

ISLAMIC DIMENSION IN MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Introduction

Islam is central to the formation of Malaysian foreign policy towards the Islamic world. Islam as the official religion of Malaysia enshrined in its constitution plays important role in shaping Malaysian foreign policy. Foreign policy plays an important role as tool in persuing national interest in the realm of foreign relations. It is a manifestation of domestic policy and interplays in response to Malaysian foreign relations. It is also the instrument used by every sovereign country in pursuing its national interest at the international levels.

In Malaysia, the constitutional elements of Islam and Islam-oriented leadership have significantly influenced its foreign policy decision making. This is manifested through the role and contributions that Malaysia has made in the international scenes to represent the Muslim world and non-Muslim countries' voices in many issues. Malaysia as the champion of third world countries and the Muslim world through its position as the chairman of the Non Alignment Movement (NAM) and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) has been responsible to deal with many universal issues such as justice, equality and peace. To Malaysia, the transformation of society into a moral order is the highest quest in its foreign policy. Hence, leadership of the country is guided with Islamic principle to meet such responsibility with all its capability as well as to wage a determined struggle without respite all its life to defeat the

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force of evil and to enthrone the forces of goodness. This principle is framed as such in accordance with *Jihad* mentioned in the holy Quran which means;

"O ye who believe! Keep duty to Allah, seek the Medium of Approach (al- wasilah) unto Him, and strive with might and main (jahidu) in His way (which comprehend spiritual and moral tazkiyah at individual and collective levels); that ye may succeed"

(al-Maidah 5: 35)

And in another verse;

"...And strive hard for Allah (which includes eradication of vice and establishment of virtue on earth) as is due to Him hard striving (jihad). He has chosen you (for this striving), and has not placed upon you any narrowness in religion..."

(al-Hajj 22:78)

This article aims to highlight and analyze the Islamic dimensions of Malaysian foreign policy towards the Muslim world. It attempts to highlight Malaysian foreign policy on issues affecting Islam in relation to the Muslim world. This article is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the main sources of Malaysian foreign policy namely constitutional basis (tangible) and religious responsibility (intangible). The second part discusses specifically the dimensions of Malaysian foreign policy that deal with Islam-oriented international issues affecting the Muslim world.

Determinants of Malaysian Foreign Policy

Malaysian foreign policy forms its shape from two grounds. The first ground is 'internal' in nature comprises domestic polity that influences the affairs of the statecraft and its policy towards internal problems. This is the tangible aspect that guarantees legitimacy to the state to formulate necessary policy for the benefits of its citizens. The second ground is 'external' in nature which responds to the demands and pressures from

international communities. This has to do with the responsibility of the country to pursue its national interest and perception in accordance to the rational choice (what the country thinks right and just to be pursued on). This is the intangible aspect of Islamic dimension in Malaysian foreign policy as it touches the religious obligation and responsibility of the government to fulfill the objectives of Islamic laws (*Maqasid Syar'iyah*). It is important to note that both grounds are interrelated in the sense that the latter (external) is the manifestation of the former (internal) in a spectrum of country's sovereignty as a player in the international scenes. Thus Malaysian Foreign policy towards the Muslim world is moulded from these basis.

The Constitutional Basis of Islam in Malaysia

The Malaysia internal politics - be it the government, the statesmanship, rule and regulation, human rights, freedom of speech and conscience, politico and socio-economic development and others – are prearranged by the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. This is the law of the land that trumps everything on the name of national security and interest. What is important to note in this constitution in relation to Islam is its special content of Islam as the official religion of the country. Article 3 clause 1 declares that Islam is the official state religion, clause 3 and 5 allocate that Rulers of States be declared Heads of Religion of Islam by State Constitution; and in the absence of Muslim rulers (states of Malacca, Penang, Sabah, and Sarawak) or in Federal Territories (Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya) the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Supreme Head of State) is declared the head of religion of Islam. Such unique content endorses the government of Malaysia to formulate policies relevant to

1. There are several prevailing views and criticisms stating that the Constitution is of a secular origin and cannot be the basis for an Islamic States to operate. I will not cover this question in this paper but suffice to consider, after taking reality into consideration, that in the context of colonial era and historical background of Malaysia or other Muslim countries, is it possible to establish an Islamic constitution at instance? If, Yes in what form and how?. In my opinion, the constitution isn't the sole determinant factor that identify an Islamic state, rather what is important is the substance or the process that runs the affairs of the state that complies with the Shariah plays significant role in determining the character of an Islamic state. For further details of Malaysia as a case study of an Islamic state, refer Abdul Rashid Moten, Malaysia: An Islamic State, IKIM Journal of Islam and International Affairs, Vol. 1 No.2, 2003, IKIM: Kuala Lumpur.

