

30/09/2004

For the new sovereignty

By Chow Kum Hor

A Libyan-born naturalised American who has made Malaysia his second home is here to spread the gospel of "technology sovereignty". CHOW KUM HOR finds out how his Multimedia Super Corridor-status company will help empower developing countries.

"I AM here to promote the concept of teknologi merdeka (technology sovereignty)," says American inventor Dr Sadeg Mustafa Faris, pronouncing the Malay phrase like a native speaker.

The chairman and chief executive officer of InventQjaya Sdn Bhd speaks passionately of his favourite subject, a profound concept he introduced to Malaysia barely a year ago.

"In 1957, Malaysia secured territorial freedom. Since then, you all can rule your own country, set your own rules and call yourself citizens of a free country.

"After that, came a wave of technology colonisation. Many developing countries, despite having been liberated from their colonial masters, were still dependent on more developed countries for technology," says Sadeg, 58, who was born in Tripoli, studied in the United States and owns New York-based technology company Reveo Inc.

Citing the military's third-generation night goggles as an example, he says Malaysia, like many other countries, could not buy them even if they could afford to because developed nations which owned the technology refused to sell the gadgets for security reasons.

The only solution then, he says, is to create your own technology and to innovate.

The inventor, with about 500 patents approved and pending to his credit, has devoted himself to "liberating" technologically-laggard countries like Malaysia to level the playing field to compete with giants like the US.

This is where InventQjaya comes in. Set up last year in Cyberjaya, the outfit is a 28,000 square metre research and development (R&D) laboratory dedicated to the study of such subjects as nanotechnology (molecular scale science), photonics (the applied science of light), advanced materials and advanced transportation (for example using electricity-powered cars).

The business model of InventQjaya works like this: first, identify a problem which nobody can solve, find a solution by creating a conducive R&D environment and then commercialise the technology.

InventQjaya was first conceptualised in 2002 when the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad paid a visit to the Reveo laboratory in New York.

The technology-savvy Dr Mahathir was so impressed with Sadeg's work that he invited him to set up a similar outfit in the MSC.

"At that time, I was already toying with the idea of expanding overseas. In fact, I was having discussions with countries like China, Korea and Singapore, but Dr Mahathir was so insistent that I couldn't refuse," he adds.

It was a difficult decision for Sadeg, having to uproot himself from his wife and four daughters to oversee the design and construction of InventQjaya - a process that took one year.

In the midst of all that, poison-pen letters were flying all over about how a Libyan inventor was trying to rip off Dr Mahathir and then flee the country upon receiving a government grant to set up a dubious laboratory.

"I am glad all that is over now. Just look at what we have come up with.

In fact, InventQjaya is one of the few, if not the only company in MSC that actually creates and innovates technologies," adds Sadeg, who spends about two weeks a month in Malaysia, and the remaining time with his family in New York.

One year on, the R&D firm can boast of a string of technological breakthroughs, including an entry into the Malaysian Guinness Book of Records for the first metal-fuelled car to travel the longest distance in the country.

Several locally-developed products have hit the market with considerable success, including IQHarvest, a combo contraption that generates solar power, collects rainwater and provides shade for certain crops.

IQHarvest is a godsend for areas with no electricity and water supply and where crops need sufficient shade from the blazing heat for optimum yield.

The company is now putting up one such unit in Pulau Perhentian while the army is also considering buying one for military outposts on an undisclosed island.

Reveo also transfers technology to its sister company InventQjaya. One of them is the LuxVu window that can change from clear glass to opaque and colour at the push of a button.

The company is also doing research on metal-fuelled batteries which are environment-friendly, water desalination technology and on a cost-efficient electrically-powered car.

"We hope to break even in several years' time. We've just started and I'm glad we got off on the right footing," says Sadeg.

His optimism is based on the company's belief in creating the right R&D environment for researchers.

A lot of talented Malaysian scientists continue to work overseas due to lack of facilities and a proper environment for them to do their research. And Sadeg knows this.

Since it was set up about a year ago, InventQjaya has attracted five Malaysians back from abroad and 15 non-Malaysian scientists from countries like Venezuela, Italy, India, Singapore, Argentina, China and Libya, bringing the total to 150 researchers working there.

From Malaysia, some of the most talented people in the industry, many PhD holders who had worked in multinationals like Motorola, Agilent Technologies and Hewlett Packard were also lured to InventQjaya.

Now that InventQjaya is showing progress, Sadeg is considering setting up similar outfits in other developing countries, including his country of birth - Libya.

"I hope to bring this message of technology sovereignty all over the world one day and I want to keep on inventing and inventing," says Sadeg.

(END)