



INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
(ISIS) MALAYSIA

ANNUAL REPORT 2021

Hope & Recovery





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Herizal Hazri
Chief executive

WE'RE JUDGED ON OUR EXPERTISE

Measuring the success or otherwise of a think-tank is difficult. Unlike commercial enterprises, we cannot judge our performance through a set of financial statements. In stark contrast to manufacturing, we do not produce a set number of products whose quality standards and quantities can be defined and assessed to the nth degree. And unlike media organisations, we do not necessarily aim to secure the biggest audiences for our work.

I'm nonetheless happy to report that ISIS Malaysia performed well in 2021.

We pushed ourselves during a challenging time and environment to produce policy relevant ideas on a broad range of issues, from the environment to foreign policy to economics. We are recognised for our expertise. Our partners keep coming back to renew their engagements with us. That's ultimately how we have judged our performance.

For 2021 was a year of great and swift change: politically, socially and economically. But through it all, ISIS Malaysia carried out its duty and we strove to do it well. We were called upon to lend our expertise to high-level policy initiatives, working with the prime minister and the foreign minister, among others, on myriad issues impacting on our nation.

Above all, we have approached our work with the impartiality that has defined our role since our formation in 1983. Our research, our policy recommendations, our every effort all are for the good of the nation. It is a legacy that I inherited when I became chief executive of ISIS Malaysia last year. It is a legacy I will continue to uphold.



REOPENING MALAYSIA

As Malaysia and the rest of the world entered the second pandemic year, 2021 proved to be both challenging and rewarding for ISIS Malaysia.

Covid-19 continued to wreak havoc on the nation's health services, straining hospitals and medical staff, while families and communities reeled from the devastation of lockdowns and economic shocks. But in the first quarter, vaccines started to trickle down to parts of the world, providing a glimmer of hope.

Malaysia started the year with an ambitious recovery plan centred on vaccinating the population, including foreigners. The National Covid-19 Vaccination Programme kicked off slowly in February, bogged down by a lack of supplies, logistic issues and teething problems with the MySejahtera app.

The task gained urgency following the devastation wrought by the Delta variant, which was first identified in India in December 2020 and became the predominant SARS CoV-2 variant worldwide in a matter of months. At the end of November, the Omicron variant – first detected in South Africa – emerged just as many countries started to lift travel restrictions while a weary public looked forward to the year-end holiday season. But by December, Omicron had spread to 45 nations with many countries reimposing travel restrictions.

Malaysia imposed various forms of lockdown, also known as the movement-control order (MCO), between January and October. The MCO 2.0, 3.0 and iterations led to widespread economic and social shocks and distress. Many businesses were still struggling from the MCO 1.0 in 2020 and could not

withstand months-long closures as the government tried to balance public health and safety with restrictions.

According to Bank Negara, the economy contracted by 4.5% in the third quarter because of the strict containment measures in July under the National Recovery Plan. All economic sectors registered a contraction while domestic demand declined by 4.1%, weighed down by the contraction in private consumption and investment activities. The employment outlook remained grim and as the jobless rate swelled, many among the B40 and M40 fell through the cracks, falling deeper into poverty with some resorting to suicide.

ISIS Malaysia worked to address the pandemic's effects on society and help shape the recovery through our policy proposals, publications and webinars.



Calvin Cheng
Senior analyst

Senior analyst **Calvin Cheng** published policy reports, papers and articles, gave presentations and media commentaries in local and international news platforms on the pandemic's socio-economic impacts on workers and the government's economic responses. In January, Calvin published Fiscal size matters (Part 1), analysing the Permai stimulus packages and comparing our economic response to Covid-19 with regional countries. The follow-up report appeared in June when the Pemerkasa Plus stimulus package was unveiled. Both reports filled the data gaps.

We also examined trends that emerged out of Covid-19, as senior analyst **Farlina Said** did following the launch of the National Cyber Security Strategy 2020-2024 in October 2020 and the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. The strategy combined with Covid-19 accelerants increased the appetite for digitisation and she focused on the pitfalls of oncoming trends, organised forums to discuss gaps

and areas of concern for policy and worked on solutions for future issues in cyberspace. The need for critical infrastructure protection was explored in the US Embassy supported webinar, Finding cyber stability amid shifting landscapes.

In March, as part of the Foreign Policy Speaker Series, we hosted a webinar "New strategies for the pandemic's second year", focused on vaccinations and global public health initiatives. Among the speakers was visiting fellow **Dr Khor Swee Kheng**.

In June, a webinar on post-pandemic recovery looked at the impact of increasing global trade tensions compounded by weaker demand, supply chain problems as well as ensuring resilient sustainable sources of trade growth.

To mark the first anniversary of the outbreak, **Zarina Zainuddin** and **Muhammad Sinatra** contributed Malaysia 2021: year of the vaccine to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India, which highlighted dependency on vaccines to break the Covid-19 "waves" and record-breaking caseloads. Together, they produced Covid's "failure" to realign Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

At our flagship conference PRAXIS in October, speakers urged Malaysia to adopt more comprehensive systems to meet the shocks of the current and future pandemics. The government should widen the social safety net to prevent more families from falling into poverty, adopt and help more businesses adapt to digitalisation, strengthen worker protection, increase health literacy, take climate change and sustainability more seriously and tackle deep inequalities, which the pandemic amplified.



Zarina Zainuddin
Analyst

Farlina Said
Senior analyst

BROADENING IDEAS, HORIZONS



Alizan Mahadi
Senior research director

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us how interconnected our issues are – an economic crisis will all too often point towards an underlying environmental, social, or foreign policy concern. Nothing is clear cut.

Though we, as an organisation, understand this academically, Covid-19 compelled us to address this complexity practically.

That realisation was the driving force behind ISIS Malaysia's efforts to integrate our research teams and break down the barriers between departments. Finding solutions to issues of national concern cannot be done in silos and we embraced the connections in both our research and our solutions.

