

## Dato' Dr. Mahani Zainal Abidin: A Tribute\*

### 1. Family and Childhood

Mahani Zainal Abidin was born on 11 April 1954 in Johor Bahru, the second of five children (Aznil, Mahani, Faizah, Zaidah and Adnan) to Zainal Abidin bin Haji Ahmad and Mahyon binti Haji Mohd. Amin. Mahani's family could trace their origins over several generations to their roots in Indonesia. Mahani's mother traced roots back to Sumatra, her father, who was a Bugis, to Sulawesi. Her paternal grandmother Hajah Rafeah binti Haji Jaafar, was of Chinese blood. Thus Mahani inherited a rich genetic mix, as is usual in the Malay Archipelago. In later years, Mahani was often taken to be other than Malay, generally as Japanese or Chinese.

The family had a long history of service to the state administration. Her maternal grandfather, Haji Mohd. Amin bin Amran, was Secretary to the Johor State Religious Department. Upon his retirement, he was appointed as the Head of the Melaka State Religious Department. Her father had passed the Senior Cambridge examinations, a significant feat in those days, and so was well positioned to serve the British Administration. Unlike the rest of the Federation which shared a common Civil Service, headed by the Chief Secretary to the Government, Johor was unique in that it had its own civil service whose officers could be posted to serve anywhere within the state of Johor, and were answerable to HRH Sultan of Johor. Zainal Abidin commenced his career as an Assistant District Officer in the Johor state civil service. His postings included Batu Pahat, Gelang Patah, Johor Bahru, Mersing, Muar, Pontian, Masai and Segamat. He held posts such as Administrative Officer (AO), Assistant District Officer (ADO), Collector of Land Revenue, District Officer (DO), as well as serving a year as Head of the Johor State Religious Department. He retired in 1977, as the District Officer of Batu Pahat. He was honoured with the award of Dato' Paduka Mahkota Johor (DPMJ) in 1970 for his services to the state.

Mahani did not always follow her parents as her father was posted to different places within the state. She only followed them to Segamat and Mersing. For the better part of her school life, she remained in Johor Bahru at the house of her paternal grandmother in Kampong Bahru. Thus Mahani became independent quite early on.

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Mahani grew up in a large extended family, with many of her cousins also living nearby or even in the same house. Sometimes there were expeditions to Singapore, to see even more relatives in Bedok, and, as a treat, there were visits to the famed Zam-Zam restaurant for *murtabak*. A continuing presence was the much-loved long-term family helper, Chik Bibah, who looked after most of Puan Mahyon's children. Chik Bibah belonged to that generation of loyal devoted helpers who served a family their entire life, and thereby lent a strong measure of stability, love and care to the young ones in the household. They were an important adjunct to the family.

## 2. Early Education

Zainal Abidin was of the firm conviction that all his children should be educated to the highest educational levels, and be given opportunities to realize their full potential. He wanted his daughters to be capable of earning their living and not be financially dependent on their husbands. Mahani's two brothers were sent to English-medium schools and finished their education at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK); both boys took tertiary qualifications in England. 'Old boys' Abdullah Dahan (Undang of Rembau); Abu Zarim bin Omar and Raja Mohamed Nordin bin Raja Shahbudin respectively recall that this 'Eton of Malaya' was the brainchild of R. J. Wilkinson (then the Inspector of Schools, Federated Malay States). Wilkinson had advocated the establishing of 'a special residential school for the education of Malays of good family and for the training of Malay boys for admission to certain branches of Government service'.

At the insistence of her maternal grandfather, Haji Mohd. Amin, Mahani was sent to a Malay-medium school. She was more comfortable with Malay in Jawi script than in Rumi. Her spoken and written Malay was considered by those who know, to be very pure and elegant. Later in life, this made her a very effective communicator to the heartland Malay community, especially to the ladies in the *kampongs*. The downside was that Mahani's English was not as strong as that of students from English-medium schools. At one period in her life, she devoured Mills and Boon romantic novels, and light fiction, as part of an English learning strategy.

Mahani began her education at the relatively young age of six, when, in April 1960, she was enrolled in the Sekolah Kebangsaan Perempuan Bukit Senyum, Johor Bahru.

### 2.1 Sekolah Kebangsaan Perempuan Bandar Mersing, 1961-63

Less than a year later, in January 1961, upon her father being posted as the ADO at Mersing, she was enrolled at the Sekolah Kebangsaan Perempuan Bandar Mersing. Just a term later, her early academic prowess was evident, and she topped the class, earning her teacher's comment that she was a very good student with a promising future.

