

ASRI - OUTFOXED IN HIS OWN KELANTAN LAIR

By SUHAINI AZNAM

THE "silver-tongued old fox" of Kelantan has been outfoxed in his own lair. After four months of verbal grappling with the new PAS leadership, former party president Datuk Haji Mohamed Asri Muda, 60, was manoeuvred into a position where he had no option but to quit the party he had led in one way or another for 18 years.

Had he stayed, he would have been overshadowed by the present orthodox Islamic leadership, who though new have shown considerable tactical skill in the internal struggle for power.

Datuk Asri's magic personal touch that could swing a crowd a quarter way through a speech has failed to do so for some time now. His ideological platform, nationalist religions as opposed to orthodox religions, is outdated in the light of renewed Islamic vigour in the Middle East since 1980.

Because of this, in the four months since Datuk Asri resigned as president, he has been unable to muster sufficient support within PAS to prevent first his suspension from the party in January, then his being forced into a position where he had to quit.

Suspending Datuk Asri and several other Kelantan State party leaders was a bold move made with April's party elections very much in mind. They were suspended for breaking party rules: two Members of Parliament and a State party official, all from Kelantan, were given warning letters and two others expelled. All were seen to

be Asri loyalists.

Stung, the 13 formed an action committee, later dubbed the "Group of 13" by the media to deal with the disciplinary action taken against them. There was much mutual recrimination in the media, but the new PAS leaders had guessed the mood of their members correctly.

If Datuk Asri had hoped that a large segment of PAS followers in all States would be sufficiently annoyed to either quit the party or, more crucially, not vote the new leaders back into power in April, he would have been disappointed. There was hardly a ripple of revolt.

Datuk Asri's resignation from his party of 30 years, is an echo of his similarly forced resignation from the presidency at the PAS general assembly last October — exactly four months ago.

Then, as now, Datuk Asri had lost out in the internal battle for power between his seemingly staid, nationalist-Islamic group and the more fiery, orthodox-Islamic faction which today controls the party.

Tactically, PAS present leadership, masterminded by acting deputy president ustaz Fadzil Nor and Youth leader Mustapha Ali had the upper hand in managing the party crisis, in October, when Datuk Asri abruptly stepped down, his staunch allies, the then secretary-general, Datuk Haji Abu Bakar Umar, then treasurer Haji Hassan Mohamad and women's wing leader Datin Hajjah Sakinah Junid (Datuk



Loading his PAS colleagues out of the Federal Government in November, 1977, From left: Haji Wahab Yunus, Encik Mustapha Ali, Datuk Asri, Encik Zahari Awang and Datuk Abu Bakar.

Asri's wife), also resigned from their posts in a show of solidarity.

That solidarity, however, left Datuk Asri without allies in the PAS Supreme Council.

Exclusion from the top policy-making body soon became exclusive at State level too with the suspension of Datuk Asri and various disciplinary measures against his allies in Kelantan PAS.

Without anyone to speak up for them in the disciplinary committee, Datuk Asri's group had no way of fighting against the decision save through appeal — which would not only have been a tremendous loss of face if the appeal had been rejected but would also have meant an admission of the validity of the disciplinary censure.

Tacitly, an appeal would also have meant acknowledgement of the new leadership's supremacy, a bitter pill, indeed, for Datuk Asri to swallow.

The new leaders were also savvy enough to only confine the crisis to Kelantan, Kedah PAS, whose former State commissioner, Datuk Abu Bakar Umar, and his former deputy, Datuk Sudin Wahab were left untouched, and the reins of State party power were gathered up by Ustaz Fildzil himself.

Meanwhile, Datuk Asri's group in Kelantan were shorn of further political legitimacy, Kelantan PAS applied to the Speaker of the State Assembly that Datuk Asri and his close ally Mefanti Assemblyman Nik Man Nik Mat who had been expelled from PAS not to be allowed to sit with their fellow opposition representatives when the assembly reconvened.

