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# Chief Minister for all S'wakians



SARAWAK assemblymen in 1981 shortly after Abang Johari became Satok assemblyman. Next year, he will be Satok assemblyman for 40 years.

BY ROOSFA HASHIM

**Today**, Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Abang Johari Tun Openg celebrates his 70th birthday.

To ordinary people, this age is very suitable for retirement and rest. However, in politics, the number 70 means that a leader has reached the age of maturity to lead a political party or state government, and for a politician like Abang Johari, he must continue to serve as long as he is needed by the people, especially the voters.

Most Sarawakians are very familiar with Abang Johari's background and character. He is known for his patient, friendly and calm nature.

He is the youngest son of Tun Datuk Abang Openg Abang Sapi'ee, Sarawak's first Head of State. Abang Johari, a native of Sarawak, was born on August 4, 1950 in Limbang. As the son of the highest leader of the state, Abang Johari's political journey is often perceived as easy. But that fact is, however, just one of the factors in determining his success in pursuing a career as a politician.

Abang Johari has worked hard and has always been patient and honest for the sake of his party and homeland.

## Growing up as a leader

His father often moved due to work. When Tun Openg was appointed as Sarawak's first Head of State in 1946, Abang Johari followed him to Kuching. That was where he grew up and received his

education.

He studied at SK Merpati Jepang and later continued his studies at SMK St Joseph. After that, Abang Johari then went to the United Kingdom to continue his studies up to the master's level; he obtained a masters in Business Management at Henley College, Brunel University.

As the son of a state leader, Abang Johari was exposed to politics at a young age. He often followed his father on visits to all corners of the state. Therefore, his leadership talents have been honed since he was young.

In the early 70s, there were several active youth organisations in Sarawak. These included Gabungan Kelab-Kelab Belia Melayu Sarawak, Sarawak Youth Council and Kelab Belia Bidayuh. In 1972, the leaders of these organisations met and agreed to merge and establish the Sarawak United National Youth Organisation (Saberkas).

In 1973, Tun Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, the then Chief Minister, was appointed the first president of Saberkas.

Abang Johari was also active in Saberkas. At the same time, he also joined Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) and was active in the party's youth wing. Both these bodies became his stepping-stones to politics.

Abang Johari's noble character and personality make him easily accepted as a young leader. He was friendly and adapted easily to everyone. That was the driving factor

that facilitated his early journey in politics. In 1977, when he was just 27 years old, he succeeded in becoming the PBB Youth chief. He also later became the president of Saberkas.

## Beginning of political career

1981 was an important year in Abang Johari's political career. Tun Abdul Rahman Ya'akub had resigned as Chief Minister and vacated his seat in the State Legislative Assembly (DUN). He handed over his post to his nephew Abdul Taib Mahmud who was brought back to Sarawak from the federal cabinet in Kuala Lumpur.

Aware that Taib was a young leader with a bright political future, Abang Johari strengthened his relationship with him. In the 1981 by-election, Taib won the Sebandi seat while 31-year-old Abang Johari won the Satok seat.

Abang Johari's victory in Satok allowed him to go to the Sarawak State Assembly for the first time. To give Abang Johari greater exposure to the intricacies of politics, Taib later appointed him as his chief political secretary in 1982. The following year, Taib appointed Abang Johari as Assistant Minister of Regional and Community Development.

## Joining Sarawak Cabinet

1987 was another important year in Abang Johari's political career. Taib, who was facing an attempt by some assemblymen to overthrow him, acted quickly to dissolve the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly and hold an emergency state election. Taib and his group won and subsequently

managed to overcome the crisis. In the newly formed cabinet, Taib named Abang Johari as the Minister of Industrial Development.

At the same time, many politicians also lost their positions and were removed for allegedly defecting. Abang Johari's atti-

tude in favour of Taib was one of the best decisions in his career. Since then, every three or four years Abang Johari would move to a more important ministry.

With his good position in the state cabinet, Abang Johari's political career continued to progress day by day. He emerged as one



NEW Straits Times' clipping on March 13, 1987 after the Ming Court incident which predicted the potential of Abang Johari as Chief Minister.

