

Khair — a leader who shunned honours

TAN SRI Mohamed Khair Johari, who died yesterday, had an illustrious political career which can put to shame many current politicians in terms of experience and exposure.

Fondly called "Pak Khair", he was born on Jan 29, 1923, in Kampung Kancut, Alor Star, and received his early education at Sekolah Rendah Jalan Bahru, Alor Star, and Sekolah Sungai Korok in Kedah.

Later, he studied at Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star and obtained his Malaya Certificate of Education (MCE) in 1932. He was conferred a Doctor of Law by Universiti Malaya in 1966, honorary Doctor of Education and Science

by the De La Salle College in Manila in 1967 and an honorary Doctor of Letters from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in 1987.

Khair, who was fond of the saying "You are where you are because of the people who prayed for you", made his foray into politics in 1946 at the young age of 23 when he joined Saberkas, an active independence movement, as its secretary-general.

Five years later, he made a decision that changed his life when he embraced Umno. He had a meteoric rise in the party, becoming its secretary-general in three years and served in the powerful

position for a year.

In the 1955 Legislative Council Elections, he won the Kedah Tengah seat on an Alliance ticket. In 1957, he became the Kuala Muda Umno division chairman and retained the Kuala Tengah seat in the country's first general election in 1959.

He retained the seat in the 1964 general election and was reappointed Umno secretary-general for the second time two years later. He defended the Kedah Tengah parliamentary seat, later known as Kuala Muda, for six terms until the fifth general election in 1978.

He was drafted into the government in 1956 when he was named Assistant

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Minister of Economic Affairs. Since then, he served as a minister in four different portfolios. He was independent Malaya's first Education Minister, Commerce and Industry Minister (1960), Agriculture and Cooperative Minister (1962), again Education Minister (1965), reappointed Commerce and Industry Minister (1969) and Trade and Industry Minister (1972).

Khair was appointed Minister Without Portfolio in 1973 when he was sent as ambassador to the United Nations in New York and as ambassador to Mexico and Brazil.

Khair stood out as a man who declined titles and honours in line with his princi-

ple not to accept any titles while in politics, rejected offers of datukship before accepting the "PNM award" from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in June 1986, which carries the title "Tan Sri".

He also politely turned down an offer for a title from the Brunei government because the award carried a life pension.

Besides his hectic political life, Khair was also actively involved in sports and environmental organisations. His vast experience and contributions to the nation would be sorely missed not only by Umno but all Malaysians, especially those who knew Pak Khair on a "first-hand basis". — Bernama