

The Eternal Optimist*

*Datuk Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin, ISIS Chief Executive tells **Sharmila Valli Narayanan** the relevance and importance of think tanks like ISIS for Malaysia, what Malaysia did right, where it went wrong in our push for industrialization and explains why Scarlett O'Hara is her role model. This interview was published in Malaysian Business on April 1, 2012.*

Oprah once said that 50 is the new 30. Datuk Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, certainly embodies that. At 58 but looking a lot younger, she has the drive, passion and energy of a 30-something. She has a pleasant face and warm demeanour that must have made her a much-liked professor at the Faculty of Economics and Administration at University of Malaya where she served for many years and made her mark via her research and writings.

Mahani had a happy, well-grounded childhood in Johor Bahru. She was the second child and the eldest daughter in a family of two brothers and three sisters. Her father was a civil servant who believed that girls should be given equal opportunities as boys to further their studies. He also insisted, which was unusual for fathers of that time, that his daughters had to be financially independent, should be able to take care of themselves and not be dependent on their husbands. 'My parents were not wealthy. They recognised the value of education. They knew that education was the only way for us children to improve our standing in life,' reveals Mahani.

Mahani entered University of Malaya where she did a degree in Economics. She later got her PhD in Development Economics from the University of London. Mahani would have spent her life as an academician but fate had other things in store for her. Her sterling reputation in her field of research attracted the attention of the



Mahani Zainal Abidin

Government, and during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, she was appointed a member of the working group for the National Economic Action Council in 1998. This was a body established by the Government to 'formulate measures to initiate recovery from the economic and financial crisis'.

The Government must have been impressed with her performance because Mahani never went back to the life of an academician at the university. She was given other posts such as Head, Special Consultancy Team on Globalisation of the National Economic Council in 2001; Deputy-Director General of the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Higher Education from 2005 to 2007 and Director-General of ISIS from May 2007 to December 2009. She has been the CEO of ISIS Malaysia since January 2010.

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One of the attractions of ISIS for Mahani was that it brought her back to what she loved: research and policy advocacy. 'A good friend of mine from Japan told me that nothing is more important than ideas at the right time,' says Mahani. 'He said that ideas can really change things, especially if they are adopted. He further said that working with a think tank like ISIS would give me the opportunity to influence directions with ideas, something that I would find to be very satisfying.'

Coming to ISIS is in a way like coming full circle for Mahani. 'It is part of my career that I would like to do now,' she explains. 'To think of ideas and hopefully, to be able to participate in the formation of ideas is something very close to my heart. Back in the university, the kind of research I did was more of academic research. ISIS has given me the opportunity to do research work in terms of formulating policy. I also wanted to get back to my research network. When I was in the university, I was working with people outside the country and with international agencies. With ISIS, I am able to engage actively with my networks again.'

Although ISIS has been a very satisfying career move for her, she does admit that being in a think tank is quite challenging and different. She explains the dilemma faced by think tanks. 'You must voice out your ideas, you must try to influence the powers-that-be but you are without authority and you have limited financial resources.'

ISIS was established in 1983 as the premier think tank of the nation. It was very influential in its early days. It had played a major part in the formulation of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020. There is a perception among some quarters that over the years, ISIS's influence and importance as a think tank has somewhat waned.

Mahani thinks otherwise. It is not that ISIS's importance has lessened, she says, it's the scenario that has changed, with the emergence of other think tanks such as the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS), the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI) and the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), to name a few.

The emergence of the Internet has also created a different set of players like the bloggers who are all giving their ideas on how things should be done. 'The new media

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is able to come up with faster response to issues. It's easier for the netizens to say what they want because they are rarely backed up by hard facts,' continues Mahani. 'When we say something, we must be able to defend it.'

'ISIS still has a role to play in society,' insists Mahani. 'The Government, private sector, foreigners, etc, still ask us for opinions and value our input. Society is much more open now and wants an objective third-party view, so a think tank like ISIS has a role to play. We at ISIS don't shout our ideas at the top of our voices for everyone to hear. We believe there are other methods that are equally effective in how we communicate our ideas. I hope society appreciates our role.'

When she was in academia, Mahani made her name in her area of specialty, which was industrialization and economic transformation, international trade and regional integration. Looking back at Malaysia's industrialization policy from the 1970s, what did the country do right and where did it go wrong?

'Malaysia was right to encourage investment in the manufacturing sector and to focus on an export-oriented industrialisation strategy,' explains Mahani. 'This outward-looking strategy made us competitive.'

Where it erred was in not linking up its export industry with the domestic industry. 'What we have now is a domestic industry that serves the domestic market. We did not use the export

industry to upgrade our own domestic industry so that the domestic industry would be a big player in the export market as well,' says Mahani.

She is pleased that under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), a lot of emphasis has been put on the development of human capital. 'It is the development of human capital that will make a country competitive on the global stage,' she says.

Besides doing research, Mahani is happiest when she is pottering around her garden. 'Gardening is my hobby. It helps me create something. If I had another life, I would probably be a landscape artist,' she says with relish. Her family life is another thing that she is proud of. She has one son who is an engineer. 'I am happy to say that I am one of those women who are able to have their cake and eat it too,' she says with a smile. 'I'm very lucky in that I have a very interesting career and a good and happy family. My husband and son have been very supportive and understanding of my career.'

What has life taught her? 'Tomorrow is another day,' is the surprising answer from Mahani. It is a famous line from the novel *Gone With The Wind* uttered by its heroine Scarlett O'Hara. 'Scarlett O'Hara is my favourite heroine,' reveals Mahani, her eyes twinkling. 'Her optimism in the face of adversity is remarkable. Her belief is that however bad things are today, tomorrow it can change for the better. She was one plucky lady,' says Mahani in admiration.

On a more serious note, she continues, 'Like Scarlett, I am always optimistic. It is something that I have learned along the way. If you are not optimistic, you cannot overcome obstacles. One way of overcoming these obstacles is to believe in oneself.'

I am always looking at the positive side of life. That way, a problem does not become bigger or worse,' she says with a smile.