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A lot expected of ex-dentist and ex-teacher in managing Selangor

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AN ex-dentist and an ex-teacher - what can they do? Nothing much, perhaps. But in reality, much is expected of them in the coming years.

The ex-dentist is not an ordinary teeth-puller and the ex-teacher also happens to be an ex-Menteri Besar. Together, the two have been entrusted with the task of managing Selangor, one of the most dynamic States on the west coast, which explains why a lot is expected of them.

Dr Mohd Khir Toyo, 35, the State Assemblyman for Sungai Panjang, is scheduled to be officially made chief executive officer today, which automatically elevates him to a higher status on the political landscape.

Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, who re-established himself as an Umno vice-president during the last party elections, was Selangor's 11th Menteri Besar. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as Prime Minister and Umno president, has appointed the two as the twin managers of the State.

In the last 14 years, the people of Selangor have had two Menteris Besar - Muhammad and Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar. Both assumed the post amidst much fanfare and expectations, only to depart in rather controversial circumstances.

Dr Mohd Khir should always remember this because, in the last few days, he has captured the headlines of most newspapers. As one senior Cabinet minister puts it: "He's the new darling of the media." This was also the sentiment when Muhammad became MB in 1986 and Abu Hassan in 1997.

Many people in Selangor want Dr Mohd Khir to be their darling for a long time, and for the right reasons. The new MB, if he is to be a darling for long, must therefore perform his duties well, and equally important, also be seen to do his job well.

While his surprise appointment remains widely debated in and outside the State, Muhammad's return as chairman of the Selangor Umno Liaison Committee has attracted much interest. Some have even concluded that the charismatic and friendly leader, whose popularity appears not to have diminished despite being out of the party's top echelon, continues his personal rehabilitation steadily and gradually.

In the Umno elections on May 11, Muhammad, who was nominated by 32 divisions, garnered 853 votes to retain his seat as a vice-president. The supreme council had asked him to go on leave to settle his problems with an Australian court over charges of not declaring more than A\$1.2 million in cash. He was subsequently acquitted of the charges.

Not many people gave him any chance of winning a seat, but he did. Thus, Umno watchers concluded, began Muhammad's political rehabilitation.

How will the two "manage" Selangor then? How will they complement each other? And, more important, will they undermine each other as they try to stamp their mark on the State? Can they learn from other States where the Menteri Besar is not the State Liaison chief for the party?

In Pahang, the State Liaison chief is Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who is Information Minister and party secretary-general; while in Penang, the State Liaison chief is Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Deputy Prime Minister/Home Minister and deputy president of the party.

Hence, the Batman and Robin partnership is not unique to Selangor, and could very well be a testbed for similar arrangements in other States. A clear division between party and Government may not necessarily be bad for both, a view gaining acceptance in some sectors.

A Member of Parliament from Selangor who had served the State as an

Assemblyman before the November election said this arrangement suits Selangor very well. Being young, Dr Mohd Khir can help attract youths into the mainstream of national development; as for Muhammad, his years as a Menteri Besar would enable him to guide the new CEO.

A question was asked whether the Selangor situation would result in one leader supervising the other, or give rise to opposing views which would complicate administration of the State.

The question of who controls whom should not arise, the MP said. Both Dr Mohd Khir and Muhammad have been told that they cannot afford to mess up the situation in Selangor.

Muhammad was only told to "guide" his younger colleague, not to supervise him. As for Dr Mohd Khir, he is to lend Muhammad a hand in party administration and give clout to the pursuit of party agenda.

What may appear true, however, is the reflection that the party in power is in control of the government. Which is not the same as Muhammad controlling Dr Mohd Khir.

Managing Selangor may not be easy, no matter how qualified a person is. Entrusting the duties of managing the government and party to two different individuals in a State facing tremendous political, social and economic challenges may just be the answer for the time being.

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