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Aishah continues to lead motor traders

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THE petite Aishah Ahmad was up against four tough guys, and yet, she came out of the fight the victor. Nine years later, she still wears the crown.

Aishah was not a tae-kwan-do exponent with a black belt nor did she practise silat (Malay martial art). Yet, she was able to defeat them all.

The "fight" was for the chairmanship of the highly-respected Malaysian Motor Traders Association in 1991.

Soft-spoken Aishah beat four other strong candidates including the late Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad, chairman of the DRB-Hicom Group.

She became the first woman to be its chairman, a remarkable accomplishment and recognition in an industry very much dominated by the opposite sex.

The 202-member MMTA, including 27 ordinary members (franchise holders), is an influential body in safeguarding the interests of players in the country's highly competitive motor industry.

MMTA decides, among others, on whether the industry should support or oppose any regulations or other measures affecting the members as well as co-operating with and making representations to any Government department or authority.

Recounting her early days in an interview at her office in Shah Alam recently, Aishah said: "The four candidates for the chairmanship in 1991 included three CEOs (chief executive officers). They're all great guys.

"When the decision came, people were very surprised to see a lady being elected. My friends could not believe it."

Even the then managing director of Amim Holdings Sdn Bhd who nominated Aishah for the post, told her that he was not sure whether she could handle the job well.

"After his comment, I was determined to prove my ability and at the same time, show that a woman can handle this job," said Aishah who is the general manager (sales) of Amim Holdings, the company that holds Ford's franchise.

She now stands tall in a world ruled mostly by men.

Based on her track record, industry players and observers agreed that Aishah is the driving force in the development of the local automotive industry over the years.

MMTA's initial success under Aishah's guidance was in 1992.

That was when the hire-purchase policy for vehicles was curbed by the Government. The repayment period was five years while upfront payment was 25 per cent of the vehicle's value.

"We kept lobbying for six months and eventually the Government allowed the repayment period and upfront payment back to the previous seven years and 10 per cent respectively."

Besides being the first woman to lead the MMTA, she is president of Automotive Federation Malaysia (AFM) and vice-president of Asean Automotive Federation (AAF).

Being a team worker, Aishah is reluctant to solely accept credit as the key figure behind the progress of the MMTA and industry, saying that "various parties had made greater contribution."

Paying special tribute to MMTA's committee members, she said: "I cannot work alone. It's the committee members who have worked very hard to ensure the members' interests are protected.

"They work well as a team," she said.

Her achievements have received top level recognition.

In August this year, Aishah was conferred Tokoh ITM Alumni by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad; the only woman of four recipients to be honoured with the award.

Aishah "tied her knot" with the automotive industry in 1976, working with foreign-owned Inchcape which at that time dealt with the franchise business of Toyota and Volkswagen vehicles.

She steadily made her way up. In March 1981, she joined Amim Holdings as trainee executive. After nearly 15 years in the industry, she gained the trust to guide MMTA to greater heights in 1991. Subsequently, she was appointed president of AFM in 1998.

Recalling her working experience with Amim Holdings in the early years, Aishah said there were initially 15 people sent to the company to be trainee executives.

Only five were selected and again, she was the only woman.

"Nobody wanted me at their department because I am a woman. Eventually, there was a general manager who took me in and put me in charge of matters relating to Bedford vehicles.

"There were very few women involved in the automotive industry at that time." Sharing her personal philosophy, Aishah believes that there is nothing one could not achieve in life.

"The most important thing is that we must be able to work with others and do not mind working hard. We must also have confidence. Then we would be able to achieve whatever our goals are."

After nine years at the top, Aishah would surely have gained the respect from her peers and sceptics.

"Do you think I've gained their respect?," she asked, and cheerfully followed up the question with a firm "yes".

Is she proud to be first woman to head MMTA?

"I'm proud because this is an elected position," she said.

How does she manage her task at Amim Holding and MMTA simultaneously?

"First of all and most important to note is that I have full blessings from my company's management (to handle the MMTA job). At MMTA, we have a secretariat and it does most of my work.

"We always co-ordinate and, are in consultation with other committee members. We come up with the right policies. If I have to do more work for MMTA, I would probably do it after my office hours on Saturdays or Sundays."

While she is apparently very satisfied with the influential role of the MMTA, Aishah hopes that AFM be given an equal opportunity to highlight its opinion and stance on issues pertaining to the motor industry.

Although AFM is basically the umbrella body for all players in the country's motor industry, the federation seems to be shadowed by its constituent member MMTA.

Then again, with Aishah, you'll never know. She has done it before, she might do it again.

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