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REPORT

Futures visions for South-east Asia: some early warning signals

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Organized by the Institut Kajian Dasar (IKD) or Institute for Policy Research and the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) a workshop on Futures Visions for Southeast Asia was held in Penang, Malaysia on 15–18 September 1994.

The Institut Kajian Dasar is an independent policy research organization committed to investigating economic and social development trends and practices in Malaysia. It takes into account the moral and ethical dimensions of development as well as the political and the economic.

The WFSF is an international non-governmental organization affiliated with UNESCO. It has more than 500 members from over 90 nations. Members conduct futures research and policy making and are from corporate, governmental and NGO sectors of society. They are committed to the view that the future should be kept open and that all cultures should be actively

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involved in creating just and peaceful futures.

The meeting was conducted by Dr Azizan Baharuddin, a visiting fellow at IKD and Professor Tony Stevenson, Secretary-General of the WFSF. Resource experts invited to present papers and lead workshops were Dr Ziauddin Sardar, from the UK, Dr Sohail Inayatullah, a Pakistani social scientist living in Australia, and Professor Cesar Villaneuva, from the University of La Salle in the Philippines. Participants included leading Malaysian corporate leaders, scientists, government officials and academics.

Purpose

The purpose of the workshop was to introduce futures studies to this august group of leaders and to imagine alternative futures for South-east Asia, particularly Malaysia. It is a part of a larger strategy of key leaders in the Malaysian government to broaden the economic base of Malaysia by beginning to enter the knowledge-production economic sector.

While Malaysia is already a leader in planning for the future (witness the Malaysian Vision 2020 national project) the focus of this workshop was on generating alternative visions of the future. Moreover, while planning often assumes a surprise-free environment, the IKD vision workshops was concerned with emerging issues, or

issues that might dramatically change the social, economic and cultural environment. The workshop focused not on creating one future but on investigating alternative futures. Finally, a major task was to develop consensus on preferred visions of the future—what groups and individuals desire to see happen.

The format of the conference was based on keynote speeches by Sardar, Inayatullah, Villaneuva and Stevenson, followed by scenario construction and visions workshops. The speeches provided the theoretical framing as well as specific scenarios of what might happen, while workshops provided the actual experience of doing futures studies.

Introductory session

Zia Sardar, an Islamic scholar and independent futurist, contextualized the meeting by asking what is the role of planning and futures in Islam. He argued that the Prophet himself was a great planner and it was through his vision, his ability to plan for the unforeseen and to strategize that Islam grew. Islam itself was a future-oriented ideology; it was a preferred vision of a different world when it was first uttered. However, today Muslims live in a world that is unfamiliar to them since Islamic categories of reality are not the ones that are used. The task for Muslims today is not so much to seek new converts but to re-create knowledge schemes so they more accurately represent the vision given to them by the Prophet. The operating question then is: what are the basic schemes from which an alternative Islamic polity, economy and culture can flourish? Thus, understanding the future and creating is and always has been central to Islam. While we should always trust Allah, we must not forget to tie our camel.

Opening ceremony

The inaugural session was held at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. Tony Stevenson argued that the future should be multicultural and that the world needs to begin the process of having a grand dialogue about the future. Moreover, the future should spring from a culture's own categories. The future needs to be decolonized. Stevenson argued that the

WFSF is interested in foresight, not prediction, and that future visions must be linked to current decisions. He also believes that Malaysia can provide a model for the rest of the world to learn from in that it has managed to combine culture and economic development.

The Chief Minister of Penang, who was invited to officiate at the meeting, argued that Malaysia needs to plan for the future. He pointed out that the future is especially important now because of the rate of accelerating change. The Malaysian government has already begun to use planning methods to create a future that represents national integration and industrialization.

In his concluding speech, Dr Azizan Bahari, Executive Director of IKD, raised key issues as to the future of South-east Asia. Will it be able to provide new leadership to the world? How will South-east Asia deal with new technologies such as telecommunications? Will this lead to closer links or to increased dependency on Western formations of news? How will changing demographics impact South-east Asia? Can we imagine a cultural renaissance coming from South-east Asia? He argued that we need to investigate these and other issues and help not only keep up with the rapidity of a changing future, but be part of the global process of creating the future.