Providing solutions to the nation's problems lies at the heart of what we do. The philosophy underlying our methodology – inform, interpret and influence – requires our research teams to inform all stakeholders on the strategic challenges ahead of creating policy, interpret the data to come up with solutions and influence decisionmakers towards nation-building.

This can only be done when we, as a research organisation, understand the interconnectedness of the strategic challenges facing our nation, so that we can provide holistic solutions.

Our research projects in 2021 embraced this philosophy. Our participation in the national water sector transformation project received input from multiple researchers with differing specialties, while our research papers with various ministries, including the Foreign Ministry and Defence Ministry, were shaped by data from researchers in multiple departments, not just those associated with foreign policy.

This broadening of our research horizons will be reflected in our current and future projects, including the national climate change policy and national research and development survey.

The relative youth of our research teams has also been a great influence on ISIS Malaysia. The experienced members of our teams benefited greatly from the energy and resourcefulness of our next generation of analysts. Their drive brought in fresh new ideas and perspectives.

As a think-tank, broadening the horizons must be complemented with delivering positive impacts. Towards this, one of the key focuses – and challenges as well – is to be more involved with ensuring that policy cascades down from the national level to implementation in the state level.

A clear example is the assistance we provided in the drafting of Johor's agro-food policy as well as our involvement in the state budget. We are often called upon to look at strategic issues at the national level. Working at the state level was a new and valuable experience. Dealing with and receiving input and feedback from stakeholders and interest groups, all with varied and important objectives, were a challenge but we passed it with flying colours. The Johor agro-food policy will be the first to be cascaded from the national agro-food policy and is a litmus test for translating national policy to the state level.

As a national think-tank, to demonstrate that policy design can have an impact at multiple levels, we must not look only at highlighting problems but find solutions. This ensures that our work provides outcomes that contribute to nation-building.

I have every confidence that our research teams will be successful in charting this new path.

Fuelling these concerns was the conviction that the country cannot return to “pre-pandemic ways” and must look at rebuilding institutions and redesign policies that could address problems, such as mistreatment of migrant workers, challenges faced by youth and women, failures in the healthcare system, mental health and building ecosystems to support microenterprises.

The national Covid-19 immunisation programme accelerated in September with Health Minister **Khairy Jamaluddin** announcing the start of vaccinations for those under 18, starting with Sarawak.

But the availability of multiple vaccines for Covid-19 at the tail end of 2020 combined with Malaysia ramping up vaccinations led to a rise in anti-vaccine content online, as senior analyst **Harris Zainul** discovered in his work on the vaccine infodemic. His research and analyses on the topic appeared in newspapers, including The Edge, The Star and South China Morning Post.

But by 15 September, more than 76% of the adult population had been vaccinated fully and on that same day, Khairy announced that booster shots would be offered to the elderly and those with comorbidities. The government then abandoned the goal of achieving herd immunity, shifting focus to vaccinations of adolescents.

In September, Malaysia and Singapore announced the recognition of each other's vaccination certificates, paving the way for the vaccinated travel lane (VTL) between the two countries, which allows quarantine-free travel for vaccinated individuals who are citizens, permanent residents and long-term pass holders of Malaysia and Singapore. By the end of the same month, nearly 60% of the population had been vaccinated fully.

In October, most restrictions were lifted with interstate travel allowed and by November, more than 75% of the population were vaccinated fully. The high vaccination rate was achieved despite vaccine scepticism and disinformation as outlined in an ISIS Malaysia policy brief.

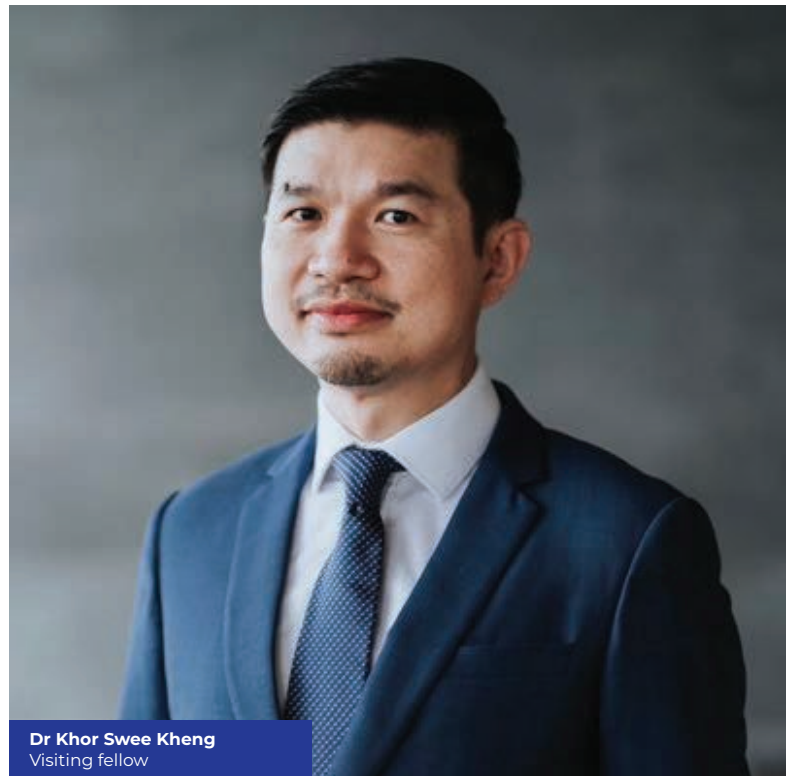
At year-end, in the face of Omicron's threat, Malaysia, drawing on the 22-month experience of dealing with the pandemic, delayed the transition to living with endemicity. A parliamentary select committee recommended that the country delay the transition until it could ensure that intensive care units are able to provide good care quality and reduce death rates in case of a surge of cases; provide more affordable self-test kits and incentives for the public to report their test results on the MySejahtera app as well as upgrading the app to

expedite hot-spot identification, contact tracing, notifications and quarantine monitoring.

However, the Langkawi “bubble” remained operational and with the success of the VTL, Putrajaya mulled its expansion to Kuching, Penang and Langkawi.

