

THE
RELUCTANT
POLITICIAN

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional research centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment.

The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 1,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

THE RELUCTANT POLITICIAN

Tun Dr Ismail and His Time

O O I K E E B E N G



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Singapore

First published in Singapore in 2006 by ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: [<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>](http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg)

This book is published under the Malaysia Study Programme funded by Professor Saw Swee-Hock.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 2006 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Ooi Kee Beng, 1955–

The reluctant politician : Tun Dr Ismail.

1. Ismail Dato Abdul Rahman, Tun, 1915–1973.

2. Politicians—Malaysia—Biography.

I. Title

DS597.15 I82O61 2006

ISBN-10: 981-230-424-X (soft cover)

ISBN-13: 978-981-230-424-7 (soft cover)

ISBN-10: 981-230-425-8 (hard cover)

ISBN-13: 978-981-230-425-4 (hard cover)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Tun Dr Haji Mohd Salleh bin Abas</i>	vii
<i>Message from the Director, K. Kesavapany</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
<i>About the Author</i>	xxi
<i>Chronology</i>	xxiii

PART ONE

***Merdeka* or Medicine?**

Chapter One	The Acting Prime Minister Dies	3
Chapter Two	Life before Politics	13
Chapter Three	UMNO and the Road to Merdeka	45
Chapter Four	Positioning Malaya in the World	86
Chapter Five	The Making and Partitioning of Malaysia	137

PART TWO
Remaking Malaysia

Chapter Six	Forced from Retirement	185
Chapter Seven	A Lack of Time	219
Chapter Eight	Nailing Things into Place	241
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>		277
<i>Bibliography</i>		281
<i>Index</i>		297

FOREWORD

I feel greatly honoured to write a Foreword for this very long awaited book on the life of the very famous son of Malaysia, the late Tun Dr Ismail bin Dato' Haji Abdul Rahman Yassin.

Undoubtedly this volume will become good source material for students of the modern history of Malaysia. I do not wish to repeat what is already written about the late Tun in this book — about his education, his well-known character as a man of integrity, his common sense approach to problems be they big or small, easy or difficult, and above all, his sacrifice, especially of his health for the country. All these are set out in details that leave no one with any doubt that the late Tun was not only a pragmatic and wise person but also one who was very meticulous, especially when it came to questions of law and politics.

I had the privilege of coming into contact with him when I joined the Attorney General's Chamber in Kuala Lumpur in 1963. I must have gradually won his confidence because he later constantly consulted me whenever law and politics came into conflict. He would want to know what the law was on any given problem that he had to deal with. The Attorney General then, the late Tan Sri Abdul Kadir bin Yusof, being a political Attorney General with membership in the Cabinet, was a very busy person. That was why the job of advising the late Tun fell on me as the Solicitor General for the country. Through constant interactions

between me, him and Tan Sri Abdul Kadir, I came to enjoy the confidence of these two wonderful persons.

Subsequent to the May 13 riots, the late Tun Abdul Razak, the then Deputy Prime Minister, called me and my colleague the late Tan Sri Hashim Yeop Sani, to the Prime Minister's Office, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra's residence at Jalan Dato' Onn. There were a few senior Ministers present. I need not repeat who they were, because these are mentioned in this book. The Ministers were discussing how to deal with the riots. From the top of Jalan Dato' Onn, we could hear gun shots being fired and we could see smoke billowing from selected spots in the city and nearby suburban areas. The late Tun Dr Ismail, who had already retired from the Cabinet two years earlier, soon arrived wearing an expression of great concern on his face. He immediately joined in the discussion, and I still remember his words of caution to those present against the idea of a permanent suspension of the Constitution. He said, "If you should fail, then it will be like in many other coup d'états, you will all end up being shot one by one." Because of this stern warning, the discussion changed direction and focussed instead on a declaration of emergency and on the establishment of the National Operation Council to run the country until normality had returned and Parliament could be recalled.