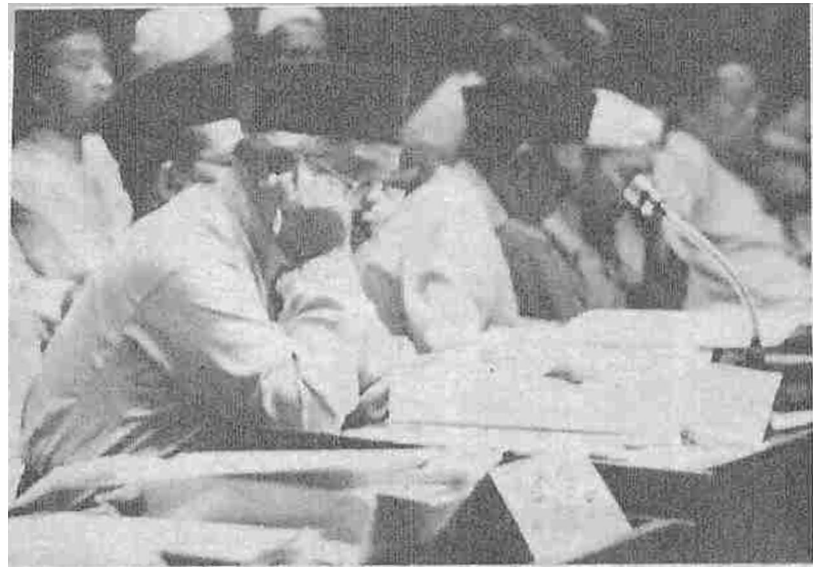
This would have forced Datuk Asri to speak as a virtual independent representative, not as a PAS representative.

PAS does not need Datuk Asri in Kelantan anymore. Kelantan State

commissioner Nik Abdul Aziz bin Nik Mohamed, MP for Pengkalan Chepa, is head of the PAS Dewan Ulamak (religious council) in the present power structure, and an "ustaz" (religious teacher) who conducts religious classes every Friday morning. He thus shares an impeccable Islamic image with his Trengganu counterpart, Ustaz Haji Hadi Awang, whose oratorical skills have drawn thousands to his ceramahs.

In effect, the new PAS leaders had won this particular political game back in January. Their goal was to keep Datuk Asri from riding back into power on a wave of sympathy. Suspended members are not allowed to stand for party office and Datuk Asri has now been forced to retreat so far he has to hail to quit altogether.

Now, he has given himself one month in which to decide if he wants to remain as an independent



Datuk Asri at the PAS general assembly last October where he announced his decision to quit as party president

(Datuk Asri is State Assemblyman for Kubang Kerian). to set up a new Islamic party, or to join either Umno or Berjasa and therefore the Barisan Nasional coalition.

Setting up a new Islamic party would be difficult, in a country of only seven-odd million Malays, out of which only a segment arc of voting age, there is really very little room for another Malay-based party — which is what an Islamic party would be.

Even now, Umno is giving PAS a run for its money in Islamic appeal, using the Islamic Bank, International Islamic University and pushing the no-liquor, no-gambling and khalwat laws for Malays to show the Malay voter that Umno is an Islamic party in more than name alone.

And inversely, it is this renewed Islamic image of Umno's which leaves Datuk Asri without, bargaining power to join it.

As a former Kelantan Umno Youth official once said: "Why should Umno need Datuk Asri now? We have Berjasa in Kelantan and even that need has waned in recent years; besides, Umno has developed a new Islamic image in Encik Anwar Ibrahim."

Unless of course, Umno has some grand scheme to use Datuk Asri to appeal to those PAS waverers who are not completely convinced by PAS present Islamic rhetoric and who have by tradition supported Datuk Asri.

Otherwise Umno certainly has no need of a vacillating Datuk Asri who led PAS into the coalition in 1974 and then out of it again in 1977. Who would believe it if he suddenly espoused the Umno cause? Who would want him especially now that he so obviously cannot deliver the Kelantan votes that usually go to PAS?

The next general election is still three to four years away. Umno and Kelantan Umno chief Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah have sufficient time to deliver to Kelantan voters development projects, job opportunities and of course, an Islamic image.

When it comes down to it, Umno realises that the PAS it will find itself pitted against in future stands for strict Islamic policies. To counter this image, Umno needs leaders with unimpeachable Islamic credentials — not a leader who has shown himself to be willing to compromise if necessary — as had Datuk Asri did when he led PAS into the Barisan in 1974.