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Carrying on Yahaya's legacy

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HIS pictures still grace the walls of the DRB-Hicom Group's offices and the staff still speak of their late chairman Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad in the present tense.

The full repercussions of Yahaya's death when his helicopter crashed last Monday have perhaps not set in for many who were unprepared for the loss of the man who has since his death, become larger than life.

But life must go on, and the conglomerate whose activities reach into the economic and daily life of Malaysia has a new chairman whose every step will be measured against Yahaya's.

Datuk Mohd Saleh Sulong knows Yahaya will be a hard act to follow, but has pledged to do his best, even if he knows that stepping into his predecessor's literally larger shoes will be a challenge.

"Yahaya was an extraordinary entrepreneur, very knowledgeable, forward looking and he displayed the sort of leadership quality expected of a textbook business man.

"His will be a very difficult act to follow. To emulate Yahaya is not going to be easy for anybody.

"I can only say that I will try my best," says the man whom Yahaya has described as his goalkeeper.

He also accepts that people will forever compare him to Yahaya.

"However well I perform or not, I will always be compared to Yahaya. He has now become a legend, how do you beat a legend?"

Born in Kelantan, Saleh at 46, is five years younger than Yahaya. He received his secondary education, like Yahaya, at the prestigious Malay College Kuala Kangsar, and went on to Institut Teknologi Mara and the UK to become a chartered accountant.

Any suggestions that the death of Yahaya means the end of the DRB-Hicom Group will have to stop, says Saleh.

"Yahaya has not presided over a fragile organisation but a very solid one, which will survive the test of any setback or catastrophe."

Saleh stresses that the achievements of a conglomerate like DRB-Hicom are the result of teamwork, rather than one man alone and the death of Yahaya does not mean the end for the group.

"All that the people need to know is that while Yahaya was attracting all the limelight and getting the headlines, there were people behind him delivering at the same time.

"And for the sake of continuity, the Government has chosen one of those people, in this case the number two man to replace him," says the former managing director of the group.

Although Yahaya attracted all the attention locally and internationally, such as when he acquired sports car manufacturer Lotus, Saleh says it was always a team effort

"Yahaya was very visible, here there and everywhere. Who do you think has been doing the work of putting everything together. He must have a team.

"This is going to be a task which we, as a team will collectively continue to undertake."

The team is already familiar with Saleh, who together with Yahaya started their first company, Master-Carriage (M) Sdn Bhd in 1980.

"I believe any person who takes over from Yahaya will be able to do an equally good job if he can get the full support of the various people in

the group, and I think I can."

"But to be doing a good job so well as Yahaya, this may take some time."

A statement issued by the DRB-Hicom group on Saleh said he always chose to keep a lower profile, "generously allowing his partner, the late Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad to enjoy the limelight" and was essentially "the silent but more than significant contributor to the success of the group".

Saleh said Yahaya was his chairman as much as his partner, and he had the understanding that Yahaya would be the front man for the company and the group.

He acknowledged Yahaya was instrumental in charting the course of the group "but I would like to think that as much as we need Yahaya, we cannot afford to be despondent if there is no Yahaya".

Malaysians often saw Yahaya with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir, and he was often part of his entourage overseas, and many wonder if Saleh would enjoy the same accessibility to the leadership as his predecessor.

"In my meeting with the PM and DPM over the last two days, I have been given their assurance and words of support that they will always be available as and when I need to see them.

"As a matter of fact, they told me that they want to be kept informed on a regular basis in terms of how the group is performing and how the projects are being implemented.

"I would be failing in my duty if I don't go to see them."

Having been with Yahaya for over 18 years, Saleh says he knows how Yahaya's mind worked, as he too was involved in discussions, deliberations, and arguments with him.

Saleh, who says he suffered emotionally when Yahaya died, remembers Yahaya was a like a brother to him, and although they had disagreements sometimes, it was a good relationship.

"In the course of 18 years, we argued a lot but Yahaya is a very reasonable and fair minded person and I have to also display this element of give and take.

"You cannot afford to have a partner who imposes his ideas every step of the way and expect the partnership to survive."

"If something went wrong, we made it a point never to blame each other."

The fact that he is an accountant by training may help a little in his new position, says Saleh, because he is more calculative than Yahaya, who was an engineer.

As for being suddenly thrust into the position of chairman of a corporate entity as large as DRB-Hicom with 36,000 employees, Saleh says the question of it being overwhelming, or not, for him will be something he will have to consume and absorb, but someone has to do the job.

"To expect me to be as good as Tan Sri Yahaya is asking too much at the onset because this take time.

"I have to settle down into the position but this is not a position which is unfamiliar to me.

Saleh also says he is much encouraged by the confidence of the leaders in the present management, and continuously stresses that the group is not about one man, but the team."

"The job of the chairman is to gather and rally everybody around and get on with the work.

"There is no doubt whatsoever that it is going to be a mammoth task, but I believe it is not insurmountable."

For those who think that Saleh is merely warming the seat for another individual, Saleh says their wait will be in vain.

"I am afraid that they will be disappointed.

"I will do my best, but of course the tenancy of my position will depend on how well I and the group perform and how I am able to get everybody to

work with me.

"I believe that the confidence the Government has in me is on account of the fact that they want to see continuity.

"All these plans, agendas and programmes are not new to me. In fact they are as much Yahaya's as they are mine because I have been there with him.

"I am not too concerned with the sceptics. In fact I have more reason than most to see the group become successful because I have a stake in it."

Saleh's relationship with Yahaya went beyond the mere running of the business together. They had an arrangement that they would take care of each other's family if something were to happen to the other.

His first reaction when he heard the news of the missing helicopter was "Oh God, please don't let it be true", followed by the emptiness and hollow feeling that comes with tragic news.

He is trustee and custodian for Yahaya's shares, now inherited by the children, whom he says will have a role later as they are still young.

Yahaya leaves behind two sons and two daughters, aged between 24 and 13.

"I have to make sure that the assets remain intact and that we do not lose control." Saleh says

The father of three boys says he is prepared for task ahead, but being a private person who enjoyed his privacy, he will now miss being able to enjoy the simple things in life.

"I've got a job to do."

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