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Megat Junid - Emerging from under the wing of Dr M

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DATUK Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob is an unabashed "Dr Mahathir man".

First of all, he makes no bones about it. Then, there are the helpful little hints dropped all over his new office at the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs.

Occupying place of honour in the spacious oblong office atop Menara Maybank is a huge, framed portrait of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in a contemplative mood, a light smile on his face and fingers resting on his chin.

More photographs of the Prime Minister, including one of Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali dot other parts of the room.

"I am here thanks to Dr Mahathir," he says of his elevation from Deputy Home Minister to Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs right at the start of the interview.

But, as an Umno Youth politician cheekily puts it: "Lucky fellow, he always gets the `affairs'."

Megat Junid is in casual attire the morning of the interview. He has on his trademark Malay-collared shirt in a blinding kingfisher blue.

He was peering long-sightedly over a copy of the tabloid Harian Metro while trying to squeeze in an appointment request by an Umno division from Terengganu.

Megat Junid is on the threshold of 55, about the age that Umno leaders of an earlier time made it big. But times have changed and his recent promotion is regarded as somewhat late in the day in this age of "helicopter politicians."

(In Umno political jargon, a "helicopter politician" refers to someone who rises from nowhere to an important position in the party or government and is, generally, not a very complimentary title.)

In his 11 years as Deputy Home Minister, at least half a dozen of his "juniors" in Umno politics have "gone over my head."

But it is not exactly a position without its own peculiar sphere of power and influence so much so that the market talk has it that "Megat has gone from a minor but powerful post to a major but less powerful one."

Besides, he was more or less running the show at the Home Ministry, something he does not bother to deny.

"PM left 90 per cent of the power (in the Ministry) to me. This year, he said to me: Megat, you sign the PR (Permanent Residence) ... something he did for the past 10 years," he says.

Indeed, Megat Junid's ties with the Prime Minister goes back to the days when Tunku Abdul Rahman expelled the latter from Umno and rendered the outspoken medical doctor a virtual persona non grata in Umno circles.

His own political career was not so much a rapid rise to the top as more a dogged loyalty to one man, namely Dr Mahathir.

His first meeting with Dr Mahathir came when he was a student leader at Universiti Malaya.

The student union organised a political forum - something he would have frowned upon as Deputy Home Minister years later - that brought together Dr Mahathir, Datuk Asri Muda and Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Khoo. Students were drawn to the radical figure they saw in Dr Mahathir.

On his graduation, Megat Junid taught in Kedah where he was a frequent visitor to Dr Mahathir's clinic in Alor Setar - not as a patient but to engage in political discussion.

"Sometimes, I would drive him to Kuala Nerang for durians, then back to his house where we would talk and talk until 3am. Dr Siti Hasmah would come out of the room and ask: `still talking politics?'"

Megat Junid joined Umno only when Dr Mahathir was readmitted into the party under Tun Razak. Dr Mahathir, then a senator, sent two Umno Youth leaders, one of them Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, to persuade him to sign up and head the Youth wing of the newly established Alor Setar division.

The division head was Dr Mahathir and Tan Sri Zahir Ismail was his deputy.

The 1974 general election saw Dr Mahathir appointed Education Minister and Megat Junid was seconded to the Ministry as special officer to the Minister. His official task: to write speeches for the Minister.

He was quite pleased with the job but less so when, barely a year later, Dr Mahathir asked him to resign his civil servant job and become his political secretary; Tun Razak had just passed away and his successor, Tun Hussein Onn, had made Dr Mahathir his second-in-command.

"I said to him: `Doc, give me a week to think about it.' A political secretary had no pension at that time. Dr M's reply was: `Megat, orang kampung saja yang pikir tentang pencen.'" (only village folks think of pension.)

Anyway, the letter of appointment from Tun Hussein arrived the next day and that was that.

In the years that followed, he faithfully trailed behind Dr Mahathir until the latter assumed the highest political office of the land in 1981.

