ISIS International Affairs Forum

Australia's Multicultural Identity in the Asian Century

ABOUT ISIS MALAYSIA

The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia was established on 8 April 1983, in realization of a decision made by the Malaysian Government to set up an autonomous, not-for-profit research organization that would act as the nation's think-tank. ISIS Malaysia was envisioned to contribute towards sound public policy formulation and discourse.

The research mandate of ISIS therefore spans a wide area. It includes economics, foreign policy and security studies, social policy, and technology, innovation, environment and sustainability.

ISIS Malaysia today fosters dialogue and promotes the exchange of views and opinions at both national and international levels. It undertakes research in collaboration with national and international organizations, in important areas such as national development and international affairs.

ISIS Malaysia also engages actively in Track Two diplomacy, fostering high-level dialogues at national, bilateral and regional levels, through discussions with influential policymakers and thought leaders.

RESEARCH

Economics
Research in this area is generally aimed at promoting rapid and sustained economic growth and equitable development in the nation. We study specific (rather than generic) issues that concern the nation's competitiveness, productivity, growth and income. Areas of research include macroeconomic policy, trade and investment, banking and finance, industrial and infrastructure development and human capital and labour market development. The objective of all our research is to develop actionable policies and to spur institutional change.

Foreign Policy and Security Studies
The primary aim of this programme is to provide relevant policy analyses on matters pertaining to Malaysia's strategic interests as well as regional and international issues, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific Region. These include security studies, foreign policy, Southeast Asian politics and military affairs.

Social policy
Demographic and socio-cultural trends are changing Malaysian society and the social policy programme was established to respond to these developments. Research in this area is concerned with effective nation building, and fostering greater national unity. In particular, we look at issues involving the youth, women and underprivileged communities. In conducting its research, ISIS Malaysia networks with non-governmental organizations and civil society groups.

Technology, Innovation, Environment & Sustainability (TIES)
The TIES programme provides strategic foresight, collaborative research and policy advice to the public sector, businesses and policy audiences, on technology, innovation, environment and sustainable development. Its focus includes green growth as well as energy, water and food security. Towards this end, TIES has been active in organizing dialogues, forums, policy briefs and consultancies.

HIGHLIGHTS

ISIS Malaysia has, among others, researched and provided concrete policy recommendations for:

- Greater empowerment and revitalization of a national investment promotion agency;
- A strategic plan of action to capitalize on the rapid growth and development of a vibrant Southeast Asian emerging economy;
- A Master Plan to move the Malaysian economy towards knowledge-based sources of output growth;
- The conceptualization of a national vision statement;
- Effective management and right-sizing of the public sector; and
- Strengthening of ASEAN institutions and co-operation processes.

ISIS Malaysia has organized the highly regarded Asia-Pacific Roundtable, an annual conference of high-level security policymakers, implementers and thinkers, since 1986.

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING

As a member of the Track Two community, ISIS Malaysia participates in the following networks:
- ASEAN-ISIS network of policy research institutes;
- Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific (CSCAP);
- Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT); and
- Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC).

It is also a partner institute of the World Economic Forum (WEF).

Australia's Multicultural Identity in the Asian Century

Mr. Waleed Aly is a Lecturer in Politics, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, Australia. He spoke at an ISIS International Affairs Forum on Australia's Multicultural Identity in the Asian Century, on 30 April 2013. The Forum was moderated by ISIS Senior Director, **Mr. Steven Wong**. ISIS Focus reproduces his talk* here.

There are a million different ways to talk about the topic of 'Australia's Multicultural Identity in the Asian Century.' I figured for this audience the best way to start that conversation would be to start in the 17th century in Europe. The reason I do that is because it is useful to begin any discussion of diversity within a nation, and the way that nation manages its diversity, by thinking of the concept of the nation itself, and national identity. So that takes us necessarily to 17th century Europe and the treaties of Westphalia.

This is really the beginning of the nation state and the mythology that surrounds the nation state. And in spite of whatever politicians might want to say, the nation state is a mythologized fiction that we keep alive through the way that we talk about it, so I think it's important to get an understanding of what that mythology is.

Waleed Aly

In Westphalia, in what is now Germany, what began there was an idea that put an end to the foreign affairs norm of imperialism, where borders were temporary, where they were constantly shifting in response to who could conquer what territories, where nothing was really fixed, and most importantly, there was no fixed notion of sovereignty. And it wouldn't be a surprise to anyone in this room to know that the foreign policy approach led to a lot of bloodshed, and to a huge amount of instability.