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## BIODATA

Datuk Patinggi Abang Johari Tun Openg

### BORN

August 4, 1950  
Limbang, Sarawak

### POSITIONS

Chief Minister of Sarawak  
Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) chairman  
Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) president  
Satok assemblyman

### FAMILY

**FATHER**  
Tun Datuk Abang Openg Abang Sapi'ee  
First Head of State of Sarawak

### MOTHER

Toh Puan Dayang Masniah Abang Abdul Rahman

### WIFE

Datuk Amar Juma'ani Tun Tuanku Bujang

### CHILDREN

Abang Abdillah Izzarim  
Dayang Norjihan

## EDUCATION

- Merpati Jepang Primary School, Kuching
- St Joseph Secondary School, Kuching
- Master of Business Administration  
Brunel University, United Kingdom

## POLITICAL JOURNEY

- 1981** Satok assemblyman
- 1982** Political Secretary to the Chief Minister
- 1984** Assistant Minister for Regional Development and Community Development
- 1987** Minister of Industrial Development
- 2000** Minister of Tourism
- 2004** Minister of Housing
- 2009** Minister of Urbanisation and Housing
- 2011** Minister of Tourism and Housing
- 2016** Deputy Chief Minister, Minister of Housing and Urbanisation
- 2017** Appointed as the sixth Chief Minister of Sarawak



SUNDAY Tribune reported the victory of Abang Johari as PBB deputy president in 1998.

of the potential successor leaders to replace Taib.

In 1998, he defeated Adenan Satem and Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha to win the post of PBB deputy president.

Although he won, he was seen to have the potential to replace Taib, his political journey after that was a bit slow as Adenan was brought back into the PBB leadership as senior vice president.

When Adenan resigned as vice-president, he was appointed information chief.

Adenan was also retained by Taib in the state cabinet and became a rival to Abang Johari for the Chief Minister's post. Adenan had one advantage over Abang Johari — he was Taib's former brother-in-law.

Abang Johari later became Tourism

Minister in 2000, Housing Minister (2004) as well as Housing and Urbanisation Minister (2009). In 2011, he held two portfolios, namely, Housing and Tourism Ministers.

## Becoming Chief Minister

Adenan replaced Taib when the latter resigned as Chief Minister in early 2014. Although PBB grassroots leaders expected Abang Johari to replace Taib, it did not happen. Nevertheless, Abang Johari continued to work as usual for the sake of the party and the state cabinet.

In 2016, apart from being Deputy Chief Minister, Abang Johari also held the posts of Housing and Urbanisation as well as Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister.

When Adenan passed away, Abang Johari, who was then 66 years old, was appointed Chief Minister on January 13, 2017.

Abang Johari is aware that he has replaced two leaders who had been very helpful to Sarawak. Therefore, his biggest challenge is to provide better services than Taib and Adenan. At the same time, he must immediately come out of the shadows of these two big names.

Day after day in his duties as Chief Minister, Abang Johari always strives to introduce new initiatives to meet the needs of voters and the people of Sarawak and to make the state more developed.

In early 2020, three years after becoming the Chief Minister, Abang Johari launched a new programme known as Sarawakku Sayang with the theme "Jaga Sarawak" in

line with the motto of Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), "Utamakan Sarawak".

As of January 2020, Abang Johari has introduced 81 initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life and easing the burdens of the people. These include the supply of clean water and electricity and the construction of roads in rural areas. However, all development projects stopped when the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

On March 23, 2020, Abang Johari announced an allocation of RM1.15 billion under the Sarawakku Sayang Special Assistance Package to reduce the effects of the economic slowdown and the difficulties faced by the people due to Covid-19.

The funds were channelled through 16 proactive measures, especially to the frontliners, households and business communities who were in dire need of support at the time.

Abang Johari always reiterates his commitment to be the Chief Minister for all Sarawakians where the interests of the people will continue to be his priority and concern. Sarawakians are lucky to have a Chief Minister who is very committed to his job. He is still healthy, energetic, visionary and farsighted. Happy 70th birthday to Abang Jo!

**Roosfa Hashim is biographer, lecturer and publisher director of International Islamic University Malaysia. He is preparing a biography of the Chief Minister of Sarawak.**