Mahani was an exemplary student. For two years running (1961-1962), she topped the class in all term and end-of-year examinations (except in one term examination when she was placed second). She scored A's in all subjects in every examination. (She could not take her examinations in 1963 as she fell ill during the examinations.) In addition, assessment for '*Kelakuan*' (Conduct) was always '*Baik*' (Good); in those days, parents and teachers paid very special and serious attention to this assessment. Girls were also taught needle work in school, as it was presumed that they were more likely to

need these skills later in life, than to be active in academia. Mahani scored top marks for her needlework; a piece of her beautiful embroidery has been preserved by the family.

### *2.2 Sekolah Kebangsaan Perempuan Kampong Bahru Tinggi, Johor Bahru, 1964-66*

Mahani's performance did not deteriorate with this yet another upheaval in changing to another school. She obtained high marks for all subjects in all the term and end-of-year examinations, and was first in class in all the examinations. Once again, her conduct was rated as 'Good' throughout.

### *2.3 Relocations*

In the nine years of her primary and secondary education, she was to move to five different schools, initially upon her father being posted to various districts in the State, and also due to her graduating from primary to secondary education. In 1967, she moved to the Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sultan Ismail, Johor Bahru; later in November 1967, to the Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Segamat. Finally, in January 1970, she was enrolled in the Sekolah Menengah Sultan Abdul Halim, Jitra, in the northern state of Kedah. Mahani seemed to have coped very well with all the shifts and difficulties caused by these relocations. For her last school, she had to travel alone from Johor Bahru to Jitra, a journey of approximately 800 kilometres that took nearly twenty-four hours by train. She was appointed Head Girl of that School: an early recognition of her leadership abilities.

### *2.4 SPM and HSC*

In 1971 she passed her Form V with a Grade I in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examinations. At that time this examination was still administered by the Local Examinations Syndicate of Cambridge University, with the cooperation of the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The examination was held entirely in English. She took nine subjects (quite unusual then, as most students only offered seven or eight subjects): Malay, Malay Literature, Islamic Studies, History, Geography, Mathematics, Additional Mathematics, General Science, and English.

Two years later, in 1973, she passed her Higher School Certificate (HSC, a preparatory examination for university education), taking four subjects at Principal Level (Economics, Malay, Geography and Mathematics), and the General paper at Subsidiary Level. At that time, most students would only offer two Principal subjects and one Subsidiary subject. By this time, this examination/certificate was jointly administered/awarded by Local Examinations Syndicate of Cambridge University, in collaboration with the University of Malaya, and the University of Singapore. Her teachers had predicted future success for this remarkable student, and on her leaving the school in Jitra in 1974, the Headmaster's assessment was that she was a student of high ability in every field, with integrity and leadership qualities that augured well for her future success.

## **3. Tertiary Education**

From 1948 to 1969 Malaya (later Malaysia) had only one university, that is, the University of Malaya, initially located in Singapore, later in Kuala Lumpur. In 1969 Universiti Sains

Malaysia was established in Penang; and in 1970, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Thus for students entering university in the early 1970s, the University of Malaya was often a first choice, as it was considered to be the premier university due to its heritage.

### 3.1 University of Malaya

In the 1970s the undergraduate programme at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya (FEA), awarded a degree in Economics with a specialization in a number of fields, one of which was Statistics. The programme could lead to various types of graduate degrees. Some graduates took a Masters degree in Economics, and then obtained a doctoral degree in Statistics; some went on to take a Masters in Statistics, and then obtained a doctorate in Economics. Mahani followed the latter course.

Mahani entered FEA in 1974 (session 1974/75), as a freshman in the Division of Statistics. She took eight courses, being introductory courses in Accounting, Business Administration, Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Malaysian Politics & Administration, Malaysian Economy, Quantitative Analysis, and *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay). In her second year, she took Mathematical Economics, Quantitative Analysis, Social & Economic Statistics, Malay, Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics, Data Processing & Computer Science, and Mathematical Statistics. Her second-year results reflected her inherent strengths in mathematical and analytical skills. She displayed much the same competence in her final year: taking courses on Taxation, Macroeconomics, Mathematical Economics, Quantitative Analysis, Microeconomics, Mathematical Statistics, Experimental Designs & Sampling, and Econometrics.

