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Profile-Halil

HALIL: THE MAN BEHIND LANGKAWI'S RAPID DEVELOPMENT

By: Nor Hammad

LANGKAWI: The legendary Langkawi group of islands has seen a drastic change in its landscape over the past decade or so, and the man behind the transformation is still far from satisfied.

Long known as an empty land fit only for doves, Langkawi's change to a bustling tourist haven is very much the work of the General Manager of the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), Datuk Abdul Halil Mutalib.

Appointed to the job in 1990, Halil's last goal before his scheduled retirement in 2001, is to see Langkawi's present population of 53,000 increasing to 100,000.

"That is my vision, I have only two years to turn the 99 magical islands in the sun into the best tourist destination in the region," he said.

With a population of 100,000 population, the resort islands do not need to be too dependent on the inflow of tourists but rather on its own strong consumer base which can sustain itself in coping with the various economic trends of the country.

Halil, who is considered by and large as the main implementator of the federal government's vision in developing Langkawi into a major tourism centre, was born in Pasir Salak and attended government English School in Teluk Intan before furthering his studies in Sekolah Alam Shah.

He obtained his diploma in public administration from Universiti Malaya and later a Masters in Public Policy at the University of Wisconsin, United States.

Leadership seems to run in the family as a younger brother, Yusof, is the chairman and director of two public-listed companies, Larut, and Talam.

Speaking in his office overlooking the main Kuah jetty recently, Halil recalled how when he first set foot here on April 1, 1990, he was in the "dark" over what was the most effective approach to develop the islands in accordance with the vision of the national leaders like Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Alhamdulillah...Langkawi managed to be developed over an unusual rapid pace since the formation of LADA on March 15, 1990, largely because I felt free to make the decision and to implement the outlined policy without interference from various parties," he said.

But Halil is no ordinary civil servant. His colourful career started off as an Assistant District Officer, Assistant Secretary in the Defence Ministry to the Malaysian Students Department in Jakarta.

This was followed by stints in the Prime Minister's Department and the Public Service Department.

He learnt much in areas like development management, politics and socio-economic needs during his promotion as the Pulau Pinang and Kedah Development Officer for seven years from 1984, where he handled community development, socio-economy, infrastructure and overall monitoring and implementation of state and federal development projects.

Halil gained invaluable experience while he was in the Prime Minister's Department where he was exposed to the country's New Economic Policy plan and the basic points of Dr Mahathir's Vision 2020 plan.

Many government observers here felt that Halil was handpicked for the LADA job, given his vast experience.

He said LADA is currently in the second phase of its development plan. Among the several social-economic projects is tertiary institutions which

should increase the population base along with other prime movers.

This will enable Langkawi to generate its own growth and justify the potential for more investors to come.

With a stronger population base, investors will be more keen to set up various businesses and complement the island's economic mainstay, tourism.

Recalling the islands' history in the 1980s, Halil said it was a stroke of good luck that Promet could not fulfill its development project due to the recession of that period.

This helped to convince the government of the need to have a singular development authority to ensure that growth and development projects were sustained over the long term, thus giving birth to LADA.

The government, he said, had learnt a lesson in that too many committees would not be effective to meet the main development objective of the islands.

LADA's key objective, on the other hand, is to make Langkawi a major tourism destination and to upgrade the socio-economic standards of the local people as stipulated in the Draft of the Langkawi Structural Plan, 1990 - 2005.

The turning point came in 1987, when the Federal Government conferred duty-free status on the island.

From being an isolated island emerging from the curse by the wronged maiden, Mahsuri, so the legend goes, Langkawi turned around to become a popular tourist destination and a favourite venue for international conferences and exhibitions, as well as major sports events.

Investments poured in and a host of projects were carried out.

Prices of land shot up as the island thrives, and several local landowners became millionaires overnight.

The duty-free status of Langkawi from January 1, 1987, has to a large extent inspired and hastened economic growth, especially in creating opportunities for the business, commercial and service sectors in Langkawi.

The increasing number of tourists have to be accommodated and by 1997, there were 79 hotel premises, hotel apartments and chalets with a total of 6,800 rooms, close to the target of 7,500 set for the year 2005.

By 1997, Lada had spent RM800 million on the island's development while the private sector invested RM3.4 billion in the housing sector, hotels, business centres, commerce and recreation centres.

"As it is, there is no denying that Langkawi has developed into a major asset for the country's tourism sector whereby the local villagers and local migrant workers have enjoyed an increase in their living standard," Halil said.

The next development phase of Langkawi, he said, is to ensure that the future generations can equally benefit as the current generation.

Towards this end, Langkawi is venturing into education to ensure that its young people would have access to the best, and help pull in students from the mainland states and overseas.

MARA Junior Science College (MRSM) and the Langkawi International University of Tomorrow (LIUT) had been set up, besides the sudden mushrooming of three private colleges.

LIUT will offer courses ranging from space science to tourism and from robotics to sports.

Lada also intends to establish environment-friendly small and medium industries (SMIs) as outlined in the Langkawi Structural Plan.

With small cottage industries, the population will indirectly increase to meet the demand of Langkawi for manpower.

Halil said the country's armed forces also plans to establish a naval and army base here, thus contributing to a higher mixture of local villagers and mainland migrant workers.

With a higher population count, the resort island which is one of the fastest growing districts in Malaysia, does not need to be too dependent on local tourists who contributed a large portion of the RM1.13 billion tourist receipt in 1996.

After nine years leading LADA, Halil can afford to smile today. "I'm satisfied with what has been achieved but much more could be done if given a chance and the support," he said.

For the new millennium, Langkawi needs an officer like a mayor with absolute say in enforcement, planning, licensing and administration to spearhead the island's development. -- Bernama

NH KGO