

Goodbye to a Mentor and a Friend

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'The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends.

Anton Ego (Ratatouille)

In the first year of my undergraduate study, I told people that I wanted to work in a think tank. For some reason, my words came true (and my exam results were strong enough for me to realize that dream). I managed to become employed in a think tank. In my four years and six months at ISIS Malaysia, I realized that securing a dream job meant nothing if you were not welcomed as part of the 'tribe.' And Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin was the head of this tribe.



My favourite picture of me with Dr Mahani

My first introduction to Dr Mahani was as a student of the Malaysian economy. Her book, *Rewriting the Rules: The Malaysian Crisis Management Model* made me realize how important it is for the economic lessons learned in the classroom to be translated into clear actions. Despite the clear-cut solutions presented in this textbook, her book is an example of why economic policymaking is an art, a process, the outcome of which can be uncertain.

The book was based on her experience as a member of the Working Group of the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) formed during the 1998 Asian Financial and Economic Crisis (AFC). As you may recall, the proudest moment of the NEAC's existence was when it convinced the nation that Malaysia could ride the AFC without the help of international bodies like the International Monetary Fund.

One of the questions that Dr Mahani asked me during my job interview was, 'Why do you want to work in ISIS?' My answer was, 'because I've always wanted to work in a think tank.' I got my bubble burst a few weeks later when my boss, Steven Wong, Director of Economics in ISIS, made this remark, 'Sometimes, you like the food in a restaurant. Then you work in the restaurant's kitchen and find out that it is a messy process.'

In this respect, I've learned the importance of being coy. Coyness in this case need not be a bad thing, but rather, can be an advantage, especially if you are dealing with a multitude of audiences, ranging from politicians to the ordinary Pak Mat on the street. You will need to break down your point of view and disseminate it in a variety of forms, so that in the end, the

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person on the other side changes his or her perspective while believing he or she arrived at this new perspective on their own. I admit I never really mastered the process but I'm glad that I got to see it being done by a master. I still don't know whether to call it coyness or a Jedi mind-trick.

Formerly an academician who worked on international trade and economics, Dr Mahani tried her best to bring the world of academia and policymaking together. We worked together on issues that required instant solutions and those that would be important in the future. However in an institution that employed only around 20 thinkers there was only so much that we could do.

There were times when I felt that, as an institution, we could do more, but she often brought me and my youthful notions down to earth. It took me awhile to realize that there is a clear distinction between throwing my efforts in different directions and on focusing on a specific area. As an economist-in-the-making, one is always hammered with the term 'trade-off' but once it is in front of you, you 'freak out.' In a way, we traded a small multitude of issues for a singular vision and dream. I wish I had learned this lesson earlier.

I admit I made a lot of mistakes in ISIS and I am glad Dr Mahani was there to correct some of

them (she even corrected my grammatical errors). She was kind to the new. She took a lot of young researchers in and provided them with many avenues to interact, and to shape each others' views. She started the tradition of yearly presentations for the research staff. I did not do very well in most of my presentations. I must say she took a risk on a 'newbie' like me, without a graduate degree and with mediocre writing skills; she 'shaped' me. She opened up many doors for me, such as when she wrote countless reference letters for my scholarship applications. I'm now in Nottingham University due to the last recommendation letter she wrote.

We also had some adventures together. I still cannot forget the time when she fearlessly took me gate-crashing at an event we didn't RSVP to (the trick is to walk in with confidence). Then there was the time she saved me when she bailed me out in Bangkok after I got my pocket picked.

I'm going to miss dropping by at her office around 6pm everyday and talking about small and big matters. I'm going to miss her laugh. Most of all I'm going to miss her admonitory tone of 'Izzatina!' whenever she was exasperated with me.

I never managed to say my last goodbye to her, physically. Being currently more than ten thousand kilometres away in Nottingham, UK, this essay is my way of voicing my feelings on a friend and a mentor.

Goodbye, Mahani, I wish you all the best in the afterlife.