Another incident that showed the late Tun to be a pragmatic politician who would fight for what he thought to be the best solution irrespective of what happened to him personally was during the creation of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The idea was conceived by him for stabilizing parliamentary democracy in Malaysia. He was convinced that with the new status for Kuala Lumpur, Malays and non-Malays would no longer have to be jealous of, and compete with, each other for control over the Selangor State Government, which then included the Federal

Capital. I advised the late Tun on the various legislative steps that the government needed to take to facilitate the separation of Kuala Lumpur from Selangor state. These included an agreement to be signed between the Selangor State Government and the Federal Government, as well as an Act of Parliament. While working with the late Tun on this undertaking, I heard him repeat several times words that showed his earnestness and sincerity: "I will do for the country what I will not do for myself and my family."

These words demonstrate the conviction and attitude of this great man when it came to making a choice between himself and the country. How greatly this contrasts with modern day politicians who shout eloquently at the top of their voice that they serve the people, and yet the truth is otherwise. The people whom they serve are, more often than not, themselves and their close friends.

Returning to this book, I recommend it to be read by all, especially by the generation of Malaysians who were born after the demise of the late Tun, so that they may attain a better understanding of the country, and gain an appreciation of the contributions this great man made.

Had he not died prematurely, Malaysia would have been different and the rule of law would not have suffered any reversal and would have continued to safeguard the freedom and liberty of all citizens, as indeed it is meant to do.

*Tun Dr Haji Mohd Salleh bin Abas
Former Lord President of the Federal Court, Malaysia*

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Growing up in Malaysia, I naturally knew about the achievements of the late Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, and about his reputation as a man of principle. When his private papers were kindly offered to ISEAS by his eldest son, Tawfik, my colleagues and I seized the opportunity to work on a properly researched book.

Tun Ismail bin Abdul Rahman served as a deputy under two late Prime Ministers, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak, during a very difficult and challenging period in Malaysia politics. After completing his medical studies in Australia, he returned to his home state of Johor, only to be drawn into Malay national politics spearheaded by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). He rose up in the party hierarchy as a result of his good work, dedication and loyalty. It is a truism to say that the Tunku would not have been able to hold UMNO together without Tun Ismail's support and loyalty. He became indispensable to UMNO and its leaders. Tun Ismail was not a politician in the normal sense of the term: He was much more a competent administrator on whom the Tunku and Tun Razak naturally came to depend. Tun Ismail was a man of principle and honesty and, above all, a person who clearly distinguished right from wrong.

During the difficult years of Malaysian politics, he was a "lone voice" against the growing tide of extremism and bigotry. Although he endorsed the concept of special rights, he made it

known that they could only be temporary and not a birthright to suppress the rights of others. On the regional and international fronts, he worked assiduously for the formation of regional economic groupings, campaigned relentlessly to make Southeast Asia a zone free from big power politics, and revealed several times that relations between Malaysia and Singapore should be placed on a proper footing. He even envisaged the day when Singapore might re-merge with Malaysia. During the turbulence of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, both the Tunku and Tun Razak had to recall him from political retirement to serve the nation. Tun Ismail was a source of moderation and comfort to all Malaysians in the aftermath of the racial tragedy in 1969. It was he who gave confidence and hope to Malaysians to embark on a new phase in race relations. In Malaysian political circles, there is a unanimous view that Tun Ismail's greatest contribution was in ensuring that the country emerged intact and stable from the turbulence caused by the May 13 racial riots.

The Reluctant Politician will provide a glimpse of the man, the values he stood for, his public and private life, and his professional relationship with other prominent politicians of that era, both in Malaysia and Singapore.

This biography of Tun Dr Ismail is the first in a series of books that the Institute plans to publish on First Generation Southeast Asian Leaders. We believe that such books would help to throw light on their contributions to the making of modern Southeast Asia. Students and scholars of Southeast Asian politics might want to examine his thoughts in greater depth because he was well ahead of his time.