Islam.¹

The constitutional basis of Islam significantly contributes to the formulation of Malaysia foreign policy towards the Muslim world. One of the most important aspects that shapes Malaysian foreign policy is the Islamic inclination provided by the constitutional definition of Islam.² The proclamation of 'Islam as the official state religion' enshrined in the constitution has become the interpretative basis for leaders and policy makers in Malaysia to deal with foreign policy. In-depth study of Malaysian foreign policies indicates that Malaysian foreign policies are tailored by taking into consideration the needs and inspiration of the Muslim society in the country as well as the visions of Muslim leaders and scholars within and outside the country. Furthermore the diplomatic missions sent abroad by the government of Malaysia are carried out with the assent of Yang Di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia, the Head of the State as well as the Head of Religion of Islam in the country, who himself is a Muslim.

The Islamic constitutional basis has invariably affected the shaping and formulation of Malaysian foreign policy towards wider Islamic agendas to cater internal and external issues of the *Ummah*. The continuous debates on various interpretation of the constitutional basis of Islam in Malaysia does not obstruct the government of Malaysia to pursue its Islamic-oriented policies.

The Basis of Religious Responsibility

In Malaysia, the belief of non-separation of religion and state is indeed prevailing. State and religion serve dual function as state implements the rights of Islamic doctrines obliged by the trust received from its muslim majority citizens. The complete identification of religion with race is so fundamental to the Malay thought that religion of Islam has become an important constitutional element in the legal definition of

2. Mohd Salleh Abbas, "Traditional Elements of the Malaysian Constitution" in *The Constitution of Malaysia: Further Perspectives and Developments*, F.A Trindade & H.P Lee, (eds.), Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 4-8

“Malay”. The constitutional definition of relation between Malays and Islam has been allocated in Article 160 of the Constitution that a Malay is “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs”.³

Religious identification with race in the case of the Malay in Malaysia significantly contributes to the domestic political pattern. It initiates policy-makers on the part of the Government to take necessary progressive actions towards inculcating and strengthening Islamic values within the system. Historically, the Government of Malaysia has faced pressures from Islamic-associated movements that had been motivated from the Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1979. Such massive and successful revolution had created tendencies of radical Islam in Malaysia to bring aggressive measure in implementing what they “think” Islam is.⁴ Contradictory, it is stated that “the roots of the resurgence lay in a new intensity of feeling about the place of Islam in people’s personal and political lives. The resurgence was aimed at making Muslims a better Muslim, not at converting non-Muslims. It was motivated partly by a desire to assert one’s Malay identity”.⁵

The sensitivity of the Islamic resurgence in this country in the 70’s, 80’s and early 90’s as well as the continues challenge/presure from the main Islamic opposition (PAS) party, have compelled the leading government (the National Front) to factor Islam into its foreign policy as a strategy to accentrate its Islamic credentials *vis-à-vis* its political pressure and opponents in this country. Malay culture in the context of Malaysian

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3. This was taken from the definition given by Section 2 of the Nationality Enactment of the Malay State passed in 1952 to supplement the citizenship provisions in the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1948. But prior to this, the definition of “Malay” can be found in various state enactments. For example in Section 2 of the Malay Reservation Enactment 1933 (F.M.S Cap 14) and in Section 55 (ii) of the Forest Enactment 1935 (F.M.S Cap.153), a Malay is defined as “a person belonging to any Malay race who habitually speaks the Malay language or any Malayan language and profess religion of Islam.
 4. For brief reference on the impact of Iranian Revolution refer to Shanti Nair, Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy, pp. 28, 73-75,
 5. R.S Milne & Diane K. Mauzy, Malaysian Politics under Mahathir, Routledge, 1999. pp. 80-6

society and Islam is taken into consideration in formulating foreign policy while other cultures compliment the policy formulation in this country. The Malaysian foreign policy conforms to the domestic polity which justifies the involvement of leaders' religious inclination and cultures of the Malaysian society towards the manifestation of policy that reflects those needs. This can be observed in the premiership of Malaysia's four leaders since independence namely Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj (1957-1970), Tun Abdul Razak (1970-1976), Tun Hussein Onn (1976-1981) and Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003).⁶

