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## Right connections

The head of Brunei's biggest architecture practice is a passionate advocate for entrepreneurs and SMEs

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**L**isa Ibrahim never imagined one day being at the helm of Brunei's biggest architecture firm. After all, the CEO and executive director of Arkitek Ibrahim entered the profession with no background in architecture and no interest in arts and design.

But Ibrahim has always been keen on being her own boss. And it is this passion that has helped her steer the company founded by her late father in 1978.

The 40-year-old architectural firm is known for designing some of Brunei's key buildings and monuments, including the Ministry of Finance building, the Istana Nurul Izzah palace and the Jerudong International School Arts Centre.

The same passion drives Ibrahim to promote entrepreneurship in Brunei. As Brunei's representative to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC), Ibrahim lobbies for the passing of policies and programs to benefit small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

"Growing up with my dad, I always wanted to have my own company," she told *China Daily Asia Weekly*. "The mentality then was: you study, then you get a government job and you are set for life. But I never thought of getting a government job."

With huge revenues propping up one of Asia's biggest fuel-exporting countries, most Bruneian workers aim for either a government role or one in the booming energy sector.

However, Ibrahim was determined to tread a different path. She still recalls running errands for her father's architecture firm during her summer holidays. That experience not only earned her pocket money, it also nurtured her entrepreneurial dream.

After finishing her A-levels in 1992 at Bedford High School in Bedfordshire, England, Ibrahim studied business management at Leeds Metropolitan University. Her grand plan after her degree was to have her own business. Returning to Brunei to manage Arkitek Ibrahim was not part of that plan.

But when her father died in 1994, Ibrahim knew that she had to help her mother and younger sister. Ibrahim graduated in 1995 and returned home to work for the family busi-

ness. First, to learn the ropes, she was tasked to become an assistant manager.

At 31, she became executive director and CEO of Arkitek Ibrahim. Ibrahim may not have been an architect but she knew how to run a business. The architectural firm thrived because she served as the middle person who balanced the clients' plans with the architects' artistic vision.

"I learned that architects are good at designing buildings but not good at managing a business," she said.

Ibrahim worked to protect her father's legacy while growing the family business, but the entrepreneur in her wanted to do something on her own. So, after running Arkitek Ibrahim for two years, she established a side venture, LILS Management Services, to help entrepreneurs set up companies.

Ibrahim found her business niche after getting frustrated with the difficulty and high costs of doing business in Brunei.

"It was hard to conduct business in Brunei as a young woman. When I came back (to Brunei in 1995), I didn't know how to incorporate companies," Ibrahim said. She then met other aspiring entrepreneurs who had no means to pay steep fees to law and accountancy firms for the processing of incorporation papers.

"These entrepreneurs didn't want to pay such a high amount (to set up a business). I realized there was a gap in the market," she said.

Ibrahim also opened up a short-lived coworking business center in Brunei's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. She offered a cheaper, shared office space for entrepreneurs, but the concept was ahead of its time and the business soon came to an end.

LILS Management Services, however, was a stepping stone for Ibrahim to tread another path — entrepreneurship advocacy.

Then in her early 20s, she was running two businesses and strived to network in a business sector still dominated by an "old boys' club". She was not alone, however. She found like-minded peers who sought support in terms of starting and growing a business.

In 2000, Ibrahim together with other Bruneian entrepreneurs launched the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Brunei (YEAB). She was YEAB's founding president, and under her leadership the organization held regular meetings where



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members shared their experiences and business opportunities.

Ibrahim deepened her work in promoting the interests of Bruneian entrepreneurs by joining global and regional business forums.

In 1999, when Brunei was preparing to host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 2000 Summit, Ibrahim served as liaison officer for Hamdillah Abdul Wahab, the chairman of the APEC SME Business Forum and CEO Summit in 2000.

Ibrahim offered her consultancy services to Abdul Wahab. She was then appointed as executive support for the chairman of the APEC SME Business Forum and CEO Summit, staffer of the APEC Business Advisory Council, and task force leader for the business forum's media, public relations, publicity and promotions committee.

