

The Accidental Politician

UNASSUMING, slightly built and quick to laugh, especially when relating anecdotes about her life in politics, Teresa Kok, 42, is nothing like the oft-unsmiling woman pictured in newspapers, with grim complainants by her side. Described by those at her service centre as efficacious and dedicated, she comes across as the 'girl next door', or as she puts it, 'the auntie next door.'

Despite having been in the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and politics since graduating from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 1990, it was only this year that Kok became the poster girl for the Opposition party, going from just another face in Parliament to an MP that the man on the street had no trouble naming, thanks to several high-profile cases, from the Independent Police Complaint and Monitoring Commission or IPCMC to women's issues, the pinnacle of which was the infamous nude ear-squat incident.

The phone rings incessantly, there's drilling being done next door and there're visitors to attend to. It's a storm of activity here but Kok appears unfazed. Her smile never wavers and she is attentive to anyone who walks in through the doors of her modest office, just off Old Klang Road.

'My initial intention was never to become a somebody in politics,' she says when asked how she is dealing with this newfound publicity.

'I should say that I went into politics by accident ... after graduating in 1990 (Kok gained her Bachelor in Communications from USM and later her Master's in Philosophy from University Malaya), I came to Petaling Jaya to help the DAP. Then, I got an offer to work in the DAP headquarters, as political secretary to Lim Kit Siang. So, it just happened – all I wanted to do was to

She has been representing her constituents in Parliament now for close to seven years, but it is only since November 2005 that Teresa Kok, MP for Seputeh, became a household name after she was pictured in newspapers showing MPs the recording of the infamous nude female detainee ear-squat incident. She tells **Malaysian Business** all about her accidental thrust into politics and the pages of newspapers.

By A S Nathan

help this party that was facing a problem of lack of manpower and resources.

'I didn't think that it (the nude ear-squat incident) would get this amount of publicity. It happened when Parliament was in session and the Press played it up ... The amount of publicity was really unexpected.'

Kok was the first woman to hold the position of political secretary to Lim, who as the interview progresses comes across as a mentor figure. She says she was inspired by the DAP supremo and his political struggle and brushes off the insults that she has received, including that of 'police basher' and of harbouring 'hatred for Islam', as occupational hazards.

'I know the police are unhappy with me (laughs), but it is something that I cannot help because it (the nude ear-squat incident) really happened in a police station. It wasn't my intention to tarnish the image of the police ... I just felt that our police needed to learn to respect human rights and dignity. There have been so many complaints and it is something that the government



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and police force need to really look into seriously.

'I asked those people who said I was wrecking the image of the police, "If this had happened to your wife or daughter, what would you have done?" I never got an answer.'

This jovial woman is a far cry from the shy girl her university lecturer Assoc Prof Zaharom Nain at USM remembers. 'I was quite surprised when she joined the DAP, but I was so proud of her when she contested in the elections,' he says. 'She was a conscientious student, a quiet girl, friendly but still quite shy.'

'I think Teresa was very inspired by her religion, and her studies, and society helped build her critical approach. She is a jovial person, I guess the pressures of being an MP means she has to see the lighter side of things sometimes, and I am very proud of her. She has come a very long way ... but she is still the same Teresa in that she is a trustworthy and loyal person, a friend who will stick by you.'

Businessman Ng Chai Heng, 42, who has known Kok for 20 years, agrees. 'Her heart is in the right place. It is in her faith, she is a devout Catholic and she is very sincere. I think that is something that she has carried with her into her political life. She is genuinely interested in people. She is truly a friend whom you can rely on and she goes out of her way to help you.'

So it comes as no surprise when Kok states, 'I don't want to be seen as a champion of causes ... I want to be a friend. I want to help them (the people who come to her seeking redress).'

Coming from anyone else, this would sound naively optimistic, but there's no sense of that from Kok, who is wholly convincing in the role that she has undertaken to bring justice to anyone to whom injustice has been done.

'I pursued the case of the wrongful detention of the four China girls (detained by police) not because I wanted their votes.

They can't vote for me, they are not Malaysian, but because ... I just wonder how the police could have detained them for four nights. If that had happened to me, I would be very angry.

'As a *wakil rakyat*, if I see injustice and don't expose it, I would

say I have failed in my job as a *wakil rakyat*.'

Challenge is nothing new to Kok. While today she faces challenges within Parliament, her early days in the DAP were no bed of roses either. She admits that there was some 'gender bias' in the bastion of malehood that was the DAP old guard.

