

Stepping back to consider

Nst 29 APR 2001

Mokhzani: Not necessary for me to go on nationwide tour

THE following is the full interview with Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir held yesterday.

Q: Can you give the reasons behind your decision to leave the corporate scene?

A: Well, there are many reasons. One would be the allegations against how and what kind of businesses we (Mokhzani, Mirzan and Mukhriz) got ourselves involved in.

In the course of doing business, we are bound to deal with the Government. However, the assumption is that the Government is being unduly favourable towards the companies which I control. By that they mean we have been getting contracts and special treatment and whatnot.

All of which are not true as I believe the company has been run professionally, by professional managers ... we have always performed in whatever task that we have been asked to carry out. As for privatisation projects, we have been awarded only one project which is the privatisation of healthcare support system for government hospitals, not for the whole country but only for the southern region.

Other than that we have not been involved in any projects, but the assumption is that we have been involved in so many things, mega contracts and all sorts of things and it comes out even in Parliament.

Q: What really compelled you to make this decision?

A: I would say there are a number of things. Well, somebody once told me that you have to concentrate on either one or the other,

politics or business, and I have been dabbling in both, so maybe it's time I take a step back and look at the things I'm doing, look at my position in both arenas and see whether I can concentrate on one rather than the other.

Q: Personally, are you more comfortable in business or politics?

A: I am more comfortable in business because in business ev-

erything is quite clear-cut. In business you can put everything in writing, in black and white. But not politics. In politics it is all taken in blind faith and you trust somebody that they will do what they say and promise. In this day and age, not many people honour what they say.

Q: Your decision to leave the corporate world was made right after the PM said that the rich should not hold positions in Umno. How do

you view this?

A: I know a lot of people have equated my actions to that statement but it has got nothing to do with that. As I have said before, people tend to look at the corporate sector purely for what is their worth through their assets. They never look at their liabilities.

They never really know what lies beneath it, whether there are liabilities or not. I would like to say sometimes that this is share-rich

options

to explain my decision

cash-poor in most cases.

Q: Why is it only now that you make such a decision as there have been allegations of nepotism, cronyism and all?

A: I believe that Tongkah and Pantai, especially Pantai, have come to a stage where we have to

have you informed him?

A: I would have gone straight to him this morning but you all wanted to come here. No, I did not consult him because generally I don't consult him on what I do. Then again because he has enough problems to worry on his plate ... I don't bother him with problems

... I never foresaw that it would be as bad as it is today. Today, it is made out as if that we can do no right ... that everything we do is wrong.

move forward. I may not be the best person to take it forward.

Today, the Government is the biggest spender on infrastructure work to develop the country and all sorts of things. We just had a meeting with some of the senior government officers who say that we can avoid recession if the Government spent the money it has allocated on development. This also applies to the health sector.

I believe the Health Ministry is looking for smart partnerships with the private sector to develop all sorts of things. Now, with me being in Pantai will pose a problem. We got involved in one privatisation exercise by acquiring a company which is involved in healthcare privatisation and already it has caused a lot of undue attention.

I think Pantai is one of the best vehicles to spearhead Malaysia into a new era of healthcare. But my being there will hinder it ...

Q: You made the decision without the Prime Minister's consent or knowledge. Now that he is back,

that I face. I make my own decisions.

Q: The Prime Minister has not said anything about this?

A: No, I have not spoken to him since I left word in Dubai.

Q: Your friends said your decision was to help defend your family's honour and integrity ...

A: In the past, only God knows how many years we have relied on friends to stand up for us because they know how we do things, what we do and they know the truth. And recently you have MPs who rebutted allegations made by the Opposition in Parliament. Now that I am no longer directly involved in business, but am still involved in the political arena, maybe I can help too.

Q: Do you think you will go on a nationwide tour to explain your decision?

A: No, no, that won't be neces-

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'I left partly because

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sary. I don't think that approach is correct. People know what we have done. Maybe because of the highly-charged atmosphere that we are living in today, they refuse to see the truth.

That we have thousands of people working under the roof of Tongkah and Pantai, we gave a lot of opportunities to a lot of people to do business, to partner with our companies by joint venture or whatever. We have done all that, and most of them didn't say anything.

