

for the *Love* of his Country

Tan Sri Nik Mohamed Nik Yaacob, the former head honcho of Sime Darby, finds himself in a different role today; at the helm of the Perdana Leadership Foundation, a role that he relishes for its significance to nation-building.

By Seelen Sakran



Nik Mohamed: I am looking forward to making PLF the premier centre of research and learning in the country

WHAT better way of capping an illustrious, high-profile, risk-rewarding career at one of Malaysia's leading conglomerates than doing 'a lot more than national service'? This is precisely the case with Tan Sri Nik Mohamed Nik Yaacob, who after having contributed 20 years of his life to Sime Darby Bhd, culminating in the post of group chief executive (GCE), has taken over the executive directorship of the Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF), a newly established non-profit organisation. Nik Mohamed, 56, retired from Sime in June last year.

Founded in 2003, PLF is committed to preserving, developing and disseminating the intellectual legacies of Malaysia's past prime ministers through research of their policies, strategies and nation-building initiatives.

In an interview with *Malaysian Business*, Nik Mohamed shows that he has lost none of his zest and zeal that had made him a corporate high-flyer in the first place. 'My role at the foundation is multi-tasking,' he enthuses, adding, 'Essentially, the management process is the same except that this is a non-profit organisation. It will be a different kind of work for me but worth the while, as it is dedicated to the past four prime ministers of the country.'

'I am looking forward to the task of making the foundation the premier centre of research and learning on the

contributions made by all our former prime ministers towards nation-building,' he says, feeling honoured by the confidence and trust placed in him to head the foundation.

Challenging tasks are perhaps nothing new to Nik Mohamed, considering that he had been a corporate chieftain for well over a decade. When probed on his stint with Sime, he says, 'I had my fair share of ups and downs.' Although Sime has been described as a conglomerate, it has never been considered a fast-and-furious entity. 'We were considered conservative, with lots of cash but not fast enough to make good acquisitions for expansion.'

And even when Sime did make an acquisition, it fell through. The company was keen on Sime Bank Bhd, then known as United Malayan Banking Corp Bhd, in 1995 for a 60.35% stake to be acquired from Datuk Keramat Holdings Bhd. However, no thanks to the 1997 financial crisis, this didn't quite take off. This was also the time when Sime went into the red for the first time in over 20 years. 'We had to cut our losses. We did not want to further strain our financial resources and human capital, as our core businesses were doing quite well,' says Nik Mohamed. In the end, Sime Bank was acquired by RHB Bank Bhd in 2001. Subsequent to the sale, Sime returned to the black.

What was the rationale of going into banking anyway? 'We felt that by owning a bank, we could have a global brand name as we thought our other brand names could not be stretched regionally or globally.'

Presumably, that was a chapter in Sime's history that everyone wanted to put behind, but Nik Mohamed views it differently. 'It gave us new meaning about teamwork and resilience,' he says.

In any case, a close associate of Nik Mohamed, who has known him throughout his tenure at Sime, describes him as a

dynamic professional who has contributed much to the company's growth. 'He is the sort who will go the extra mile,' says this associate.

Nik Mohamed was born in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, in 1949. He led a full life even in his childhood, complete with his own dose of mischief-making. 'I guess boys will be boys and I was no different,' he grins.

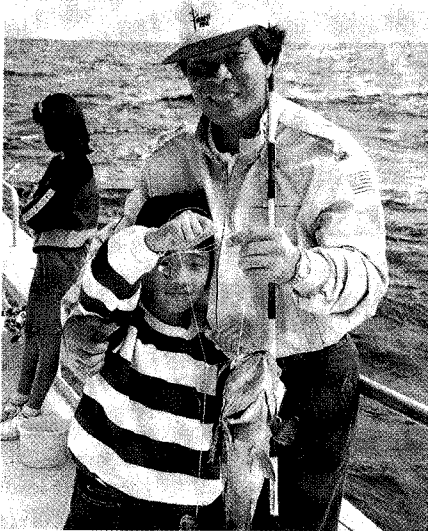
Having seven children, five boys and two girls, did not deter his father, a government servant, from educating all of them. In fact, all his siblings are professionals living in various parts of the country. 'My mother was a very supportive housewife,' says Nik Mohamed. And judging from his mannerisms, it is obvious that his parents have inculcated good values and humility in him. His father has since passed away, but he still visits his mother, who is in her 80s, in Kota Bharu. And if there is one thing Nik Mohamed remembers about his father, it's him telling him that 'balance in life is important'.

