

TAN SRI MOHAMED KHIR JOHARI (Jan 29, 1923 — Nov 19, 2006)



The first Cabinet meeting of independent Malaya. Khir (third from left) is standing behind the Tunku (seated, fourth from left).

PASSING OF A PATRIOT

■ By Anis Ibrahim
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KUALA LUMPUR: Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari, one of the nation's founding fathers, died yesterday after a heart attack. He was 83.

Pak Khir, as he was known to most, was laid to rest at the National Mausoleum at Masjid Negara after *Asar* prayers.

He is believed to have collapsed about 10.30am at his apartment at the Suasana Central Condominium in Jalan Tun Sambanthan, Brickfields.

Khir leaves his wife, Puan Sri Christine Lim, and nine children. His first wife, Puan Sri Kalsom Abdul Rahman, died in September 1994.

The former teacher, who was a close friend of first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, joined the Kedah prince to win independence for the nation.

The first post-independence Education Minister, he left active politics in 1983 after holding several senior positions, including that of Umno secretary-general.

He was also at different times Trade and Industry Minister and Agriculture Minister.

Khir had also been Malaysia's permanent representative to the United Nations and ambassador to the United States, Mexico and Brazil.

The veteran leader, known for his keen sense of humour, refused to accept a title while in office.



Khir was known for his keen sense of humour

He was conferred the *Panglima Mangku Negara*, one of the nation's highest honours carrying the title "Tan Sri", in 1986.

Born on Jan 29, 1923, in Kampung Kancut, Alor Star, Khir received his secondary school education at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star.

In 1955, he became Member of Parliament for Kedah Tengah at the



Christine Lim and her sons, Yusri (left) and Zairil, accompanying Khir's body for burial at the National Mosque.

age of 32, a position he would hold for the next 19 years until 1974.

After the 1974 general election, he was MP for Kuala Muda until 1982.

How Khir came into politics is interesting. After the Japanese surrendered in September 1945, the Tunku discovered attempts by the communists to take over Kedah.

The 42-year-old Tunku then be-

gan rounding up young men to help him defend the state. One of the volunteers was 22-year old Khir.

They developed a friendship that lasted years until the Tunku's death in 1990.

Khir soon immersed himself in the nationalist movement, moving up the ranks in Umno.

In 1956, the British administration appointed him the Assistant

Minister of Commerce and Industry.

Khir stuck by Tunku's side throughout the Merdeka campaign and assisted in receiving foreign dignitaries who had come to witness the historic event on Aug 31, 1957.

When Tunku became the nation's first Prime Minister, he appointed Khir Minister of Education, a post he held for nine years over two separate terms — from 1957 to 1960 and from 1966 to 1970.

Having held the education portfolio for so many years, his greatest lament in recent years was the fact that many young Malaysians knew little of the country's history.

He once remarked that students lacked an understanding of what had happened before their time.

"To some, Aug 31 is just another national celebration or holiday.

"They do not know how we achieved independence," said Khir in an interview last year.

In the 1980s, Khir left politics to take an active part in voluntary activities.

He was president emeritus of the World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia after holding the presidency from 1972 to 2002.

He was also the president of the Malaysian Zoological Society.

Khir was also president of the Badminton Association of Malaysia and the National Sepak Takraw Association and the deputy president of the Olympic Council of Malaysia.

Abdullah: A loss to the nation

HANOI: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday said that Malaysia had lost one of its founding fathers of independence with the death of Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari.

The 83-year-old Khir, died yesterday after a heart attack.

"I am saddened because someone I knew very well has died," he told a Press conference at the Hanoi Horizon Hotel here, before leaving for Kuala Lumpur. He arrived at the RMAF

base in Subang last night.

Abdullah, who took part in the two-day 18th Apec leaders summit here which ended yesterday, said Khir would be greatly missed as he had served his nation and the Malays with dedication.

"All of us deeply appreciate his contributions as all that he had done was for Malaysia and the progress of its people.

"He was truly a son of Malaysia who succeeded as a leader in the government and community because he had

been active in many organisations," he said.

Among others, the former Cabinet minister had served as the Badminton Association of Malaysia (BAM) president for 25 years from 1960-1985, was the Malaysian World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature president from 1979 to 2003 and was also president of the Malaysian Zoological Society, also known as Malaysian Wildlife Society, from 1979 to 2004.

Abdullah also extended his

condolences to Khir's family members.

In Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak expressed sadness over Khir's demise.

"He was one of the men who has contributed a lot to the development and success of the country.

"Being a member of the country's first Cabinet, he was one of the leading figures in Malaysia's history. The country will always remember his contributions."



Tan Sri Azahari Taib says Khir taught him a lot about politics

'He was more than just a teacher'

ALOR STAR: Very few today can claim to have worked with Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari in the independence effort.