K. Kesavapany
Director
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Singapore

PREFACE

This work is based on the private papers of the late Tun Dr Ismail Alhaj bin Datuk Haji Abdul Rahman. These documents were found in somewhat scattered condition in his home after he passed away on 2 August 1973. His eldest son, Tawfik, understood that it was his inescapable duty to collect them and to care for them until such times when they could be used to tell his father's story, and to speak of the Malaysia he envisaged. The collection of Ismail's letters was in the keeping of one of his brothers, and came into Tawfik's care much later.

In March 2005, after lengthy discussions with his old friend Ambassador Verghese Mathews, a visiting research fellow at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Tawfik decided to deposit these papers, which were in danger of physical deterioration, with ISEAS Library.

ISEAS Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany, who immediately decided that a biography about Tun Dr Ismail was long overdue, gave me the honour of writing it, and convinced Tawfik to be consultant and adviser for the project.

Perhaps because Tun Dr Ismail was a stickler for rules, hardly any official documents are to be found among his papers, with the exception of a Special Branch report from the early 1960s, the introductory page to which is missing. Being a hard-working and

conscientious man, he tended to finish his work at his office, and seldom took important files home.

The documents that this biography relies upon most are, first, an unfinished and unpublished autobiography called “Drifting into Politics” that Tun Dr Ismail authored after he resigned from government work in mid-1967, to which he made only two additions in later years; second, the collection of correspondence he kept throughout his life, which though incomplete, provides intriguing information about his life, his friends and his character; and third, the series of reports that he wrote between September 1957 and January 1959 for the benefit of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, when the former was Malaya’s first Ambassador to Washington and first Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York. These three constitute the “core” of his papers.

Tun Dr Ismail was a man of few words, even when he was recording his own life, and few embellishments are found in his writings. Much complementing research has therefore been carried out to provide illuminating backdrops for the sake of the average reader, to retrieve intimate details about his life, and to confirm events mentioned in the private papers.

A generous amount of relevant information was gathered from the archives of Malaysia’s *New Straits Times Press (NSTP)*, which host newspaper clippings about Tun Dr Ismail sorted in half-a-dozen medium-sized folders. Most of the pictures in this book are taken from there, and are used with the kind permission of *NSTP*.

Tun Dr Ismail graduated in medicine from Melbourne University’s Queen’s College in June 1945, and was the first Malay to do so. Altogether, he lived in Australia for six years, and if not for the letters he wrote home in 1940 and 1941, most details from that period would be unknown to us. Luckily these

have been preserved. Some information on this period of his life can be found in the minutes of the bi-monthly meetings of Queen's College Sports and Social Club (QCSSC), from which several anecdotes are reproduced here. The present Master of Queen's College, Professor David Runia, kindly provided some pictures from that period for the book.

The National Archives at Kew, England, aided my work through the huge amounts of documents available about Malayan politics in the 1950s, and other relevant matters, including reports on a couple of Ismail's many visits to the United Kingdom.

Last, and certainly not least, a great number of useful and intimate details were gained through interviews with members of Tun Dr Ismail's family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and staff.

My job has been to collect this information in order to weave together an easily readable and factually corroborated story. Although the tone of the book results from a balancing act between scientific writing and biographic narrating, I have tried as far as possible to resist dramaturgical temptations.

From start to finish, this journey has been awesome, to say the least. To write about the man, I had to understand the man, and I can confidently say that the more I understood him, the more he struck me as a rare and integrated soul. It is easy to understand him because he strove to be consistent, and it is easy to admire him because he strove to be fair.

The responsibility of writing the biography of such an important personage has been heavy. In many ways, this eased my job. The best strategy for an author in such a position to adopt is to allow the man's many facets to speak for themselves.

His life reflected Malaysia's early experiences, and his death in many ways also foreshadowed the waning of many early dreams. Of lasting significance is the fact that his actions and

ideas remain a reminder to Malaysians of the hopes and aspirations of one of the country's most respected founding fathers, and one of the region's more far-sighted and practical thinkers.