Nik Mohamed received his primary education at the Sultan Ismail Putra School, while part of his secondary education was at Sultan Ismail College in Kelantan. 'Upon completing my Form Three, I was chosen to attend the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), where I continued till my Upper Six (Form Six).'

After successfully completing his Form Six, Nik Mohamed obtained a scholarship to go to Australia to enrol in a diploma programme. 'It was at the Footscray Institute of Technology in Victoria,' he says. As his father had instilled in him the doctrine that education was the key to success, he realised that he had to continue with his degree programme. He came back from Australia armed with a degree in mechanical engineering from Monash University. What made him choose mechanical engineering? 'I liked tinkering with toys and taking them apart,' he says in jest. Jokes aside, the young Nik Mohamed was simply good at maths and physics.

In 1974, Nik Mohamed started working for Dunlop Malaysia Industries Bhd, never suspecting that it would later be part of the Sime group. 'I started out as a management trainee,' and left the company as a maintenance manager in 1978. 'I learnt all that I could but later found that engineering was not exactly my cup of tea.

'I wanted change. I wanted excitement ...' says Nik Mohamed. And change and



Fishing in Florida with his son Adam in 1974. In the background is his daughter

excitement he got ... albeit at a much later stage, from his stint as an entrepreneur. But before becoming an entrepreneur, he decided to acquire as many skills as possible.

So, he asked his wife to resign and hop on a plane to get their MBAs. Destination: the unlikely location of the Philippines. At that time, the Asian Institute of Management, which was located in the Philippines, was said to be on a similar level with US-based Harvard, albeit at a more affordable price. So it made perfect sense to opt for the Southeast Asian nation instead of more familiar choices like Australia and the US.

How did it feel to be course-mates with his wife? 'We were put in different classes so as not to be in cohorts to get As in class,' he laughs.

In 1980, upon his return from the Philippines, he headed to Kelantan, where he helped his relative manage a company. In 1984, he finally decided to become an entrepreneur, manufacturing plastic bottles in Shah Alam. 'I felt this industry was relatively risk-free, with low investment costs.'

Things were chugging along fine but Nik Mohamed 'got the itch to return to the

corporate sector'. In 1985, when he joined Sime's Century Batteries as its general manager, his wife took over from him, enhancing the business in the process. In tandem, Nik Mohamed's star was shining brightly in Sime, culminating in him becoming GCE in 1993, in a short span of eight years.

His friend of 49 years, Datuk Hashim Yusoff, who has been through thick and thin with Nik Mohamed, has this to say about him, 'Nik Mohamed is a non-controversial, pleasant and good-natured fellow who doesn't forget his old friends.'

On a more personal note, his wife – whom he describes as 'loving and challenging' – is now a homemaker after selling the plastic manufacturing company. They have four children, ranging from the ages of 18 to 26. The eldest girl is married and working while the youngest boy is in college. The middle two girls are studying abroad. 'As the family is currently spread around, we try to make it a point to be together as often as possible,' he says.

These days, the well-dressed and fit-looking Nik Mohamed's pastime includes reading intrigue and espionage novels by John Le Carr and playing golf, fishing and 'scheming, not reading management and technology books, to get ideas'.

For all his experience and wisdom, what is his take on the youth of today? 'They must dare to dream but at the same time, keep their feet firmly planted on the ground,' he opines. Not surprisingly, his own secret of success, nurtured at Sime, will always be embedded in him. Among them: professionalism, integrity, taking calculated risks, leadership qualities and team spirit. Adding to this, he says, 'I do not believe in backstabbing as it ruins an organisation in the long run.'

Any famous last words? 'At all times (even after retiring), an individual needs to possess, among others, a strong mental challenge and physical robustness.'

Sound advice indeed. 