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## The return and rise of Rais Yatim

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IT is photographs galore in the Putrajaya office of Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, a keen cameraman who rarely lets Kodak moments go by without a click.

His favourite subjects are the country's Prime Ministers and other top politicians in their most off-guard and endearing moments, giving a fascinating glimpse behind the scenes.

In contrast, his close-knit family was featured in only one picture, standing stiffly and dressed in matching bright blue outfits.

One particular photograph stood out from the clutter; it was put up, he says, to remind him of where he had come from.

It showed Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah with a broad grin stretched across his cherubic face as he bent over a list of names, watched by a beaming Rais. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stood to one side, looking benignly on the scene.

It was the day of Semangat 46's return to Umno in October 1996.

"There are 80,000 names there," says Rais, the moment still fresh in his mind although he says "Semangat is now only a speck in memory".

Rais was in Team B in the bitter 1987 Umno elections and in the resultant upheaval, lost his post as Foreign Minister. He left Umno and became Semangat 46 deputy president when the party was formed.

When the party was dissolved in 1996, he returned to his old Umno branch in Kampung Gagu as an ordinary member and in March, won the Jelevu division chief's post without contest.

Rais says he will never forget the years outside even though he's now solidly back in Government and Umno - the only former Semangat 46 top gun to return to a ministerial post.

It's a remarkable comeback for a man who had infamously "burned his bridges".

Rais is grateful to Dr Mahathir.

"Dr Mahathir has taken me into Government, and others like Tengku (Datuk Seri) Azlan (Sultan Abu Bakar) and (Datuk) Zainal Abidin (Zin), he has galvanised things to make it work," he says.

All hatchets are buried, the Semangat 46 story is gone, he says.

Once described as "yesterday's man", Rais has proven that he's no museum piece. But he is also no longer on a dizzying ascent up the party ladder and will probably find it hard to pick up that pace again.

Though just 59, in the prime of his life by political standards, and immensely talented, many think that his best chance for a shot at a top position may have passed him by.

"He might find it hard to find a space for himself now, but who knows? This is politics," says an Umno divisional leader.

Rais contested the Umno vice-presidency last year but didn't come close to winning. He says now it's "too remote" to think about the next election unless there is a level playing field.

By which he means that money politics no longer has a role in Umno.

"I did entertain some thought years before, which politician hasn't? Way back in 1981, I almost won the VP race, I lost by five votes and after that, the margin became bigger and bigger," he says.

(In 1984, the margin was 187 and in 1987, it was 160.)

He attributes this, rather obliquely, to an "altered value system", although it's also fair to say that during his absence from Umno, a whole

generation of leaders had grown up and the power equation had changed for good.

He is now said to be aligned to a certain top leader, but to move into a position of power is an entirely different game.

Rais says he does not see himself moving into the top echelon; the rising stars are already poised on the threshold to move in, and "there should not be any dislocation".

He insists, as he always had since his return, that he only wants to "participate well". He talks tirelessly of remaking Umno into a service-oriented party, and seeing an end to jostling for positions.

An eloquent speaker, both in English and Malay, Rais is well-respected for his intellect although some privately confess that they find him hard to understand.

He does like complicated sentences and can be quite florid at times.

"He can conceptualise ideas and see things in a wider sphere. It's quite a rare talent among politicians!" says a former Semangat 46 leader.

And he works hard in his constituency, making the two-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur to Jelebu twice a week to attend even the smallest of functions, from parent-teacher association meetings to cookery contests.

A Seremban-based journalist recalls how an old Chinese farmer had waited outside the Kuala Klawang district office for Rais to emerge from a visit, because he wanted to present the Minister with some fresh vegetables.

Rais is fairly well regarded in public perception although he has taken a bashing of late, thanks to his spirited defence of recent Internal Security Act detentions which got the Opposition barking at his heels with a copy of his anti-ISA book.

The book, *Freedom under Executive Power in Malaysia: A Study of Executive Supremacy*, was published from his dissertation written in 1994 for his PhD in public law from the University of London.

And the best known chapter is his strenuous condemnation of the ISA.

Rais (his detractors wickedly call him Rise) is very tired of being asked about this. Generally mild-mannered and with oodles of self-effacing charm, he can be acerbic when pushed on the issue.

"My personal views are my personal views, but a ministerial view is something else. Once a person interweaves his personal opinion with public duty, I think he is in trouble," he says.

He insists that many have begun to see the ISA in a softer light since the Sept 11 attacks on the US.

Rais has largely been credited for revitalising the justice system since he became Minister in 1999 although strictly speaking, this is outside his purview.

Indeed, he has often been accused of interfering.

He had stepped on a good number of toes, including those of the former Chief Justice who apparently said Rais should stick to his job as Minister in charge of Tables and Chairs (court administration).

That was after Rais commented on the judge's holiday in New Zealand, purportedly with a lawyer.

It was this episode which sparked a new phase in public scrutiny and debate on judicial conduct.

And it was in this role that Rais's star shone the brightest. He may not have had direct control over changes but he spurred them with his frank views and behind-the-scene hard work.

He didn't let down those who saw him as the best hope for improvement to a system which had been mired in controversy for too long.

It is no secret that Rais and a few other Ministers had lobbied for the appointment of Tan Sri Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah as Chief Justice, the single most important step in reviving public confidence.

Rais credits Dr Mahathir for playing a "positive role" in this.

"I can say that there is now some sense of pride in the legal practice and international recognition, I think, is coming in slowly," he says.

Rais's career began in 1966 as a teacher before he took up law studies in the University of Singapore.

Upon graduation in 1973, he and Hariram Jayaram set up the law firm of Ram Rais & Partners, today well regarded for its intellectual property practice, and which he had returned to when he was out of Umno.

Rais's talents were soon noticed by Cikgu Aminuddin Abd Manaf (Pertang State Assemblyman 1969-78) who recommended him highly to Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, then political adviser to Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

Abdullah, in turn, recommended Rais to Razak.

"It was your editor Tan Sri Abdullah (now NSTP group editor-in-chief) who took me by hand to introduce me to Tun Razak," says Rais.

He became MP for Jelebu in 1974 at the age of 32, and Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

He later became Deputy Law Minister (1976-78), Deputy Home Minister (1978), Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar (1978-82), Land and Regional Development Minister (1982-84), Information Minister (1984-86), Foreign Minister (1986-87) and Minister in the PM's Department (1999-present).

The future? It's too far to see, he says.

One thing he wants to pursue is his love for writing and photography. He is about to publish a book on Jelebu. It should make interesting reading as it will also cover his years as Menteri Besar.