Working during the APEC summit in Brunei made Ibrahim more aware of issues affecting SMEs in Asia-Pacific. After stepping down as YEAB president in 2008, she went on to represent Brunei in international groups.

Ibrahim was appointed Brunei representative to the ASEAN-BAC in 2013, during the 23rd ASEAN Summit held in Brunei. She was subsequently appointed as Brunei representative to the ASEAN-Korea Business Council and the East Asia Business Council.

By representing Brunei in regional forums, Ibrahim learned about the best practices in the region. She also used this post to propose business-friendly reforms, such as reducing processing time for foreign workers' permits and setting up an SME center.

Ibrahim also realized how Brunei's participation in regional groupings

can open up a bigger market for Bruneian SMEs.

Market size has always been a sore point for Bruneian entrepreneurs. The oil-rich sultanate is among the world's most affluent countries, with an annual per capita income of over \$28,000. But Brunei's small population — roughly 400,000 — makes it difficult for domestic businesses to grow.

"Brunei has a very small market, so it has to be part of ASEAN in order to get access to a bigger marketplace," Ibrahim said.

Despite these challenges, Ibrahim remains optimistic about Brunei's SME sector. For instance, the depressed oil prices in 2014-16 were a wake-up call to Bruneians and encouraged young people to strike out on their own.

"It pushed people to go (into) business. They know that they have to work harder as there are no jobs available," Ibrahim said.

Brunei has long depended on its oil and gas export revenues. The oil and gas sector alone accounts for about half of the country's GDP and roughly 90 percent of government revenues.

When crude prices fell to a 13-year low in 2016, Brunei's economy contracted by 2.6 percent, according to the Asian Development Bank. This also cramped public spending. In the 2016-17 financial year, Brunei's budget was slashed to 5.6 billion Brunei dollars (\$4.1 billion) — 11 percent lower than the previous fiscal year.

Ibrahim sees how the government actively promotes entrepreneurship, noting that Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah is encouraging the country's youth to become entrepreneurs.

The Sultan recently said the government will upgrade training pro-

### Bio

#### Lisa Ibrahim

CEO and executive director, Arkitek Ibrahim

#### Education:

1995: BA in Business Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

#### Career milestones:

2005-present: CEO and executive director, Arkitek Ibrahim

2013-present: Brunei representative, ASEAN Business Advisory Council

2000-08: President, Young Entrepreneurs Association of Brunei

#### Awards:

2013: Global Leader of Tomorrow Award, World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland

2009: Pingat Indah Kerja Baik, medal for excellent public service, conferred by the Sultan of Brunei

#### Quick takes:

##### What keeps you busy when you're not working?

My daughter. She's 15 years old and we go out a lot. We go to the mall, we watch movies, and we do her homework. We also travel a lot in Europe to visit my mom in Belgium and my sister in London.

##### What is the most important lesson that you want to impart to your daughter?

Financial intelligence. I'm teaching my daughter how to manage her money at an early age. So I got my daughter to open a bank account. I'm teaching her how to spend and how to save money. She also makes extra money by baking cakes and selling them to her classmates. I lend her the money to buy the ingredients and she repays me after she sells her cakes.

**Date of birth:** March 16, 1974

grams, provide physical and digital infrastructure, financial support and market access to help young entrepreneurs, according to news site Biz Brunei.

Ibrahim added that the establishment of Darussalam Enterprise, a body that nurtures Bruneian startups, has "created an ecosystem for entrepreneurs to thrive".

Ibrahim plans to continue to work on entrepreneurship advocacy, either as a life or executive coach. "I like the idea of coaching. I realized that coaches don't tell people what to do. They help them to find their way to answer their questions," she said.

What Ibrahim likes most about running a business and joining business groups is developing personal connections — a reason why coaching is the next step for her.

"A lot of things move because of the personal connections. It's not just about business," she said.