The basis of religious responsibility in the formulation of foreign policy is corresponding to the true teachings of Islam. In Islamic belief system, 'duty' and 'rights' of an individual - in private and public spheres - are of two intertwined concepts. The elaboration of this is that the Quranic moral code is based on the emphasis on 'obligation' or 'duty' in contrast to the emphasis on 'right'. This emphasis has been mentioned in Surah al-Maidah verse 44 means;

"It was We who revealed the law (to Moses): therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the Prophets who bowed (as in Islam) to Allah's will, by the Rabbis and the doctors of law: for to them was entrusted the protection of Allah's book, and they were witnesses thereto: therefore fear not men, but fear Me, and sell not My signs for a miserable price. If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah has revealed, they are (no better than) wrongdoers"

The implications of the emphasis respectively on the duty and right are that of 'right', is a right against someone and 'duty' is a duty towards someone. Right means that someone else owes something to us. For, when we say "it is our right", it means someone has to perform a duty for us. On the contrary, when we say: 'it is our duty', it means that someone has right against us.

6. For further detail about Malaysian foreign policy within the OIC under the four prime ministers, refer S.M Saifuddeen S.M Salleh & Suzalie Mohamad, "Malaysia and OIC" in Abdul Razak Baginda (ed.), Malaysia and the Islamic World, ASEAN Academic Press: London, 2004, pp. 73-76

The emphasis on duty creates harmony in social life [this is what I call social order]. This happens because if everyone were to concentrate on his or her duty, the emphasis on grumbling for right will naturally vanish. On the contrary, the emphasis on rights creates strife, because if everyone were to think about his or her rights on others, he or she would hardly have the mind to think of his or her duties towards others. The immense increase in quarrels and strifes between the different classes of human beings and between races and nations, which we find in the world today, is the direct outcome of the emphasis on rights.⁷

The inclination of religious responsibility towards formulating and implementing an Islamic-oriented foreign policy is prevailing in Malaysia. This impression is tangible and transcended in the leadership practices to formulate an Islamic-oriented foreign policy as the basis to conduct its foreign affairs and relations. The sense of responsibility – duty and right - is sustained by an emerging role of Malaysia in the international scenes particularly its role to champion Islamic plight among the Muslim countries. Malaysia, as a model of moderate Islamic state has seriously initiated and tailored its foreign policy sensitive and reflect the Muslim needs. It is suffice to say that the consistency and connection between religion and foreign policy formulation in the Malaysian context is always parallel to the constitutional basis.

Brief History of Malaysian Foreign Policy

Malaysia gained its independence from the British in 1948. By the year 1957, federation of Malaysia was established which includes the island of Borneo comprises Sabah and Sarawak. Due to political disagreements in 1959, Singapore took its own political course through separation from the federation.

7. See the similarity of religious and non-religious views on duty and right of citizens and states in two substantive references, Ansari, Muhammad Fazl-ur-Rahman, *The Quranic Foundation and Structure of Muslim Society*, Vol. II, Darul-Ishat: Lahore, 1994, pp. v-vi and Frost, Mervyn., *Constituting Human Rights: Global Civil Society and the Society of Democratic States*, Roudledge: UK , 2002.

Since independence, Malaysian foreign policy received colourful chapters in its foreign relations maneuvers. Unlike its neighbouring countries which gained independence through bloodshed of national struggle for independence, Malaysia gained its independence through constructive negotiation and dialogue. This has contributed to an exceptional and unique example of Malaysian approach in gaining peaceful independence in this region and around the world. Such outstanding approach, has made Malaysia received encouraging supports from its colonial master and other developed countries in many ways.

Being a Muslims majority country, yet at the same time being a newly independent country from the British and non-Arab descendent, Malaysia has successfully maneuvered its affiliation with both worlds – Muslim and non-Muslim world. Since independence Malaysia has had no serious fractured bilateral relations with other countries except Israeli which received non-recognition from Malaysia until today. Outstanding problems related to bilateral relations with other countries are dealt cordially through international laws and constructive approaches through negotiation, dialogue, discussion and mediation at the official and non-official levels.

