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Tajuk : Leveraging Malaysia's seat on the ICA Global Board

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Cooperatives operate below conventional statecraft while connecting millions of citizens, producers, workers and consumers across borders making cooperative diplomacy a potentially useful complement to Malaysia's economic engagement, particularly across Asean and the Global South.

Malaysia's return to the International Cooperative Alliance's Global Board should be understood as more than a ceremonial achievement.

The election of Angkatan Koperasi Kebangsaan Malaysia Bhd (Angkasa) President, Datuk Seri Dr Abdul Fattah Abdullah, for the 2026–2030 term places a Malaysian cooperative leader within a global governance institution representing more than one billion cooperative members and approximately three million cooperatives worldwide.

The opportunity is substantial, but its value will depend on how Malaysia uses the seat. The election was held during the ICA General Assembly in Panama City on September 15.

ICA records indicate that Abdul Fattah was one of 15 at-large directors elected from 24 candidates. Seven were returning directors and eight were new, while 116 voters represented 193 ICA member organisations from 66 countries.

Dr Ariel Guarco of Argentina was re-elected unopposed as ICA President. Together with regional vice-presidents, sectoral representatives and committee leaders, the directors constitute the 30-member Global Board.

Abdul Fattah is the only Asean representative on the ICA Global Board for the 2026–2030 term, consistent with his role as President of the Asean Cooperative Organization (ACO). This regional distinction strengthens Malaysia's institutional standing and deserves appropriate government attention.

Recognition, however, should be linked to a practical national strategy ensuring that cooperative experience and priorities are reflected in policy deliberation, including through suitable parliamentary channels and, where appropriate, consideration of representation through a Senate appointment.

Institutional continuity further strengthens this development. Angkasa Vice-President Datuk Kamarudin Ismail served on the preceding 2022–2026 Board, while ICA's profile of Abdul Fattah records his regional responsibilities as Vice-President of the ICA Asia-Pacific Regional Board, President of the Asean Cooperative Organization since 2014, and Chair of the ICA-AP Trade and Business Committee.

This experience matters because international representation becomes valuable only when networks are converted into practical cooperation.

The Panama gathering provided a broader policy context. Jointly organised by ICA and Cooperatives of the Americas, the conference adopted the theme "Building Bridges: Cooperative Contributions for a Peaceful World."

Its Panama Declaration affirmed cooperation as a force for peace, justice, democracy, inclusion, solidarity and shared prosperity. These principles are not merely diplomatic language.

Cooperatives combine enterprise with member ownership and democratic governance, potentially linking economic participation with stronger communities and wider social inclusion.

That proposition is increasingly connected to sustainable development. ICA and the United Nations Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives have produced policy briefs covering all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Their consolidated 2026 report draws on cases from nearly 90 countries and argues that cooperatives can contribute across the 2030 Agenda.

Such evidence should be treated as a policy resource, not as proof that every cooperative automatically produces sustainable outcomes. Governance quality, financial discipline, scale and measurable impact remain essential.

Malaysia's domestic platform is considerable. Official Cooperative Commission statistics for 2025 record 16,468 cooperatives and 7,330,531 members, with RM186.75 billion in assets and RM81.62 billion in turnover.

These figures demonstrate economic reach, but size alone cannot guarantee productivity, innovation or resilience.

Malaysia's ICA presence should therefore become a channel for benchmarking governance, expanding professional capacity and identifying credible models that can be adapted locally.

The commercial dimension deserves equal attention. Cooperation among cooperatives is one of the movement's defining principles. Malaysia can use deeper ICA relationships to explore cross-border procurement, halal supply chains, agriculture, finance, digital platforms, tourism, renewable energy and community enterprises.

Yet international memoranda are not outcomes. Partnerships should be assessed by transactions completed, markets opened, capabilities transferred, member incomes improved and sustainable value created.

There is also a diplomatic opportunity. Cooperatives operate below conventional statecraft while connecting millions of citizens, producers, workers and consumers across borders. This makes cooperative diplomacy a potentially useful complement to Malaysia's economic engagement, particularly across Asean and the Global South.

Abdul Fattah's regional responsibilities provide an institutional bridge, but the agenda must remain grounded in member benefit rather than prestige.

The next four years should therefore be treated as a mandate for delivery. ANGKASA could publish clear international priorities, establish measurable indicators for partnerships arising from ICA engagement, strengthen Malaysian participation in global policy discussions, and report periodically to members on results.

Universities, regulators and cooperative institutions should also examine which international models genuinely improve productivity, governance and inclusion in Malaysia.

A board seat creates access, not automatic influence. Panama has opened a door.

Malaysia's achievement will be measured by whether that access produces stronger cooperatives, better livelihoods, deeper international commerce and a credible Malaysian contribution to a more inclusive global economy.

Representation becomes meaningful when international standing is translated into accountable domestic progress.

That is the standard against which this four-year Malaysian mandate should ultimately be assessed.

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