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Syabas and some friendly advice for the new MB

Ahmad A. Talib

SAUDARA YB YAB (Yang Bakal Yang Amat Berhormat) Dr Mohd Khir Toyo,

Please accept my congratulations on your appointment as the new Menteri Besar of Selangor. As I understand it, your swearing-in ceremony will be on Thursday, which is why I'm referring to you as Yang Bakal Yang Amat Berhormat. Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers are always referred to as Yang Amat Berhormat, as are the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

From Thursday onwards, you move one step higher from a mere Yang Berhormat to a Yang Amat Berhormat. What a climb this is for you. You were not the only one caught by surprise. Everyone raised their eyebrows and asked "Who?" the moment your name was announced on Friday night over television.

You were chosen partly because you're only 35, making you the youngest ever to become Menteri Besar in Selangor. As a complete outsider, Selangor watchers didn't even speculate about you in the run-up and you were not even on the list of 11 names submitted by Umno Selangor.

But then Selangor has a tradition of dark horses coming out from the shadows to take the limelight. I'm sure you realise the high expectations of the people, coming at a time when Selangor politics, especially that of Umno, are in greater need of unity than ever. Being only 35, I expect this would be one of your biggest challenges in the coming months, if not years.

By naming you, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has once again demonstrated his willingness to go against the norm. Many, if not all, had expected the PM to pick one of 11 names.

Now, you find yourself in the driving seat of one of the most dynamic, active and successful states in the country.

There must be a pile of congratulatory cards and messages on your table, not to mention the bouquets and fruit baskets! But be careful, some of the sweet-smelling bouquets may come with long strings attached. Many before you have seen this.

You must work hard, and smart. You must bear in mind that you were picked over many others. Despite their encouraging words, they, like you, are all being tested. All the Umno Assemblymen have declared that they will work with you to restore Umno's glory and bring more development to Selangor.

In the coming months, their sincerity will be put to test and your leadership skills will also be pitted against more politically experienced personalities.

I've already heard some cynical remarks soon after your name was announced - "What is so special about this fellow who scraped through with only a 165-vote majority?"

Saudara,

I hope you'll just disregard such remarks. They probably stem from sour grapes. You were picked for the future, I think. I'm sure you were picked for your energy, especially in attracting young voters who are seeking leaders with whom they can identify. You're actually helping to bridge the generation gap, and this you must do effectively.

That you're a dentist who graduated from Universiti Malaya in 1989 and then served as a dental officer at the Kajang Hospital may be useful. You are expected to fill the gap in the state leadership and serve well and sincerely - no more, no less.

Looking at your record, you seem to have had quite a tutelage on your way to the top, having been Umno Tanjung Karang branch chief in 1991 and then appointed to the division's youth committee (1993-96). In 1996, you became the division's youth chief and during this year's Umno elections, you were elected to the national youth exco for a three-year term.

I'm also encouraged by your words yesterday. If I'm not mistaken you said: "All personal agenda must be put aside. Everyone must work hard for the development and progress of the State besides fostering unity and harmony among all races.

"I have an open door policy. My office and house are open to anyone who wants to see me ..."

These are nice words and most heart-warming. But be careful, don't make promises you can't keep. You looked very serious on television and I get a feeling that you'll be a hands-on MB. Perhaps, your training as a dentist will make you function as one.

A heavy responsibility rests on your shoulders. If you think that you have made sacrifices since you entered politics, then just you wait - there'll be plenty more as you go along. A lot of people have placed their faith in you, including your Boss, the PM.

At this point, you're trying to cope with all the attention and probably have been invited to many doa selamat in your kawasan or in other parts of the state. Enjoy the attention you're getting now. That is only natural.

In a couple of days, and after you've been sworn in, your life will take a new twist. Sometimes, the attention from the TV cameras may not be so complimentary and what you read in the print media may not be flattering. But if I can offer unsolicited advice - don't worry; develop a working relationship with the media and you'll be all right.

From now on, you'll be scrutinised. Your every move, utterance and gesture. But if you go by what you have declared, that is, if you serve sincerely and without malice, then you'll do very well indeed. You don't have much time though. Come 2004, when the next general election comes around, you'll be appraised by the voters, some of whom will be new and will be exercising their democratic rights for the first time.

I wish you well in your new job. If you find that you sleep less in the coming months, take it as an occupational hazard; and if you find a long queue of people coming to seek your help, take it as a manifestation of their hopes and dreams; and if you find them shaking your hands and chanting your name, take it as a show of gratitude but ask them to show their support at the hustings instead.

Saudara,

As a young man at the helm of state politics, you'll find friends (and potential enemies) everywhere. But use your own judgment, trust your instincts and be guided always by your constituents' desire for a productive and meaningful life.

Syabas and Good Luck - you will need plenty of that.

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