Q: Now that you have decided to leave the business world and hope to defend the integrity of your family, you alone can't do that because your brothers are also in business

...
A: Well hopefully, I will take the heat off them. My younger brother is not involved in business, as I am by virtue of my position in Pantai Holdings and indirect shareholding in other companies.

It is stated that I have shareholdings in seven public-listed companies, whereas I only have two. So the perception is completely wrong. I was told that the net worth of all this is something like billions. If that is true, I wouldn't have quit! I think it's time for me to look at other things.

Q: How much money will you make when you sell Tongkah and Pantai?

A: Well, basically, it will even things out between what I owe and what I am selling them for. Well, that is the best that I can hope for.

Q: So what are you going to do next?

A: I will spend time with my wife and my children. Well, not to say that I lost time but I was distracted by a lot of things in business and politics. When I was growing up I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with my parents until my father became a Minister. At that time I was only

two particular healthcare companies, it has generated a lot of arguments. So, I look at what has happened in the last couple of years and the last six months in politics and how we have gone about it, whether the Opposition or Umno. I find it very disheartening that the sincerity is not quite there. So, I decided to get away from the corporate limelight and look at other areas.

Q: People will not change. If you read the Internet and visited websites in the past two days, you would find that they have said all kinds of things. They don't look as if they are going to stop.

A: Well... (reading the copy of the Internet articles) sadly they are mistaken. They like to think that this is part of the political agenda, but it is not.

Q: Critics have likened your involvement in business to that of former Indonesian President Suharto's son?

A: With all due respect to our neighbouring country and how they administer their country, and if you look at the way they operate business... it's different. Everything is given to the family on privatisation and monopoly of business. You can't see that happening here at all.

We do not stand to gain the way Suharto's children gained on the strength of their father's position. Over there, it seems like the father is awarding things directly to the children whatever business there are. That doesn't happen here.

Q: How long did it take you to come up with this decision?

A: We thought about it for quite a long time. I left partly because of my age. I just turned 40 recently, so I got to sit back and reassess what I am doing. This is one of the things that I have thought of. It took a long time because we want to make sure that Tongkah and Pantai would still stand solid even after I left and somebody else took over.

and foremost look at myself as a Bumiputera entrepreneur. The stigma of being the PM's son will follow me everywhere even after he retires. And even then, I don't know whether it would have any effect. So, if people can get past the first hurdle, they will see that we are actually a credible group. So why should we stop from bidding for anything? We are not bidding for contracts, we put in proposals. And as you have found out in recent years, not all privatised projects are making money.

13 years old. It was a fantastic family life. But looking at the sacrifices my father made over the years, we hardly had time to see him. My wife has pointed out that the children are growing fast and I need to spend as much time as possible with them. That is what I will do.

Q: When you first went into business didn't you think that it would put you in public scrutiny, you being the Prime Minister's son?

A: Yes, I accepted that... I mean it was unavoidable, but I never foresaw that it would be as bad as it is today. Today, it is made out as if we can do no right... that everything we do is wrong. In 1992, when I first took on Tongkah Holdings, we were still not quite out of the recession yet. But, I was fortunate enough to invest in a public-listed company just as the bull run started.

And I was lucky. We did a lot of things to turn the company around, which involved a lot of people. We set a Bumiputera management team from what was previously a Chinese-controlled company. We... I did all of those things. But, in the end, unfortunately, the Malays condemn what I have done. This is very disappointing, they do not differentiate between what I have done as a Malay entrepreneur and what I have done as the Prime Minister's son.

Q: How much of the decision (to quit) is influenced by your own feeling? Did you feel the pressure or was it more due to the pressure on the Prime Minister?

A: Well, it is actually a bit of both. I am disappointed with what some people are willing to do today. You know — buying building, selling companies is a normal thing. It happens every day. But just because I am involved in this

At the same time, to find somebody in the corporate sector who is not a market speculator but purely a trader for Tongkah and Pantai is not that easy. Now people are asking me "why sell at a low price?". If I were to sell at a high price, nobody would want to buy. If I sell at low (price), people won't buy too. We have been approached many times by foreign companies, but we didn't accept. By leaving the companies, I hope the management would stay intact and Pantai will continue to grow.

