

Love

of

Labour



Excellency
Abdulnabi Abdulla
Al Sho'ala by Roy
Kietzman

THE epitome of the self-made man, His Excellency Abdulnabi Abdulla Al Sho'ala is a man who firmly believes that "the university of life is the greatest teacher". As a pupil in the government schools of Manama he dreamed of being a tugboat captain wearing a crisp white uniform. Never mind that, he suffers from seasickness.

But the family wanted Abdulnabi to get a higher education. In order to help support both the family and himself and build up his savings for an overseas education, he worked after school in the Y. K. Almoayyed offices, helping out with sales and performing other office tasks.

He headed for Bombay where he studied at St. Xavier's College, discovering to his dismay that all the money saved up wouldn't be adequate to get him through his schooling. To give Abdulnabi the pocket money he needed in Bombay, he became a self-employed and undertook translations for a number of companies.

Change and turmoil

As a student in his 20s, Abdulnabi was absorbed by the events around him, the political issues, the social concerns and the economic climate. As this was also the immediate post-independence era in Bahrain, and the island had links to the subcontinent stretching back countless generations, he began to file reports regularly as a correspondent for the Bahrain press.

The Al Sho'ala byline was regularly seen on the pages of the Bahrain periodicals like *al Adwa*, *Akhbar al Khaleej* and

Sada al Usbou, whose readers avidly followed his in-depth commentaries and news dispatches.

Luminaries

As a spokesman of sorts for both Bahrain and other Arab students, Abdulnabi became part of circles of such luminaries as Indira Gandhi who was fascinated with the young man's intellect and grasp of issues affecting the subcontinent. Though he claims that, after spending years in India, he never learned Hindustani, "I'll tell you this: in India I'd never go hungry or lose my way".

After receiving his bachelor degree from St. Xavier's in economics and political science, Abdulnabi attended semesters at colleges in England to hone-up on his accountancy, journalism and management skills.

At the age of 25, he entered the newly constituted

Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1973 where he stayed just 11 months. "I must be the only person in the world who got married and lost his job...in the same week!", Mr. Al Sho'ala muses.

New concept

By the next year, he launched himself into a career in communications, starting a company called Gulf Public Relations. "Those were the days when P.R. was a wholly new concept here and not well understood".

"I'm not actually certain that some businessmen even understand what P.R.'s all about today. However, we succeeded slowly but surely in fulfilling the goals we set out for ourselves." Work started at 5 a.m. with his cleaning the office and then making tea which could be put into a thermos flask, a more practical solution to serving instant tea. "I was just starting out and couldn't afford to have a staff of tea boys and cleaners."

Specialist Agencies

Not being big on lunch or a siesta, his non-stop office day merged from day to evening. From G.P.R., the company spawned specialist agencies which then included Gulf Translations, Gulf Advertising and Marketing, Falcon Publishing and TeleGulf, now a wholly owned corporation.

But P.R. activities were always at the core of the business, and finally, in 1985, G.P.R. joined hands with the Hill and Knowlton network to solidify its international links.

The following year, G.P.R. set up the Middle East Research and Consultancy which specialised in market research at a time when such consumer data barely existed or was considered unreliable.

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Biggest vote

In 1982, he was elected to the board of directors of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry by the biggest vote ever witnessed then at the organisation for a first-time candidate. In the early 1980s, Mr. Al Sho'ala said that he was approached again and again by business contacts from outside Bahrain to help them find sponsors or agents on the island.

"Why don't you become our agent?" was the common refrain in those days", he said. The ever-increasing requests of acting as a sponsor or agent made Mr. Al Sho'ala conceive of developing his business interests into a three-phase programme.

He wanted to concentrate on the service industry in the initial ten years of activities, 1974-84, which developed in Bahrain services which barely existed before, such as public relations, marketing research, corporate communications and translations. In the next ten-year plan, 1984-94, he wanted to press ahead with moving into the trading sector which gave birth to Gulf Markets International.

Blue-chip Category

Despite the mounting pressures of business, Mr. Al Sho'ala continued his writing for newspapers and magazines as well as studies and proposals for the United Nations or other international organisations. In the final phase of his 30-year plan, 1994-2002, industry—particularly medium-sized enterprises—gains his attention.

As part of that last phase, a joint venture with German investors created Bahrain Alloys Manufacturing Company, a primary aluminium-alloy operation which has been set up to produce 80,000 tonnes of ingots per year, nine-tenths exported to the Far East. B.A.M.C., still in its first full year of operation, employs 30 staff.