Tan Sri Azahari Taib, 82, is one of those who served the cause with first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, former minister Tan Sri Senu Abdul Rahman and Khir.

The former Baling state assemblyman said Khir taught him a lot about politics.

"I didn't have formal qualifications. He was a teacher and taught me everything I know about politics. I'm forever indebted to him.

"He was very giving as a person. He was willing to guide me. We went through thick and thin together."

Azahari, devastated by Khir's death, said he last met him at an Umno meeting in Kuala Lumpur six months ago.

"He looked healthy except for his failing eyesight."

Azahari had expected to meet Khir at a luncheon for Umno veterans during the recent party general assembly.

"I wondered what happened to him when he didn't show up. He would always make it a point to attend every year."

Azahari and Khir were part of a pre-Umno political movement in Kedah, the Syarikat Bek-erjasama Am Saiburi (Seberkas).

Najib and VIPs pay last respects

KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Najib Razak joined hundreds at Masjid Negara yesterday to pay their last respects to former Cabinet minister, Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari.

The Deputy Prime Minister, who arrived at 5.30pm, spent about 10 minutes talking with Khir's wife, Puan Sri Christine Khir, and her children, Zairil and Yusril.



Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (fourth from left) and other dignitaries joining in the prayers yesterday.

He then joined in prayers led by Grand Imam Datuk Kamarudin Zakaria.

Other dignitaries present included Environment and Natural Resources Minister Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid, Gua Musang Member of Parliament Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri

Mohamad Sidek Hassan and the Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Musa Hassan.

Khir's body, draped in the *Jalur Gemilang*, arrived at the mosque about 2pm and was shortly after taken to the mosque's main hall where those gathered paid their last respects.

About 6.15pm, the casket was carried into the main prayer hall for the *sembahyang jena-zah* (funeral prayers) led by Kamarudin before being taken to the Heroes' Mausoleum.

The site is reserved for members of the nation's first Cabinet and others considered worthy by the Prime Minister.

A capable minister, likeable, warm and a good friend



Dr "Coco" Majid always shared a good laugh with the late Khir

■ **By Tan Sri Dr Majid Ismail**
(Former director-general of Health)

I WAS introduced to Khir in Singapore by some of my batch mates in the King Edward VII College of Medicine when he came down to visit them. He knew the college boys from Kedah who were studying medicine with me.

During the Second World War, I used to visit my friends in Kedah and I used to bump into him there every now and then. Later, when he was a pillar of Umno and he was made a minister, he came down to live in Kuala Lumpur.

As he was a minister and I was in government, we had occasion to meet many times during conferences and meetings. It was during that time that I got to know him better, and we became very close friends.

Khir was a jolly, happy person and used to make plenty of jokes. He was a very likeable chap —

friendly and warm — and we used to enjoy his company because of his good nature.

He had a great interest in wildlife, and he set up Zoo Negara together with the late Tan Sri Vic Hudson. I became one of their close associates and we met almost every week, taking turns to entertain each other.

We called ourselves the "A-Team"! I cannot remember how it started although I know that each of us was nicknamed after a character in that television series. It was Vic's idea and he was B. A. Baracus (the character played by Mr T).

After Vic died, we stopped having our weekly gatherings. But I was still very close to Khir and never missed his Hari Raya open house or his birthday parties.

I even gave a speech at his last birthday party and it was full of naughty stories, which we loved to tell.

One of Khir's favourite anecdotes came from the time when he was the chairman of the Family Plan-

ning Association.

According to him, at one time, they were distributing contraceptives to many Malay Muslim families as they wanted to reduce the escalating birth rate. But the programme didn't seem to work as the population of babies born the following year was still high.

So he asked the families if they used the contraceptives. They said they did use the condoms caps, but because they were Muslims, they would cut the tips off!

This used to be one of his favourite jokes that he used to tell friends at public gatherings. He was such an open-minded person.

I also remember how Khir gave me my first taste of politics. In 1956, when we were fighting for independence, Umno was not well received by the Malays. So the government encouraged civil servants to join and support Umno.

At that time I was the state surgeon of Negri Sembilan, based in Seremban. Khir contacted me and

asked me to invite some of the doctors for the Umno meetings, and we went together.

Oflate, before he fell ill, we often met together with some of our old friends.

When he got married to Christine, I was always invited to all the parties they held so I was never out of touch. He was a clubbing man and he enjoyed it. Christine used to accompany him and look after him. They were a very loving couple.

Fun and jokes aside, he was a very capable minister and displayed his professionalism in every portfolio he held.

He was always very kind and had many friends because of this — almost everyone knew him.

During a party at his home, I joked that three quarters of the wealth of the country was owned by half the people there who were the cream of society!

He was a good friend who had a good life. — As told to Ranjeetha Pakiam