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`Reluctant politician' quits after 19 years

FOR Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek, who has earned the reputation of being a "reluctant politician", being in active politics for 19 years is a long time.

The son of the late Pahang tycoon Tan Sri Lim Yen who had close ties with Umno bigwigs as well as the State's royalty, Ah Lek had been exposed to politics since young.

His father was a strict disciplinarian, typified by the old-style Chinese known for their unwavering principles; he once sued the then Jabatan Telekom for overcharging by a RM1.50 an outstation telephone call he had made. He won with costs - after a prolonged legal battle.

Such were the values instilled into Ah Lek, who was born in Kuantan, Pahang, in 1942. Ah Lek pursued his tertiary studies in business in Australia and returned to help run his father's diversified businesses. These included transport as well as the lucrative logging projects.

He enjoyed close relations with Pahang's Sultan Ahmad Shah with their ties going back decades - the Sultan is said to have appealed to Ah Lek thrice in 1999 not to quit active politics.

Ah Lek joined MCA in 1968 - the same year as president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik. They also made their debut attempts in standing for the general election in 1974, with Ah Lek contesting the Bandar Kuantan State seat and was immediately made an executive councillor.

In the 1986 general election, he contested in the Teruntum State seat but did not complete his tenure as wakil rakyat. He resigned from the seat in 1989 to stand in the Bentong parliamentary by-election following the death of Pahang MCA chairman Datuk Chan Siang Sun.

Just as he was immediately offered a Pahang Exco position in his first term as an assemblyman, Ah Lek was made a full minister when he moved to the Federal level - much to the dissatisfaction of more senior leaders like MCA vice-president Datuk Kok Wee Kiat.

His ministerial portfolio was Labour, later renamed Human Resources, a post he held for more than a decade until he decided not to defend his Bentong parliamentary seat.

When he moved to the Federal level in 1989, Ah Lek was determined that it was only temporary and not to seek reelection in the 1990 general election.

But came the 1990 general election, Ah Lek was talked into contesting by, among others, Dr Ling himself. This was repeated again in the 1995 election where Dr Ling had reportedly told Lim that he (Lim) was like the president's "arms and legs" and was needed by MCA.

Ah Lek became actively involved in national-level MCA politics in 1984 when he was elected to the central committee. In 1989, after the death of vice-president Chan, Ah Lek was appointed to replace him.

In 1996, after a prolonged feud between Dr Ling and deputy president Datuk Lee Kim Sai (now Tan Sri), Ah Lek took over the party's number two post in the MCA polls.

After giving up his parliamentary seat in 1999 - and automatically his ministership - Ah Lek concentrated mainly on party work, especially in by-elections where his popularity with the grassroots was even recognised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But a breakdown in the party succession talks between him and Dr Ling saw the eventual formation of Team A and Team B factions.

By virtue of his seniority, he assumed the role of figurehead in the dissident camp as the feud intensified with the MCA takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd and the phantom members issue.

Lim is married to Datin Seri Agnes Toh. They have three daughters.