Her choice of subjects indicated an early interest in research. For her final examinations, in addition to her compulsory courses, she preferred to submit a 2-unit Graduation Exercise on a research topic, plus three single-unit elective courses, rather than to offer five single-unit courses. In the event, her 94-page Graduation Exercise, entitled '*Kajian Perangkaan Mengenai Perusahaan Nenas di Malaysia*' (A Statistical Study of the Pineapple Industry in Malaysia), written in Malay, presented an early analysis of the challenges (falling prices, increased international competition) faced by the industry, of a crop that was first planted in Perak, Singapore, and her native state of Johor. In June 1977, she graduated with a First Class Honours degree in Economics from the University of Malaya, majoring in Statistics.

### 3.2 University of London

Mahani wasted no time in taking her educational attainment to higher levels. In 1977, she left for England under a Bumiputra Training Scheme award from the University, and was enrolled as a student in London University. She went on to earn a Diploma in Statistics in November 1978 from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), University of London. In July 1979, she obtained her Master of Science (Statistics), also from LSE.

As required by the terms of her training scholarship, she willingly returned to the University to begin life as a Lecturer, and like quite a few of her colleagues, had to teach huge first-year classes in the Faculty's new multiplex auditoriums. This was a daunting

prospect for the young lecturer. Special herbal remedies from her grandmother, fortified with prayers, helped to overcome her stage fright!

It was in these early teaching years that she met Don Miller in 1981. They married in 1983, and completed the family with the birth of their son James Imran in 1985. She continued teaching, raising her family, and began undertaking research for her PhD. This she undertook as an External Degree so that she could continue her work and family life in Malaysia.

There were periods that were fraught with anxiety, owing to factors like change of her supervisor, and supervision via the postal service. Anyone who has gone through obtaining a doctorate while holding down a job full time, and raising a family, will be familiar with the tiredness and uncertainty that attend this experience. True to her character, she was able to crown her academic achievements in August 1992 by obtaining her Doctor of Philosophy in Economics (Development Economics) from London University. Her teachers' predictions through the years had proved to be prophetic. By mid-career, at the age of thirty-eight, she had achieved the highest academic honours from one of the world's most prestigious universities, culminating a three-decade journey that she had begun at the tender age of six.

## 4. Academic Career

### 4.1 Honing Her Craft

After obtaining her Bachelor's degree in early 1977, Mahani joined the Statistics Division, FEA, as a *Pengajar Sambilan* (temporary tutor) in April 1977. In September 1977, she was awarded a scholarship under the *Skim Latihan Bumiputra* (*Bumiputra* training scheme) for her Diploma and Masters at LSE. She joined the Statistics Division as Lecturer after her Masters degree.

The Statistics Division was relatively small: ten staff gave courses to over 1,000 students who had enrolled for courses in Statistics. From the 1980/1981 session until the early 1990s, Mahani taught the 'ES115: Quantitative Analysis IA' course to first-year students; and the 'ES220: Social and Economic Statistics' course to the second-year students mostly by herself, but in some later sessions, shared them with colleagues (Goh Thuan Jig, P. Sellappan, Rohana Jani, Halimah Awang and others). In later years, she took on the 'Statistics II' course with Goh Kim Leng.

### 4.2 Career Advances

But her interests lay elsewhere. Perhaps these arose from her first foray into the world of academic publishing, when she translated a chapter into Malay of a World Bank publication on Malaysia's growth and equity. Perhaps it was the variety of industry projects that she participated in, or the subsequent studies that exposed her to fiscal issues, trade, employment and competitiveness. Or that she worked with, and learned from, some of the other serious and dedicated faculty who were concerned about growth and development in Malaysia, including Mohamed Ariff, Chee Peng Lim, and Cheong Kee Cheok. Whatever the reason, Mahani was exposed to the economic system through glimpses of its seemingly unrelated but really tightly-linked components. Not surprisingly, when she decided to pursue her doctoral degree in Economics, her thesis submitted to

the University of London (entitled *Alternative Industrial Strategies and Effect of Fiscal Incentives and Trade Policy in Achieving Employment Objectives in Malaysian Industrialization*) reflects her work up to that point.

