia and New Zealand became associated — made it possible for independent Malaya to repudiate the idea of membership in SEATO, which might well have alienated a number of states in Asia with whom Malaya sought friendly relations, as well as suggesting to its sizeable Chinese community that the country was to become involved in an anti-Chinese combination (Leifer 1974: 47).

As some have pointed out, “since Malaya had unequivocally camped on one side of the East-West conflict, it also naturally behaved strategically as a minor “cold warrior” (Saravanamuttu 1983: 28).

The Tunku was suspicious of the Afro-Asian Non-Aligned Movement, although he did prioritise ties with Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Sheppard 1995: 116). Bilateral agreements between Britain, Malaya, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore led in 1971 to the formation of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which replaced the AMDA.

At the United Nations, Dr Ismail saw it as his job to take clear positions on international affairs in order that Malaya's standpoint could be made known. 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” (in contradistinction to the “old capitalism”