

An insight into Khair's life and times

The Star - 22/11/2006

THE late Tan Sri Mohd Khair Johari was a high-profile politician, diplomat and businessman, an ardent nature lover, a champion of the underprivileged and a friend to many. *The Society*, the newsletter of the Royal Commonwealth Society, of which he was the patron, gives an insight into his life and times from an interview to mark the country's 49th National Day.

HE was no ordinary 83-year-old man, working out for an hour every morning to keep fit and healthy.

"No time for sports or exercise in those days," he reminisced, his mind returning to the bygone years when he was working with the country's founding fathers to achieve independence for the nation.

"Today, I have a lot of time," he said, adding that he and his wife, Puan Sri Christine Lim, regularly hosted dinners for ambassadors and his former Cabinet colleagues.

They also make regular trips up north, to catch up with relatives and friends in Penang, Alor Star and Sungai Petani.

Khair was active in the Association of Former Ambassadors and the Malaysian chapter of the World-wide Fund for Nature (WWF Malaysia), among others.

Born in 1923 in Kampung Kancut, Alor Star, Khair was an enduring personality in politics and the government.

After his early education in Malay schools, he joined the Sultan Abdul Hamid College when he was nine.

He completed his schooling in 1939 and in 1945 became a teacher.

However, he cut short his teaching career in 1948 to be active in politics, where he rose to become an assistant minister in 1956 in the then Commerce and Industry Ministry of the pre-independence Cabinet.

He served as a Member of Parliament for nearly 30 years and was a Cabinet member - under Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein - for about 20.

He was among the national leaders who famously refused either state or Federal titles during his term in office and only accepted the Tan Sri title in the 1980s, a decade after he retired from the Cabinet.

He said: "You must serve first and prove yourself. Only then can you accept titles and awards."

Starting out in 1946 as a founder member of the Malay national movement *Saberkas (Sayang Akan Bangsa, Ertinya Korban Apa Segala)*, he joined Umno five years later and became its first secretary-general.

When Malaya achieved its independence on Aug 31, 1957, the Tunku invited Khair, who was just 34, to be the Education Minister.

He had since held several other

ministerial posts, his last being a Minister without Portfolio in 1973 in Abdul Razak's Cabinet.

Khair's diplomatic career started soon after his retirement from politics, when he was made the Malaysian Ambassador to the United States in 1973.

From 1975 to 1976 he was Malaysia's permanent mission to the United Nations and in 1982 he was the country's chef-de-mission to the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia.

On the social front, Khair set up the Kiwanis Club of Kuala Lumpur in 1976, the first of similar clubs nationwide, that later earned him the affection as *Bapa Kiwanis*.

For over 30 years until 2002, Khair was also actively involved in nature and wildlife conservation through WWF Malaysia.

In sports, he championed the cause of sepak takraw, which has since become a regular feature in regional sports meets like the SEA and Asian Games.

Khair died on Nov 10 of a heart attack at his condominium in Suasana Sentral in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

He was given a state funeral and laid to rest at the Heroes' Mausoleum.

He leaves behind a wife, nine children and several grandchildren.