

The Chairman Speaks*

On July 3, 1993, **Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong** chalked up his third year as Chairman of **ISIS Malaysia**. In this interview with **Ridzwan Othman** and **Dorothy Teoh**,** he speaks about what **ISIS** means to him, and about the challenges facing the institute



To get to the office of Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong at the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, one walks down a long and narrow corridor, bordered on both sides by rooms filled with people busy at work.

A similar route might take one to the core of Tan Sri Zainal Abidin, Chairman of both **ISIS Malaysia** and **MIDA**. He has in the past been referred to as 'The Quiet One', but as we discovered, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin can, on occasion, be persuaded to open quite a few doors leading to rooms which contain interesting memories and ideas busy at work.

* *Reproduced from ISIS Focus No. 100, July 1993*

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Tan Sri Zainal Abidin's association with **ISIS** began years before he became Chairman of the Institute. As Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry from 1984-88, he sat on the Board of **ISIS**. When he retired in 1988, he and Tan Sri Rozhan Kuntom (former Public Services Director-General) were the first two to be appointed **ISIS Distinguished Fellows**.

The man who subsequently assumed chairmanship of **ISIS** in 1990 was therefore no outsider. Someone more of a stranger to the workings of the think-tank might have hesitated on being offered the challenging post of **ISIS** Chairman, but for Tan Sri Zainal Abidin, the decision to accept did not involve much hard thinking.

'The only problem I was worried about was time, whether I would be able to devote enough time because I have **MIDA** also,' he added.

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin saw his new job at **ISIS** as a natural continuation of his previous one at the Foreign Ministry. If previously at **Wisma Putra** he was required to deal mainly with policy issues from a macro perspective, his assignment at **ISIS** now exposes him not only to macro- but micro-level issues as well, such as specific projects and proposals at the ground level.

'I regard my appointment in **ISIS** as a flow from my previous career; it's a complement. So **ISIS** fits in very naturally.'

Since he took over as Chairman, **ISIS** has grown, with the addition of the Centre for Japan Studies and the Centre for Environmental Studies. And the challenge, said Tan Sri Zainal Abidin, has grown as well.

'So much is now being put on the shoulders of ISIS. We are coordinating secretariat for so many activities, both domestic and international. We have to be therefore prepared, for there are increasing expectations. At the same time I think we should congratulate ourselves in the sense that we have secured the necessary confidence in the country to perform our tasks with excellence. In the past we have responded well to many challenges and we ought to be able to do the same in the future.'

And what exactly should ISIS be doing? Should ISIS maintain a more international, agenda, or should it pursue more domestic issues?

'It should do both. We must strategise ourselves domestically as well as internationally - and both are interlinked. In fact, it's not possible now to say that domestic issues can stand by themselves without international implications.'

'However, we have to set our priorities right,' he said, on whether ISIS might be in danger of losing its focus.

Indeed, the 'International' programme in ISIS notwithstanding, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin is particularly proud of the work done on domestic socioeconomic issues, which he refers to as both 'extensive' and 'intensive'.

But it is one thing to talk about what ISIS should do, and another thing to talk about what ISIS can do. Tan Sri Zainal Abidin acknowledges that ISIS currently faces certain limitations - that of finance and manpower.

'Obviously the endowment [from the Government] is not enough. As we draw up programmes, we need inputs from whatever sources are available -- I think we need to do a lot more work for the private sector, not only our own private sector but maybe also internationally, that is, those who may want to

use our services as a consultant, or want us to undertake research.'

'For example, the Centre for Japan Studies is supported by Keidanren. That kind of programme, supported by various bodies, will help to keep us going,' he said.

Asked if this might not lead ISIS off the original track of being a think-tank for the nation, and into the realm of catering to narrower interests, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin said that although funds obtained in this manner might relate to certain specific studies that obviously bear significance for the party providing the funds, 'the result of the studies is the outcome of our own independent thinking and research. We are independent and our reputation must be based on our ability to establish our credibility as a very impartial and independent institute or think-tank'.

He believes that there are people who are prepared to pay or give donations to ISIS for research work. But the problem is that donations to ISIS do not qualify for tax exemption.

'This has been an outstanding issue for so long. At every board meeting we debate this issue and we have not been able to see a solution yet,' he said, referring to it as a 'technical point that needs to be straightened out' with the Government.

Despite this constraint, ISIS boasts a 10-year history that is hardly lacking when one talks of rooms and corridors in a metaphorical sense. It seems to be rooms and corridors of the more tangible sort that have posed the biggest problems lately.

Although Tan Sri Zainal Abidin is quick to point out that a think-tank should be thinking of ideas, and not buildings, he concedes that ISIS certainly ought to have been able to offer its staff a better environment to work in. He has a novel solution. But not all support it, he added.

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'We are supposed to establish the Tun Hussein Onn Centre for National Unity Studies. So I suggested that rather than remembering ex-Prime Ministers by building museums, one should remember Tun Hussein with something alive, such as the dynamic institution of ISIS -- of which Tun Hussein was the first Chairman.'



'We have the funds for the programmes, but not for the building. If the idea is accepted, then we should go to the government for the funds for the building,' he said. On manpower, he is concerned about two things. 'First and foremost, we have to get the right staff, who're not only qualified but interested in doing the kind of jobs we do.'

'Crucial is probably job satisfaction. Second, we must pay them enough, otherwise they won't come. I think by government standards, we pay more, much more, we're even able to attract officers from the government. But there must be a cut-off point - we certainly cannot afford to compete with the private sector,' he said.

Nor can ISIS expect people to remain with it forever, said Tan Sri Zainal Abidin. 'In fact, at certain moments, if an officer is very good, he or she will be "pinched." 'That I think should be looked at as a natural process.'

The same process takes place at MIDA, he said. The spirit of independence at ISIS has always been important to Tan Sri Zainal Abidin. When asked to take over as Chairman of ISIS, he welcomed the opportunity and the challenge, because 'being associated with ISIS means that I have an opportunity to be at the front end of a think-tank for ideas and policies, and to keep abreast of current events'. But the one aspect of ISIS that Tan Sri Zainal Abidin has found particularly appealing is the fact that at ISIS, one can speak one's mind in a personal capacity.

'ISIS is the best place to say what you like. So whenever I think I cannot say it here (at MIDA) because of government constraints, I can always switch ... and say "Well, I'm speaking as ISIS Chairman." '

Perfect! So much for the reference 'The Quiet One'.