Mahani's training in Statistics no doubt enabled her to explore and understand the intricacies of an economic system. She realized the importance of good data for sound policy and business decisions, writing on this aspect early on with fellow academic Shyamala Nagaraj and then later, as head of ISIS. As a faculty member, she helped undergraduates majoring in Statistics not only to learn about its important applications to Economics, but equally important, she helped them to learn about the complexities of Economics itself.

It was not surprising that promotions followed in the train of her many professional and academic achievements. She had joined the FEA as a Tutor in the Division of Statistics in April 1977. She was promoted to Lecturer in September 1979. After obtaining her PhD in Economics in 1992, she was appointed Associate Professor in the Applied Economics Division in May 1993; to Professor (Grade VK7) in January 2000; and to Professor (Grade VK6) in October 2006.

## 5. Family and Home

It was not only her studies and work that occupied Mahani's total attention. In 1981, she was consulting with the Johor State government to undertake an economic study of the Johor port; her fellow consultant was Associate Professor Dr. Fong Chan Onn. Dr. Fong (now Tan Sri) was then a colleague from the Faculty's Division of Business Administration. In 1990, he left the University for greener pastures in politics; later his appointments included being Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Minister of Human Resources.

Mahani had this project to thank for paving the way for her to meet Don Miller (Hamidon Abdullah), who was to become her husband. In later days, Don liked to joke that Mahani 'picked me up' at the Johor airport (Senai). This is literally true. Mahani and Dr. Fong had taken a flight to Senai for their study. Don was also on the same flight. He was visiting Johor Port, as part of a federally-funded port tariff study. The Port sent one car to pick up the three of them. In the car, Dr. Fong sat in front and Mahani and Don occupied the back seat. It was right at the end of Don's stay, having been in Malaysia by then for about three years; he left Malaysia for Fiji about a month later. By then, he had gone on a date with Mahani at the Bangles restaurant in Jalan Ampang, adjourning to the Blue Moon lounge in the Equatorial Hotel on Jalan Sultan Ismail, in Kuala Lumpur. A long romance by post ensued. Fortunately, Don was awarded some projects in the region (in Sabah and Java) so he was near enough to visit Mahani.

Mahani and Don were married in 1983, from the house of Mahani's sister, Faizah, in Taman Melawati, Kuala Lumpur. If anyone had any reservation about the marriage, they kept it to themselves. Mahani's family was probably a bit unsure as to how the marriage would go, but held their breath and kept their fingers crossed (or the Malay equivalent), that it would not all end in tears. Mahani and Don had the quiet satisfaction in later years to have proved their fears to have been completely groundless.

In their early married life, Mahani got a leave of absence from the University to follow Don on projects in Burma, Bangladesh, and Kalimantan. When their son James arrived in 1985, Don left the consultancy life, and got a less peripatetic finance job in

Muar, Johor. The marriage was remarkably content, considering Don and Mahani could not be more unlike, in their culture, family background, interests and temperament. Strangely, this recipe worked very well, as each found the other's views different, sometimes unexpected, and at times even a little weird! This kept the marriage fresh. Mahani loved to travel, and Don spent much of his time away from home during the week, so their brief times together resembled a series of honeymoons. Their son James was the apple of their eye. He was to grow up into a personable and equable young man; and in later years followed his parents in obtaining his education in the UK, taking Honours and Masters degrees from the University of Manchester.

Together with her close family ties to her own large family, Mahani lived and worked from a stable and warm platform. She extended her expertise and friendship in equal generous measure, to young colleagues training under her; to senior colleagues working with her; and to friends for whom she had nothing but kindness.

## **6. Research and Writing**

For most lecturers, it is all they can do to keep up with the literature, dispense their lectures, mark essays, and endure the grind of examinations: preparing questions, marking scripts, etc. Many lecturers find it difficult to meet the requirement of research and publishing in their job specifications.

As an academic, Mahani did more than keep up with the literature and develop economic thinking among the undergraduates. In addition, she threw herself into a plethora of activities, undertaking diverse research and consultancy projects in the 1980s and 1990s. Topics ranged from privatization, education, industrialization, infrastructural development, international trade, and finance. She was a prolific writer, and contributed numerous articles to learned journals; provided commentaries to periodicals such as newspapers and weeklies; and presented papers at diverse forums such as roundtables, meetings, and conferences.