Foreign policy could not exist in vacuum. Since interaction between states dynamically changes over times so do the foreign policy of the country. In order to be relevant to the country's need, foreign policy cannot remain static, it must always proactive, responsive, and viable to response to the vibrancy of other states' foreign policy. Hence Malaysia is seemed able to maneuver it foreign policy parallel to the international norms as well as Islamic inspiration.

Malaysia has always respected the international norms in its dealings with other countries. The fundamental principles governing foreign relations have always guided Malaysian approach in crafting its foreign policy. The principles of sovereign equality and mutual respect for territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes as well as mutual benefit in relations and peaceful coexistence are always adhered by

Malaysian foreign policy makers and implementers.

The evolution of Malaysian foreign policy reflects the continuity and maturity of policy. The thriving achievement in Malaysian foreign policy is that the acceptance and acknowledgment of international communities to the role and reputation that Malaysia has made through its persistent adherence to its stances and the international norms. The consistency in Malaysian foreign policy implementation has boasted the good name of the country in the international scenes. Today, Malaysia has become one of the leading and active Islamic role player at the international forum. Such achievements enable Malaysia to lead the 10th Session of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) as well as the Non Aligned Movement (NAM).

The overwhelming support and acknowledgement is noticeable not only from the Muslims countries but also the non-Muslim countries who intensively claim that Malaysia is a liberal Islamic state that should lead the Muslim world out of backwardness and disunity. The confidence that has been given to Malaysia by the developing countries through the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) shows immense recognition on the part of underprivileged countries towards Malaysia's credibility in defending the plights and universal related-issues such as development, peace, human right, equitability and so on in the developing countries at the International forum.

The continuous achievements and initiatives at various regional and international platforms have put Malaysia on the world map to play more vital role at the international scene. The increasing economic prosperity and political stability has enabled Malaysia to carve its own niche at the international scene and receives overwhelming recognition from the international community. This is important because by exposing Malaysian and receiving international supports, it allows Malaysia to exercise some influence in setting the international agenda. Being less dependent on foreign aid and assistance, Malaysia has been able to speak up on issues that other developing countries feel constrained to voice for fear of retribution by the major powers.

Malaysia and the Muslim world

The foundation of Islamic identity has always become the main principle in the formation of Malaysian foreign policy towards the Islamic world. The extensive established relationship and cooperation between Malaysia and the rest of Muslim countries have generated fruitful outcomes to the bilateral interaction between them. Such relationship can be analyzed from two angles namely prewar (WWII) and postwar relationship.⁸ For instance, to the Arab nations, Malaysia has been closely co-operating with the Middle Eastern countries in relations to the ritual activities such as the Pilgrimage (*Haji*) and Umrah, education, trades and many others.

Prewar involvement of Malaysia to the Middle Eastern political issues was primarily confined to the caliphate question and the absence of independence. This pattern changed significantly after the war because of the normal expansion of international relations that came with independence. Therefore it is crucial to note that the formal diplomatic relations with the Arab world is a post war phenomenon. Five years after independence, Malaysia has embassies only in the Muslim states of Indonesia, Pakistan, and the UAR. This number increased to eight in 1967 and a dozen in 1984. By 1991 there were 150 formal foreign relations and embassies with almost every Middle Eastern country.

Briefly, there are several factors that influence Malaysia tendency to embark on formal diplomatic relationship with the Muslim world.⁹ For instance, the independence of Malaysia provides chances to interact with the Muslim world particularly the Middle Eastern brethren through the United Nations, non-aligned organizations, economic groups, and Islamic associations as well as the regional factor. Many countries that had Muslim minorities in conflict with the central government, such as

8. Von Der Mehden, Fred R., *Two Worlds of Islam: Interaction Between Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, University Press of Florida, 1993, pp. 38-63. See also Piscatori, J., *International Relations of the Asian Muslim States*, University Press of America, 1986

9. *Ibid.*, pg. 44

Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines, came under considerable pressure from other Muslim states to treat their minorities equitably, and this includes Malaysia's role in voicing such ill treatment. The growth of Islamic resurgence in the region (Southeast Asia) also caused local pressure for the government to become more involved in worldwide Muslim issues. Its strategic relationship with the Muslim world in part helped in reducing the tendency of religious extremism and radicalism.¹⁰

Muslim Commonwealth Proposal

The inception of the OIC for instance has put Malaysia in the history when the Malaysian Government proposed the establishment of a Muslim Commonwealth.¹¹ The first International Islamic Conference which was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 had endorsed the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) coincidentally with the appointment of Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj, Malaysian first Prime Minister, as the first Secretary-General to the OIC.

