

INTRODUCTION

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Nations do have choices. And their fate is neither fatalistically set in stone nor static and irreversible. Much of history, from the forerunning work of Ibn Khaldun onwards, is the narrative of the rise and fall, the ebb and flow, of nations and their peoples, and much of it is surprising and twisted. Scholars and commentators alike often cite the example of how two vibrant and aspiring nations had roughly the same promising starting positions at around 1900, but just a century later, one had transformed itself into a global hyperpower while the other had descended into the largest sovereign default in history.¹

On the eve of Merdeka in 1957, this young nation of ours faced a multitude of challenges and perhaps had little right to expect to grow so dramatically, eradicate poverty so clinically, and by and large maintain peace and harmony so calmly within itself and with its neighbours. At the inaugural Khazanah Global Lectures on 12 July 2007, Kofi Annan contrasted Malaysia's development with his native Ghana, which had faced the same initial conditions when it gained independence at the same time as Malaysia. His fellow Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, made the same point a little over a month later.

While we remain eternally thankful to our very learned and impeccably gracious guests, we can be a tad more critical and ask for a more challenging comparison. While we have indeed outpaced Ghana on practically all important development indicators (with the notable exception of FIFA football rankings), perhaps the right question to ask instead is why, in the same period, the Republic of Korea has outstripped us on many of these same indicators (and quite painfully, in this Merdeka month, in the not unimportant matter of football as well!).

¹ The contrasting fortunes of the United States and Argentina are much documented. A good recent account is the first chapter of Alan Beattie's *False Economy – A Surprising Economic History of the World* (2009). Interestingly, the fortunes of the United States itself is now often being discussed in end-of-empire terms post the global financial crisis of 2008 (Ferguson et al).

It is against this backdrop that this collection of essays has been put together. It is part of an ongoing effort by Khazanah to contribute to the building of Malaysia's knowledge capital, work that started with the Khazanah Merdeka Series in 2007. We also seek to continue asking what factors will help drive our holistic development as a nation and as a people.

Development has multifaceted and intertwining dimensions – social, political, economic, and international – and all are familiar themes that were outlined and discussed in 2007 and 2008. Finally, in building on the earlier work, we wanted to find fresh perspectives on what has indeed been a tumultuous time of change within Malaysia and the world in the past two years, with the unfolding of the global financial crisis, the aftermath of the 12th General Election in March 2008, and the smooth change in national leadership on 3 April 2009.

We are very honoured and thankful to host in these pages such a diverse and eminent group of contributors. As pointed out by the editors in the following pages, this is an eclectic group, ranging from economists to artists, champion sportspersons to leading academics, statesmen to bloggers. Any attempt to capture the great heterogeneity that is Malaysia, and the full breadth of a topic as broad and deep as development, will necessarily fall short of being truly comprehensive. Indeed, this is a compilation and not a compendium of views, and astute readers will no doubt find several gaps that will need to be supplemented from other sources.

Putting together such a compilation during a time of great change also presented the challenge of keeping up not just with the validity of the contributors' views as facts rapidly changed, but in some cases, in the positions of the contributors themselves. Mufti to academic, frontbench to opposition bench, homegrown disaster-relief heroine to global relief chief – these were among the transformations that we witnessed in the course of working on this book.

Its four parts address the development dimensions of identity, institutions, economy and globalisation, with a focus on what Malaysia could, or perhaps more precisely should, be by 2057. Some topics are familiar, others less so. All, we believe, are engaging and together they form a mosaic with the essence of the book found in the subtitle that we have adopted, "Uncommon Voices, Common Aspirations". The voices are indeed uncommon, not just in their diversity of views but also in the outstanding nature of the contributors and contributions. Regardless of the position each voice takes, they are all rooted in a common aspiration, of their love and ambition for this still relatively young nation of ours.

We at Khazanah would like to extend our many thanks to those who have made this work possible. First are our esteemed contributors and their support staff, who gave their time so generously. Indeed, we are honoured that most of the essays are original material specifically written for the book and in the case of Dato' Lat, specially drawn. Then there are also those who generously contributed to earlier renditions of the Khazanah Merdeka Series, as captured in our earlier publication, *Khazanah Merdeka Series: A Year in Pictures 2007/2008*. We would also like to thank our editors and the teams both at Khazanah and at Salt Media Consultancy Sdn Bhd, who have worked tirelessly for the past 12 months to produce this book.

We reserve our most grateful thanks and deepest appreciation for our past and current Chairmen of Khazanah: Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, our fourth Prime Minister and founding Chairman of Khazanah, who graciously granted an interview entitled "Revisiting Vision 2020", which we have fittingly opened this book with; Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who encouraged us to initiate the Khazanah Merdeka Series in 2007, gave us the space to grow it and whose contribution to the Khazanah Global Lectures is recorded for posterity in his lecture, "Building Hearts and Minds"; and finally, Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, our current Chairman, for capturing the essence of our times and outlining the national agenda so clearly, some of which we have tried to capture in these pages. Indeed, in Dato' Sri Najib's closing address at the Khazanah National Development Seminar in September 2007, which this book is a direct outgrowth of, he outlined the shape of things to come:

"Our next 50-year journey is going to be challenging and exciting. It will be a phase where we will fill our hopes, aspirations and dreams as '*Bangsa Malaysia*.'"

Indeed, 1Malaysia speaks of national integration and unity of purpose in a nation confident and respectful of its diversity as a necessary condition for a harmonious, progressive and developed Malaysia. The combined wisdom of these pages and the annals of history have concluded that nations do indeed have choices. It is not the amount of natural resources, the might of its armies, the perchance of geography, the accidents of history, or the size of population that lastingly determines their fate. These and many other things matter, but what counts most is indeed always the sum total of the quality of the people and their leadership. For it is the people and the leadership that they select that make the choices. And in the brave, honest, ennobled and humane choices, lie the foundations on which the greatest and truly lasting prizes of a harmonious, progressive, humane and developed nation are built.

May the reader find this little effort of ours useful and a worthy contribution to Merdeka 2009.