By the mid-1990s, Mahani was truly entrenched in teaching and research in Economics. It was as an economist that she wrote about the different economic sectors, exports and exchange rates. She then moved beyond the study of Malaysia, and wrote about regional trade blocs, international finance, and the impact of globalization. Her work indicated her concerns about Malaysia's development, competitiveness and growth, the role of the financial sector and investor confidence, human capital formation and innovation-led growth. She wrote about policy-making during a financial crisis. Assuming a market-oriented slant, she published important articles on the financial crises that affected Malaysia's economy in 1997-98 and 2008-09, as well as providing her views on ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) integration.

## **7. National Economic Action Council (NEAC)**

In 1998, Mahani made a career change. The 1997 Asian financial crisis had hit the Malaysian economy very hard; and made the government of the day understandably very anxious. An important tool for recovery was the establishment, in November 1998, of the National Economic Action Council (NEAC). NEAC was set up by the Government to formulate, implement and monitor recovery measures for the Malaysian economy.

Mahani was invited to be a Member of the Working Group. She took a leave of absence from the University, which agreed to her full-time secondment to the NEAC in the national interest, recognizing the importance of the appointment. In 1998 she was appointed a Member of the Working Group for the NEAC. In 2001, she was appointed Head of NEAC's Special Consultancy Team on Globalization. By then, economic recovery was well on the way. Although the desperation felt in 1997-98 had largely been overcome, the usual challenges of a burgeoning economy still needed to be addressed. Mahani continued to be appointed to positions of increasing responsibility and authority, including Deputy Director General, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE).

### **8. Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia**

On 26 March 2007, Mahani was accorded the high honour of being appointed Director General, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia by the Prime Minister of Malaysia. In 2010, she was confirmed as Chief Executive of ISIS; an extension in this post was confirmed on 4 January 2013.

ISIS had been established in April 1983 by the Malaysian Government as an autonomous, not-for-profit research organization that would act as the nation's think-tank, and to contribute towards sound public policy formulation and discourse. She threw her heart and mind into her duties and once again, was set to make a mark in leading the Institute to enhance its already high reputation.

In 2009, Mahani began an ISIS-led project to gather prominent social scientists to research and write on the nation's economic history and development. She conceptualized and headed a book project to document fifty years of economic development in Malaysia. The project was sponsored by The Prime Minister's Exchange Fellowship Programme Malaysia (The PROGRAM), and resulted in a book, *Malaysia: Policies and Issues in Economic Development*, published in 2011 to commemorate twenty-five years of the establishment of ISIS. The book was launched on 25 May 2011 by HRH Raja Nazrin Shah, Regent of Perak.

### **9. Contribution as an Economist**

There are two important areas in which we can recognize Mahani's contributions, one as a scholar in the field of macroeconomics and the other as a practising economist in an interdisciplinary world. For Mahani, these two seemingly disparate environments were symbiotic, enabling her to grow as a public intellectual who shared her broad and discerning perspectives with different audiences.

Mahani's work on international trade and finance had an impact on policy and programmes. Her industry-level studies were the bases for work on this field and resulted in her being accorded international recognition. She had a deep interest in international trade, particularly issues related to regional integration, ASEAN, and East Asia. Her interest also lay in trade in services over time; she worked with Tham Siew Yean and Loke Wai Heng on certain services liberalization issues under the ASEAN Economic Forum (AEF), a network of ASEAN economists who had worked with Carsten Fink from the World Bank Institute. This network served to groom economists and officials from ASEAN member states in researching liberalizing trade in services.



Mahani was one of the most visible researchers to work on the liberalizing currents in the ASEAN integration process, being an ardent advocate of deregulation in Malaysia. She not only undertook rigorous assessments of industrial restructuring in the face of the introduction of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and Common Effective Preferential Tariffs (CEPT) to sustain competitiveness in the region, she also devoted considerable time to advise government agencies on the need to remove quantitative and non-quantitative restrictions on imports.

Through her work with the NEAC, Mahani provided important insights into the macroeconomic management of an economy in financial crisis. The NEAC was embedded in serious policy-making processes. It represented a perfect opportunity for Mahani to understand the policies and politics that underlie the functioning of an economic system. She was able to observe and evaluate the vagaries and transformations in the economy, and to contribute to problem-solving within such a system. Her 2002 book entitled *Rewriting the Rules: the Malaysian Crisis Management Model* documents her views of the work of the NEAC. The book provides an incisive depiction of the events leading up to the design and introduction of the capital-control based crisis management package; it remains on the reading list of many courses on development economics.