Keynote presentations

In the first session, Sohail Inayatullah examined the politics of forecasting methods. He covered methods such as trend analysis and cross-impact analysis, arguing that while they were useful in predicting the future, they leave out too many variables and often the social assumptions behind these variables are left unexplored as well. Inayatullah also examined causal layered analysis and emerging issues analysis, examining, for example, the implications if Malaysia becomes a world intellectual centre. Methods, he argued, should attempt to be predictive, interpretive and critical, that is, asking not only what will the future be, but how different cultures and traditions construct the idea of the future. He also argued that we need to unpack the assumptions and the politics of particular statements made about the future.

Inayatullah concluded his session with

alternative scenarios for ASEAN. These were a ceremonial ASEAN, that is, a failed ASEAN; an ASEAN that becomes culturally, politically and economically linked; and an ASEAN that remains tied to previous colonial links, that is, one with strong vertical links with the West and weak horizontal links between members.

In his lecture, Cesar Villanueva used the Philippine case to discuss alternative futures for South-east Asia. Using the metaphors of typhoons, grand waves of change, he argued that the first typhoon is the rush to become a dragon, to export the nation into wealth. The second typhoon is internal migration (from the rural to the city) and external migration (labour moving across all borders in search of better living conditions). The third typhoon is the spread of the tourism/consumerism paradigm and the resultant costs to the environment. The last typhoon is the growth of non-governmental organizations, the possibility of a strong civil society.

The contending scenarios for Southeast Asia in the year 2020 are as follows. First the 'Dinosaur Future'—in this future, the entire region achieves developed status. Traditional values are replaced by the post-industrial values of leisure, artificial communities, and spacelessness. In the second scenario, of 'Seas of Separation', ethnic conflict and cultural differences lead to fragmented communities and nations, each in fear of the other. The latest technologies are used to ensure that the poor, the Other, do not cross over into one's own community. In the third scenario, the 'Mosaic Future', communities are empowered, federated and based on cultural and environmental concerns. Communication technologies aid in recovering community and economic development aids in creating strong democracies committed to spiritual and environmental interconnectedness. For Villaneuva, the key to understanding the future is to examine the future of communities, asking what forces are impacting them, and what they are doing to create their own future in the midst of these typhoons.

In his lecture, Tony Stevenson discussed the future of communication. The emerging communications and information technologies (C&IT) are set to change the nature of the social fabric like nothing before, he argued. But in what way is still unclear, believes Stevenson.

On superficial inspection, these C&IT seem to be shrinking the world in terms of linkages across spatial and cultural differences. But, at a closer look, this shrinkage could be leeching the very creativity from a traditional sense of community that thrives on local initiative, decentralized autonomy and diversity.

Stevenson argued that the human ability to symbolize has transformed social interaction and the inner, human experience. Developing into speech, and later writing, this symbolizing has been at the very heart of humankind's manipulation of plant and animal life.

The globalization spawned by this advanced, symbolic system and its impingement on our species' own biophysical homeland, now stands ready to turn back on the very social system which created such conditions. This backlash will be aided and abetted by the emerging information superhighway. There are thus three contradictory, if not competing tensions between: globalization and localization; centralization and decentralization; and standardization and diversification. They represent the paradoxes of C&IT.

Stevenson believes that there are four possible scenarios. A 'Drab Uniform' scenario where new technology homogenizes social relations. A 'Gold Lamé and Sackcloth' scenario in which there come to be two worlds, an information- and money-rich scenario, and information- and money-poor scenario. In a 'Rich Tapestry' future, cultures blend together to create a new future. In the 'Bazaar' scenario, culture remains less blended, with technology making the world a giant marketplace of many forms and shapes of ideas, goods and identities.