So the idea formed eventually, after a lot of lives being lost at this particular point in

history and we are talking about the intersection of the eighty years war and the hundred years war that, may be, there is a different way of organizing ourselves politically. So the concept of inviolable sovereignty was born at that point.

It did not resolve in a nation state immediately but the idea that is indispensable to the creation of the nation state was born — the idea that 'you leave us alone, we leave you alone,' and that we will have fixed borders eventually and that will be that. And it worked. The eighty years war and the hundred years war ended as the result of these series of treaties. And in time the idea of the nation state came to be born.

* The talk has been edited for clarity

But when you come up with a political creation like this, in order for it to work, what you need is the mythology that makes it seem real. And here we are talking about 17th century Europe — the mythology that was constructed went something like this: that each nation state is a fixed identity that reflects some kind of reality of the people that are within it.

So every nation state has a kind of inherent homogeneity about it. All the people within that nation state are in some essential way the same. And the nation state exhibits an essential difference from the other nation states that surround it. So there is something inherently French about France and the people of France that is definitely not British. And there is something inherently British (and I understand the problematic nature about using the term British) about Britain that definitely is not German and that's definitely not Italian.

And this is all perfectly understandable as the main generating foreign policy norm. But exercising that mythology was problematic for a couple of reasons: one, it was never really true — all these nation states had quite a high level of diversity within, and two, that diversity needed to be managed in one way or another.

When you are trying to create a mythology on the back of the idea of a homogenous population, one of the principal ways in which you deal with that diversity is to try to limit it. So regional languages would die out and there would be violence within states in order to create that homogeneity and we saw the lingering effect of that in Europe well into the 20th century.

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And Franco's Spain is all about this. For example (at least, according to my lonely planet travel guide), the way you say Spain in Spanish is Las Espanols. It's plural for Spain because there are so many different regions in Spain that are so different, and with such linguistic diversity. Franco was trying very hard to undo that — to assert the idea of a single un-problematically unified, homogenous Spain. This is the result of that legacy.

When you create an idea of a nation state, and you create with it an accompanying mythology that says everyone within that nation state is essentially or broadly the same, and everyone outside of that state is somehow different, you have to try and identify the ways in which the people within that nation state are the same.

And so in Europe, it strangely came down to understanding the nation state as an embodiment of culture, ethnicity, language and often religion. That was the European model and it held for a very long time. And you might argue it still holds, although Europe is now facing a real challenge to that because of the level of migration that is going into Europe and the diversity of those societies.

And that is one way, and I would say that is the dominant way, in which the nation state has been constructed: on pillars of cultural, linguistic and sometimes religious homogeneity — and if not homogeneity, then some limited difference. It

might be a nation seen as being half Catholic and half Protestant but that in itself is part of the identity of that nation. So what I'll do is, I'll call that — in purely descriptive terms, with no judgment attached to it — the old world national identity. Because that is what it is. It was a product of that old world that emerged from the European circumstance.

There is however another way of constructing a national identity, and here if you want to look at the quintessential example, for the perfect, the most idealized example of that, at least in theory, you would probably have to look no further than the United States.

What is the United States? What is it that defines an American? And here is the understanding of the historical circumstances of the creation of that nation. That it was founded by a group of people fleeing religious persecution in Europe. They established their own nation, and one of the key principles that they needed to establish that nation on was the principle of religious freedom. And from that emerged a much broader idea that is really the whole idea of the United States — the idea of individual liberty.

There is something very important about constructing a nation that way that is different from constructing a nation the way the old world did. Because once you use as your beginning — as your starting point for the very idea of your nation — the concept of individual liberty, you then run into the problem of diversity. You must. Because liberty carries with it implications of people doing things that you may not like, holding positions that you may not like, having values that you may not like, and having cultural attachments that you might find strange.

And so, what the United States has ended up with, really, from its very beginning — and this is not just a function of modern immigration but really from its very beginning — is a society that is quite radically, plural. It had to be, it had no choice about that. But it also ended up with an identity, an American identity, that was not of the old

(From left) Ridwaan Jadwat, Waleed Aly and Steven Wong

world, because it was not cultural or linguistic or even religious — and I say that understanding the importance of religion in public discourse in America. But because it was not built on an identity that was cultural, it was instead building a national identity in a sense of itself and in a sense of Americaness that was civic.