This event opened new chapter in the history of Malaysian foreign policy initiatives by engaging itself with the Muslim world formally. Since then Malaysia has been a member of and has hosted numerous activities for the OIC such as the first meeting of the Governors of Central Bank of the OIC in 1978, the second annual meeting of the Board of Governors of the Islamic Development Bank in the same year, the Council of Foreign Ministers of the OIC more than once, the fifth and tenth Islamic Conference in Kuala Lumpur and many regional symposia and seminars. Significantly, in 1975, Malaysia had actively lobbied the UN to grant observer status to OIC.

Trade Relations with the Muslim world

The importance of Islam in Malaysian foreign policy towards the

10. Ibid., pp. 53-58

11. A. Ahmad, Tengku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia's Foreign Policy: 1963-1970, Berita: Kuala Lumpur, 1985, pp.112-13

development of the Muslim Ummah has prospered economic ties and cooperation between Malaysia and number of Muslim countries.¹² Malaysia strongly believes that OIC could be the best platform to project development plans and to stimulate trading exchange between member countries. The role of Islamic Development bank (IDB), which served as a potential conduit for investment from private and international investors from the rich Middle Eastern countries and the rest of Muslim countries could spur further economic growth.

Malaysia is full aware of the opportunities for trade and investment in the Muslim world which contribute to 1/3 of world economy, particularly the rich Middle Eastern countries. As early as 1973, following the oil crisis, there were major efforts to increase trade and investments. There was regular trade missions flowed back and forth between the two continents. Malaysia has organized visits to number of Middle Eastern countries seeking trade and investment and in many occasions received economic visits from them. Besides bilateral economic visits, Malaysia uses other means to develop economic relations such by participating trade fairs in the Middle East and holding trade seminars and exhibition to which Middle Easter representative are invited.

Number of investment opportunities in the country has attracted Middle Eastern country to locate their fund. There are variety of economic agreements have been made between Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and multinational financial institutions. Kuwait, for instances, in 1976, Kuwait loaned M\$60 million to FELDA, in 1978 Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) agreed to M\$42 million toward Trengganu River dam project, M\$72 million for Palong rubber scheme project, and M\$48 million for oil palm production, in 1979 Kuwait finalized plan for M\$100 million joint venture in Sabah timber, in 1980 Plans arranged for

12. Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, pp. 58-66 proposing developmental activities to be undertaken in the Muslim world. Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj, the first Prime Minister's speech at the United Nations in October 1969 certainly gave the impression that Islam was a great significance in Malaysia's foreign policy. The speech emphasized on the importance of Islam in International Relation. Refer "Prime Minister's Address at UN General Assembly", *FAM*, Vol.2, No.2, December 1969, pp.29-35.

Kuwait-Malaysia investment holding company was structured and in the same year Kuwait agreed to take 20 percent of equity Petronas refining plant in Malacca.

In the case of Saudi Arabia's investment in Malaysia, in 1975 M\$180 million loan were given primarily for medical faculty at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), in 1976 M\$183 was received from Saudi Fund for Development for development projects in Malaysia, in 1982 Saudi aided thirteen development projects, with RM400 million for Malaysian fourth five-year plan, and in 1986 Saudi Development Fund allocated RM132 million for Penang Port and East-West highway in Malaysia.

The ways Malaysia handles the issue of Palestine is always consistent since the outbreak of the tragedy. Malaysia is always giving consistent defense of the Palestine rights. Through official international organizations, Malaysia is always consistent in condemning Israel aggression against Palestine at the United Nations (UN), Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN).

Malaysia has been the most vociferous critics of Israel in Southeast Asia. Since the beginning, Tunku Abdul Rahman, as the first Secretary General of the OIC, and Malaysia representatives at the OIC meetings of heads of states and conference of Islamic foreign ministers, and the United Nations demanded the return of Arab lands and called for Muslim solidarity against Israel. A statement by Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen at the 1977 Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers defines what has been the Malaysian policy since the late 1960s.

