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Mohd Saleh ride the crest

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DRB-HICOM Group chairman Datuk Mohd Saleh Sulong seems to have taken in his stride his new role in life, which he assumed in the harsh glare of publicity that trailed the larger-than-life figure of his predecessor, the late Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad.

"It was fun being Number Two," he says of his days as the group's managing director. "You're not really exposed. You enjoy your work and still can maintain your privacy," he said in an interview last Friday.

"Now, there is television, interviews. Unavoidably, I have become more recognised. But I'm not uncomfortable with it. I'm not totally a shy person. I'm not an introvert; neither am I an extrovert. I'm somewhere in between."

He added that the process of adapting had to be done quickly as being chairman of DRB-Hicom, he has since become "almost like a public property.

It's been over 100 days since his appointment as group chairman on March 6, three days after the tragic helicopter crash that claimed the life of DRB-Hicom group controlling shareholder and chairman Yahaya.

Mohd Saleh feels the transition from managing director to chairman has not been as difficult as had been originally envisaged.

"You must appreciate that I am not someone from outside. So, it is not as if I was overawed by the expectations they have of me; therefore I am not under pressure."

This was due to Yahaya having had to cope with many positions, including that of president of the National Malay Chamber of Commerce.

As his right-hand man, it was Mohd Saleh who regularly chaired meetings instead and as such knew the group's operations like the back of his hand.

And, in taking on the responsibility for the dozens of companies in the diversified group, Mohd Saleh said his management style is similar to that of Yahaya's.

His management style is to be more consultative in nature, liking the benefit of views from his staff before making decisions.

And because he has lesser positions than Yahaya, Mohd Saleh is more accessible to his staff.

Mohd Saleh is not in the least perturbed by the constant comparison between him and Yahaya.

He is aware that many observers still regard his appointment as merely seat-warming for the next chairman - but many have since begun to accept the fact that he is here to stay.

"There were even questions posed in the early days of my becoming chairman, on whether or not I would stay in my current position until the next Tan Sri Yahaya comes along."

"But you must understand, he was unique. He can never be replaced. So, you have to get used to Saleh Sulong now."

Reacting to questions referring to the three months as a transition period, Saleh is quick to point out that he was never under probation.

To him, the position would have been temporary only if he could not live up to the expectations.

And that possibility never crossed his mind, said Mohd Saleh, because he is a shareholder of the group.

The affable 46 year-old is seen as lacking Yahaya's connections and clout, a factor naysayers believe could affect the group's ability to clinch future deals.

Saleh's answer to this prickly question is simple. The Government and its leaders want the diversified group, which undertakes many projects of public interest, to succeed.

"The Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, our ministers want to see the group succeed. Collectively, the listed companies account for slightly more than 10 per cent of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange market capitalisation."

"Can you risk denying its chairman from having access and hope he will succeed just by himself? There is no way he could succeed alone. And the Government is not out to frustrate him.

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has given me his assurance that he is available for me to see as and when available. In fact, he went out of his way to address 200 senior managers in a special session after I requested for it.

"It must be very visible to everyone in the group that I have the backing of the Prime Minister. And in the last three months, I have been happy with the support."

Of course, he hastens to add, if the chairman lacked drive and the ability to communicate, all this support would amount to nought.

And he is not about to let that happen.

He stresses that his objectives and those of Yahaya's are the same and the programme being undertaken now for the group is not much different from what it was.

The aim is to take the group into the next century with focus on expanding capacity, increasing local content and upping exports of the Proton cars, and also beefing up its non-automotive sectors.

For Proton itself, the immediate aim is to increase its export market as the target of at least 25 per cent of its production - which would rise to one million units annually with the Proton City plant in Tanjung Malim - is slated for foreign markets.

Saleh also promised that the group will continue to secure new projects and cites as an example, the group's submission of proposals related to the services sector to the Government.

He, however, says its too early to give details.

He added that the past three months have been made easier with the support of his wife Datin Akmal Abdul Salam, whom he says has been a source of strength, together with the confidence of his 36,000-odd staff.

There were no disgruntled employees, or resignations.

Business associates and principals such as Mitsubishi and Isuzu have also extended the same support, he said.

Asked if he still feels the loss of Yahaya, Saleh had this to say:

"I feel the loss of a close friend, more than the chairman of the company. He was like a brother. We were both from Dungun, went to the same school although he was five years older. Our wives were good friends, and so were the children.

"At first, when I came into this room," he said, in reference to the wide, tastefully furnished office we were sitting in, "I felt I could see Tan Sri in this room. He had such a big personality."

He said when the tragedy struck, his grief had to be put aside because DRB-Hicom's operations could not be interrupted.

Staff morale had to be maintained and by his accounts, everyone has risen to the occasion.

And how does he rate his performance so far?

"I am not unhappy. I am not unsatisfied."

"The results (released last Friday) have shown that there is continuous harmony in the group. There is no politicking, or animosity. Everyone works very well together, and that is crucial."

Furthermore, Yahaya's legacy at the group continues with the recent appointment of his daughter, Yatina Yahaya, 24, as director of several companies within the group.

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