So to say, `I am American,' is a civic claim; it is not a cultural claim. To say, `I am German,' has for a very long time not been a civic claim. It's not merely a claim about where your taxes go, or what your passport is; it is to say I am Germanic. There are two very different ways of approaching national identity: cultural identity as a way of constituting a nation and civic identity as a way of constituting a nation. They are very different.

But civic identity and civic national identity really is something that comes out of the new world. It is not something that the old world could have produced because as I mentioned when I started in 17th century, the circumstances

of that creation were vastly different. These were not people who were fleeing one part of the world for another, they were not people who were in search of a particular idea or a particular political experience. The circumstances that gave rise to the United States were such that it was in some ways inevitable or at least not remotely surprising that a civic identity would be born.

With that in mind I want to think for a moment about Australia. What is Australia? Or to put it as one rather unkind English grandmother of a friend of mine put it — what is the point of Australia? Why have it. What does it do? That's a very English perspective, I should say. And of course, as far as the English are concerned, Australia had a very clear point, and that was they needed a prison. It began as a penal colony. It did not begin as the United States began as a political experiment or indeed as it continues as a political experiment. Those are not derogatory terms. Those are terms of George Washington, and not meaning it in any kind of disparaging way. It did

Participants at the forum

not begin as a project to realize some kind of progressive political ideal — in the case of the United States, the ideal was of individual liberty and the maximization of individual liberty.

But nor did it begin as a nation with a population that had been there for centuries, culturally defined as a civilization that would develop into a nation state. It has an indigenous population — the indigenous population that was persecuted upon arrival of White settlement — but it was an indigenous population of incredible diversity, and that was not really recognizable to Western eyes as any kind of organization that would approximate a nation state. It simply didn't operate that way.

So what is it? It was something that was created, a society that was created more or less as a matter of pragmatic policy-making on the part of the British. There was diversity within it from the very start. The first fleets that arrived in Australia were more multicultural than is often acknowledged, partly because the United Kingdom was more multicultural than was often acknowledged at the time.

But the main divisions within early Australians were really to do to with class and authority. Sometimes there were nationalistic divides: the downtrodden — the Irish often called themselves the downtrodden with respect to the English. And this was a major divide within Australian society for a very long time — the Catholic–Protestant division, the Irish and the English — it showed up at major flash points in Australian political history like the debate over conscription in the early 20th century.

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This is not a nation that was founded on a particular idea, but it couldn't claim to be of the old world either. It was so clearly a new creation of some description, a new political creation. Everyone — apart from the indigenous population that was relatively small in number — whether they came willingly or unwillingly, was a migrant. It is very much part of the new world, but it very much has a British lineage.

Australia never declared war on Britain. Sometimes when we debate whether or not we should become a republic, it was something that was jokingly suggested, that perhaps we should declare war on Britain and that would be our way to discovering our independence. But we have never done that. We still have the Queen. We voted to retain the Queen, although that was on a very technical legal argument in the end.

So the idea of Australia that originally arose had very much at its heart this idea that this is a brash new young nation that has all sorts of possibilities. And one of the ideas that came very clearly to define Australia early on was the idea of egalitarianism. Britain is a very class structured society; Australia was not. It didn't have to be.

So there was a resistance to authority, a kind of rejection of the idea of authority and an understanding that we are all equally deserving of, I suppose, equal treatment. It was however at that point very much a White nation and that was still an important part of the way that Australia saw itself. The phrase that is often used to describe this is that Australia would seek to become a

`White working man's paradise;' labour rights would be protected.

And this was a very important aspect of the idea of Australia that was emerging, but it was definitely White. And we had what is infamously referred to as the `White Australia Policy,' which persisted on the books in Australia right through the 1970s, although it had clearly broken down well before that. Because my parents came from Egypt in the 1960s and didn't have any trouble doing so. So someone either wasn't paying attention or it was on the books far more than it was in practice.

But it was very much part of the Australian consciousness in the first part of the 20th century. As Australia went to war as part of the British empire in World War I, it went to war really as Britain as much as anything. World War II was different because you had a particular threat coming out of Europe, and Asia as well, in the form of the Japanese, but still, the Australian self-image was very much related to Britain. We understood ourselves as a nation in relation to Britain. The way the British saw us and the way we saw Britain was a very important aspect of our own self image.