Mahani's papers on the economic recovery did not merely echo the government viewpoint, but were analytical perspectives of a recovery path that was sometimes different from those followed by other countries that had adopted IMF-prescribed measures. While recognizing the importance of selective capital controls to shield the economy from external currency attacks, she argued that the 1998 capital control measures also affected foreign direct investment inflows and discouraged the return of portfolio equity investment to the country.

Mahani's deep knowledge of international trade, markets and finance enabled her to provide critical perspectives on the declining competitiveness of the manufacturing sector in the 2000s. Working with Rajah Rasiah, Mahani analyzed the contraction in external demand as the major markets crumbled following the 2008-09 global financial crisis that crippled Malaysian exports. Further work with Loke Wai Heng investigated the changing export patterns and impediments to diversification into new product lines. The study used revealed comparative advantage to show that the competitiveness of Malaysian manufacturing sectors was declining, and that the resource-based industries had become more important than the non-resource-based industries since 2000. These studies provided arguably one of the most acute accounts of the impact of the fiscal stimulus to the Malaysian economy in the period.

The 700-page *Malaysia: Policies and issues in Economic Development* that she conceptualized and saw completed for ISIS has proved to be a definitive economic history of Malaysia since Independence. The book covers macroeconomic management, sectoral perspectives, equity issues, institutions and related policy challenges. Its wide scope reflects Mahani's broad interests in different fields of economics. The high quality of writing underscores her preoccupation with maintaining high standards, and is indicative of the recognition of her scholarly standing by peers who readily participated in the project.

Mahani's analytical and astute perspectives brought her not only to meetings in public, private and academic sectors nationally but also to international economic

forums. She attended meetings at the National Bureau for Economic Research (NBER), writing in their publications. She was a member of Malaysia's negotiation team for the World Trade Organization (WTO); and also the Malaysia-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), until she moved to MOHE. At MOHE she assisted in the sectoral commitments of the Ministry in different trade agreements. As an economist who understood commitments and their implications, Mahani was able to make significant contributions in an environment unfamiliar to policymakers in education.

When she moved on to ISIS, Mahani's interest in regionalism also included international relations and strategic issues, moving beyond trade and economics. In this way, she developed very broad perspectives for regionalism, and was conversant with the different disciplinary perspectives on the topic. She was able to exercise this area of her expertise when she was appointed Member of the International Steering Committee for the Pacific Trade and Development (PAFTAD). She was also advisor to several private-sector institutions, including the AmBank Group, Malaysia's biggest banking group.

Mahani accepted other appointments that reflected her professional interests and academic passion. She was a Board Member of the Employees Provident Fund (1998-2000), and Deputy Chairman of the National Accreditation Board, which oversees adherence to standards by institutions of higher learning (2003-07). She was also a Commissioner of the Suruhanjaya Pengangkutan Awam Darat (SPAD), or Land Public Transport Commission. SPAD was established in 2010, as an initiative of the Prime Minister, to raise the level of land public transport services.

## 10. Contribution to Wider Society

Mahani was an active participant and leader in civil society organizations. She was a Member of significant national committees such as the Malaysian Industrial Plan Committee, Business Cluster Working Group, and the LSE alumni association. A life-long favourite was the Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia (PEM). From 1988, when she joined the PEM, she was a committed and active Member who made a tremendous contribution to the Association.

### 10.1 Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia

The Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia or Malaysian Economics Association was established in 1962 by professional economists as a forum for economists in academia, public and private sectors to exchange ideas, and contribute to national economic activities.

It was perhaps PEM that gave Mahani her earliest opportunities for working with people outside academia. Within the university, she was part of a hierarchy, albeit a benevolent one. PEM projects and activities were collaborative, and those who participated, or consulted for PEM, did so on equal footing *inter pares*. She followed the noble footsteps of many a President, Honorary Secretary and other Executive Council Members, who worked long and hard to stimulate interest in economics, disseminated knowledge on the discipline; and raised funds to sustain the Association. Mahani was involved with PEM for over twenty-five years; and was an EXCO member for much of that period. Her appointments included the following:

| <b>Period</b>      | <b>Appointment</b>     |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1988-1990          | Committee Member       |
| 1990-1992          | Publications Secretary |
| 1992-1996          | Honorary Secretary     |
| 1996-2008          | Advisor                |
| From November 2008 | Deputy President       |

*Note:* All appointments are held in an honorary capacity.