Zia Sardar spoke about the centrality of values in thinking about the future. Even while postmodernism takes us to positions of cultural relativity, as we design and think about the future, we should not forget that there are certain universals, even if these are interpreted differently. Islam in this sense becomes a compelling vision of the future. Values remain central to Islam, giving us a vision where the environment, social justice and concern for the other are uniquely integrated with spiritual values which give us direction. Unlike modernity, which has replaced values by instrumental

rationality, Sardar argued for a vision where who we are and what we believe, and how we treat others is central.

Workshop

These keynote speeches were interspersed with special group meetings which functioned as practical workshops. In the first workshop emerging issues and metaphors were discussed. Emerging issues are those that have potentially a high degree of impact but are generally not known. Discerning them is difficult since the present forces them into conventional categories.

Some of the issues presented by participants were:

(1) Deterioration of the natural environment.
(2) Questioning of development.
(3) Rise of consumerism.
(4) Disintegration of traditional social structure.
(5) Polarization within society because of religious fundamentalism.
(6) Malaysia playing a dominant role in regional and international affairs.
(7) A shortage of skilled labour.
(8) New types of leisure and the problem of too much free time.
(9) A greater flow of information within and into Malaysia.
(10) Illegal immigrants.
(11) Increasing cults.
(12) Increased domestic violence and child abuse as the family begins to breakdown.
(13) Increase in pornography.
(14) New diseases.
(15) Environmental problems such as deforestation and waste disposal.
(16) Urban problems such as traffic jams.
(17) More critical attitudes towards royalty.
(18) Emergenc of a generation of Malay entrepreneurs.
(19) New converts to Islam.

These issues were criticized as being overly present-focused, as many issues considered 'emerging' had already emerged. Resource experts challenged participants to move farther into the future, asking them to imagine second- and third-order impacts, to begin to think of the impossible, as they develop their own preferred visions of Malaysia and South-east Asia. This chal-lenge led to participants creating vision statements and futures such as a culturally and politically integrated ASEAN and the establishment of global centres of learning in Malaysia.

In addition to emerging issues analysis, which helps both forecast the future and contest conventional categories of the future, metaphors give us seeds as to what the future can be. Metaphors help us envision the future. For example, the metaphor of the ocean gives a sense of an unbounded future. The dice gives us the metaphor of total chance. However, each metaphor misses various factors. The ocean, for the Muslim, misses the role of family, community and the divine. The dice, as well, does not take into account destiny. In the workshop, the task was to investigate which metaphors within Malay society best describe the future.

It was argued that Malay proverbs and metaphors portray the whole spectrum of Malay sociocultural life of the past, the present and the future. Malay proverbs enforce Malay consciousness with regards to time management, hard work, a state of preparedness for the future, integration into Malay sociocultural life, village solidarity, leadership roles, Malay identity *vis-à-vis* other ethnic groups, as well as Malay political leadership. With respect to the future, metaphors generally are agriculture based, such as *'Barjagung-jagung sementara menant padi masak'* or 'plant maize while waiting for the paddy to be harvested', that is, be prepared for the future.

Other proverbs of importance in Malay are:

(1) *Sediakan payung sebelum hujan* (prepare the umbrella before it rains).
(2) *Tuah ayam terletak di kaki, tuah manusia tidak siapa yang tahu* (the good fortune of a rooster can be seen by looking at its claws; the good fortune of a man, however, is invisible).
(3) *Dengar guruh langit, air di tempayan dicurahkan* (when thunder is heard, water in the storage vessel is thrown away).
(4) *Tidak Melayu hilang di dunia* (Malays can never be expelled from the world, they have a strong spirit of survival).
(5) *Bukit sama didaki, lurah sama dituruni* (together we ascend the mountains and together we descend the valleys).
(6) *Bulat air kerana pembentung, bulat*

manusia kerana mufakat (water is con-
centrated because of the vessel that
contains it, but people are strong on the
basis of mutual understanding).

In general, Malays are occupied with *adat*
or tradition: *Biar mati anak jangan mati adat*
(one must never lose sight of one's roots
and moral tradition). The above proverbs
provide a basis for futures consciousness in
the context of cultural unity.