In fact, if you go to Australia House in London, you will find it is an amazingly impressive, very un-Australian-looking building. It looks incredibly British. But it's strategically located, so that every single powerful person of the upper middle classes in England, or in London at least, will see it and will notice that Australia is there. This was part of the aspiration of what Australia was — it is very much tied not just to England or Britain but actually to London as a city. You could not be an Australian Prime Minister, really, without having fond regard for London at the very least.

But then something happened in Australia that changed it fundamentally. Levels of migration came into Australia from all over the world that were so significant that they so radically changed the composition of Australian society. Some of them came as refugees — a large number of refugees came to Australia from Vietnam for example. Some came as economic migrants   it could have been people like my parents from Egypt, could have been people from South Africa, who came to Australia and actually did really well because the Rand was very strong at that time They bought a lot of property in Australia, and those properties appreciated. But it was people from all over the world. European migrants, yes a lot of them were, but not British migrants necessarily.

A huge wave of Italian migration through the 70s and the 80s changed the complexion of Australian society forever. And then a wave of Asian migration through the 80s changed Australian society again. And now waves of migration from the Middle East and from Africa are changing it again.

It's now up to a point where the migration intake into Australia is distinctly not European. Australia has become, whether by design or not, one of the most hyper plural societies anywhere in the world. Only the United States, I would say, really rivals it. The UK has a claim, London certainly has a claim, but the rest of the UK, I would argue, is not plural in quite the same way as Australia is.

And that raises another real question for Australia. What is it? What is it now? If we weren't exactly sure what it was before, how can we figure

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out what it is today, when it is so radically different from what it was? Well here's the thing — you do have a couple of things from Australian history that continue to inform what the Australian image should be. One of those things is that it is inescapably a new nation. A nation founded on migration. Once upon a time, that migration was White. Now it is far less White. Either way, it is founded on immigration.

The population growth in Australia comes because of the high level of immigration that we have. We have an open market economy. We embraced the global economy back in the Hawke-Keating era, through the 80s and the 90s, through deregulation and the floating of the Australian dollar and so on. And that meant that we became very much an open market place and that meant migration — economic migration as well as humanitarian migration.

We have also an ethic — I would call it a mythology because it's not always true, but it almost doesn't matter whether or not it is true, because it is our imagination of ourselves — we have an ethic of egalitarianism. It's an idea that in Australia gets thrown about in a phrase I find a bit grotesque but nonetheless remains a part of the Australian ethos of 'the fair go'. We like to think that, whatever else, we are fair, and that, ultimately, we don't really care where you come from. We might care what you do when you get to Australia, and the contributions that you make, but we don't really care where you came from.

And here I would say Australia has a very clear new world quality, more akin to the United States, that is different from the old world quality

of Europe — and that is, its notion of Australianess is evolving more and more towards a civic nation. That today, to say that you are an Australian is becoming more and more a civic claim. It is to say that the state will regard you as a citizen and then ask no more questions of who you are — only of what you do. If you appear before the courts, the background that you have is completely irrelevant to the way the court will proceed. It is relevant only to the extent that, if you need a translator or something, the court will provide that.

It did not warrant separate laws for separate groupings of people because it has become a nation that has established itself more and more in line with the tenets of liberalism and understanding people as individuals within the state. And people are not perceived by the state as belonging to any particular social grouping. That does not mean however that people did not regard themselves as being part of a social

Elina Noor discussing a point

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grouping. And here we are running to a debate that Australia inevitably was always going to confront, once high levels of migration started coming into Australia — that is, the debate around multiculturalism.

I want to say two things about multiculturalism. The first is, if you take the American approach to the issue, that sort of pure and new world approach to the idea of a nation, then, debates about multiculturalism simply don't arise. You don't need a debate about multiculturalism because you have a nation founded on the idea of individual liberty, which includes within it the idea of the liberty to choose one's cultural attachment and express one's own culture.

The only reason I would say that Australia has a debate about multiculturalism is because within the Australian mindset there is still some residue of that historical experience and that lineage to Britain. But the thing about the multiculturalism debate in Australia — and there are some within Australia that would argue about whether or not Australia's experience in multiculturalism has been a good thing — is that those voices are inescapably now irrelevant.

