

Malaysia Boleh spirit burns within Baharin the entrepreneur

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ENTREPRENEUR Baharin Ayob, group managing director of Kausar Corp, has set himself an ambitious target - as his contribution to national service.

He has teamed up with Fev Motorentchnik, reputed to be the world's leading independent car engine research, design and development company in Aachen, Germany, to spearhead an automotive engine technology in Malaysia.

Baharin's target is to come up, in about six years, if not earlier, with a prototype car engine, designed and developed by Malaysians, that will meet the exacting market demands for high performance and quality at competitive cost.

Baharin set the stage for the implementation of the project when Kausar Corp, which he has a 70% stake, signed an MoU with Fev Motorentchnik on March 17 in Munich.

Tan Sri Dr Abu Bakar Sulaiman, chairman of KL Al-Dhuha, its subsidiary, and Dr Ernst Scheid, executive vice-president of Fev Motorentchnik, were the signatories, witnessed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

To many, the project is a tall order, with sceptics asking whether it is feasible, in the first place, in an established field dominated by leading global players.

And Kausar Corp has no track record to speak of, both technically and in marketing such a niche project. Lack of experience could, perhaps, be overcome with a strong foreign partner in Fev.

According to Fev, its business partners read like a who's who - Alfa Romeo, Ford, Nissan USA, Peugeot Citroen, Vauxhall, Volkswagen, Toyota, Volvo, Hyundai, Audi VW, Lamborghini, Lexus, Pontiac, Mercedes-Benz and so on.

But, isn't Proton developing its own engines with the technical expertise of Lotus, its world famous British subsidiary, which has equally renowned clients such as General Motors? And, there is the Petronas-Sauber venture.

The challenge of developing a home grown automotive engine technology has not, in the least, daunted Baharin Ayob, the Malacca-born entrepreneur, who told TAN KAH PENG in Munich recently, why the project meant so much to him.

In the region, Thailand has already had a head start with a number of automotive research centres. It is also the manufacturing base of General Motors and Ford, not to mention some

of the leading Japanese carmakers.

There is also the question of footing the bill for the project: the costs, at least RM100mil for a start, and could total RM500mil, require some very deep pockets with no guarantee of success.

Baharin is quietly confident. He has a proven car engine designer and his company, with interests in property, construction, manufacturing and services, including banking, insurance and asset management, has assets worth about RM1bil.

The project has political blessings, but Baharin said he would rather be judged by his ability to deliver than the cables he could pull.

He has a good record in manufacturing. In 1995, AEM Automotive Sdn Bhd, the company's industrial arm, teamed up with Robert Bosch GmbH to assemble automotive electrical parts under an OEM programme.

Kausar Corp is also involved in the supply, installation, commissioning and testing of machine equipment, and has initiated a joint venture with a German machine tools maker to assemble lathe machines, with plans to produce parts and components.

Its latest venture is with Babcock Borsig, a Dutch-based firm, to repair and service turbo machinery

for the power producers in Malaysia, in a sector estimated to generate about RM1bil of business a year.

For a man with humble beginnings - born into a struggling Felda settler family, started as a certified charge man, and worked four years as a Rubber Research Institute technician - Baharin has come a long way.

He went to night school, worked his way to Universiti Malaya where he graduated with an economics degree and, with the help of a Chinese friend, went into business as an electrical contractor.

In his 17 years in business, Baharin said he had held fast to two principles: a good bottomline and a healthy cash flow, guidelines that had helped him build up his diversified company into what it is today.

"I consider myself a conservative businessman, who will always remember his humble roots," said Baharin, a father of 11 children, who financed the three eldest to local universities. The daughter is a lawyer, the son a final-year finance undergraduate, and another daughter is going to read medicine.

Baharin declined government scholarships for them because he wanted to provide opportunities for others, the same principle that motivated him to help another long-time Chinese business associate, who was then in a tight shape.

Now, he wants to realise his most ambitious target with the help of German technical expertise as a way of repaying back society, a sort of national service, for affording him the opportunity to make the climb from rags to riches.

In any venture, especially one of this scale and ambition, there are sceptics, not to mention the critics, but to his admirers, Baharin personifies the Malaysia Boleh spirit.