But the rise of the Omicron variant again threatened the fledgling recovery and many countries reimposed travel bans amid surging cases. At ISIS Malaysia, the administration instituted weekly Covid tests for all staff and visitors from 20 December onwards in response to Omicron.

As 2021 ended and just a week before Christmas, many parts of the peninsula suffered devastating floods attributed to a tropical depression that landed on the east coast, bringing downpours for three days. Eight states were hit by a “once-in-a-century” flooding that left more than 50 dead and displaced more than 71,000. The worst-hit areas in the Klang Valley included Hulu Langat, Taman Sri Muda in Shah Alam and Klang.



Dr Khor Swee Kheng
Visiting fellow

AT ISIS, WE ACT AS FAMILY



Sohana Enver Azyze
Administration head

Family lies at the heart of ISIS Malaysia and 2021 was the first full year that our new chief executive, **Herizal Hazri**, was in office.

It marked a year of transition and renewal. Under his auspices, we restored the office up to modern standards. New surroundings, new thoughts and ideas.

But all this was happening against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our restored building, beautiful though it is, was empty and devoid of the usual hustle and bustle of life. It was very beautiful but also lonely.

As we transitioned to regular operations, our office began to fill with the voices of staff. But the loneliness and detachment caused by the pandemic did take a toll on everyone. We knew then that the human element that makes up the most important part of an organisation takes time to heal.

I thank our caring support staff for also recognising the problem and doing their utmost to heal this loneliness and nurture the connection between our staff. Some became self-appointed cooks and used our pantry to make breakfast and lunch, so that people need not leave the grounds to eat. We appointed a welfare officer, who would ensure staff were taken care of both physically and mentally.

Our people began acting like a family again.

This was most apparent when one of our beloved staff members passed last year, during the national lockdown. Arwah **Mohd Hanafi** was a beloved member of ISIS Malaysia and we all felt his passing. Members of our staff were with him to his final moments and took care of his funeral arrangements. We felt that it was our responsibility, as his colleagues and friends, to do this.

These values, this love and kindness for our fellows, are what we strive to nurture here. We are in the business of nation-building. How can we build a kind nation if we ourselves are not kind? How can we promote empathy if we ourselves are not empathetic to the suffering of others?

We cannot publish what we do not practise.

To all our staff, thank you from the bottom of my heart for believing in our values and acting on them. For being kind, considerate and patient. For being family.



UNVEILING A HIDDEN GEM

In December, the restoration to the main building was completed. The “front” building, whose history could be traced back to 1895, served as the home of the first Dewan Rakyat speaker, Tan Sri **Mohamed Noah Omar**. It was designated as the offices of ISIS Malaysia in 1985.

The year-long restoration involved tearing down the false ceilings and partitions, ripping out the carpets to restore the vertical spaces in the bungalow, floors made from high-quality wood and classical-designed tiles.

On 2 December, we hosted our first in-person event, the European Union Delegation to Malaysia’s cocktail evening, at the refurbished bungalow (Building A).

More than 40 guests enjoyed the cocktail evening as H.E. ambassador **Michalis Rokas**, head of the EU Delegation to Malaysia, expounded on the Indo-Pacific strategy, launched in September, and what the EU would bring to the table.

At the “Indo-Pacific strategy: springboard for deepening EU-Malaysia relations” event, Rokas touched on Global Gateway, the new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in the digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world.

Global Gateway aims to mobilise up to €300 billion (RM1.5 trillion) in investments between 2021 and 2027 to underpin a global recovery.

The EU is already the largest contributor of development aid to Malaysia and the region and its

“alternative” to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promises to invest in digital transition, clean energy transition, transport, people-to-people connections, trade and resilient supply chains.

The bloc aims to diversify its relationship with Malaysia and is committed to solving thorny issues, such as the palm oil ban with the delegation going to the ground and getting first-hand information to convey to Brussels on the steps Malaysia is taking to achieve sustainability and green certification by

tackling deforestation.

Rokas also touched on securing the value chain as the world grappled with supply chain bottlenecks and strong trade ties. The EU’s offer of “sustainable prosperity” is built around the framework of democracy and rule of law, including ocean governance in the South China Sea; security in digital governance via dedicated partnerships in AI/5G connectivity; fight misinformation and disinformation; and technical assistance and investment.





ASIA-PACIFIC
ROUNDTABLE

APR 34

DISRUPTION REDUX

0900 - 1400 (UTC +8)

17-18 August 2021

Our Partners



SUCCESS OF VIRTUAL APR

ISIS Malaysia went on to host two of our flagship conferences – Asia-Pacific Roundtable and PRAXIS – online in 2021. Both went 100% virtual in August and October despite some optimism that we could host a “hybrid” event with local speakers and participants present at a selected venue while international participants could link up to the conferences.

But by the second quarter, Malaysia was in another stage of MCO and we moved the two events digitally. Both conferences focused on Covid-19's disruptive nature, the impact of lockdowns on the economy and the continuing health crisis.

They also examined the pandemic's impact on the region in terms of security, policymaking, global realignment and, on an optimistic note, the path to recovery and opportunities ahead.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organisation, who delivered the opening remarks at the APR, warned that Covid-19 exposed the huge disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and called for the development of a framework for pandemic preparedness and response.

More than 450 participants, including speakers and role players, took part in the two-day event.

Thomas Daniel, a member of the 34th APR organising committee, said there was no question of postponing the event for yet another year. For most ISIS Malaysia folk, said Thomas, it was also clear the 34th APR was not going to be anything like the 33rd APR.

The APR traditionally takes place in late May or June.