Because while those voices are now in the minority — there have been distinctive polls to show public support for multiculturalism with rates right up to 90 per cent of the population — while those residual voices are talking about whether or not Australia should embrace multiculturalism, it's become such a profoundly multicultural society that there is simply no way of undoing it. And it has become a multicultural

society without particularly needing to try very hard at doing that.

And here I would say there is a marked difference in the way that Australia does multiculturalism and the way that Europe has done it — or at least, the experiences of multiculturalism that Europe has had, which have been variously declared a failure by different European leaders. And I would describe the European experience as really an experience of parallel monoculturalism.

Multiculturalism is not simply having people with different cultural backgrounds and different ethnicities within a country. It is about the interrelationship of those people with each other and their experiences within the state and society.

Because Australia is leaning more and more towards a civic identity rather than one that is, defined narrowly, cultural, the multiculturalism that Australia has evolved organically, is one in which people understand and can understand themselves as Australian *and* something else. So there need not be an exclusive Australian identity that says that if you are an Australian, you are definitely not Greek or Italian or Chinese, or Malaysian (there is a quite significant Malaysian population in Australia).

I think what Australia has successfully managed to do, whether deliberately or not — and Australia is wonderful at achieving things by accident — is create a social environment where people can maintain what I call dual authenticity. They can be authentically one thing and

> *Australia has successfully managed to ..... create a social environment where people can maintain what I call dual authenticity*

authentically Australian and those two things need not be in contradiction. That, as far as the Australian state is concerned, and by and large as far as Australian society is concerned, their `Australianess' is not compromised by their attachment to some other cultural affiliation.

Australia is not completely there yet in this regard. Australia still has this debate about whether it is to be determined by its history or by its geography. That is, its history by Britain, or its geography, really, in Asia. But that debate is slowly starting to recede and there is a reason it is starting to recede, aside from the levels of migration that we have seen, and that is, frankly, money. And this is where the Asian Century comes in.

Does anyone here use the phrase Asian Century? So this is just a phrase people in the West use? I get the feeling. I think it is indicative of something – of an atmosphere. A civilization that they have felt for centuries preceding had always been theirs. And suddenly the emergence of Asia challenges that. And Australia is in a very unique place when it comes to that, for a couple of reasons.

One, geographically speaking, our nearest neighbour is Indonesia. And Malaysia is not far away, China's not so far away, and Japan has been our major trading partner for a very long time — which, when you think about the fact that Australia and Japan were on opposing sides in World War II, is quite an extraordinary feat. Now, the Australia-China trading relationship is possibly the most important one to the Australian government at the moment. Our entire economy seems to be built now on the back of resources being sold into Asia, and China is a very major part of that.

But also for well over a hundred years, Australia has had a very significant Asian population. There have been times, in those hundred years, where Australia has not particularly wanted to have that Asian population.

But there was a point, maybe right through the 20th century where Australia understood that that actually could be an asset and now it's being understood more and more that that can be an asset.

So one of the things that is the focus of the Asian Century, in Australia, is the idea that the nation has a very flexible, open concept of national identity that is open to the levels of diversity that it now inevitably has to sustain. With that in its capital, and its proximity to Asia and its population, a huge number of whom have an understanding of Asia that is intimate because it is through family connections and lived history, Australia doesn't need to be seen as an European outpost in Asia. Indeed it doesn't need to see itself as an European outpost in Asia. It can see itself as intrinsically part of the Asian story. That the Australian story has an Asian chapter within it — just domestically.

In fact I often talk in Australia about the history of Islam in Australia and of Muslims in Australia. And one of the things that is very surprising, even to a lot of Australians, is that that history begins, at the most conservative estimate, in about the year 1600 when you had fishermen coming from Makassar, Sulawesi, into the north of Australia for six months every year. They married the indigenous people — there are words from

A participant posing a question

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their language in indigenous languages in the north of Australia. There is a very long history of that engagement.

So the Asian chapter of Australia actually is a very long one; it's just that it hasn't been told until recently. And the fact that it's being told is essential to understanding the way in which the Australian society is beginning to change.

But here's the thing about economic integration and about taking economic opportunities. You don't take those opportunities well if you don't also evolve culturally. That is, if the future Asia-Australian story is purely an economic one, then it will actually have a very limited future in Australia. Asia probably won't mind so much because it will go on growing and becoming an emerging power house. Australia will mind — it will have to mind.