He died on the evening of 2 August 1973, but his burial was postponed until 4 August in order to allow his eldest son Tawfik and Prime Minister Tun Dr Razak to rush home in time for it. The *Malay Mail* (*MM*) proclaimed on the day of Ismail's funeral procession:

Few men in the history of Malaysia have earned so much respect from the people or given so much of himself to their cause, as the late Deputy Prime Minister did. [...] For a man who insisted that he be judged not by his rhetoric but instead by his deeds, reputation and reality became one, a standard which is hard to emulate (*MM*, 4 August 1973).

This sense of loss was further expressed the day after the burial in the *Sunday Mail* (*SM*), which confidently stated: "The history books will record his full contributions both to the nation and the South-east Asian region". Strangely and sadly, this proved a false prophecy. There has in fact been a sorry lack of knowledge about Tun Dr Ismail and about his importance in the forming and reforming of Malaysia. This book is a humble attempt to help remedy that situation (*SM*, 5 August 1973).

Ooi Kee Beng

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have been completed without the able assistance of Encik Mohamed Tawfik bin Tun Dr Ismail. He was crucial to the project, and his generosity with his time, his memories, experiences, contacts, documentary sources and breadth of learning, has been overwhelming to say the least. The work he had earlier put into arranging his father's papers saved the project much valuable time. This wonderfully resourceful man arranged most of the interviews with prominent Malaysians done for the book.

Deep gratitude is also owed ISEAS Director K. Kesavapany for his trust in my ability to carry this project to its conclusion, and for arranging important interviews for me. He saw how important it was for Malaysia and Singapore, and indeed the whole region, to revisit their early history through the writing of biographies on chosen personalities. His decision to secure Tawfik Ismail as a consultant for the project was an inspired move, and turned the research process into an exciting experience for me.

Prof Saw Swee Hock provided generous financial and moral support through the Malaysia Study Programme at ISEAS. For this, I am deeply grateful.

I wish to express my warmest appreciation to the following for granting me exclusive interviews and for sharing their memories with me over the last two years:

Encik Daud Ahmad, Datuk Abdullah Ali, Tan Sri Zakaria Ali, Datuk Dr Hussein bin Tun Dr Awang, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, Prof Tan Sri Maurice Baker, Mr Tom Critchley, the late Tun Ghafar Baba, Ungku Bakar, Leslie Eu Peng Meng, Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, Datuk Abdul Rahman Hamidon, Tengku Tan Sri Razaleigh Hamzah, Tun Musa Hitam, Encik Ariff bin Tun Dr Ismail, Cik Badariah binte Tun Dr Ismail, General Tun Ibrahim Ismail, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, Encik Tarmizi bin Tun Dr Ismail, Encik Tawfik bin Tun Dr Ismail, Cik Zailah binte Tun Dr Ismail, Encik Zamakhshari bin Tun Dr Ismail, Tan Sri G.K Rama Iyer, Prof Datuk Khoo Kay Kim, Tan Sri Robert Kuok, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Tun Lim Chong Eu, Dato' P.G. Lim, Tan Sri Lim Taik Choon, Datuk Haji Abdul Wahab Majid, Encik Din Merican, Tun Mohd Hanif Omar, Datuk Noordin Omar, Dato' Dominic Puthucheary, Mr Francis Puthucheary, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, Tun Ghazali Shafie, Dato' Chet Singh, Brother Lawrence Spritzig, Tan Sri Abu Bakar bin Dato' Sulaiman and Puan Sri Sukarnya, Datuk Shahrman bin Tunku Sulaiman, Dato' A.S. Talalla, Dato' Tan Chin Nam, Datuk Abdullah Abdul Wahab, Prof Wan Arfah binti Tan Sri Wan Hamzah, Encik Wan Hussein bin Tan Sri Wan Hamzah, Encik Ismail Iskandar Wildun, Datuk Annuar Zaini, Puan Sri Razimah Zakaria.

Thanks also to my researcher colleagues for being available when advice was sought, and to ISEAS' administrators, librarians and publishing staff who afforded me professional service with a smile. I am deeply indebted to ISEAS Library for allowing me full access to documents in its safekeeping.