Q: Maybe you will start a small business?

A: That is how I started. Before I got involved in Tongkah I sold water pumps.

Q: You are slightly better than your father because he was doing small business at Pekan Rabu.

A: Yes, he started at Pekan Rabu. I used to work in Shell Bhd as an engineer. I work offshore, one week off, another on. But, nobody saw me then. There, they couldn't be bothered whether I was the Prime Minister's son or not... and I was already the PM's son then. But, I worked just like any other site operations engineer.

Q: Being the PM's son do you think or do you have the feeling that you are being victimised or not treated fairly in terms of the awarding of privatisation projects.

A: Nobody seems to be able to get past the fact that I am the PM's son. So, they would not see whether what I proposed is something viable, that we are financially and technically capable. They will not look at that. They will only look at the fact that I am the PM's son and this is the company belonging or involved with the Prime Minister's son. This is very sad because I first

Q: Are you thinking of embarking on a political career?

A: That is not for me to decide as much as we would like to plan and strategise. Only the people can decide, Umno members will decide — where I go and how far I can go in politics. As far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter what position I hold or not.

Q: How far do you want to go? Like your father?

A: No, I don't think I have the ambition to go very high. I've seen what my father has to sacrifice as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. I'm not sure that I'm made of the same stuff as he is.

Q: But other sons of former Prime Ministers, like Datuk Najib Razak and Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, also got involved in politics.

A: But the atmosphere and environment in which they were given the opportunities to perform to the position that they now hold were different from what it is today. At first, when I attended the Umno Merbok Annual General Meeting in 1996, the story that came out was on *kesinambungan* or continuity, the heritage of political change, but today that *kesinambungan* is replaced with scepticism. Again, it comes back to the people... If they cannot see past that hurdle, no matter what I do, I will be put elsewhere.

Q: Being the PM's son and involved in business, people have 'interpreted' many things. Now, if you join politics they will still be talking about the same things. How do you take it?

A: To be successful, you need cultural hard-work. I think what he said in Kubang Pasu was misinter-

of my age'

bull run started. Tongkah shares which I bought at RM1.10 went up to RM7.50. That was the platform which allowed me to succeed in business. I played around with the money and channelled it into the corporate sector.

So then you have to ask: How much of the Prime Minister's position helped me gain from the stock market? Nothing. Everybody benefited. As you can remember, we had problems trying to get people to work because everybody was dabbling in the stock market. *Semua nak jadi remisier.* (Everybody wanted to be a remisier)

Q: I read on a website that the market has picked up since you quit.

A: Well, *alhamdulillah* (laughs). I really believe Pantai was not given its due. Under the chairmanship of Dr Aziz Mahmud, the former deputy director-general of the Health Ministry, Datuk Dr Redzuan Bakar, Azman Ibrahim ... they are a credible and formidable professional team. They can do a lot of things which the Government wants us to do. Because I am there it is sensitive *lah* ... I don't attend our functions, even to signing ceremonies I don't go. I don't want them to be penalised unnecessarily.

Q: You are still young and strong. I think you have a lot of time to ponder ... can I suggest that you may one day go back to business?

A: You can suggest that ... I don't know. Right now I am not working towards that. Maybe I will venture overseas, take a look at what can be done there. In the course of doing business in Malaysia I met so many people, so many interesting things — projects — put forward to us to consider. Maybe I will look at that for investment overseas. Currently, I am still the chairman of Gold Corn in Singapore. So I still have a foothold in the corporate sector there.

Q: Your family may have some suggestions, advice — your wife,

cult for me (laughs). I am honoured to be his son but then, as I keep telling people, I was not born the Prime Minister's son and I don't think I'll die a Prime Minister's son. This is just a phase in my life which I need to handle as best as I can. It is the same with my siblings. I would like to think, and I believe, we have handled it very well with the care and consideration that is due for being in this position and I think we have never abused it. Other people would like us to abuse our position, but I don't think we have. We carry the position with as much dignity as possible and I don't think people see that.

Q: You seem to want people to see the real thing. How do you get them to see this? People will go on forming their own impression and interpreting things in their own way.