Language Affair

The deal with the Germans culminated in a love affair, too, with the German language that Mr. Al Sho'ala had been smitten with for years. A regular visitor to Austria, Germany and Switzerland, over a four-year period, he took classes and played German-in-30-days cassettes again and again when driving to business appointments in Bahrain.

"Like Hindi, I don't think I'd ever go hungry or lose my way in German-speaking Europe", Mr. Al Sho'ala says, taking a puff on his omnipresent cigarette, and then he demonstrated during the interview how to deal with the hotel reception in Innsbruck...auf deutsch. "The only thing, however, I never calculated into my three-phase business-development programme was my own return to public service", His Excellency says.

Two years ago, he was called from private industry to become, at 47, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. Observers surmise that the entrepreneur was doubtless recognised by the government as a successful trader, an achiever, a businessman who set targets and goals for himself and his staff—and obtained results.

He was called at 47 to be Minister for Labour and Social Affairs



Most Important ministry

Those kinds of aptitudes and skills could be employed advantageously by the government in a ministry which, His Excellency unabashedly terms "the most important ministry in Bahrain". His appointment will set an example, too, for young Bahrainis, that hard work in a job, commitment and dedication to career goals can pay off.

Formidable Spokesman

Over the years, Mr. Al Sho'ala has been a formidable spokesman for the private industry, having experienced life as an employee, employer and corporate chief executive. He was named a member of the Consultative Council from its inception.

With his new post in government, his writing in the media has naturally ebbed off in the past couple of years. Though he hasn't deviated from his early rising of 5 o'clock, he tends to get into the office at 7.30am, after having made a few tentative attempts at strolling in at 6.30.

Quality time

The father of four children, aged 11 to 22, tries to provide "quality time" to be with his wife and children, to share in their daily lives. While the minister talks of "the tremendous achievements" that the Ministry of Labour has already accomplished, he pays tribute to the firm foundation which existed upon his arrival as minister and that, that foundation provided a sound basis upon which to build.

He underscored "strong interaction with the community" as part of his ministry's new steps, dealing with employees and employers on a common ground. "We have attempted to eliminate misunderstandings by bringing the community with us into discussion and involving them."

Changing Attitudes

As part of involving the business community, two labour-ministry-appointed committees, composed of business leaders, are bringing their proposals to the minister on October 26. The panels are grappling with issues like the changing attitudes in the private sector and improving the industry's resource-management processes, labour-law interpretation as well as

requirements, policies and quotas in the Bahrainisation-programme.

More emphasis is being placed on training and human resources, he said, the human resources of both locals and expatriates. The message for employers is to seek improved quality in what they do. "Don't rely on quantity."

"We're going to have to rely for a long time, too, on expatriates. But this is also healthy in helping us to make the economy grow."

Key factors

Local human resources must not remain marginalised as an idle productive element. Education and training are key factors to providing a valuable work force.

"I think we've succeeded in demonstrating that training isn't an expense for companies but an investment." Constant visits to work places—like Bahrain Duty Free and Midal Cables recently—are a part of the minister's way to get to know labour conditions. "Such visits have been very, very helpful.

"What a pleasure it is in my leisure to shop at Jawad's or British Home Stores and know that they, for instance, have an 80 per cent local work force." Mr. Al Sho'ala's obviously stimulated by his own job and the enormous challenges laid out before him.

Asked what he does in his spare time, the minister looked stunned and retorted: "What spare time?" The all-absorbing job demands quite literally seven days a week. He does admit to reading, particularly articles about international politics.

"But reading doesn't count as a leisure pursuit because it's quite essential to my work. However", he hesitated, "I do like to read books on design and decor."

Does that mean he's a closet interior decorator or a painter? "Well, I do like to paint", Mr. Al Sho'ala admits a bit sheepishly. "But nothing to exhibit outside my home."

"Though I wouldn't mind doing a few decorative touches to my own office, I just haven't had the time to focus on it." Sports in general also interest him, and he loves to get behind the wheel of a sleek car.

An important part of the minister's portfolio is social affairs, and he's found it of enormous satisfaction to know that the ministry has been instrumental in assisting the elderly, the disabled, the orphans and other disadvantaged citizens. Within social affairs, expatriate associations are another area the ministry shepherds. But like his getting around in India or Germany, Mr. Al Sho'ala is the self-made man who won't lose his way in Bahrain either.