

The Mercedes remains, so too the memories

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UNTIL 24 years ago, he used to mesmerise the masses with his fiery speeches.

Wheelchair-bound for the past two years, former Johor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Othman Sa'at, 82, lost his ability to speak six months ago.

His mind is still alert, but it is agonising to see him struggling to speak and share his thoughts in a voice that is barely audible and heavily dependent on hand gestures.

A strict and no-nonsense Johor strongman that he once was, Othman now comes across as a frail and kindly grandfather.

Othman lives with his wife, Kamariah Bujang, in their bungalow in Stulang Baru, Johor Baru, amid a serene garden of potted plants and shady trees.

"He tires easily nowadays. But he has not lost his sense of humour," said Kamariah, who stood in as the "interpreter" for Othman, who wore a white cotton T-shirt and sarong.

Kamariah said he would often ask her to read aloud the newspapers to keep abreast of the latest political developments.

"And he rarely misses the prime time news on television. He wants to know everything. Often, an item or two would rile him."

Kamariah said Othman had great admiration for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"He recently told me that Pak Lah is on the right track by focusing on agriculture. He feels the real economy is agriculture."

Former chief of the defunct Semangat 46, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, and Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim are among his closest friends who visit him from time to time.

The son of a rich rice trader in Muar, Othman was only 16 when he was thrust into the world of business and politics after completing his religious education in Mecca.

The Malay nationalistic movement was at its peak and he was swept right into it, along with Hassan Yunos (former Johor Menteri Besar) and Sulaiman Ninam Shah (the late Umno permanent chairman).

By 1952, he was in the Umno executive committee and in the general election three years later, he won the Jorak seat uncontested. The rising star in Johor Umno was appointed a State Executive Council member in 1964 and in 1967, at the age of 43, he was appointed Menteri Besar.

Johor Assembly Speaker Datuk Ali Hassan, who served as a Religious Department officer under Othman in the 1960s, remembers

He was the colourful, controversial and long-serving Menteri Besar who ruled Johor with an iron fist. **SITI NURBAIYAH NADZMI** meets up with the former Umno strongman who had a passion for fine cars like Ferraris, Daimlers and Jaguars.



Othman enjoys looking at old photographs with Kamariah.

his old boss.

"He was a stickler for discipline," said Ali.

"He was in complete control of the civil service and politics and tolerated no nonsense.

"He expected officers to be in the know and on their toes at all times."

Ali said Othman made spot checks at government offices and was meticulous when it came to public funds and accountability.

Tanjung Puteri assemblyman Ali Mohamed, who was an executive officer under Othman in the late 1960s and 1970s, said Othman ingrained in civil servants the need to serve the people.

"He would call in new recruits and tell them to hang their degrees outside the office. What's important, he reminded us, was service to the people."

Othman was a visionary and ahead of his time, according to former Johor MCA politician and state Exco member Datuk Jimmy Low.

"He was the first to come up with a master plan for the development of Johor," said Low.

"He conceived the idea of low-cost public housing for the

people and was instrumental in opening land development schemes."

Low, who served as a Barisan Nasional backbencher during Othman's tenure as Menteri Besar, remembers him as being authoritative and domineering.

"He was a very short man with a booming voice. And when he spoke, he commanded the full attention and respect of all. He was in complete control."

Low said Umno and the BN were supreme in Johor when Oth-

man was calling the shots.

"There was absolutely no opposition in Johor under Othman. He crushed any bid to disunite Umno and Johor BN."

Lawyer Abdul Razak Ahmad, a young politician at the time, remembers this too well.

Razak was among the leaders of Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia which was being promoted as an alternative to Umno.

"Othman was bent on keeping out the Opposition. I was arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act for two months in September 1974," said Razak.

Despite his growing political power and influence, there was a



problem — the Johor palace.

His acrimonious relations with the *istana* saw the Sultan stripping him of the Darjah Kerabat (DK) in the early 1980s.

The DK — the Most Esteemed Family Order of Johor, which is usually conferred on royalty — was bestowed on Othman by the Sultan's late father, Sultan Ismail.

"My husband was completely unfazed by this unfortunate episode involving the *istana*," recalled Kamariah. "He told me titles and decorations meant little to him. What was more important was service to the people."

By this time, Othman's political career began to take a dive.

Things took a turn for the worse for the Johor strongman when (Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad became prime minister and (Tun) Musa Hitam, his deputy.

Othman dismissed them as "young turks" and resisted attempts by the new administration to curtail his influence and power base in Johor.

"Othman overstayed his welcome," noted Razak.

"By his third term as Menteri Besar, people were getting tired of him. There was also pressure from educated Malays who wanted him to make way for young blood."

Clearly, the tide was against Othman.

Musa used the full weight of the Umno machinery from the party headquarters in Kuala Lumpur to weaken Othman's influence.

This was the beginning of the end for Othman. He stepped down as Menteri Besar in 1982 after a record 16 years at the helm.

The embittered Umno veteran then joined Semangat 46 which was led by Tengku Razaleigh who, after failing in his bid to replace Dr Mahathir as Umno president, had quit the party.

But Semangat 46 and Othman never went far.

Johor Heritage Foundation researcher Ungku Mohamed Zaman Tahir, who is writing a biography on the former Menteri Besar, remembers Othman as a fastidious dresser.

"He was always immaculately dressed. And he liked to wear his *songkok* with a tilt, a style emulated by many in Johor."

Othman also had a passion for cars. He had 50 cars of various makes, including a Ferrari, Alfa Romeo, Daimler and Jaguar.

Today he has just one, a Mercedes 400, his favourite, with the registration number JDN 7.

Othman with his Mercedes 400.



Othman (left) meeting Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak at Parliament House, Kuala Lumpur, in February 1967, after his appointment as Menteri Besar.

FACT FILE

- Born in Muar in April, 1924.
- Completed religious studies at Sekolah Tinggi Arab Madrasah Al-Attas in Johor Baru. Studied in Mecca for two years.
- He was 16 when he started working for his father, a wealthy rice trader in Muar.
- Political life started with the Malay nationalistic movement in the 1940s, after his return from the Middle East.
- Joined Umno after the party was founded by (Datuk) Onn Jaafar in 1946 in Batu Pahat.
- Became Umno committee member in 1952.
- Stood for elections for the Jorak seat in 1955 and won unopposed.
- Became Johor state Exco member in 1958.
- Appointed state Exco member in charge of Local Government and Housing in 1964. Introduced low-cost housing schemes for the poor.
- Appointed Johor Menteri Besar in 1967.
- Stood down as Menteri Besar in 1982.