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Insight
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DATUK Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat eats like a bird. A normal meal would consist of about three tablespoons of rice and some fish and soft vegetables.

The elderly Tok Guru is one ulama who has not given in to the sin of gluttony. He is still the same slight built he was when he became Menteri Besar of Kelantan in 1990. That is the degree of his personal discipline.

He has been on a strict diet following a major heart attack in 2004 and the PAS grassroots who host meals for him at political functions are told he has to avoid meat as well as oily and spicy food.

About two weeks ago, state exco member Datuk Nik Amar Nik Abdullah joined Nik Aziz for dinner before starting their ceramah in Pengkalan Chepa.

"Tok Guru took a little bit of rice and ikan percik. It is awkward because I eat quite a lot. But I try to eat less when I eat with him," said Nik Amar.

For years, Nik Aziz's frail health was attributed to gastritis or, as PAS people call it, "stomach problems". His health has always been delicate. He becomes unwell for various reasons - if he eats the wrong thing, if he does not eat, if his schedule is too hectic or even if he gets splashed by a few drops of rain.

When he is feeling well, his wit sparkles, his smile is as sweet as that of a baby's and the freckles on his face look so cute. But when he is feeling under the weather, he becomes a glum and grumpy old man and the freckles look like liver spots.

Ill health

Speculation about his health has grown more acute and Nik Amar recently dismissed claims that his boss has cancer. This is not the first time the cancer rumour has cropped up. Last year, Nik Aziz himself denied he was suffering from cancer.

PAS leaders often say "Tok Guru is as healthy as a man his age would be". It is their way of deflecting the fact that Nik Aziz is 82 and has health issues.

But the reality is that there are very few leaders in the world who are still in active politics at that age. Even the great Fidel Castro, who finally retired at 87, is taking things easy these days and only appears in public when there are rumours that he has died.

Nik Aziz, however, is not clinging on to power. Earlier this year, he told a party meeting that he wished to retire but was met with a chorus of protest. They told him he is their "Panglima Perang (war admiral)" and they could not do without him.

"He has to lead us in the general election. But we told him that whether or not he wishes to stay on as MB, it is up to him," said Nik Amar.

Like it or not, Nik Aziz's age has become an election issue for PAS in Kelantan and especially after holding on to power for 22 years.

He feels his age and there is no shortage of people out there who will let him forget it, including Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who has a memory like an elephant when it comes to political slights.

Nik Aziz had, back in the 1990s, said that leaders should not stay for more than two terms. He asked

Can Nik Aziz go the distance?

Last Monday marked Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's 22nd year as Kelantan Menteri Besar but he is poised to contest the next general election because his party says it cannot do without their Panglima Perang or war admiral.



Keep your promise: Dr Mahathir and Nik Aziz in a friendly situation in Kelantan around the time Nik Aziz said that the then Prime Minister should retire and that he would follow.



PAS has two sets of rules. They say the MB and the deputy must be ulama. But their No. 2 in the party is Mat Sabu who is not an ulama.

-DATUK ALWI CHE AHMAD

Dr Mahathir to retire and said he would follow suit. Last week, the former Premier reminded Nik Aziz of his promise to step down. It was not exactly a gentle reminder because Dr Mahathir sort of twisted the knife and said that Malaysians should "open their eyes and reject leaders who do not honour their promises."

Revenge is sweet but, as they say, it is a dish best served cold and Dr Mahathir is savouring the dish.

Dr Mahathir stepped down after 22 years in power. On the other hand, Nik Aziz marked his 22nd year in power exactly six days ago - he was sworn in as Menteri Besar on Oct 22, 1990.

PAS assemblyman for Gaal Dr Nik Mazlan Nik Mohamad touched on the same sensitive subject when he rose to speak during the Budget session at the recent Kelantan Legislative Assembly.

His fellow PAS assemblymen looked on aghast as he urged ageing leaders who had to use walking sticks to make way and referred to Nik Aziz as "aged and sickly". Egged on by the opposition bench, he said he did not have to name them, they knew who they were. He went on to say there was no shortage of quali-

fied, younger ulama to take over.

Dr Nik Mazlan knew he was skating on thin ice but he insisted that the assembly sitting was the best forum to raise issues of ageing leaders and succession. It was obvious that he was sticking his neck out to send a message to the top leadership.

The tall and distinguished former cardiologist is a third term assemblyman and has health problems. This is very likely his last term and he knew he had nothing to lose by being frank.

He is also an intelligent man and probably senses that the next general election will be the most challenging for his party.

The signs are there - big crowds attending Umno ceramah, unhappiness over the sacking of former Selangor PAS leader Datuk Dr Hasan Ali as well as concern among top leaders like Datuk Dr Haron Din and Datuk Harun Taib about DAP and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. More recently, PAS veteran Datuk Shahnun Ahmad, who wrote that infamous book *Shit* in the 1990s, hit out at the party's partnership with DAP.

