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The long road ahead

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REMEMBER how as kids you couldn't wait to be all grown up? Then, when you did get there, time seemed to fly so fast that you'd often be left pining for the good ol' days of callow youth? New Selangor Menteri Besar Mohamad Khir Toyo certainly has youth on his side, but he cannot afford to slide into such reverie. At only 35 years of age, he finds himself at the top of the state administrative pile. Looking down, he sees the onerous task - administrative as well as political - of getting the state's development plans back on track.

By now, we all know the manner of his elevation. The job of state chief executive came his way like the proverbial bulan jatuh ke riba - a most apt Malay saying to describe unexpected good fortune coming one's way without solicitation. After several days of uncertainty, following the shock resignation of the previous Menteri Besar Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, the appointment of one so youthful, a personality heretofore so anonymous and a quantity so unknown, came as much as a surprise to all of the state's citizenry as a shocking bombshell to many aspirants to this high office.

Hardly had he the chance to enjoy any sort of honeymoon when the DAP launched its maiden attack, which resulted in the first police report being lodged against the 'greenhorn'. Addressing his Malay constituency on the demand for the institution of more rights for the non-Malay community by the Suqiu pressure group, Mohamad Khir let fly by saying he was ready to mandi darah (bathe in blood) to defend Malay rights. Such blood-curdling 'fly-off-the-handle' rhetoric may go down well with hot-blooded ultra-nationalists, but it is hardly the type of language that cut fuel from fanning the fires of racial intolerance.

Mohamad Khir's rise to the 'MBdom' is the classic case of poor-kid-made-good. The passport out of his early wretched existence was education. He was born and raised in Sekinchan, an area not exactly in the same prosperous league as Petaling Jaya, Damansara Utama or Bangsar. The Malay community there is largely of Javanese extraction, deeply religious, but whose children were mostly raised quite bereft of material comforts. It takes a very tenacious individual to overcome such odds to rise above their station and succeed in life. Mohamad Khir is one such gem to have been unearthed from all that grit.

As a kid, he remembers having to walk five kilometers to school daily. One memory that sticks clearly in his mind is of having to cobble together enough money to pay for his university entrance fees of RM350. He did this by seeking donations from the local mosque. He studied dentistry from 1986 to 1989 at Universiti Malaya.

Youth can have its advantages. Malaysian politics has had its fair share of precocious young men (always the male of the species) being elevated to high office. Datuk Dr Rais Yatim became Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar at the same age of 35. He was succeeded by Tan Sri Isa Samad in 1982, who was then 33 years old. In neighbouring Melaka, Tan Sri Rahim Thamby Chik held office for 12 years, having reached the coveted position at a tender age of 32. The oldest of the 30-something brigade was Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who became Johor Menteri Besar at 39.

Youth was also no handicap for high office at national level. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself set the tone when within a year of becoming Prime Minister in 1981, he elevated Shahrir Samad as a full minister. Shahrir then was a mere 27-year-old. The then fresh-faced

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, also 27, became Pahang Menteri Besar and Muhyiddin, at 38, was made deputy minister.

Incongruously, it is Mohamad Khir's lack of political 'credential' that is the biggest asset he brings to the job. Indeed, he was not in the list of 11 names proposed as prospective Menteri Besar submitted to the Prime Minister for consideration as soon as the search for a replacement for Abu Hassan was launched. He comes into the job with a clean slate, as it were. Whether he has skeletons waiting to tumble out of the closet remains to be seen.

True to form, the Opposition in the Selangor State Assembly are not wildly enthusiastic about Mohamad Khir's appointment. Sungai Besar assemblyman Sallehen Mukhyi of PAS feels his youth will be exploited by more senior Umno men, especially those who felt slighted at having been 'passed over' for the 'MBship'. 'His lack of administrative experience will be exploited by people with intimate knowledge of the whole process,' says Sallehen. PAS is also relishing the prospects of internal squabbling within Umno which they feel is inevitable, considering there is an army of 'disgruntled' politicians spoiling for the chance to install their man in the hot seat.

Hulu Klang assemblyman Mohamad Azmin Ali of Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan) does not envy the daunting task faced by his young adversary. He believes Mohamad Khir will have his work cut out to win back support for Umno from among the state's Islamic constituents. He believes Mohamad Khir is very much a greenhorn who has to rely on plenty of guidance from more seasoned party hands. Therein lies room for political machinations and he expects Mohamad Khir to be fully tested by his own supporters throughout his tenure as Menteri Besar.

Klang assemblyman Teng Chang Khim of the DAP describes the appointment of Mohamad Khir as at once a boon as well as a bane for Umno. 'It is a bold decision on one hand but carries with it risks,' he says. He says there may be problems if the more senior Umno politicians in the state administration give less than wholehearted support to the young Menteri Besar. By way of illustration, Teng pointed out that following Mohamad Khir's bermandi darah gaffe, it was only the state Umno youth that came out with a defence while the more senior politicians hardly raised a whimper of support. 'I doubt Mohamad Khir can attract young and idealistic voters from the rural areas as this bloc of voters are quite solid in support of PAS,' Teng says.

One political observer, however, believes youth is such a red herring in any discussion about the merits or otherwise of Malaysian politicians. 'The situation, no doubt, will easily be addressed when one ruler or the other, in his generosity, awards a "Datukship" to the Menteri Besar. What other sweetly cunning elevation in seniority can there be?' he observes wryly.

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