

T'ganu prince aims to be first Malay architect MP

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By Hafiz Yatim

INTERVIEW Despite coming from the royal household of Terengganu and being a well-known architect, deep down inside Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah Raja Ahmad always had a feeling he would be in politics some day.

Not that he thinks politics is better than his profession, but he has developed a drive in recent years to be an agent of change, a strong voice of reason for the advice of experts in various fields to be accepted, not just by the masses but by the authorities as well.

For the 58-year-old has seen his views on design, especially that on the Sultan Mizan Stadium in Kuala Terengganu, not being followed, resulting in its roof structure to collapse not once but twice - the first in 2009 and for the second time last year.

Determined to be an active voice of professionals whose advice have been neglected under the BN government, Raja Kamarul Bahrin's (right) hopes his active entry into politics would force the authorities to respect the views and opinions of professionals more seriously.

Opposition party PAS yesterday named the master planner, town planner and architect as its candidate for the Kuala Terengganu parliamentary seat.

"Many professionals in the country are frustrated that their expertise and advice are being taken lightly by the present government, resulting in our expert opinions being neglected or not given the seriousness required.

"Maybe it is time that someone from the architectural profession takes centre stage, to return professionalism to all aspects of planning and development country, especially in town planning," Raja Kamarul Bahrin said in an interview yesterday.

"Many a time we see local councils draw up master plans, only to see them not being followed. What is the purpose of administrators taking pains to coming up with great plans only to see politicians and the elite in local councils changing them or not following the well-worked-out ideas?" he asked.

Raja Kamarul Bahrin, who in the 1992 was involved in a dispute with his Australian wife over the custody of his two children, is the cousin of the Terengganu sultan.

A graduate from the Melbourne University, Raja Kamarul Bahrin had a bitter custody dispute with his Australian wife, Jacqueline Pascarl, over their two children - Raja Shahirah and Raja Mohamad Baharudin - whom he eventually smuggled out of Australia on a boat during a visit.

The Terengganu royalty hopes he will be the first Malay architect to be elected to the Dewan

Rakyat in the upcoming national polls.

Using the Sultan Mizan Stadium as an example, Raja Kamarul Bahrin, who was the architect for the project, said the reason for the collapse of its roof was because the advice given by the experts was ignored.

"As consultants, we did not have the powers of a binding say in the project. They listened to our views, but what we had communicated was not given serious attention.

"Many professionals in government or public projects are frustrated because their expertises are not appreciated by the authorities concerned, even by the local councils. They come up with guidelines for master plans, spending a lot of money on research and planning, but the plans are later abandoned, or not followed fully," he said.

Pasar Payang taken lightly

Raja Kamarul Bahrin, who is a member of Badan Warisan Malaysia (Malaysian Heritage Trust), said Pasar Payang in Kuala Terengganu, highly popular with tourists for its songket and batik, has been largely ignored by the present BN state government - and by the federal authorities as well - despite it being the third most visited open market in the Asian region, just behind the one in Bangkok.

"Pasar Payang was recognised as an icon of the nation in 2005. However, the state now wants to build a hotel on the site. I do not say no to development, but there are other alternative sites where the hotel can be built, whether it's going to be of 20 floors or 100 storeys high!

"In Seberang Takir, there is a vacant land of 140 acres, but it has not been put to use till today, not even a hint of high-rise buildings that can easily be accommodated there.

"There is a master plan for the development of Tanjong, which is about a kilometre away from Pasar Payang, but nothing has taken place so far. So, why are they targeting the very popular Pasar Payang?"

This frustration, Raja Kamarul Bahrin said, does not stem from the professionals alone, but it is also known to be an annoyance among the civil servants in the state, who have often questioned the purpose of working papers and master plans when these are not observed or put into effect.

He described the incidents involving Sultan Mizan Stadium as an eye-opener for him but he does not want people to consider his entry into politics as a move to defend his design for the stadium.

"My move into politics is just a coincidence, for besides the stadium, I am also actively fighting for the preservation of Pasar Payang, which I did not design, and for Kampung Ladang Gemilang, a place where traditional items such as the keris, songket and copper

items are made, which has been told to make way for a road.

"This traditional activity, which has been there long before oil and gas were discovered in Terengganu, may be lost forever as a result of such warped thinking!

"It is incumbent on us as professionals to point these things out. We do not have an avenue, or the grounds, to tell off the authorities for not taking seriously our advice as professionals," Raja Kamarul Bahrin said.

Why Hassan Merican left?

Raja Kamarul Bahrin also raised the matter of why former Petronas chief executive officer and managing director, Hassan Merican, left the country for Singapore.

He said despite Hassan (left) being highly respected as an accountant, he may have felt frustrated at not being able to do his job professionally and therefore opted to leave for Singapore.

"Just a few days ago, Hassan was promoted to head an energy company under the republic's Temasek group. Singapore is pictured as anti-Islam and anti-Malaysian but it took this Malay son to sit in Temasek.

"It is a big slap to Malaysians, making it clear that we do not value our professionals. Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nor Mohamed Yakcop called it an honour for Malaysia, but the problem is that leaders like Hassan are leaving the country because we do not accept or appreciate their professional opinions," he said.

Raja Kamarul Bahrin also questioned the success of Talent Corp, the state agency tasked with attracting talented professional citizens who are working abroad to return to serve the country.

"Is there any clear plan of the government to attract the professionals back? None! The Hassan episode is an eye-opener that we do not appreciate our own professionals and that is why they feel left out.

"If Hassan, who is well-known for his professionalism and respected as an ethical and trustworthy person and who has served under three prime ministers from Dr Mahathir Mohamad, can leave the country, it shows there is no room for professionals of integrity to put their expertise to use in Malaysia."

As another professional, Raja Kamarul Bahrin hopes to change these sorry situations that he and his colleagues have experienced and aims to strive to enable professionals to put their expertise to proper and effective use and not be ignored by the government.

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