State exco member Datuk Husam Musa's claim that Umno is worse than DAP will only infuriate this ultra conservative circle in PAS. He had riled the Umno side when he said that at the recent Assembly sitting.

Nik Aziz is much loved but he has been up there too long. People are talking about the fact that his son Nik Abdul, who is the deputy PAS Youth chief, is about to make his electoral debut in the parliamentary seat of Pasir Puteh.

Sources at the party's central leadership said Nik Aziz will lead Kelantan in the election but Deputy Menteri Besar Datuk Ahmad Yaakob is likely to take over the top post. Ahmad has apparently assumed many of Nik Aziz's duties. He has

also taken on the task of briefing the Sultan about state affairs and has established a good relationship with the palace.

Two candidates have been identified as the potential deputy: Nik Amar who is the state exco in charge of religion and education, and Nasaruddin Daud who is Speaker of the State Legislative Assembly.

Husam was once a contender for the No. 2 post but his ties with the Raja Perempuan has affected his standing in the eyes of the Sultan following the fallout in the royal family. His other disadvantage is that he is not an ulama.

"I am not interested in any post. I have read reports claiming I want to be a minister. One article even said I will be PM after Anwar Ibrahim. I like to joke to my friends, just make me the petroleum minister, I can bring oil royalty to Kelantan," he said.

Blue-eyed boy

But Husam is still the Menteri Besar's blue-eyed boy despite what his detractors may say. During the Assembly sitting, as Husam was elaborating on why he thought DAP is better than Umno, Nik Aziz suddenly stood up and left the House.

By evening the gossip mill was abuzz with claims that Nik Aziz was upset with Husam for praising DAP. But the Menteri Besar apparently left to perform *zohor* prayers and had later called Husam to congratulate him for defending DAP.

The party has been driving home the point that the Menteri Besar must be an ulama. They are aware that for the first time in decades, Umno has a Menteri Besar candidate who is acceptable to Kelantanese and the point about an ulama Menteri Besar is aimed at him.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed

has become a serious contender not because he is a high flyer or has a first class honours degree from a top Australian university. Locals respect him because he is humble, hard working and lives a moderate lifestyle. Mustapa's house in Jeli as well as his father's house in Bachok are indistinguishable from that of the average Kelantanese.

State opposition leader Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad said PAS is contradicting itself on the ulama leadership. He said party president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang is an ulama but the deputy Mohamed Sabu is not.

"PAS has two sets of rules. They say the MB and the deputy must be ulama. But their No. 2 in the party is Mat Sabu who is not an ulama. If anything happens to Hadi, Mat Sabu will take over. So what are they talking about?"

Kelantanese are even crazier about football than politics. The euphoria over the Red Warriors' winning the Malaysia Cup last week has yet to dissipate. Red is a happening colour in Kelantan so much so that the state Barisan has eschewed the official blue and gone for red as its campaign colour.

PAS would like to claim credit for the Red Warriors but the team rose to the top only after Umno warlord Tan Sri Annuar Musa took over as president of the Kelantan Football Association.

But football is truly one game where both parties come together. A PAS official joked that football is so popular in Kelantan because there are no nightclubs or karaoke outlets. Football matches are the only outlet for them to let their hair down, to sing, dance and shout.

The PAS government's ties with the palace have never been this good. Nik Aziz has cultivated a warm working relationship with Sultan Muhammad and had even advised the sovereign to get married as soon as possible. When the Sultan replied tongue-in-cheek that Tok Guru should help find him a wife, the latter merely smiled in a diplomatic fashion.

Tok Guru also has a comfortable relationship with Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. The Prime Minister is always respectful and solicitous in the elder man's presence. After all, Najib has seen Nik Aziz at the height of his power and also at his most vulnerable.

The most famous photograph of them together is that of Najib in his shirtsleeves, leaning anxiously over Nik Aziz as he lay on a hospital bed. Najib, then the Deputy Prime Minister, had flown to Kota Baru to visit the PAS leader after the latter's heart attack. He also arranged for the VIP patient to be flown to Kuala Lumpur for further treatment.

The Umno side used the picture at several by-elections to show that Najib is a caring leader but the PAS side slammed Umno for exploiting the Tok Guru's illness.

Nik Aziz has some good things going for him but the pressure is building. After 22 years as the ruling party, PAS cannot pass the buck to others for the lack of progress or development in the state. There is a do-or-die mood building up in Kelantan politics and it could not have come at a worse time for Nik Aziz. The PAS leader is at his most vulnerable.

Being 82 is very auspicious. In Chinese, the number means "easy to prosper". In politics, however, it simply means one has overstayed.

Nik Aziz will probably be the oldest candidate in the coming general election. The grand old man of PAS has become both an asset and liability to his party.