"My loyalty to Dr M is undivided. They say there will be only an artiste like P. Ramlee every 100 years. I say there will not be another leader like Dr Mahathir in 100 years," he declares with a flourish.

His entry into electoral politics came only in the general election of 1982.

He was helping the three-man panel of Dr Mahathir, Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Tun Ghafar Baba sort out names of electoral candidates - accompanied by their plus and minus points on a Sunday morning.

All Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers had been summoned to the PM's office.

Suddenly, Musa came into Megat Junid's room and told him he had been picked for the parliamentary seat of Alor Setar. Eventually, Megat Junid chose to contest in Hilir Perak, in his own home State.

He won and became the first MP-cum-political secretary. In other words, he was not given a post.

Even now, he is among a handful of people said to have Dr Mahathir's ear. For instance, he was the man with whom former Parti Semangat Melayu '46 deputy president Datuk Rais Yatim first broached the idea of rejoining Umno.

According to Rais: "We knew he had access to Dr Mahathir."

Says a Wanita Umno division chief: "He is one of the more influential Umno leaders, but no one really notices that because he stays in the background."

Megat Junid's former position and its connection to the country's security also made him a figure whom most civilians were wary of. And he held sway over an area which affects our lives in the most basic, yet crucial of ways.

He happily declares that despite the high security nature of the job, he and his family have never once received a death threat. And he is unfazed by the public reaction to his proposal to place those suspected of commercial crimes under restricted residence.

"It's a form of rehabilitation, you know," he says in all seriousness and goes on to elaborate on how "near impossible it is to prosecute a

brothel-owner because prostitutes who work for him will not testify against him."

"So I tell these people, since you admit it, I will send you to RR (restricted residence) for rehabilitation."

One would suppose that it takes a special kind of person to do the sort of things called for in the Home Ministry and still get a good night's sleep.

Does he, I enquire, ever feel guilty about detaining people without trial and its effects on their families?

His reply is oblique: "There are no more political detainees in Kamunting. That shows we don't misuse the ISA to silence our political opponents, only to restrain those who are a threat to national security ... not because they are a threat to Umno or Barisan Nasional."

As for the 1987 Operation Lalang, he says, the detention orders were signed by the Home Minister although the release orders, he adds rather too quickly, were signed by him.

He also claims the illegal immigrant and dadah issues - migraine proportion problems for him in the Home Ministry - are under control; but, perhaps, the public will be the better judge of that.

Despite his high profile job, little is known about him and as is typical in an under-informed situation, rumours tend to abound, some of them far from pleasant. Definitely, it is one of the less breezy jobs to be had in the Cabinet despite his attempts to gloss over the onerous nature of the job.

Megat Junid's policy seems to be that he is doing a job "in the national interest."

In person, he is far from the tough-talking, uncompromising figure that he comes across as. In fact, if one did not know his job, one would take him as an "everyday sort of person".

As Kota Melaka MP Lim Guan Eng himself attests: "His private and public image are total contrasts. He's very friendly on a personal level, I consider him a friend ... but too authoritarian publicly, like threatening to buang daerah those accused of copyright violations. That's a bit too much."

Lim recalls that Megat Junid was among the "top Umno guys to welcome me as an MP."

Megat Junid himself says: "They are my friends ... Mohamed Sabu, Hadi (Awang) ... (Lim) Kit Siang can ring me up any time; Karpal (Singh) calls me all the time."

And although he may be less popular among activist groups and NGOs, he is immensely popular with the Umno rank and file.

"His PR is class!" says an Umno politician.

Despite expensive pastimes and a taste for the good life (he was at pains to explain that the fleet of luxury cars usually parked outside his house belongs to his businessman son), he is generous to a fault, loves to "belanja everyone" and is very popular among the Wanita ladies because he lets them think they are bullying him.

His yearly durian parties at his Kelana Jaya house find guests ranging from Ministers to opposition figures.

Although Megat Junid says his new Ministry is "another job", it is not. For the first time in his political career, he has emerged from under the wing of his mentor, Dr Mahathir.

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