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## Business with a heart

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FOR all his exploits on the corporate front, Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary is also prominent in philanthropic matters, proving that a fusion between business and charity is not only possible, but also complementary and essential.

'He thinks about service to God and community,' says Datuk Seri Megat Najmuddin Khas, the chairman of Pernas International Holdings Bhd, a Syed Mokhtar company. 'His motivation is not purely monetary.'

While he has, to date, no directorship in any of his public-listed companies, he has always been known as the chairman of the Al-Bukhary Foundation, a vehicle set up in March 1996 to aid the poor, support Islamic arts and culture and promote civilisational understanding.

The foundation has two components - the part that carries out the charitable work and a corporate structure that ensures every one of Syed Mokhtar's businesses contributes a portion of its profits to the foundation. 'By doing it this way, Syed Mokhtar believes he is discharging his corporate responsibility as a good citizen,' Datuk Ismail Yusof, the foundation's executive vice-chairman, once said.

Long before the foundation was set up, Syed Mokhtar had already been known to make personal contributions to public causes. As Ismail recalled, when Syed Mokhtar was for the first time paid a director's fee of RM1,500 in 1976, he immediately gave away half of it to 15 needy families. Today, via the foundation, he channels millions of ringgit annually to numerous public and private charitable, educational and social projects.

One of his pet projects is the RM400 million Al-Bukhary Complex in Kedah, which is scheduled for completion at the end of 2004. The integrated complex adopts a 'cradle to grave' concept, which provides for Malaysians of all races and religions a whole range of facilities, including a mosque, medical centre, community centre, orphanage, old folks' academy and institution of higher learning.

Thus far, phase one has been completed. The first batch of 500 students, including Muslim students from Asean countries, enrolled at the institute in July this year. 'Giving back to society has always been his credo in life,' says Abdul Halim Hassan, who is responsible for the complex's operations.

The Yayasan Al-Bukhary Tuition Centre, which provides academic assistance for poor students in rural areas, is an effort that stemmed from the founder's own impoverished background. 'I realised how difficult it was to study well under such circumstances,' Syed Mokhtar tells Malaysian Business. 'In later years, it inspired me to start free tuition classes under the Al-Bukhary Foundation. Today, some 15,000 poor schoolchildren are benefiting from our nationwide tuition programme.'

Perhaps the jewel in the crown is the RM100 million Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur, which has become all but synonymous with the Al-Bukhary Foundation. The brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the exquisite four-storey museum was constructed during the height of the financial crisis in 1997/8 and is the first in the Asia-Pacific region to showcase Islamic art, culture and lore.

Rooted in Islamic principles, the foundation also seeks to promote Muslim brotherhood by sponsoring poor Muslim students from Asean countries to study in Malaysia and hosting global dialogues that attempt to enhance inter-faith acceptance and tolerance.

It is also credited with the construction of about a dozen mosques throughout the country. In 2000, the foundation donated STG1.25 million (RM7.75 million) to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, one of the world's pre-eminent centres for Islamic learning.

This, however, has not stopped Syed Mokhtar from channeling funds to public-interest programmes carried out by other non-Muslim groups and organisations. For example, in 1999, the foundation donated RM1 million to the MCA-initiated Langkawi Project that raised funds for education projects to rural schools and provided scholarships to needy children. It also pledged a few million ringgit towards the setting up of the Tun Abdul Razak (TAR) University in Perak, on top of donating an 81-hectare plot for TAR's medical college in Johor.

The foundation has also committed itself to assisting the Maju Institute of Educational Development (MIED) in establishing the Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST) in Sungai Petani, Kedah.

Perhaps Syed Mokhtar's keen interest in promoting education is what spurred him to buy the entire regional book retailing and distribution business of Singapore-based MPH group last year. According to a close associate, the tycoon believes that books are integral to education and promoting understanding, and MPH can serve as a vehicle for publishing and distributing books, including literature on Islam, and inculcate the reading habit among Malaysians.

Be it through his businesses or the foundation, Syed Mokhtar's ultimate goal seems to be making a difference in society for the betterment of all. 'He loves his country to a fault,' says Megat Najmuddin. 'And he has a genuine and overwhelming passion to improve the lot of the Bumiputeras.'

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