



Rural folk is on this rising politician's mind

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Rural folk is on this rising politician's mind

The new Umno Youth leader has gone from student activist to banker, and is likely to be a minister. He talks to **BRENDAN PEREIRA** in Kuala Lumpur.

DATUK AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI was born in Sungai Nipah Darat, Bagan Datoh, Perak, on Jan 4, 1953. He is married to Datin Hamidah Khamis and they have five children.

Education

1973-76: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Universiti Malaya.

1981: Senior Management Development Programme, Harvard Business School.

Political posts:

1987-94: Political Secretary to Minister of Youth and Sport, and Minister of Defence.

1988-96: Information chief, Umno Youth.

1996: Umno Youth head.

October 1996: Member of Parliament, Bagan Datoh area.



HE LOOKS every bit the chairman of one of Malaysia's largest banks. Dressed immaculately in a dark-blue suit and not a strand of hair out of place, he sinks into a plush leather armchair in a tastefully-furnished office that is the size of a four-room Housing Board flat.

He flashes a broad grin and is ready for interview number ... well, never mind, he cannot remember how many.

Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi is riding high and is very much in demand by the media.

The head of Bank Simpanan Nasional and a director of several companies, he is now making waves in po...



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Zahid explains company appointments

13 December 1998 - Zahid explains company appointments BAGAN DATOH Former Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said yesterday that his appointments m several companies were made before

is now making waves in political circles.

A relative unknown in the political field, he was elected Umno Youth chief after defeating incumbent Tan Sri Rahim Thamby Chik, two chief ministers and a Cabinet minister.

"I did quite well. Winning by 64 votes is quite good, considering it was a five-cornered fight," he says, a bit of an understatement, since the last two elections for the post were decided by fewer than 50 votes.

Speculation is rife that he will be offered a deputy minister's post when the Cabinet is reshuffled.

How times have changed.

Growing up in a village in Bagan Datoh in Perak, he helped supplement the family income by selling *kueh*, *meehoon goreng* and *sotong kering* to schoolmates during recess.

The eldest of nine children, he kept a notebook to jot down names of those who ate on credit.

"Some of them still owe me money and they know who they are," he says, adding that, when he was in his village recently, an old friend came up to him and wanted

to repay a 50-cent debt.

"I told him that time had settled all our debts."

He says growing up in an environment where there was hardship has made him more determined to help rural folk.

"I may have made it, but I have not forgotten the difficulties of people in backward areas," he says. "More has to be done for them."

His words are being backed by action. One of his first initiatives on becoming the head of Umno Youth was for the youth movement to adopt two schools in rural areas.

The youth wing will pay allowances for teachers to hold tuition classes and equip the schools with re-

he was elected as an Umno Youth leader. "After I became Umno Youth chief, I made sure that there was a demarcation line between business...

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source centres and computers.

He also hopes to persuade ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries and other politicians to adopt under-privileged children for a few days during school holidays to give them a taste of the good life.

Datuk Ahmad Zahid's introduction to politics came very early. Ironically, it was provided by Parti Islam (Pas), Umno's rival for the Malay vote in Malaysian politics.



His father, a religious

teacher, was drawn to the politics of Pas and took him along to *ceramah* or talks that were held every week.

It was at these gatherings that he experienced the fire-and-brimstone politics of Islamic fundamentalists, whose hard-hitting speeches moved the crowds.



This early exposure to the power of oratory skills may explain why he has become a speaker of some repute.

In fact, it was his gift for delivering speeches, laced with verses from the Quran at Umno assemblies, which took him to the limelight.

He first came to prominence in 1984 when he was elected Umno Youth head for Bagan Datoh.

During the next few years, he rose in the party hierarchy and this ascent has been matched by his rise up the corporate ladder.



Pas may have ignited his interest in politics, but Datuk Ahmad Zahid does not share its beliefs or manifesto for an Islamic state.

"Malaysia is a multiracial society where Islamic fundamentalist politics has no place," he says. "We need tolerance and moderate policies to live side by side."

That was why he supported the Cabinet decision to allow Michael Jackson to perform here and applauds the decision to encourage the wider use of English in tertiary institutions.



"I lost out as I was not ed

Most out as I was not educated in an English-medium school," he says. "Now I have to make an effort to improve my command of the language. The Malay language will not suffer with the wider use of English."

These are surprisingly moderate views from the leader of a movement that has been labelled extreme and ultra right-wing, and whose members have been accused of using rough-house tactics to break up a conference on East Timor organised by a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

He says: "I gave the order to demonstrate against the holding of the conference. Unfortunately, things got out of control.

"I am not against NGOs. I used to be a member of an NGO. But, this time, they went against the order of the government."

How times have changed.

Eighteen years ago, Datuk Ahmad Zahid sat in jail for three days pondering his future after being arrested for taking part in a student demonstration.

He was among some university undergraduates who protested against the authorities for the plight of farmers in outlying areas such as Baling.

He was deputy president of the radical Universiti of

of the radical Universiti of Malaya students union, assuming the top post when Mr Hishamuddin Rais went into self-exile.

If this piece of history sounds familiar, it is because it is the same as that of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim — the only difference being that the DPM was held in detention longer.

The similar paths taken by both men have led some in Umno to say that Datuk Ahmad Zahid won the Youth post on an "Anwar ticket", an allegation at which he scoffs.



Leaning forward, he says: "People tend to link us because we share an interest in Islamic thinking and have a similar leadership style."

"But all this talk about me being a proxy in the elections is nonsense. I have been Datuk Najib's political secretary for seven years. So why don't people label me as his proxy?"

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is Malaysia's Education Minister and a vice-president of the Umno Supreme Council.

Datuk Ahmad Zahid's detractors also accuse him of being overly ambitious, alleging that he bought his way to power.

In the run-up to the elections in October, the hottest gossip in town was that Datuk Ahmad Zahid was distributing credit cards to delegates. Some said the cards were pre-paid.

There were also questions over his disposal of 2.7 million shares — worth M\$14 million (S\$7.7 million) — in a company of which he was a director just before the election.

He smiles when these allegations are repeated. "I am a bank chairman. I do not go around issuing cards to people. It is too small for someone of my position."

"I am from a religious background and I do not subscribe to money politics," he says, adding that he does not even entertain *mutasyabihat*; the grey area of discretion that is allowed under Islam.

As for being overly ambitious, he says those people who accuse him of that do not know him well enough.

"I ran for the Umno youth post only because the support from the people was very strong."

"If I had lost, then I would have taken the backseat."

"Similarly, if I am offered a Cabinet post, I will do the best I can. But I will not lose any sleep if I am not appointed a minister."



He says involvement in politics has come at a price — he hardly gets a chance to spend time with his wife and five children at their sprawling bungalow in Country Heights, an exclusive residential area, about 20 minutes drive from Kuala Lumpur.

“I am so busy that I only have half an hour a day every morning with the children. But they understand,” says the man who has more than 30 family photographs in his office.

Then he looks at his watch, jumps out of his seat and says: “Sorry, I have to go. I am due in Parliament in half an hour.”

The writer reports on issues and developments in Malaysia for The Straits Times.



Datuk Ahmad Zahid: 'I may have made it, but I have not forgotten the difficulties of people in backward areas.'