

20/01/1999

Meeting new challenges with confidence

M. Jeffri Razali

WHILE his appointment as the Foreign Minister may raise a few eyebrows, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar is confident his stint as the former Defence Minister will contribute immensely to meeting the challenges of his new portfolio.

"There is no difference between the two Ministries as our defence policy is consistent with the Government's foreign policy. As such, I think I am on a very comfortable level to carry out my new responsibilities," he said in an interview at his office in Wisma Pertahanan recently.

While some may question his appointment to a senior post in the Cabinet, Syed Hamid feels it is more a question of trust rather than a promotion.

He feels that trust, especially one entrusted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, should be carried out to the best of one's ability. Trust, says Syed Hamid, goes hand-in-hand with responsibility.

"Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (now Deputy Prime Minister) did a good job when he was Foreign Minister, having set very high standards. The least I can do is maintain that legacy and undertake all responsibilities.

"As you can see, everything here has been cleared," he said, gesturing towards his empty room before breaking into a smile. The room was once filled with memorabilia and miniature military equipment from his days as the Defence Minister.

From outside the room, the sound of workmen clearing and packing his belongings for his new office at the Foreign Ministry could be heard.

Syed Hamid, who will officially assume his post as Foreign Minister on Jan 25, was appointed Defence Minister in May 1995, replacing Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak who was appointed Education Minister.

Prior to his appointment as Defence Minister, he was the Justice Minister from 1990 to 1995.

While describing the Foreign Minister's post as challenging, Syed Hamid said he was prepared to face the challenges and continue with Malaysia's foreign policies.

"As human beings, we are always in the learning process, learning and doing new things as we move along ... and as politicians, we should be ready for changes, too.

"Malaysia is becoming more conspicuous in the international arena, more so, following its election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council this year. I feel this will be challenging, good exposure (for the country) and am really looking forward to it."

Born in 1944, he was appointed a Minister in 1990, after he was elected Kota Tinggi Member of Parliament in the general election, beating Semangat 46's Ma'on Omar with a 26,548-vote majority.

Syed Hamid, son of former Umno Youth leader Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar, is married to Datin Sharifah Aziah Syed Zainal Abidin. The couple have six children.

On any change or fine-tuning that he will undertake as the Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid said there was no need for him to do that as he would continue from where Abdullah left.

"Things will still remain the same. Our policy will continue to be consistent with the UN Charter, and that will include voicing our opinions and views if we feel there is a need for it."

While some may feel that he would be entrusted with the responsibility of restoring Malaysia-US relations which have strained following US Vice-

President Al Gore's remarks in Kuala Lumpur recently, Syed Hamid said there was no need for such action.

"We are not anti-US and we respect our relations with them. Being friendly doesn't mean that we must share the same opinion and follow their lead.

"We have always tried to play our roles effectively in the international arena. In fact, I have not known any instance where Malaysia was deemed as an unreasonable country."

Will Syed Hamid, following his close links with the military over the last four years, deem China as a threat and try to change Malaysia's foreign policy towards that country?

"My personal feeling is that we cannot isolate China as it is a new world power ... not in the normal military sense but as an emerging economic powerhouse.

"I will continue with Malaysia's policy towards China which is constructive and positive engagement ... where both parties can benefit. As it is, our bilateral ties have been good."

While being thankful to Dr Mahathir for entrusting him with the Foreign Ministry, Syed Hamid admitted he was sad to leave the Defence Ministry which he took over as a greenhorn.

The fraternity and esprit de corps among the Ministry staff and armed forces personnel had made parting a difficult experience.

"After being a part of this large family, it is only natural to feel emotional, having to leave them.

"Overall, I am happy that I have contributed in a small way to the Defence Ministry and succeeded in doing what I intended to do when I took over."

Syed Hamid pointed out that one of the things he sought to change when he assumed the post of Defence Minister was to ensure that there was no short appointment for chiefs of the three armed forces' branches, including the armed forces chief.

"If you look at some of the chiefs, they were only at the top posts for a few months before retiring. This is not good as there will not be any continuity in the armed forces as the changes are so frequent."

The first to benefit from Syed Hamid's goal was former armed forces chief Jen Tan Sri Ismail Omar. His tenure was extended for another two years when he was due for retirement in 1996.

"All the chiefs of the three services will now hold on to their posts for between four and five years. This will ensure continuity and will give ample time for the second-liners to be groomed into future chiefs."

No one gave Syed Hamid a ghost of a chance when he took over the Defence Ministry.

However, as he leaves the Ministry after serving for four years, he will look back with pride as he had proven that he was a capable Minister despite several shortcomings.

As he steps into his new office on Jan 25, he will surely be hoping that the stars will shine on him again as he sets out to prove he can be a good Foreign Minister as well.

(END)