A simple and humble leader who served quietly

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AS A boy, he had wanted to be a teacher. Instead he became Education Minister.

Born in Alor Star on Jan 29, 1923, the young Mohd Khir Johari had his early education in Malay schools in Jalan Bharu and Sungai Korok in his hometown. At nine and filled with trepidation, he entered the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star to study English for the first time.

"At first I was apprehensive because of the difference in conditions and atmosphere of Malay schools and English schools," Khir wrote in his alma mater's commemorative programme to mark the college's 70th anniversary.

"At the same time, however, I was proud to have been accepted by the 'white man's school', especially when it was the biggest school in Kedah," he wrote.

"Although our teachers then were allowed to cane us (and many students became their victims) we respected and loved them.

"Regardless of race, we affectionately added the honorific 'Pak' to their names. Thus Mr Lim Chien Chye became Pak Chye, Mr Veraamuthu, Pak Muthu and so on."

Upon graduation in 1939, Khir had wanted to pursue a teaching diploma at the Raffles College in Singapore but World War II cut short his dreams.

Fate, however, lent a hand. In 1945, first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman – whom Khir eventually called "my very good friend" – was serving as Kedah Superintendent of Education and spotted the earnest youth. He was made a teacher but resigned four years later to go full-time into politics.

A dozen years later, as Malaya hoisted the flag to mark its independence, Khir was appointed its first Education Minister.

Like many of his peers, the late Tan Sri Khir was an unassuming man. He served quietly in both Tunku's Cabinet as well as that of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein – the latter with whom incidentally, he went to Mecca to perform the *haj*.

In 1943, he married Puan Sri Kalsom Abdul Rahman, whom friends fondly remember as Che Tom, until her demise in 1994.

Two years later, he married Christine Lim.

Khir's oratory and leadership skills gave him a leg-up in politics.

He was a founder member of Saberkas (Sayang Akan Bangsa, ERtinya Korban Apa Segala – If you love your people, you must be willing to sacrifice everything) a Malay nationalist movement formed during the Japanese Occupation to campaign for independence. Saberkas was later absorbed into Umno.

He was Umno secretary-general when Malaya faced its first federal elections in 1955.

Acting promptly on Tunku's instructions to go "full-speed ahead", Khir traversed the length and breath of the peninsula. He was then the Umno representative heading a three-man Alliance team, charged with vetting and recommending candidates.

In the end, the Alliance won 51 out of its 52 contested seats, recalled the late Khir proudly.

Khir himself stood in Central Kedah, which he won then and again in 1959, 1964 and 1969. He was returned unopposed in 1974. He defended the Kedah Tengah parliamentary seat, later known as Kuala Muda, until the fifth general election in 1978.

A fellow traveller from Umno's birth in 1946 remembers him as a friendly person, down-to-earth and without pretensions.

"I first met him when he came to open the Sekolah Arab al-Rusdiah in Batu Kurau," recalled Ismail Diron, 85, the deputy chairman of the Larut North Umno division.

"He would come wearing either Malay *baju* or a bush jacket," said Ismail.

"There would be no entourage, just him and his one car.

"Years later, when he met me again as Minister of Industry, he said that we were like brothers because we looked alike."

In the run-up to the landmark 1969 general election, Khir survived an opposition smear campaign against him and his wife, in the form of a picture showing him and his wife wearing traditional Chinese dress.

It was Khir himself who had had the photograph taken while on holiday in Hong Kong, recalled his friend Peter Chua, secretary of the Methodist Afternoon School Old Boys Association, of which Khir was patron for three decades.

"He used it as a Chinese New Year greeting card to send out to his Chinese friends," said Chua.

"Unfortunately, it backfired when his political adversaries in the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia used it against him."

Through his 21-year career as Minister of Education, Agriculture and Cooperatives, and Commerce and Industry, he remained plain Pak Khir to his friends and peers. He turned down offers of titles and it was only much later, after he had left office, that he accepted the title of Tan Sri from the King in 1986.

Upon his retirement, Khir served as ambassador to the United Nations and as ambassador to Mexico and Brazil from 1973 to 1976.

In 1966, he was conferred Doctor of Law by Universiti Malaya. The next year, the De La Salle College in Manila conferred him Honorary Doctor o Education and Science. In 1987, he received an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Universiti Pertaniar Malaysia.

A keen conservationist, Khi became president of the World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia in 1972, a post he held for three decades. He was also president of the Malaysiar Zoological Society and a director o the Malaysian Wildlife Conservatior Foundation, which with his excellen political connections he was able tc push forward as an integrated body of environmental concerns.

Khir was also active in sports. He held important positions in sports bodies including as Badmintor Association of Malaysia president Sepaktakraw Association of Malaysia president and Bodybuilding Association of Malaysia president.

Among his sweetest and most memorable achievements is leading the national badminton squad to wir the coveted Thomas Cup in Jakarta ir 1967.

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