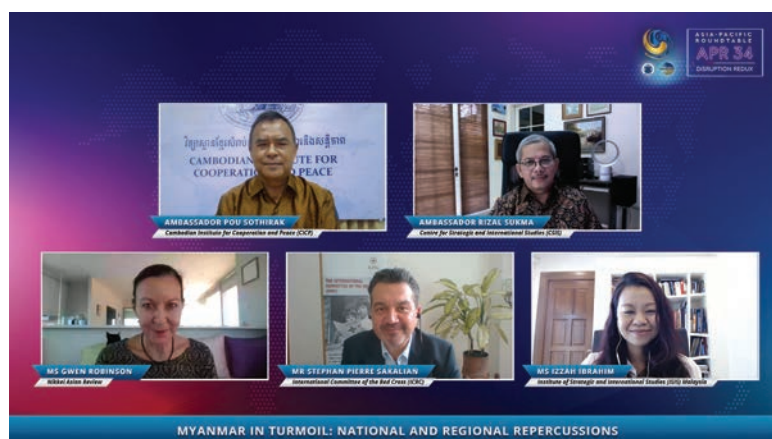
This year, it was held in August.

“It is good that we came back after one year hiatus. It is important for conferences, roundtables like the APR to continue,” said the senior fellow in the foreign policy and security studies programme, the team tasked with overseeing the APR.

The success of the virtual APR showed that ISIS Malaysia as an organiser was able to adapt, not only to the disruptive forces of Covid-19, but to the realities in the horizon. The next few APRs will likely be virtual or hybrid, taking logistics into consideration. Our chief concerns were the virtual platform and getting the mix right – both of which worked out and will be the template for future conferences.



Thomas Daniel
Senior fellow





Hosted by ISIS Malaysia

PRA  **IS**
RECOVERING MALAYSIA
21 – 22 October 2021

RECOVERY, REGENERATION & ROAD MAP

The PRAXIS conference, themed Recovering Malaysia, looked towards the future, specifically moving forward after two years of lockdowns and economic disruptions.

The five sessions examined the economic and geopolitical risks of a post-Covid world, Malaysia's response to the pandemic, vaccine drive, growing trend of digitalisation and need for a comprehensive social safety net.

Speakers warned about the digital divide between individuals, firms and Malaysian states, shifting global landscape towards trade and services; sustainability and localising sustainable development; youth empowerment; and the pandemic's toll on mental health.

Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, acknowledged in the keynote speech the steep cost of nearly two years of lockdowns and the shocks for a small trading nation like ours.

PRAXIS also took place against the backdrop of the 12th Malaysia Plan, unveiled earlier that month. The nation's development road map (2021-2025) came at an important juncture just as Covid exposed and exacerbated many underlying structural problems. The 12MP outlined aims, such as increasing the average household income to RM10,000 by 2025; reducing growth gap between the central regions and Sabah and Sarawak; reducing bureaucracy and building reliable infrastructure and ecosystem to attract quality foreign investments; developing an ecosystem to support the gig economy; and



addressing the mismatch in the labour force for certain sectors.

Much of our work touches on its key themes – resetting the economy; strengthening security, wellbeing and inclusivity; and advancing sustainability. We focus on Malaysia's bid to become carbon neutral as early as 2050; carbon pricing and carbon tax; National Energy Policy; renewable energy to account for 31% of Malaysia's total energy capacity by 2025; and the policy "enablers" to help the nation reach annual GDP growth of 4.5%, embark on structural changes and accelerating technology adoption and innovation.



PRAXIS brought some of these concerns to the fore. The panellists highlighted the challenges confronting the B40 and M40 groups navigating the pandemic: inadequate housing, which did not allow for social distancing and lack of ventilation in existing buildings; reliance on gig jobs; closure of schools, resulting in many dropping out of the formal education sector; and upskilling the labour pool.





STEPPING OUT OF COVID SHADOW

Malaysia was still operating under the Covid standard operating procedure (SOP) up to Q4 but with a ramped-up vaccination rate and reopening of almost all sectors, we hosted the first in-person event – the Malaysia Scholars on Korea (MASK) Network – at the DoubleTree Kuala Lumpur on 24 November.

More than 50 participants took part in the “hybrid” event, Partners in recovery: Malaysia and the New Southern Policy Plus. Almost all the speakers and role players at the event registered their delight at mingling after nearly two years of virtual meetings.

On the fifth anniversary of the NSP, the focus was on Covid-19 and post-pandemic “recovery”. **Tan Sri Jemilah Mahmood**’s call for an additional “P” – investing in planetary health to prevent the next pandemic – struck a chord with many participants. The medical practitioner warned that assuming business as usual or “pre-pandemic normal” was contrary to safe recovery.

She noted that the NSP allows countries to move forward while balancing between the aspirations and health of the nation. The health of the planet is a collective priority and we must all work to reduce carbon emissions, curb our insatiable travel desires, and address the behaviours driving pollution, toxicity and obesity. Finding an integrated way to improve our relationship with planet Earth should focus on achieving the highest attributable standards on health, wellbeing and equity, she urged.

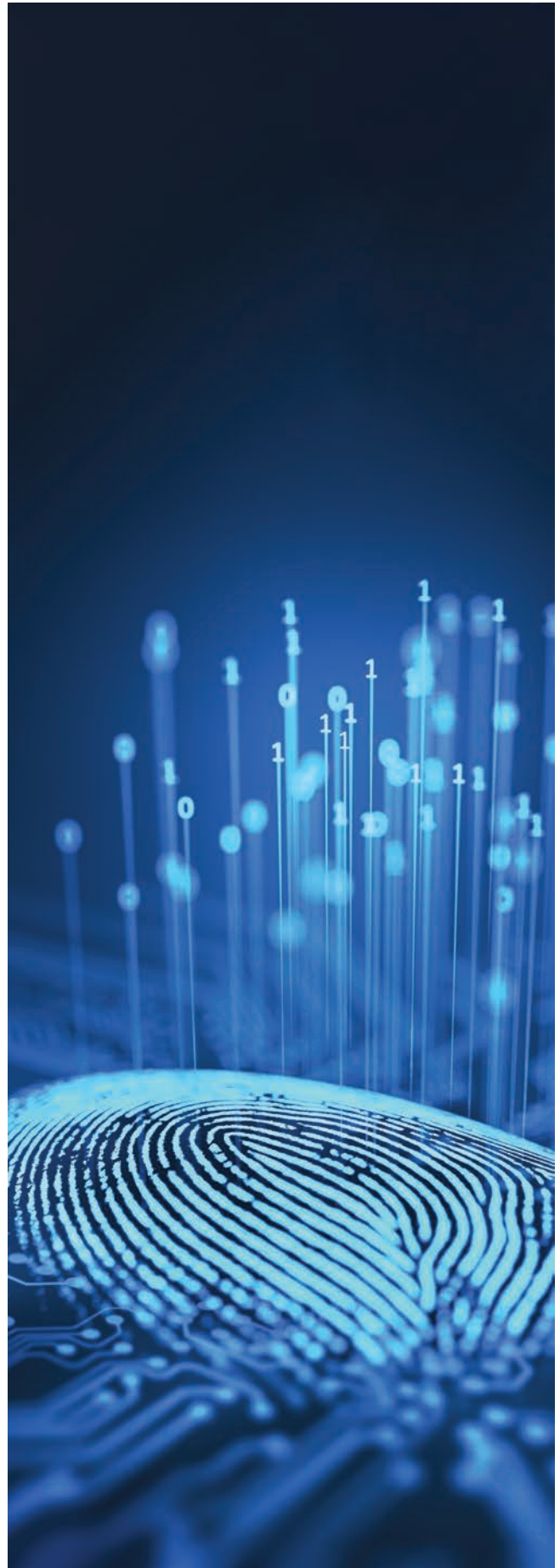
The other speakers echoed the central message, urging investments in education and science of public health; developing better food systems to reduce