Visions

The next group session began directly to
move into visions. Zia Sardar interviewed
various individuals and asked them how
they see the future, that is, what a day in
their life would look like in 30–50 years.
For one, this meant a new Kuala Lumpur
that was highly technological and environ-
mentally friendly. Public transport would
be inviting, eventually almost replacing the
car. The city would be accessible and
architecturally rich. For another, it was a
world where they could use helicopters to
fly to meetings. News would be people-
oriented, Malaysia would be less Kuala-
Lumpur-centred, and the country would be
connected by numerous highways. A third
person saw a nation where the people were
organized around the values of the Quran,
where the *ulema* were scientists and scien-
tists were *ulema*.

However, in this person's vision, there
was much to be worried about. There
would be more patients seeking profes-
sional help, especially women, as men
would not raise families and, in fact, would
continue to exploit women. Divorces,
depression, and other psychological prob-
lems would continue to incrase. Another
person saw South-east Asia as an integrated
region. It would be multicultural, multi-
religious, and multilingual. The operating
value would be living in diversity. One
participant described in detail the monetary
system of the time, largely one where
Malaysians had a great deal of ownership in
the economy. It would be a shareholding
democracy, where there would be a happy
coexistence between Islamic finance and
secular institutions. The Malaysian ringitt
would continue to gain in strength until
it became valued at double the US$.
Politicians would be increasingly scrutin-
ized and the nation would have a strong
social support system. Development thus

would be sustainable, integrated and
holistic. Research institutions would be
focused on finding ways to prevent natural
calamities. In a startling high-technology
vision, one participant described a world
where there would be no politicians, where
computers would do almost everything.
Power would be decentralized into the
communities. However, even with strong
self-determination, there would be agreed
universal values. The United Nations would
play a much stronger role in the world,
and there would be regional governance
centres.

These visions generally showed the
optimism the group had. They emphasized
the need for universal values even within
diversity. They saw Malaysia and the region
as culturally, economically, and even polit-
ically integrated in the long-term future.

Scenarios

This workshop laid the groundwork for
collective, group scenarios and visions of
the future. In the discussion on scenarios, a
range of scenarios was posited as ideal
types. The first was the continued growth,
status-quo scenario. This assumes that the
past will continue into the future, basically
more of the same. The second was the
collapse scenario, which assumes that
because of contradictions in the first
scenario there would be a social, techno-
logical or economic collapse. The third
assumes a return to a past steady state, prior
to growth. The last scenario is of the
transformational type, which assumes that
there will be fundamental societal, techno-
logical or spiritual changes. The past will
not continue; instead, there will be a
rupture and some new type of society
would emerge.

The groups divided into two, one
focusing on the status-quo scenario and the
other on transformation. In the status-quo
scenario for Malaysia in 2020, it was
assumed that economic growth would con-
tinue, and that there would be political
stability with no foreign interventions and
no natural disasters.

It was predicted that there would be a
decrease in the gap between the North and
South-east Asia; that South-east Asia would
become increasingly democratic, adopting
a soft-authoritarian type of polity. The
dominant paradigm would be that of

TABLE 1. BACKCAST EXERCISE

1995
1. South-east Asian multinational corporations develop.
2. South-east Asian leaders have summit meeting.
3. Liberalization of economic policies from state to regional level is agreed and implementation steps begun.

1996
1. Establishment of South-east Asia Funds (mobilization of region funds for investment overseas) and South-east Asia Investment and Development Bank (providing assistance for poorer countries within South-east Asia).
2. Highly skilled and high quality human resource base continues to emerge.
3. Agreement on R&D goals and policies reached.
4. ASEAN University set up.

1997
1. South-east Asia high-technology centre (run by private corporation) is established. It helps move the region from mere manufacturing to invention.
2. SEA leadership summit reaffirms goal of an industrialized region by 2020.

1998
1. High-growth region image is promoted.
2. Highly skilled and high-quality human resource continues.
3. Five major stockmarkets in the region flourish. Capitalism continues to grow.