And so, to the extent that Australia is caught between these two competing notions of national identities, one that owes itself to the old world — the ethno-cultural understanding of Australia — and one that is more civic, the shift has been more and more towards the civic. And that shift will only grow and grow and grow to the point, I believe, where any discussion of Australia and Australianess as an ethno-cultural discussion

will begin to sound like some very strange colonial relic rather than having anything meaningful to say about a contemporary Australia.

It is actually a very powerful evolution in the social history of Australia and when you think about it, it's quite a remarkable achievement that a country that has had a very short history, really, as a nation. I mean it became a nation in 1901 — a nation with that short a history and that began its time with a white Australia policy. One of the first Acts that the newly-minted Australian Parliament passed was the Immigration Restriction Act — it was concerned with immigration from China. That that country has become a country that is now not only hyper-plural, but is developing a national identity that can deal with that hyper-plurality, at a time when I think it is fair to say that European national identities are struggling with it.

Because the very essence of what it means to belong to a nation is a flexible notion, becoming more and more flexible in Australia, partly by necessity, partly by accident and partly I think by that underpinning Australian ethic of egalitarianism. And although it's not always lived up to, it at least means new arrivals to Australia have an argument about their place in the nation and the chances that they should be given. And I think that's the Australia that you will start to see evolving in the Asian Century, even if you have no idea what the Asian Century means and we think we do. That is necessarily what will happen.
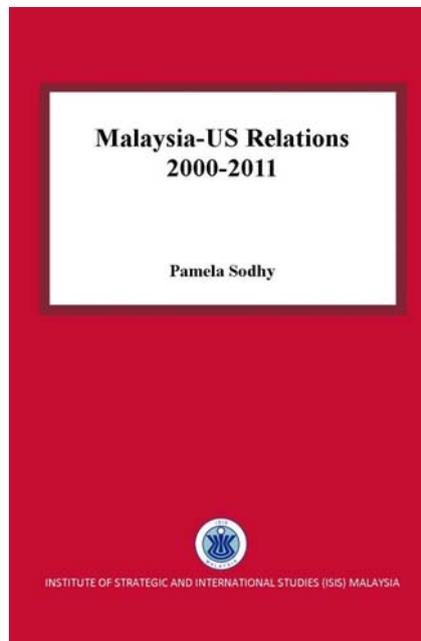
Malaysia-US Relations 2000-2011
By Pamela Sodhy
Kuala Lumpur: ISIS Malaysia, 2012
126 pages E-book

This monograph looks at the present relationship between Malaysia and the United States during a decade-long period, covering the main political, economic, and socio-cultural relations during the prime ministerships in Malaysia, of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and Najib Tun Razak and the presidencies in the United States, of George Bush and Barack H Obama.

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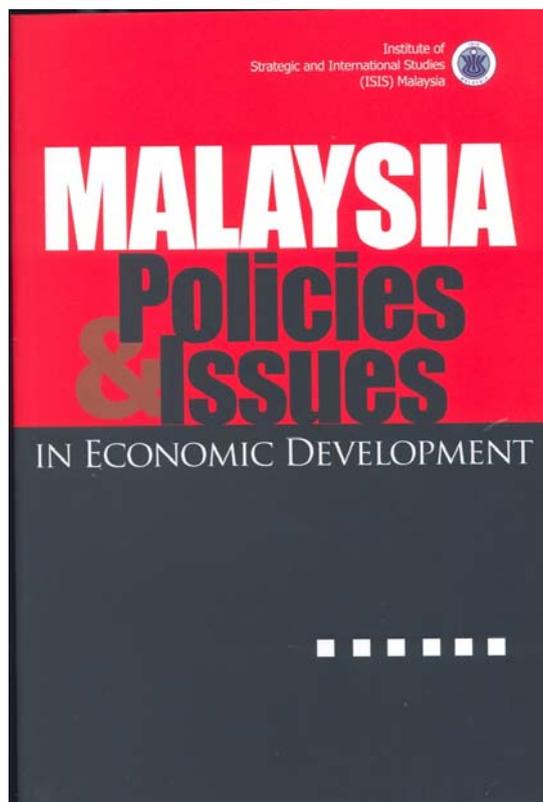
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The book, consisting of more than 20 chapters, covers four main themes: Macroeconomic Management, Economic Growth and Transformation, Management of Growth and Equity, and Enabling Environment and Institutions for Development. The authors are drawn from various sectors, with wide-ranging and rich experience in academia, the public sector and the private sector.

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