wastage, a major contributor to CO2 emissions; addressing supply chain snarls; exploring “soft power” and the power of culture; making cities sustainable whereby we place the planet and ourselves at the centre.

There were calls to be proactive and work together to achieve the NSP’s goals, including peace in the Korean peninsula by utilising Track 1.5 diplomacy to achieve this goal. Civil society should lead dialogues focused on humanitarian assistance, food safety and sustainability as a form of outreach to Pyongyang. Peace and prosperity require us to think about the human dimension, suggested the speakers.

Asean centrality was another focus, with a speaker arguing that it offers its own civilisational routes, political and economic systems, diversity and dynamism and vision. There were calls to look at the big picture in terms of an Asean-South Korea free-trade agreement to address the unequal investment equation.

On the health front, parts of the policy announcements from the Korean New Deal were extended to NSP+, tying economic interests to health and security. Some applicable lessons from the pandemic touched on infrastructure or the need for crisis and disaster management. One speaker urged the government to invest in updating data, contact tracing, upgrade communications to avoid confusion over the SOP and reap the rewards of technological improvements and deploy them for future epidemics.





FROM BIDEN TO BEIJING AND BEYOND

Foreign policy remained our forte and we collaborated with the US Embassy on a series of foreign policy webinars from February to December, covering topical subjects relevant to both countries and improving the narrative on Malaysian-American relations. The team also produced the foreign policy framework on engagement with “priority” countries for the Foreign Ministry in September. The prime minister launched the final product on 7 December.

Following President Joe Biden’s election victory, we hosted in collaboration with HELP University a post-inauguration forum on 21 January to gain an insight into US foreign policy. The US ambassador was among the speakers.

Izzah Ibrahim spent 2021 focused on the development of foreign policy during the pandemic and altering its application to suit such changes. She worked on counterinsurgency activities in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines, sharing these assessments with the ministry up to Q3. In the run-up to the APR, she published a comment piece followed by a number of news articles and papers. She also undertook speaking engagements with students.

Angeline Tan’s research focused on the changes in China and the implication for Southeast Asia. She commented on China’s pursuit of a Dual-Circulation Strategy, tech-sector crackdowns, common prosperity policy and the Communist Party’s centenary anniversary.

In September, Angeline published a policy brief on China’s Dual-Circulation Strategy and its implications on Malaysia and was interviewed by BFM on its

common prosperity plan and also on the tech crackdown. She appeared as a panellist at the September forum The Quad and Southeast Asia: reception, perception & opportunities, where she touched on Malaysian, Asean and Chinese perceptions of the Quad, and how these views impact on its ability to engage in the region. **Yanitha Meena** was also speaker in the September webinar, with remarks focused on India as the Quad's gateway to Southeast Asia.

Among Angeline's other media engagements were an interview with BFM on the Chinese Communist Party's sixth plenum, discussing current affairs within China and President Xi Jinping's legacy and an appearance on Awani Global on the newly signed Asean-China comprehensive strategic partnership.

The media also tapped Meena's subcontinent speciality when BFM interviewed her on the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August.



In July, Meena was a speaker at the "ISIS Malaysia-ISSI Pakistan institutional dialogue: food security & the OIC" on initiatives to empower South Asia and Southeast Asian countries in the realm of food security. Meena later published a policy brief A new self-reliant India: priorities and opportunities for Malaysia, which highlighted how Malaysia-India relations can remain resilient as India advances its new Aatmanirbhar Bharat policy.

Farlina's core focus on cybersecurity led her to articulate concepts of security amid tech rivalry and geopolitical shifts. She wrote extensively on the



subject, including Getting it right on tech sovereignty, digital sovereignty from an Asian point of view and the perils of navigating cybersecurity amid tech rivalry.

Malaysia's digitisation process also required engagements on cybersecurity concerns, ranging from building up capability to protect infrastructure to perils of 5G and protecting critical infrastructure. Farlina moderated three panels in the CYDES 2021, organised by the National Cyber Security Agency and shared with The Edge concerns on data collection, data security, the government's digitisation processes and the pitfalls of algorithms.

Exploring future horizons in these areas and to start conversations on technologies of the future resulted in the Australian High Commission-supported webinar, Let's talk in 5G, which addressed the absence of civil society in cybersecurity conversations. On the latter, ISIS Malaysia is working together with Global Partners Digital to explore the ideas of digital rights in Malaysia, with the project set to conclude in 2022.



COP26, CLIMATE CRISIS TO THE FORE

We have had a long relationship with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and towards the end of 2020, ISIS-KAS held a series of roundtable discussions on four key topics on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Orang Asal matters and institutional reforms. At the start of the year, we published *Making SDGs matter: leaving no one behind*, edited by Alizan and **Nazran Johari** and focused on the localisation of SDGs.