2000
1. Reverse investment from the region to the rest of the world.

2001
1. Great depression in the First World.
2. SEA leaders' summit attempts to soften impact of depression on South-east Asia.

2010
1. New period of growth centred around the Pacific Rim begins.
2. Signing of memorandum between SEA and the world leads to greater integration of the region with the global economy.

2020
1. Malaysia achieves its vision; becomes an industrialized nation.
2. SEA leaders' summit continues; now meeting yearly.

2030
1. ASEAN nations are able to sustain high economic growth development status.

2050
1. Technology and capital transfer from SEA to the rest of the world.

consumer-led economic development. Economism would dominate culturism and environmentalism. Malaysia, in particular, would begin to have greater control of its manufacturing. Moreover, it would be technology, not politics, that would lead to greater regional cooperation. Cities would continue to grow, with megacities emerging. Poverty would be reduced, natural resources would be exploited, and the people would be cheerful but vacant.

Using this scenario, participants attempted to backcast from 2050 to the present. One group's effort at this is shown in *Table 1*.

The transformational scenario is in some ways similar to the status-quo in that economics and technology play a central role in driving the future; however, in this vision, language, religion and politics are equally important.

In this scenario, Malaysia plays a much more central role in the political, cultural and economic integration of South-east Asia. To begin with, transportation will be pollution-free and perhaps even self-powered. Along with high technologies such as robotics and telecommunications systems, there would be extensive reforestation. At the political level, integration will be quite rapid with the development of an ASEAN Parliament, an ASEAN court of Justice, and a rotating head of ASEAN. Travel would be possible without passports, at least in the region. An ASEAN passport would emerge which would be respected worldwide. Malay would most likely become the common language of the region, although English would still be important. The gap between the rich and poor would be dramatically reduced, partly by export economies, partly through more local forms of tourism, and partly through the success of Islamic welfare economic practices. Agriculture would become increasingly mechanized. There would be a common currency and a common economic policy. Eventually, a common defence policy would emerge. The region, however, would be integrated into the world economy but on its own terms, not those of the North. Malaysia would become a centre of Islamic learning, particularly, Islamic medicine. Both Western and Eastern medicines would become commonplace. Society as a whole would become caring, with strong social and family

networks. In addition, daycare would become statutory. The region would be a cultural, economic and religious centre—a renaissance in all areas of life.

This group chose not to backcast the entire scenario but only to determine how Malaysia would become a centre for Islamic medicine. By and large, it was argued that more funds would go in that area, cures for numerous diseases would come from Islamic medicine, and individuals and societies would be attracted to it because of cost savings and because of its holistic nature. In addition, since it blended Western and Eastern medicine, individuals from all over the region and world would be attracted to it. Breakthroughs would come, however, when deadly viruses were cured through Islamic medicine. In addition, as Malaysia and the region became richer, instead of spending money on arms, national surplus would go to health and education. A sophisticated centre for medicine would be established in Kuala Lumpur. Technology, coupled with holism, that is, an eclectic focus, would lead to the development of Malaysia as an Islamic centre, particularly for medicine.

Resolutions

On the final day, group visions and backcasts were presented to the group. After a lengthy discussion, a series of resolutions were adopted. There were:

(1) Expand participation of this type of futures workshop across ethnic lines and across various disciplines.
(2) Indigenous discourses should be used to understand futures.
(3) There should be more and longer workshops.
(4) The Prime Minister should be invited to such a course or meeting.
(5) IKD should provide a Reader of futures studies.
(6) Help establish an ASEAN Court of Justice.
(7) There should be research to investigate the results of the workshop.
(8) There should be a critical collaboration of futurists and social scientists on futures methods that are South-east Asian focused.

To conclude, the workshop began the process of thinking about the future.

Tensions existed between those who wanted an eclectic religious model and those committed to one particular religion. However, all believed that values are central for the future of the region. Many aspired for increased integration, some for total integration, others just for economic integration in the region. All believed that South-east Asia, particularly Malaysia, had an important and vital role to play in the emerging global ecumene.