

CALL ME PATRIOTIC

Pak Khir looks back on his life in politics and the things that matter most.

HE HAS BEEN described as 'the last of the Mohicans' and 'the Tunku's right hand man' by his associates. Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari, fondly known as 'Pak Khir' belongs to the diminishing group of men who fought alongside the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj for the nation's independence.

'When I went into politics,' says Khir, 'I never thought of becoming a minister at all. Call me patriotic.' Inspired by people like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Abraham Lincoln, the young Khir felt strongly about their common trait – the desire to bring about national unity.

As he puts it, 'To me, national unity is far more important than industrialisation. If you've unity, industrialisation is easy. Everybody's gung-ho about it. There's nothing you can't do when you have unity.'

How does unity come about? 'You help people trust one another,' replies the former education minister, simply. 'In a multi-racial country like Malaysia, this is especially critical.'

His friends believe him. Says one, 'His greatest passion is the unity of the races and he's liked by all. He's comfortable attending any function.' His associates describe him as 'a true Malaysian'.

Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah, president of the Olympic Council of Malaysia says 'Most people admire Khir's frankness. They also like his direct-to-the point enthusiasm. He's a very pragmatic kind of guy, full of humour and not very much into protocol.' The Tunku obviously agreed. In his book, *Looking Back*, The Tunku portrayed Khir as 'quite a character in the Cabinet; a man with a great sense of humour, with bags of tricks in his pocket'.

Hamzah himself had a lot of brotherly advice from Khir while serving in the Cabinet. He tells **Malaysian Business**, 'Khir was instrumental in my introduction to politics.'

Khir, at 69, has come a long way. As a man who went through the Japanese Occupation during World War II, fought for Independence, and endured the travails of May 13, 1969, his story is a well of memories.

As he recollects, 'It was very clear in my mind that we wanted Independence from the British. So I went ahead and supported a political party – Saberkas – in Kedah; Tunku was the patron. The main objective of the party idea was to arouse people's feelings and political consciousness.'

Saberkas was established as a co-operative society during the Japanese Occupation. It was then illegal to go under the flag of a political party even though the party was engaged in politics. 'Umno was not even in the picture then,' says Khir, 'but it paved the way for the formation of Umno.' Saberkas later became an affiliate of Umno. When the Tunku became president of Umno, Khir was made secretary-general and Saberkas was disbanded. 'I had no choice but to assume the position,' Khir reminisces. 'And from there we fought for Independence.'

Teamwork was very important to Khir. As he explains, 'I remember there was a break of the MCA away from the Alliance leaving a small number of members behind. Tunku's words then were, "We'll stick by the MCA even if there's one or 10 members left". That is symbolic of unity. And I have been imbued with his spirit of love for the people, no matter what their race or religion.'

To say that Khir admires the Tunku is putting things mildly. He refers to the late Tunku as 'my friend, my mentor, ...my everything.' He believes that fate brought them together.

On Independence Day, Aug 31, 1957, Khir was made minister of education. In 1960 he changed portfolios and became minister of commerce and industry. In 1964 he was appointed minister of agriculture, and three years later went back to the education ministry, thus completing a total of 9 1/2 years in the ministry of education.

Hamzah describes Khir as a shrewd politician who had strong grassroots support. As a politician, Khir never lost an election. He stood for Parliament in the first general elections in 1955 and remained as member of parliament until 1982; his Merbuk constituency was taken over by Tun Daim Zainuddin. But in the 1969 elections, he had a scare. His winning margin was drastically slashed.

Among the reasons for the shaved majority, one stands out. During a trip to Hong Kong with his family, he was photographed with his wife in Chinese traditional grab. After their return, the minister thought it would be fun to send Chinese New Year cards to his friends with the photograph enclosed. Unfortunately opposition parties, notably PAS, used the pictures to portray him as un-Islamic.

'I have been criticised for so many things,' Khir says. 'I let people criticise because at the end of the day, I might learn something to better myself.'

The man was also one of three politicians who refused to take any titles while in office – the other two in the 'no-titles-until-retirement' category were Senu Abdul Rahman (now Tan Sri) and currently deputy prime minister, Ghafar Baba. 'Otherwise,' says Khir, 'I'd have been burdened by the responsibility of the titles. Besides, people might be under the impression that you go into politics for your own glory. I take my hat off to Ghafar because he keeps his side of the promise till this day.'

'The Tunku knew how I felt about receiving titles. I have always maintained that no active politician should receive a title while still in office and the late Tunku respected my wishes.' The Tunku used to try though. In 1963, Khir was made a representative of the federal government to declare Sarawak's independence. The Tunku, who was Prime Minister then, wanted Khir to accept the title of Datuk. Khir flatly refused.

Political historians say that the Tunku's successor, Tun Abdul Razak was less fond of Khir. In any case, Razak's ascension seemed to spell an end to his career in the administration. In February 1973, he was made Malaysia's ambassador to the United States and later, ambassador to the United Nations in New York with ministerial status. He returned to Malaysia from the US in 1976.

After retirement in June 1986, Khir was conferred the Panglima Mangku Negara (PMN), one of the highest honours of the country and which carries the title 'Tan Sri'. He is also the recipient of a number of foreign state honours from Thailand, Korea and Japan.

For Khir, things have changed. Described by Hamzah as a man who does not pull his punches, Khir hates hypocrisy. 'I always believe in calling a spade a spade. But that's very lacking these days.'

He also laments that 'it's a pity that people view politics as something dirty these days'. 'We never regarded politics as dirty in those days. Leadership was by example. But things have changed quite a bit since. What is actually carried out is not what is preached.'

'The difference between politics in those days and politics today is that we had a more open society then,' he says. 'That's the most glaring thing. There was no protocol...nothing. Even in Parliament, we were accessible to the Opposition. We looked upon them as something that was a must. They criticised us, and they hammered us. But we welcomed it. They sharpened our wits. This is something that's missing today. The Opposition today is practically silent.'

As for ingredients needed to be a good politician, Khir says 'First of all you must be honest – honest to yourself, honest to your electorate and honest to your country. It's a fundamental requirement.' Sincerity comes next. 'If you have these qualities,' says Khir, 'nothing can shake you because nobody can question your sincerity, your honesty and your integrity.'

Today, the former minister wears many hats; he is either chairman and/or director of several economic and financial associations and public listed companies. His most prominent position is as vice-chairman of Magnum Corporation Bhd.

Where social activities are concerned, Khir is president of the World Wide Fund for Nature of Malaysia (WWF) and president of the Malaysian Zoological Society (MZS). His involvement with MZS goes back to 1961 before the national zoo came into picture. His dedicated contribution to the preservation of world wild life was recognised by the Rotary Club of Bangsar, which presented the Vocational Services Award to him.

He has been equally active in sports and is currently deputy-president of the Malaysian Olympic Council. In January 1986, he was re-elected president of the Sepaktakraw Association of Malaysia. Before then he was president of the Badminton Association of Malaysia for 25 years.

Khir's a 'helping people machine' who never stops working. When **Malaysian Business** met him, he was busy signing 800 letters aimed at raising funds for the Montfort Boys Town (MBT) premiere charity dinner. The boys at MBT can be sure it's going to be a success. Why?

'Khir's on their case,' answers a close associate.