The monograph touched on rural development, food security, as well as a call to rethink rural transformation, in addition to analysing the political system's impacts on implementing the SDGs and the role of civil society to ensure "no one is left behind".

It also looked at a new climate change policy for Malaysia, urging the use of carbon as part of policy efforts, climate-change adaptation and other potential green growth initiatives, such as circular economy. It addressed Malaysia's need for a robust climate change policy to increase its climate resilience while considering the rights of the Orang Asal and how environmental degradation impacted on their livelihood.

Darshan Joshi contributed "A new approach to climate change policy in Malaysia" to the monograph. Alizan's "Localising SDGs: observations from the all-party parliamentary group on SDGs" continued his work on engaging with MPs in both houses of Parliament and across political parties on the SDGs with a focus on economic, social and environmental concerns pertaining to development planning and delivery. Prof Datuk **Dr Denison Jayasooria**, who joined in the last quarter, wrote on the "Role of civil society organisations in localising SDGs in Malaysia".



Syamil Kamaruzaman
Researcher

Darshan Joshi
Analyst

Nazran Johari
Senior researcher

Alizan and **Ainun Jaabi** together with UNDP-Malaysia reviewed Malaysia's green policy for the Economic Planning Unit. The baseline review produced a report on the MyHijau Programme, which was first introduced in 2012 with the aim of supporting the development of green technology.

ISIS Malaysia focused on the climate crisis and in the run-up to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) from 31 October-12 November, we



hosted a webinar focused on nations' pledges to the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The webinar looked at whether large emitters would produce ambitious targets and whether the carbon budget would be allocated in a just manner. It also discussed Malaysia's updated NDCs. Another COP26 precursor was the webinar "The future of Malaysia's international climate commitments" held in June, which touched on some the same concerns.



Prof Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria
Senior fellow

Alizan, Darshan, **Afandi Azmi**, **Syamil Kamaruzaman** and **Ili Nadiyah Dzulfakarwe** embarked on a review and update of the national policy on climate change policy ecosystem, for adaptation and mitigation, and the drafting of the next policy. We are also assessing Malaysia's climate ambition, working with the Asia Foundation on a series of articles, roundtable discussions and a policy brief from the perspective of global climate change and COP26.

Another major focus was the water-food-energy nexus, looking at transforming the water sector (2040). Led by Alizan, Darshan, **Syakira Syafiqah** and Ili Nadiyah worked on a research paper to identify and map key nexus interactions, issues and challenges. They forwarded recommendations to mainstream the use of nexus approaches and concepts to address key resource security concerns.



CONSTITUTION UNDER STRESS

Emeritus Prof Datuk **Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi**, the fourth holder of the Tun Hussein Onn Chair, presented his final lecture on the constitution on 28 July, one of the most widely attended webinars with more than 110 participants. We also published Shad Saleem's monograph in June 2021.

The constitutional expert took us on a journey on its history and what the Merdeka-era leaders tried to achieve by going down the rich, cultural "mosaic" route. He argued that while the original authors walked the middle path of moderation to create an extraordinary multifaceted society, which became an exemplar for much of Asia and Africa on harmonious inter-communal relationships, it is now threatened by forces and new electoral demands.



The "document of destiny" is under stress as it undergoes a process of readjustment and reinterpretation. The problem is worsened by constitutional illiteracy and a lack of patriotism within the population, political and administrative elite.

Shad Saleem warned of the dark clouds looming as religious racialism and bigotry go mainstream and challenging the decades of experience of living together in peace and harmony.



POWER OF COLLABORATION

Nazran, **Tengku Qistina** and Swee Kheng assessed Malaysia's healthcare resilience during Covid-19, which appeared in a five-nation study published by the Centre for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD) in November. CIKD was launched in 2017 to research and communicate development wisdom, promote international development cooperation and push forward the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (2030 Agenda).

The assessment looked at how the healthcare system responded to the pandemic in 2020 from the designation of Sg Buloh Hospital as a "Covid-19 centre" to diagnostics, contact tracing via MySejahtera, quarantine facilities and the "breaking points" as the country battled infection waves.

From the project, Qistina went on to look into women's involvement and their contributions in the healthcare system. She focused on how much women contribute to the healthcare system and yet issues that mostly affect women, like cervical cancer, were often neglected.

ISIS Malaysia's "fluid" arrangement allowed Qistina to "cross over" to work with Swee Kheng, which she described as an "enriching experience" because of the latter's medical background. She learnt, among others, about ethics, personal development on mentorship/leadership and developing media engagement skills to talk about women and gender.

At the height of the second wave of the pandemic, Malaysians were shocked over the death of **Siti Sarah Raissuddin** from Covid-19. The singer was not vaccinated because of pregnancy, showing the



dilemma women face when it comes to information on vaccines, Covid-19 and pregnancy. Qistina got in touch with a few doctors working in the field to produce a piece touching on the maternal angle to the pandemic.

On International Youth Day on 12 August, Qistina moderated the webinar Youth empowerment in times of Covid-19, which focused on a generation affected by the pandemic and highlighted the role of youth rising above the challenges.



Tashny Sukumaran
Senior analyst

Senior analyst **Tashny Sukumaran** also focused on gender equality and migrant labour. She was a guest speaker at several forums and panels on topics, such as reproductive health rights, online gender-based violence and hate speech, and early childhood care and education. Notably, Tashny's research on period checks in schools where she interviewed the affected girls and discussed the practice led the Education Ministry to issue a circular banning the practice.

Articles summing up her findings appeared in the local media as well as Women in Islam, a journal published by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa.

Terrence Too helped frame issues from an international perspective, owing to his organisational knowledge gleaned from years at Unicef and other bodies. Qistina highlighted the importance of tapping the experience of older experts like Terrence and senior fellow Denison to grasp and understand, network and convey ideas and suggestions.



