

'Politicians are my friends'

With his experience working with political leaders of both divides, the apolitical new Election Commission chairman is confident he can improve the electoral body and uphold democracy in the country.

mStar

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WHEN you hear his strident voice, nothing will come to mind, but two words that seem to capture his personality – serious and stern.

That's our first impression of the new Election Commission (EC) chairman Datuk Seri Mohd Hashim Abdullah.

His voice rang out clear, even though the Kelantan-born official was in another room, deep in conversation with another journalist, while *mStar Online* was waiting for their turn outside the EC chairman's room.

We can't deny that we were anxious while waiting, in case our supposedly casual chat would suddenly take on a graver tone due to the "serious" character of the 62-year-old Administrative and Diplomatic Officer (PTD).

It definitely did not help that his solemn face was staring down at us from the framed photographs hanging at various corners of the EC office in Putrajaya, as if taunting us.

Our fears disappeared as soon as we were ushered into Mohd Hashim's room.

When we quietly requested that we have our "chat" at the sofa, he immediately agreed.

"Okay, sure. It will be more comfortable for us to *borak* (chat) there," Mohd Hashim said as he moved from behind his big, formal desk.

Our relief was palpable as the mood became more relaxed.

Even after a gruelling hour of answering questions, Mohd Hashim could still rattle on energetically with us, until our interview, which was initially set for half an hour, lasted for nearly 90 minutes.

The fourth of 10 siblings, Mohd Hashim is of Bugis descent, although he was born and bred in Kota Baru.

"I bonded with Tan Sri Aziz (Mohd Yusof) over this as he is also Bugis.

"But he is an aristocratic Bugis, a descendant of the Bugis who sat in the royal court, that's why even the way he speaks is gentle.

"But not me. I'm the kind of Bugis who was at sea – the pirates.

"Our first instinct is to fight, we are not the gentle type," he quipped.

In fact, he admitted that growing up and living by the harsh seas in Kelantan had made him more "vocal" as he had always had to raise his voice to "fight the strong sound of the sea and wind".



Entrusted responsibility: Mohd Hashim wants to reduce the number of unregistered voters from the current four million and help them realise the importance of voting. — MOHD SAHAR MISNI/The Star

Ready for attack

When asked if the Bugis blood flowing in him is a sign that he is not easily discouraged and is determined to face anything, be it false accusations, threats and harsh criticisms – such as those hurled at him as soon as he was appointed to fill the hot seat of the EC Chairman in January – Mohd Hashim said: "God willing, I am ready to face any possibility. I submit to Allah and seek refuge with the prayers of my parents.

"But if people have bad intentions against me and want to create trouble, there is nothing I can say or do.

"My hope is for the best; it's not like I'm gearing for any battles," he said in a thick Kelantanese accent.

But do not be quick to assume that this kampung boy will give up easily.

What is certain is that he has set a goal to improve the functions of the EC and develop strategies to dispel the negative perceptions people have of the Commission and criticisms that have been levelled against it.

Although they are the same challenges faced by the former chairman – from the issue of voter registration, transparency and the constituency delineation exercise – the father of four does not see these issues as impossible to handle.

The Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Masters in Political Science holder also has his own reasons for his goal in ele-

vating the position of the EC under his leadership.

Undeniably, everything would be easier with the cooperation of the leaders of political parties, either in the Government or the Opposition. And here is the strength of Mohd Hashim, who has experience working and a good relationship with various political leaders.

"Many of those in office and those in political leadership today are my friends.

"The Selangor Menteri Besar (Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali) is my friend.

"When he became a private secretary to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, I was the senior private secretary to Tan Sri Annuar Musa, so we are not strangers, but instead have been 'colleagues', working together as government and ministerial officials," explained Mohd Hashim who started work in the public sector at the Public Enterprise Ministry in 1984.

Others whom he counts as friends include those he had met while studying at UKM, such as Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Hassan and Sungai Petani MP from PKR Datuk Johari Abdul.

"How can I break off ties with these people? They won't betray our friendship, just because I am the chairman of the EC," he said.

"It is the same with (Datuk) Saifuddin Abdullah. Although he wrote about me on Twitter ... he is

like a younger brother to me.

"Whenever we meet, he will call me *abang* (older brother).

"That's why whatever he says, I am not hurt, it will not be a problem if we meet.

"What could be a problem is with the new (political leaders) elected recently who don't know me," he said, stressing that "I am not involved in politics, but I have politician friends."

Free from politics

Publicly disclosing his experience working with the leaders of the ruling party, Mohd Hashim reiterated that he has never been involved in politics, nor has he become a member of any political party.

"If I am to declare it, I was with Tan Sri Annuar Musa as his senior private secretary for 10 years, and Datuk Seri Noh Omar was my boss at the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry.

"But I wish to state that during my tenure as Tan Sri Annuar Musa's SUSK, I was not involved in any party politics.

"Until now, I am not a member of Umno; in fact, I have never been a member of any political party whatsoever.

"I think this is one reason why I was entrusted (with the post of the EC chairmanship).

"I choose to remain as PTD, without having to disconnect from my friends in politics," Mohd Hashim said.

Mohd Hashim, who served as

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the EC deputy chairman for 16 months, said he would continue the efforts initiated by the former chairmen, in addition to improving the operation of the body responsible for running and managing elections in the country.

"In the EC, we cannot make any changes or updates as we like because we are bound by the Constitution and the Act. I cannot do as I like.

"The changes we can make are from the point of administration.

"For example, how we want to encourage people to register with us.

"Of the four million who have not registered, we want to reduce the number over time.

"However, we have to do it according to the law," he said.

As Mohd Hashim elaborated, "Now we are looking for them, and that's why we have to do a lot of collaborations and awareness programmes for the people so that they realise the importance of registering and voting.

"But only registering and not voting is also pointless, so that is why we have to educate because everything stems from people's perception of the integrity and transparency of the EC," he said, urging the media to help in realising this goal.

His 36 years serving as a civil servant has clearly shaped his work ethics and personality of never giving up.

He is determined to make sure that all parties involved in the electoral process will act more maturely and not be influenced by emotions, which can damage the country's democracy, only because their personal political dreams were not achieved (in the elections).

What is sure is that Mohd Hashim is not filling the position he is holding to fulfil anyone's wishes or fancies.

He sees it as an entrusted responsibility to his beloved country.

"We were appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, and we uphold the trust that His Majesty has bestowed upon us to conduct the elections in a peaceful, calm, fair and transparent manner," he concluded.