'When I first joined, some of the older leaders, they didn't know how to deal with me – they didn't know how much I knew or even what I knew ... they only saw me as a woman and a fresh graduate so close to the so-called power core. I remember clearly one time (laughs) there

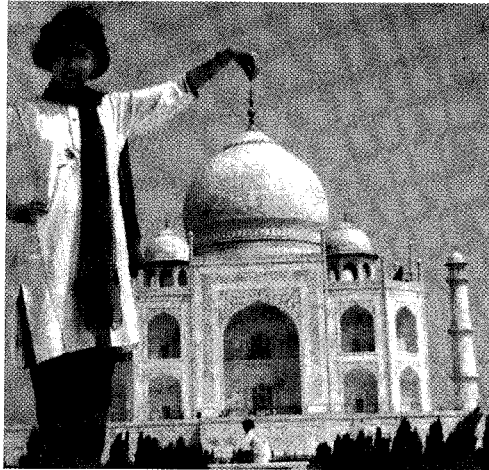
was a party leader who asked my colleague to write a Press statement, and since he was busy, he suggested that I write it, to which the leader asked "Does she know how to write?" (laughs) Can you imagine that?' she asks in mock amazement.

Freely admitting that she admires strong political figures, naming Lim, Aung San Suu Kyi and Corazon Aquino, Kok says she persevered because she wanted to prove the naysayers wrong.

Still, the pressures were there and a year after joining DAP, she took some time off to find herself by going on a spiritual trip to India, to 'discover herself' and decide if she had made the right decision in joining the Opposition.

'I started to question myself whether this was the right choice, and a church friend suggested I take the trip to see what I really wanted in life. So I went and I learnt about my Christian faith, but more importantly, I learnt to be obedient (laughs) ... you know it was a conservative Indian community. I had been taught at university to be critical, especially in the communications school where we were taught to think critically and question things. So I had to let that go ... and in India, I learnt that there are times to take a step back and listen.'

The eldest child of a retired businessman



(Clockwise from left) Kok in front of the Taj Mahal, filing her nomination papers in the last general election and savouring victory in 1999 in her current constituency

father, Kok Kim Tong, 70, and a former teacher, Thong She Cheen, 68, Kok is the only one in her family involved in politics. She has two brothers and a sister, and says that it was only when she contested in the 1995 election as candidate for Ipoh Barat that her parents came around after years of disagreeing with her choice of career. 'I faced opposition from my parents for five years. They couldn't understand why I didn't want to take up another job, go somewhere else. Only when I contested in 1995 did their attitude change. They gave me their full support and even came to help me in my election campaign in Ipoh.'

She lost that election, but was elected in 1999 to her current constituency.

As MP, she has a full diary but says that the one luxury she affords herself is eight hours of sleep each night and the occasional movie. 'I love going to the theatre ... though now I am so busy, I find it hard to make time for movies, but I did see one two weeks ago, about a ship that sank.'

She can't name the movie (*Poseidon*) and one is given the impression that even at the movies, Kok is too wired to completely relax. 'As far as I can remember, I have always led a busy life. At school, I was chairperson of the Chinese Language Society and head of the school magazine committee. I was never

good at sports. In any race I took part, I was always the last (laughs), but I was involved in other things. So, sometimes I think to myself, what will happen when I retire? I guess I will join some NGO or a social club to keep myself active.

'I do try to make some "me" time. It's not always easy with reporters (she looks pointedly at this writer) calling all the time for quotes, but when I travel abroad ... for instance, I will be travelling soon to New Zealand as part of a parliamentary committee to attend an international conference, I will take a

few days off to go sightseeing and relax.

'I even need to make time to clean my house. A newspaper wants to feature me at home and this means I have to do a massive clean-up. I don't have a maid so I have to do everything myself.'

Clearly, Kok is enjoying where she is at right now, despite her full plate to which she recently added a blog. (She is among a handful of politicians who maintain blogs).

'It took a while but I now understand the potential and value of the Internet. As the Opposition, we don't really have full access to the papers to air our views. We get some space in Chinese papers, but hardly any in the English ones, so with blogs, we can better reach out to the public. They have a chance to hear another side to the story and make up their minds. I don't have a problem with criticism of myself (the blog is managed to filter postings that are against the law), I will put it up and my readers can debate it. (Laughs) Public figures like us are used to criticism ... few people say thank you to us ... but criticism, we get a lot.'

And with that salient observation, Teresa Kok, Opposition MP, activist, advisor, columnist, blogger and friend, rises to attend to yet another person who has walked into her office seeking her help. **mb**