Terrence Too
Senior fellow

Tengku Qistina
Senior researcher



PANDEMIC INEQUALITY, VACCINE MISINFORMATION

As Covid continued to disrupt the economy, Calvin and Harris published “Trends in Malaysia’s future of work” in the Journal of China-Asean Studies, Volume 2, 2021, China Social Sciences Press.

Calvin looked at the pandemic’s impact on the marginalised at an online forum titled Fighting the inequality pandemic: Covid-19 and its economic impacts on marginalised worker groups. Alongside **Dr Amanina Abdur Rahman** and **Alyssa Farha Jasmin** from World Bank Malaysia, and **Dr Grace Lee** from Monash University Malaysia, Calvin presented updated work from his November 2020 policy brief, highlighting the unequal impacts of Covid-19 on workers and uneven recovery for groups like the youth, women and lesser-educated workers. This research was widely quoted by local and international news outlets and research organisations, including the OECD.

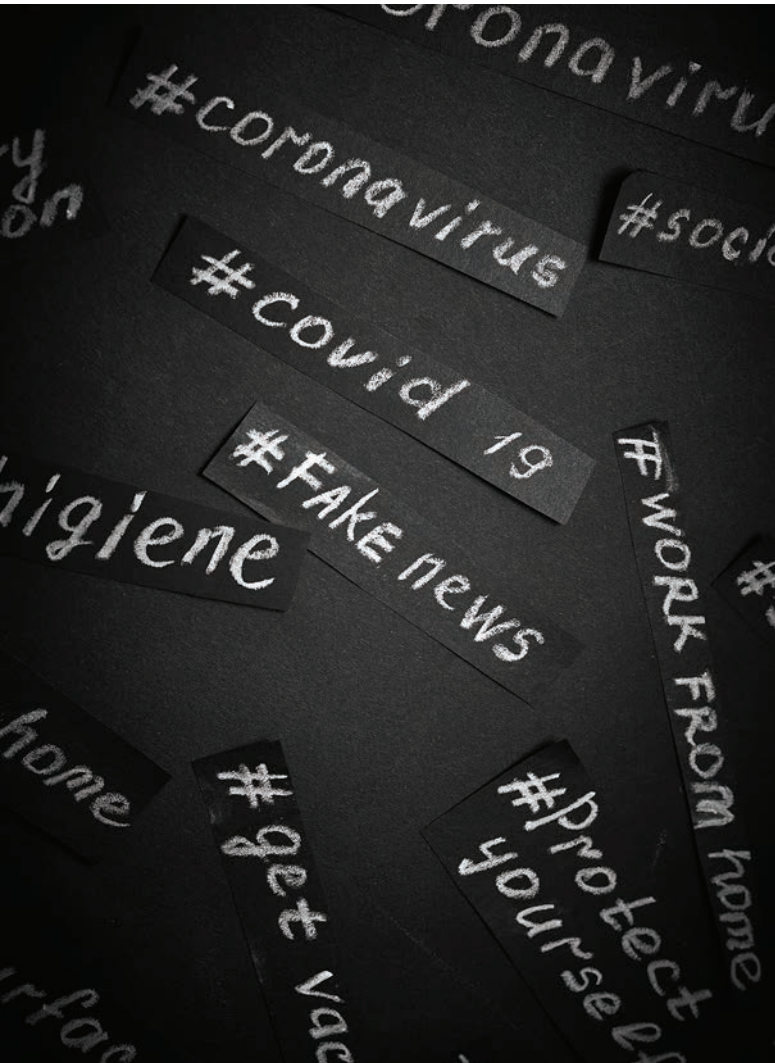
Calvin was also active in youth policy networks and youth-related economic policy research. In May, Calvin, together with **Dr Bridget Welsh**, published Malaysia’s youth in peril, examining Covid-19’s impact on graduates and young workers. He presented this research at a Speak Up! event jointly organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia Students’ Affairs Division and Serdang Royals Debate Club (SRDC). He shared “Policies for the future of Malaysia’s youth” at a Merdeka Centre webinar on “Post-Covid-19 Malaysia: policies for youth economic development”.

Other youth-related issues were raised and discussed at an Astro Awani special on the 12th Malaysia Plan and Budget 2022 where Calvin was a panellist. **Sofea Azahar** presented a youth-centric paper on Preparing

future workforce for post-pandemic recovery with a focus on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) capabilities at the Research Institute Network (RIN) online workshop series in November and the following month, she appeared on Channel News Asia to speak about SME digital adoption.

importance of media literacy, typology of false information, problems with the term “fake news”, concerns with an overreliance on prosecution and deterrent strategies, and the parts we can play to overcome this issue.

Tashny’s research on migrant and refugee communities led her to call for more egalitarian vaccination measures while providing media comments to various news outlets on the increase in immigration raids.



As noted earlier, Harris spent much of 2021 focused on the rise of online anti-vaccine content, producing policy options in A framework towards addressing vaccine-related false information. He tracked the rise in vaccine-related content on social media, working with Farlina, Nazran and Izzah to sample the top 500 most-engaged posts from Facebook and Twitter, in both English and Malay, to shed some light on the way “information” was peddled, shared and disseminated. This resulted in the Vaccine narratives on social media in Malaysia policy paper.

In September, Harris and Tashny drafted a module on “Disinformation and media and information literacy” for Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia as part of Unesco’s media information literacy module for media and communication students. The module covered the



Sofea Azahar
Senior researcher

Harris Zainul
Senior analyst



FOOD SECURITY, MAPPING R&D PROGRESS

The Johor government appointed ISIS Malaysia to strategise and draft the state budget in November. Alizan, Harris, Calvin, Sofea and Syamil mapped the various priority areas for the state and helped frame the various initiatives introduced under the budget. The experience was a memorable one as the team was based in Kota Iskandar, the seat of the state government, for a few weeks in the lead up to the tabling of the state budget.

