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Mohd Khir is new MB (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Unheralded Dr Mohd Khir Toyo, a dentist by training and a first-term assemblyman, is the new Menteri Besar of Selangor.

He replaces Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar who resigned last Thursday after holding the position for three years.

The appointment was announced about 6.30pm today by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in a statement read out to reporters by Information Minister and Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob at Angkasapuri.

The 35-year-old Sungai Panjang Assemblyman, who was not even among the 11 names submitted by the State Umno to the Prime Minister, has become the youngest person ever to assume the stewardship of the Selangor Government.

The announcement also ended days of intense speculation about Abu Hassan's successor since Selangor had been without a Menteri Besar for nine days.

Dr Mohd Khir's immediate reaction was one of shock but he pledged to do his best to live up to the expectations of the Prime Minister in leading one of the most developed States in the country.

Met at his house in Taman Ria Jaya, Sekinchan, he said journalists were the first to bring him the good news.

"I wish to thank Dr Mahathir for my appointment and also the Barisan Nasional leadership for having confidence in me to hold such an important post in a State that is rapidly developing and full of challenges," he said.

In the three paragraph statement, Dr Mahathir said he had informed the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah who is also the Sultan of Selangor and the Regent of Selangor Tengku Idris Shah, who had both consented to the appointment.

The Prime Minister had met the King at Istana Negara about 5pm for a one-hour audience. In the statement, Dr Mahathir also announced the appointment of Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib as the new Selangor Umno liaison committee chairman and Dr Mohd Khir as his deputy. Muhammad Taib, 55, was the Selangor Menteri Besar from August 1986 till his resignation in 1997.

Dr Mohd Khir defeated Pas candidate Mohd Fadzin Taslimin with a 165 majority in the last general election. He was elected to the Umno Youth executive committee in the May party elections and later appointed chairman of its Religious Affairs Bureau.

Some newspapers reported that Dr Mahathir wanted a young man with "no skeletons in his closet" for the hot seat, given that two chief executives of the State had to resign in the last three years.

Abu Hassan's resignation came amid allegations circulated through poison-pen letters that he had an affair with his sister-in-law, which he denied.

Muhammad, his predecessor, quit after he was accused of failing to declare foreign currencies worth RM2.7 million while leaving the Brisbane airport after holidaying in Australia in December 1996.

Muhammad was charged in an Australian court but was acquitted in 1998.

In Kuala Terengganu, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi tonight congratulated Dr Mohd Khir and reminded the new Menteri Besar that he had a strong responsibility to the people of Selangor in particular and the nation in general.

Judging from the statements Dr Mohd Khir made when told of the appointment, Abdullah said the new Menteri Besar gave an assurance to the people in the State that he would discuss and consult his colleagues on how to continue to develop Selangor.

The Deputy Prime Minister was speaking at a Press conference after the Terengganu Press Club dinner.