A: Maybe we have to go back to what you say about not being more accessible to people. To me, I am very accessible. Ask my wife. I always go back to Merbok to the people there. It's not that I go there and mingle only with bankers, financiers, corporate players and what not. These are people who are my friends, kampung people. Half of them are unemployed or rubber tappers and lorry drivers.

Q: You were not born there?

A: I was born in the Alor Star general hospital in Kedah. I grew up in Alor Star, Jitra, Titi Gajah. When I am in Merbok, it's different. The last programme there was for Hari Raya Haji. I donated three cows, something I do every year.

Q: So you must be very close to Tun Daim (Zainuddin)?

A: Tun Daim, I have been very close to him for a very, very long time. Even when I was studying, I use to be in his house playing badminton or squash with him. He is the second person I refer to if there's anything ... that is, after my

preted. That the rich should not be involved in politics. Actually I think it is more about whether the rich are sincere. Are you using the wealth to buy power or to help others?

There is nothing wrong in being rich and wanting to serve the country whether it is via the political channel or through NGOs, or other platforms. That is fine. We have done all sorts of things. We give free hospital treatment for instance.

But nowadays, it is typical of the

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people to keep quiet when they get something. I started all these kinds of things. I have given the opportunities to those I think have the ability to perform. I would not want to see them penalised for being an associate and friend of mine, employees of mine, co-directors and, particularly, shareholders.

The shareholders of Pantai and Tongkah have done no wrong. They believed in what they thought I could do. I don't like to think that because of me being there, they would be deprived of what Tongkah and Pantai should be able to do.

So my conscience is quite clear. I have been telling everybody that "Yes I really have quit from these two companies." But they are still going to say that I am involved and these people are my proxies and that kind of rubbish... It's rubbish really.

Q: Do you think you would have achieved the same kind of success had you not been the Prime Minister's son?

A: That's a hypothetical question. For an answer, I would like to go back to my first instance when investing in Tongkah Holdings which was really a make or break decision. That was in 1989 after I quit Shell.

I was unknown in Shell, and was preparing the groundwork to leave and to start business in Kuala Lumpur. I quit on Aug 31 that year. I was lucky enough to invest in Tongkah. In December 1992, the

brothers — or do they leave you to decide?

A: Yes, they leave it to me to decide. My wife asked me whether I did the right thing and I said, "Yes".

Q: And what did she say?

A: She said okay. The only thing is, I don't have an office now. I don't even have a card to give you (laughs).

Q: In which direction are you moving now?

A: I honestly haven't sat down and planned it. I have been doing the routine stuff for the past 11 years. This is a strange thing, to be able to sit around.

Q: Do you like it?

A: Yes, I like it... with the kids around, stuff like that — because in the office I get different people coming to see me. Business. Politics. Business. Politics. And I still play squash nearly every other day. Now it is quite different.

Q: Are you a workaholic? Do you feel your work is like a second wife?

A: No. I would like to think that the new generation of Malays know how to allocate time between work and play. I am not much of a workaholic, not like my elder brother.

Q: It must be difficult to be the Prime Minister's son.

A: It is not difficult for me to be his son. Other people make it diffi-

father. I have known him for a long, long time, since 1983.

Q: Maybe you want to say something, other than what you have said...

A: I hope people can see the facts happening in Malaysia. Don't be too emotional in making decisions. Don't be too emotional when coming to a conclusion. The facts are very clear. You will know who is telling the truth and who is lying.

People are now too consumed by emotional things. They don't give credit where it is due. Not giving credit is one thing, discrediting those who actually do the work is another... sad.

We only have a place to live... that is here. A lot of efforts are being made to rubbish this country by people who live here, this is something I don't understand.

Q: Is that a message to the Opposition?

A: To everybody... because some of the problems I face being a Prime Minister's son and being in politics are coming from within.

Q: Pressure (on you) mounted after the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

A: Agreed.

Q: Before that things were better?

A: Not necessarily, for example there was one privatisation contract that we were successful in, but it was split into three to appease the so-called other parties ... other groups. We offered the lowest price. The ministry evaluated it and said technically we were the most competent... so how do you explain that!

NST: Thank you for the interview.

Mokhzani: My pleasure.