

08/01/2004

Nor Mohamed overcome by PM's trust in him

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - It was 9.50am and Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop was in his third-floor office of the west wing in the Prime Minister's Department when his direct line rang. Few people have this number and one of them was his boss, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

As Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister, Nor Mohamed, 56, is quite used to getting calls from the boss and usually it means more work or more issues to look at. He was not mistaken. Abdullah, who was just about to go in for the weekly Cabinet meeting, congratulated him, wished him all the best and said "you are the Finance Minister II" (see profile on P14).

"I was surprised; then emotional. I thanked the Prime Minister and just sat back," Nor Mohamed told the New Straits Times in an interview shortly after his appointment was officially announced. But his thoughts were not on his sudden elevation to the Cabinet. Nor did he feel exalted at being given the second Finance Minister's portfolio.

"I was just overcome that the Prime Minister had the confidence and trust in me to shoulder this responsibility. I felt the weight of responsibility weighing down on me immediately."

All his life, Nor Mohamed, the only child of a poor family from Butterworth, Penang, has been in public service. His father passed away when he was 10 and he was brought up by his mother, to whom he was very attached. She passed away three years ago, just weeks before he took up his appointment as economic adviser to then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He started as a clerk in Bank Negara in 1968 and worked his way through university. He rose through the ranks and less than 20 years later, he was already in the key position of one of the five advisers of Bank Negara, a step just below that of Deputy Governor.

Did he ever think that as a career public servant he would one day become a key member of the Malaysian Cabinet? "It never occurred to me. I really thought I would end my career in a few years as adviser to the Prime Minister."

But much as he is overwhelmed by the trust the Prime Minister has placed in him, Nor Mohamed says he is even more awed by the fact that he will be in the frontline instead of being a "backroom boy".

"The PM has placed his trust in me. So I must deliver. Whatever sacrifice that my family and I have to make, we will make."

His wife, Puan Sri Fauzia Mohd Abu Bakar, a retired senior civil servant, knows all about that. Whenever she meets up with the young men that Nor Mohamed picked to restructure government-linked companies, she will remind them to spend time with their families. She always tells them she knows all about having a husband who works day and night, not seeing enough of his wife and children.

Former Danaharta chairman Datuk Azman Yahya, one of the young people involved in the restructuring of corporate Malaysia, can only agree, having worked closely with Nor Mohamed the last five years.

"In all the years I have dealt with and reported to Tan Sri Nor Mohamed, one thing that touched me was his selfless dedication and commitment as a public servant. He always has the country's interests at heart. He has sacrificed much for the country and there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that he is the best choice for the job," Azman said.

What are the challenges for him in his new job? "Basically, the economic

crisis is over. It's more than a cycle away. In the context of the new circumstances, we have to come back to financial management of an economy where recovery is well underway."

Nor Mohamed declined to speak on what he intended to do in his new job. "I have to report to my boss and get the brief from him first," he said, adding that "it is an honour to be given the opportunity to serve the country. I will give my best to support the Prime Minister and Government in carrying out the duties entrusted to me. I pray to Allah for his blessings and guidance so that I can serve the nation well."