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Movers & shakers

Clarence Y K Ngui

AMIDST the significant corporate events in Malaysia for 2001, there were a number of prominent personalities who hogged the limelight.

Most notably, people like former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, ex-Renong chief Tan Sri Halim Saad, the two young consultants who took control of Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd (MRCB) and the boss of asset management company Pengurusan Danaharta Nasional Bhd (Danaharta) Datuk Azman Yahya, all of whom made headlines for various reasons.

Daim had the market speculating for months about his impending resignation and in the end quit in June 2001. Formerly a teacher, lawyer and magistrate, Daim came to the rescue of the Malaysian economy twice - once during the recessionary period of 1987-88 and the other, during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Daim is regarded as the architect of the 1990s boom that resulted in steady annual economic growth of eight per cent.

Tan Sri Halim Saad, the former executive chairman of infrastructure giant Renong Bhd and executive vice chairman of United Engineers (Malaysia) Bhd (UEM), is perhaps the most prominent businessman to lose control of his business empire. The Renong group has been taken over by the Government and is currently being restructured.

Halim ran into financial difficulties when he failed to pay up his first installment of RM100 million in 1998 in relation to a RM3.2 billion put option to buy a 32 per cent stake in Renong from UEM. Three years ago, Halim had promised to buy back this block of shares by February 2001.

The New Zealand-trained accountant, once deemed as a rising Bumiputera corporate figure, has indeed come a long way to become one of the wealthiest businessmen. But, at least for now, it seems Halim has lost his magic touch in business. But analysts are not writing him off.

The exit of someone from a corporation often sees the entrance of new faces. This happened in the case of diversified MRCB which saw Penang businessman Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Maidin making way for two young executives, Abdul Rahman Ahmad and Shahril Ridza Ridzuan, who were subsequently appointed chief executive officer and executive director of the company respectively.

Both Cambridge-trained, Abdul Rahman and Shahril Ridza were formerly with Danaharta, but left to set up their own consulting firm. With the new management in at MRCB, analysts say it brings hope for MRCB to strengthen its media business and sell unrelated assets to pare down its RM2 billion in debts.

Last year also saw the emergence of a little-known businessman making a grand entrance via the acquisition of Pantai Holdings Bhd. Datuk Lim Tong Yong, founder of Poas Holdings Bhd, made headlines when he purchased a 32.8 per cent stake in Pantai Holdings from Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir, the second son of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

'There is nothing great about it,' says Lim commenting on the deal. 'I am coming in purely as a businessman. I see this as a good business deal.'

Nevertheless, the market is incessantly interested in Lim's controlling stake in Pantai Holdings. The lecturer-turned-businessman, through his stake in Pantai Holdings, now has a 16.1 per cent stake in Tongkah Holdings Bhd and a 22.8 per cent stake in Avenue Assets Bhd, which in turn owns 18.5 per cent of Phileo Allied Bhd. Additionally, Avenue Assets also has a 16 per cent stake in Eastern & Oriental Bhd (E&O). This gives Avenue

Assets an indirect interest in E&O's 26.9 per cent shareholding in toll-road operator Kamunting Bhd.

For 2001, there were also some not-so-new personalities who continued to make headlines. This included low-profile tycoon Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary. Touted as the next rising star in corporate Malaysia, he started his business career as a cattle and rice trader in his home state of Kedah in the 1970s. He is also known for his charity work.

Syed Mokhtar is believed to be behind the acquisition of a 19.9 per cent stake in cash-rich Malaysia Mining Corporation Bhd (MMC) for RM499 million by relatively unknown general trading company Impian Teladan Sdn Bhd.

Earlier, it was speculated that Syed Mokhtar was increasing his stake in MMC to 35 per cent. With MMC, Syed Mokhtar stands to control at least eight listed companies, although he does not sit on any of its boards. However, two of his brothers are likely candidates for the MMC board.

MMC has a 22.3 per cent stake in Malakoff Bhd, the biggest independent power producer in Malaysia. Syed Mokhtar is said to be behind both Malakoff and SKS Ventures Sdn Bhd, the latter being the company awarded the privatisation of a power plant in Prai. He is also behind the RM7 billion power plant project in Pulau Dayang Bunting, Langkawi.

Another personality, not a businessman but nevertheless thrust into the corporate scene, is Datuk Azman Yahya. He sits as the chairman at both the Corporate Debt Restructuring Committee (CDRC) and Danaharta.

Recently, Azman imposed a 12-month deadline to resolve the RM29 billion debt backlog under CDRC's supervision. Azman made the headlines when his agency assisted the government in the rescue of the country's largest corporate debtors, including UEM and Renong. He was voted Restructuring Agency Chief of the Year by financial magazine Asiamoney. At one time, there was even talk that Azman was on the list as a potential Finance Minister.

Besides the comings and goings of corporate personalities, some family squabbles also made the headlines in corporate Malaysia. Founded by brothers Tan Sri Tan Yuet Foh and Datuk Tan Kim Hor, Tan Chong Consolidated Sdn Bhd, the parent company which controls three KLSE-listed companies - Tan Chong Motor Holdings Bhd, APM Automotive Holdings Bhd and Warisan TC Holdings Bhd - was thrown to the forefront when Kim Hor, his wives and sons filed a petition to the Kuala Lumpur High Court to wind up the parent company.

Bad blood between Kim Hor and Yuet Foh's sons, led by Datuk Tan Heng Chew, Yuet Foh's eldest son, made the headlines in many local newspapers. Malaysian Business first highlighted the feud in its April 16, 2001 issue.

Notwithstanding the family feud, the Tan Chong group remains at the forefront of the Malaysian automotive scene with an illustrious history that stretches back to the 1950s. The Tans are known to be low profile - they have turned down numerous requests for an interview. Nevertheless, it is still business as usual for the company.

Another Malaysian who made news is telecommunications magnate T. Ananda Krishnan. He acquired 46 per cent of Maxis Communications Bhd from British Telecom and AT&T for US\$ 680 million, raising his stake in Maxis Communications to 70 per cent.

He once again made waves recently when he managed to raise a US\$ 735 million loan for Maxis Communications on Sept 20. It is Malaysia's largest corporate loan since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Besides Maxis Communications, which owns the national cable television franchise, the Australian-educated Ananda owns Malaysia's only satellite systems (Measat 1 and 2) and the world's largest Chinese-language movie library (Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd Film Library).

Ananda was named the second richest Malaysian in Malaysian Business' Feb

1, 2001 issue. Then, his total net value stood at RM10.7 billion. This reclusive businessman made his money in the 1970s as an oil trader for Petronas. His achievements include building the Kuala Lumpur City Centre which comprises the shimmering Petronas Twin Towers, the world's tallest building.

For many, while 2001 may appear sluggish and slow, it was by no means a dull year for corporate Malaysia. While comings and goings are normal fare for the business world, the impact they leave behind their made lasting moments for the year. Perhaps as the economy improves next year, it will herald more comings rather than goings of Malaysian corporate leaders.

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