I am also very grateful to the *New Straits Times Press (NSTP)* — and its Editor-in-Chief Dato Hishammuddin Aun — for allowing me to hunt through its archives. Not only did I find invaluable information there, I was able to countercheck details found in the Ismail papers and elsewhere. Many of the pictures in this

book are used with the kind permission of *NSTP*. Thanks are also owed to Bernama News Agency and its chairman Dato Annuar Zaini for various forms of assistance that he rendered the project.

Others I wish to thank include the many who helped me throughout the research period. These include Dr Dato' Rais Yatim, Professor David Runia and Jennifer Bars from Melbourne University's Queen's College, Secretary of Parliament Datuk Abdullah Abdul Wahab, my friends John Liebmann and Maggie Fordham, Kay Kuok, and Marinda Wong, as well as all the personal assistants and secretaries involved in arranging meetings and interviews. Thanks also to Bashir Basalamah for bringing several howlers to my attention. Finally, a warm hug is due to my loving wife Laotse Sacker for proofreading the final manuscript.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr OOI KEE BENG was born in Penang, and received his basic education at La Salle School and St Xavier's Institution.

He is presently a Fellow at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), where he coordinates its Malaysia Study Programme. His fields of interest include modern language philosophy, Chinese philosophy, nation building with a special focus on Malaysia, political economics and the philosophy of science. He has degrees in Public Administration and Chinese Language Studies, as well as a doctorate in Sinology, all from Stockholm University, Sweden, where he also lectured in Chinese Philosophy, Chinese History and General Knowledge of China between 1995 and 2004.

His books include *Chinese Strategists: Beyond Sun Zi's Art of War* (2006); *Era of Transition: Malaysia after Mahathir* (2006); *HRD for Developing States and Companies* (2005) in editorial collaboration with Abdul Ghani Pg Hj Metusin; *The State and its Changdao: Sufficient Discursive Commonality in Nation Renewal, with Malaysia as Case Study* (2001); *Chinese Studies of the Malay World: A Comparative Approach* (2003) in editorial collaboration with Ding Choo Ming; as well as translations of Chinese military classics into Swedish, such as *Wei Liao Zi's krigskonst* (2001), *Wu Zi's krigskonst* (2001) and *Sunzi's krigskonst* (1997).

He also writes regular commentaries for regional newspapers about Malaysian politics and socio-economics.

CHRONOLOGY

Tun Dr Ismail Alhaj bin Datuk Haji Abdul Rahman

1915 — Born 4 November in Johor Bahru (JB) 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.

1945–46 — Becomes the first Malay medical graduate from Melbourne University, and subsequently returns to Malaya. 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 Toh Puan Norashikin Seth (nickname Neno, born 17 January 1930 in Johor Bahru). The couple has six children, two girls and four boys (Mohd Tawfik, 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 Templer. He becomes Member of Lands, Mines and Communication at 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 — The new Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman appoints him Minister of Commerce and Industry.

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

1959 — Returns from Washington and becomes Minister of Commerce and Industry.

- 1959 — Elected member for Johor 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. 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 Johor 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 receives the Grand Officer of the National Order of Vietnam from the South Vietnamese Government through a visiting delegation.
- 1966 — Ismail 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 the Royal Marsden Hospital in London for cancer of the naso-pharynx. Starts private practice in Kuala Lumpur with a group of doctors on his return.
- 1969 — Asked to return to government by 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 3 March 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 4 and 11 October for a medical check-up on the way to New York for Twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of the United Nations.
- 1971 — He 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 24 October–28 November for 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 with an honorary degree of doctor of laws. He also visits the University of New England in Armidale to see his son Tawfik. 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 a huge state funeral procession the day before — the country's first — he becomes the first to be buried at the State Mausoleum.

Recreational activities: Regular nine-hole golf games and evening swims. Also involved in rugby, tennis, swimming, boxing, soccer and photography when he was a student in Australia.