

Newspaper	NEW STRAITS TIMES
Date	14 FEB 2015

Know a man by his deeds

EULOGY: Tok Guru will be remembered for his humility and simple life as much as his piety



"**TOK** guru sihat? (How is your health, Tok Guru?)"

That was my first question to Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, who looked frail during a visit to his house in Pulau Meiaka, north of Kota Baru, sometime in 2005. He looked odd without his trademark *serban*, which, on the day that I met him, was replaced with a thin, worn skullcap.

I was there attempting to get a scoop which, of course, did not happen. The conversation had, somehow, made me set aside my pen and notebook on a coffee table, where his maid had placed two cups of tea and a small plate of crackers.

The then Kelantan menteri besar was more interested in talking about his health.

He complained, somewhat jokingly, that his assistant had bought the wrong type of brown rice. The right-type, he said, would help him maintain his blood glucose level.

"He bought the wrong one. Now my knees are hurting. I'm not just a religious teacher, but a politician as well. I must be able to walk and be on the ground to meet the people," said Pas' grand old man, massaging his left kneecap.

His driver and bodyguard, known as Abe Ya among local newsmen, sat two chairs away reading a newspaper. He sheepishly smiled in guilt.

"Maafdeh. Saya salah beli. Takpo, nanti saya tubikgi kedai (My apologies for buying the wrong rice. I'll head out to the shop soon)," said a contrite Abe Ya. Nik Aziz glanced at him and continued talking about what he wished for Kelantan.

"I, too, want Kelantan to be prosperous. But while it has been developed physically, the people must equally grow iri terms of spirituality

and morality," said Nik Aziz as he took a sip of tea.

He denied accusations of him detesting entertainment following a dearth of such outlets in Kelantan. His answer led me to pop another question: would he re-open cinemas in the state?

"You see, the reason why the cinemas were closed 10 years ago was because people would not adhere to the gender segregation rule. Men would be seated on the left side, and women on the right.

"However, most violated the regulations. So, we decided to turn on the lights during movies. Yes, that irked the patrons and they left. The cinemas were not making money anymore because no one wanted to watch movies when the lights are on."

At the end of the day, cinema operators decided to close down their businesses.

"However, everything is alright now that we have satellite television. There are so many channels. I am impressed," he said, while switching channels on a TV set with a remote control.

He regaled me with a story — how it took him a week to fully comprehend the remote control's functions, leaving me choking on my tea in hilarity.

Lengthy anecdotes were very much a feature when talking to the man, which served to show that Nik Aziz, despite being a much-revered leader, was still, only human.

While it was common for him to court controversy, particularly when it involved his religious views, he was respected even by the staunchest detractors of Pas, including several Barisan Nasional leaders and members of the media.

Journalists who had covered Nik Aziz locally in Kelantan knew him as

a down to earth, soft-spoken man whom, for all his intentions to champion the Islamic cause, had never once held malice towards his political rivals.

His house was always open to the public, even in the wee hours.

"He is the only person, other than my parents, whom I would kiss the back of the hands when I *salam*," said a senior reporter, whenever the topic of Nik Aziz cropped up during an evening coffee session. In short, the old man was a revered guy.

Politically, Nik Aziz was equally a force to be reckoned with. He was, arguably, the only politician in the country who did not once suffer a defeat at the polls, in a career which spanned almost 50 years.

His political stardom began in 1967 as a parliamentarian for the Kelantan Hilir constituency, later renamed Pengkalan Chepa, before he was appointed Kelantan menteri besar on the night of Oct 22, 1990, right after the results of 8th General Election were announced.

Nik Aziz, however, was more interesting as a person than as a politician. He once told me that it was mind-boggling to him that many thought of Islam as a rigid religion rather than a way of life (he had often stressed on the latter element of Islam).

"For example, I don't think that dancing is wrong in Islam. It is like *silat*, which has various moves akin to a dance. Do it right and it can be beneficial to you," he said in an interview.

Datuk Wan Abdul Rahim Wan Abdullah, former Kelantan speaker and press secretary to Nik Aziz, said Tok Guru was a man of principle and would stick to his guns even on the minutest details.

"He told us (state secretary's office staff) once that we were not allowed to bring home even a pencil from the office, as that would mean stealing government property. A pencil is only worth 20 sen. But Tok Guru would not have it any other way."

Thank you for the lessons, Tok Guru. May your soul be blessed in the afterlife. *Al-Fatihah*.

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