Her busiest period with PEM was when she was the Honorary Secretary. Together with the President and other EXCO members, she organised numerous Dialogues; Public lectures; Roundtables; Seminars; Talks; and Workshops. Examples include the Tunku Abdul Rahman Lecture (14 August 1995), and Seminar on the Seventh Malaysia Plan (8 March 1996).

Her busiest year had to be 1993. In that one year, in between other activities, she packed in the following major functions:

- The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Federation of ASEAN Economic Associations (FAEA) on 'Trade in Services in ASEAN' (5-7 September 1993).
- PEM Thirtieth Anniversary Dinner and Inaugural Conferment of PEM Honorary Fellowships (7 September 1993).
- The 12<sup>th</sup> PEM Economic Convention on 'Malaysian Services Sector' ( 8-10 September 1993).

All these activities promoted PEM, increased PEM's membership, enhanced its image to an all-time high, and benefited the membership tremendously.

### *10.2 Representing Civil Society*

Mahani was very aware of the difference between the theoretical world of the academic, and the 'real' world of the government appointee. She was attracted to the potential for change that a sensible and sound bureaucrat can bring to his responsibilities; she could see the need for the good results that can emanate from effective government and administration. She was proud therefore, to receive appointments in various ministries, and later, in ISIS. Her conviction was that her work should be linked to real issues faced by the people; to this end she read avidly news in the business and politics sections of the newspapers, in addition to gleaning information from a wide personal network of contacts.

Out of the confines of academia and in the world of serious policy-making, economic development and regional negotiation, Mahani truly blossomed into a purveyor of ideas, opinions and knowledge: she was no longer writing solely in furtherance of an academic career. She wrote on her own mostly, but also in collaboration with fellow economists, some from her local networks, and others from her international connections. She was no longer mentoring only young academics, but also nurturing bright young minds in the public and private sectors.

Mahani's contributions made her known to both national and international circles. She was sought after for her views; she was approached time and again to consult on projects and studies. Malaysia's success was a personal cause; national unity a life-

long interest. In 2010, she took on the positions of Treasurer and Trustee to Yayasan 1Malaysia, a privately funded independent organization, established by concerned citizens to promote ethnic harmony and the values that epitomize the spirit of Malaysia. In all that she accepted to do, she gave generously of her time and expertise, and gained a reputation as a professional who could be depended upon to obtain results. As she developed the expertise that allowed her to participate in higher-level economic forums and debates, remarkably, she became more and more able to communicate the intricacies of economic problems in very simple terms to the man in the street. She featured on talk shows on the radio and on television, speaking in a forthright and down-to-earth fashion, like a '*kampung* girl next door'. On another level, as a columnist for the business and politics weekly, *The Edge*, she wrote about the economic issues affecting daily life.

### 11. In High Regard

Mahani's contributions were recognized by an appreciative nation. She was bestowed two federal awards by the King, the Yang Di Pertuan Agung; and received one state award from Pahang.

- In 1999, she was awarded the Kesatria Mangku Negara (KMN). This federal award is bestowed on public servants who have rendered meritorious service to the country.
- In 2003, she received the Johan Mangku Negara (JMN). This federal award is bestowed on those who have served the nation with distinction. The JMN is held by a restricted number of people at any one time.
- In 2010, she was awarded the Darjah Sultan Ahmad Shah (DSAP) by HRH Sultan Ahmad Shah of Pahang; this award carries with it the honorific of Dato'.

Despite her many achievements and recognition of her contributions and expertise by academic, administrative and political circles, Mahani remained unassuming and approachable. In her own private way, she was deeply religious. She performed the *hajj* in 2001. In the frontispiece of her book *Rewriting the Rules*, she humbly acknowledges: "I thank Allah, the Almighty, in whose hands lies all guidance."

### 12. Farewell

The 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2013 was a sad dark day for her family, her colleagues and friends, and the nation. Mahani's passing was deeply mourned by those near and dear to her, by those in power, and also by ordinary people in the society, most of whom did not know her personally, but appreciated her knowledge, and understood what she said and stood for in regard to economic development for all. Those who had worked with, and for her, those who had the privilege of being her friend, will remember her as an elegant lady of great charm. She combined easily the gentle ways of traditional society, with the decisiveness of the modern world. She was firm, but never unkind; she gave of herself and her expertise in the most generous manner. We will miss her knowledge, her humour, and her fellowship. May God grant her eternal peace.

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