

OBITUARY SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER

TO THE LATE PRESIDENT YUSOF ISHAK

Mr. Govindasamy, Sir,

I am sure Members will join me in formally recording our sorrow at the death of our late President, Yusof bin Ishak Al-haj. He has become an institution over the past 11 years. He has visited this House on so many occasions at the opening of each new session.

I last spoke, in this House, of him and his gracious lady, when moving his re-election as Head of State in November 1967 for a third time. Shortly afterwards he was to fall ill. We did not then know how grave the illness was.

During a sea voyage from Singapore to Australia in April 1968, the rhythm of his heart beat was upset and he had to be flown to Melbourne for treatment. We were grateful to the Australian Government, and the doctors and nurses in Melbourne who treated him.

The prognosis of the Australian specialists was not encouraging. But, with skill and devotion, our doctors and nurses who took care of him, stretched what could have been a matter of a few months into 2½ years. Their professional competence made this possible.

I first came to know the late President early in 1951. He had come to seek my advice over an UTUSAN MELAYU editor who was detained under the Preservation of Public Order Ordinance (PPSO). He was naturally well-mannered. Over the years, I got to know him as a deeply religious man, but one who did not allow his religion to hinder his relationship with non-Muslims, whether they were Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, or atheists.

He stood for our multi-racial policies. A recent speech he made to start off the fund for a monument to the early pioneers of Singapore was one which could only have been made by a person who believed in our multi-racial approach to solving the problems of our multi-racial society. At the same time, he was keen that in this multi-racial milieu, our Singapore Malays should break out from the bounds of custom which were preventing them from making the same progress as the other communities. He believed in policies to modernise our society, including our Malays. He believed that all men should be equal, or at least given equal opportunities to advance themselves through their own effort.

I remember him as the man I spoke of in the Motion for his re-election in November 1967. The long illness over nearly three years reduced him slowly to an invalid. It was painful and sad to watch him go down little by little after each relapse of his cardiac and respiratory problems.

The burden was heaviest on his wife and children. As his condition deteriorated, his usually composed demeanour was affected. He was beset by anxieties.

I saw him last on Sunday night, 22nd November, at 9.30 p.m., at the General Hospital. I had spoken to him on Saturday, 21st November, over the telephone. He told me not to see him until his attack of herpes, or shingles, was over. He sounded in greater pain than usual. The next day, Sunday afternoon, he had a heart failure. He was put into an oxygen tent at the General Hospital. He must have known that the end was near. After a while, when the doctor had given an injection to resuscitate him, he came out of his plastic oxygen tent. He insisted on shaking hands with the doctors and nurses who have looked after him, and with me. I left after 20 minutes. The next morning, I was informed of his death.

May I formally, Mr. Govindasamy, Sir, ask that this House join me in sending the widow and his children our deep sympathies. Their loss must be greater than ours.

Date: 30th December, 1970

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