We carried out the Review of National Research and Development 2020, with Alizan, Farlina, Harris and Nazran co-leading the project. The goal was to measure and study the status and recent progress of R&D activities in four sectors: (1) higher education institutions (HLI); (2) government research institutes (GRI); (3) non-governmental organisations (NGO); and (4) public and private enterprises (BE). This encompasses an analysis of R&D spending trends, sources of funding and human resources. The pilot survey was completed in December with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation accepting the inception report. The project is due for completion in June 2022.

Another major project with the Johor government was DANJo 1.0 centred on the state's ambition to secure the nation's food security. Capitalising on its agribusiness-friendly ecosystem and geographically strategic location, the state aims to embrace smart agriculture, agtech and digital transformation to meet the demands of future food systems and serve domestic and overseas markets.

The strategic outcomes include preparedness to mitigate and manage future food security crises and

disruptions of agrofood value chains; improved management of internal productive resources and a diversification of import sources and export destinations for major food items; increased availability of safe, nutritious and traceable food at stable and affordable prices for healthy diets; greater private sector and people/community participation in transforming agrofood systems; and a reduction in imports by increasing production of seeds, breeds, feed and agrochemicals.

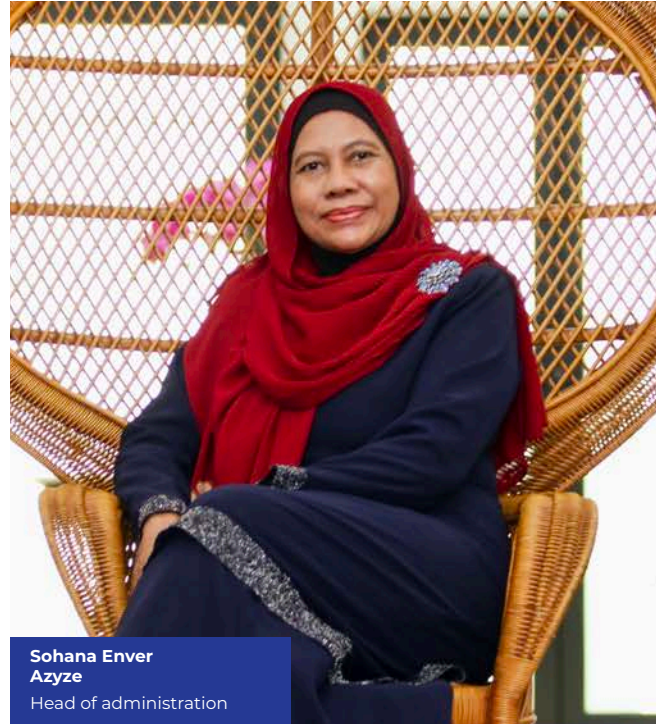
Led by senior visiting fellow **Dr Larry Wong**, our role is to assist in holistic planning, monitoring and evaluation towards better performance-based budgeting and public expenditure. The study identified the fruit, vegetable and poultry subcategories as the most suited to be catapulted to the next level and stay ahead of the curve. We will also help an upgraded “Johor Inc” become more resilient, inclusive, sustainable and competitive while striving to “leave no one behind”.



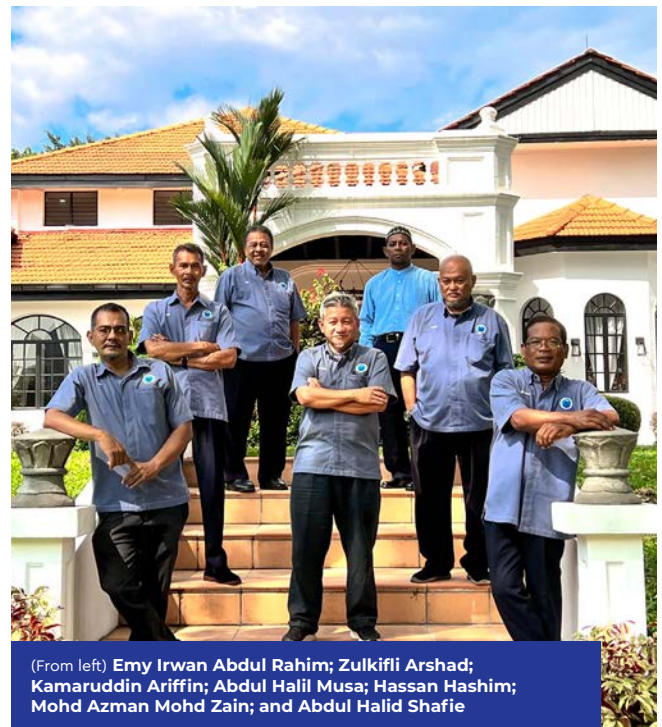
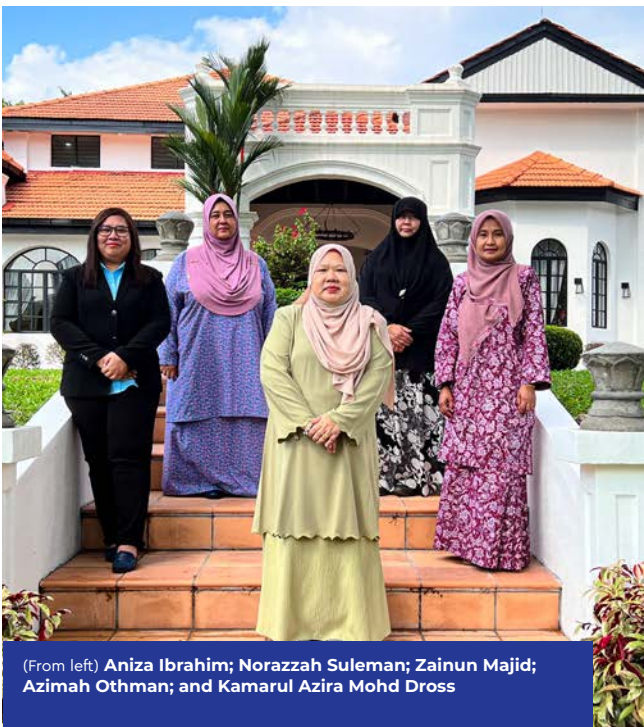
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