The forces of Zionism, and Israel aggression and territorial aggrandizement, in complete disregard of world public opinion and resolutions of the United Nations continue to pose a threat to peace in the Middle East with serious implication to international security and stability. Peace in the Middle East can be guaranteed only by two conditions, that is the total withdrawal of Israel from its illegal occupation of Arab territories including Holy Jerusalem

which it has taken by force, and a just solution to the very Palestinian issue whose fundamental and basic question, including that of a Palestinian state be solved.¹³

Under Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia has taken even stronger position against what it perceives to be a total unacceptable situation in the Occupied Territories. Malaysia hosted the Asian Regional Conference on the question of Palestine in 1983, and recently in 2004 in Putarajaya, where it took the leading role in committing the meeting to the Palestinian cause. Tun Dr. Mahathir has criticized in two important statements on the treatment of Palestinian by Zionists, declaring that "all men of goodwill must abhor this mass persecution perpetrated by people who craved the sympathy of the world when they are persecuted but are no better than their former persecutors when they have the power"¹⁴ and "Israel rules the world through proxy" which received intense criticism as anti-semitism by the Israelites and the Jewish community in the West.

Malaysia by its own stance has accorded full diplomatic status to the Palestinian state, made her the first Southeast Asian country and second in the world to do that. At such, Malaysia also accorded the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, the status of a Head of State during his visits to Malaysia in 1984 and 1990 respectively. Malaysia has also upgraded the status of Palestinian Liberalization Organization (PLO) office in Kuala Lumpur to full resident diplomatic mission in 1989. In addition to public campaign for donation to alleviate the sufferings of Palestinian people, numerous grants and scholarships were made available for Palestinian students to study in Malaysian institutions of higher learning.¹⁵

13. Foreign Affairs Malaysia 10, No. 2, June 1977, pp. 45-46

14. "Towards Islamic Solidarity", speech in Saudi Arabia, January 27, 1981, in M. Pathamanathan and D. Lazarus, eds., *The Wind of Change: The Mahathir Impact on Malaysia's Foreign Policy*, Eastview Productions: Kuala Lumpur, 1984, pg. 61

15. S.M Saifuddeen S.M Salleh & Suzalie Mohamad, "Malaysia and OIC", in Abdul Razak Baginda (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 73-76

Bridging Role Between the Developed Countries and Developing and Under-Developing Countries

Malaysia plays a bridging role between the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The trend is seen that in the first few years of the 21st century, in particular beginning 2003, gives the indication that Malaysia is taking an active and proactive role in mobilizing both organizations in solidifying solidarity among the member countries. As of 2003, Malaysia also holds the distinguished position in the international arena when it simultaneously leads both organizations. Doubtless, much more needs to be done by Malaysia in rejuvenating and reactivating the OIC.

Despite Malaysia's dissatisfaction over internal disunity among the member countries in the OIC, Malaysia has been consistent in promoting ideas and means to make the OIC a more effective organization. At the OIC Conference in Casablanca in 1993, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, in his speech to the OIC proposed the formation of an Eminent Persons Group to look into ways by which the Organization could be made a more cohesive and effective association for Islamic countries and more relevant to a post-cold war global context.¹⁶ This idea has been materialized when the first meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005.

The issues of Islamic solidarity within the OIC are the premier agenda as far as Malaysian role in OIC is concerned. There is a great need for every member countries to look over the organization as a medium of interaction among themselves. In spite of the lack of interaction among the countries, the organization has become a reactionary instrument rather than proactive mechanism to solve conflicting issues.

The problems that exist among the countries are such that they react separately within the framework of national interests, rather than utilizing the OIC for voicing out a "unified" opinion on international issues.

16. Ibid., pg. 95

Many of the Muslim countries have depended over other developed nations to preserve and pursue their national interests. When it comes to promoting Islamic solidarity, they pursue their own national interests in accordance to the agenda as laid down by the Western superpower. Besides having different approaches towards implementing their own agenda, the initial focus within the OIC is based on the will to forge solidarity. Instead of mere lip service on the issue of disunity in the Muslim world, it is important for Malaysia as the Chairman-designate of the OIC to pursue a different approach in tackling this problem by concrete actions and measures. It is also equally imperative that the Muslim world begins to rely more on one another in solving their problems.

Global Peace Security Initiatives and the Well-Being of the Islamic World

As a member of the world community, Malaysia believes that together with the rest of the world, it has a responsibility in the preservation of global peace and security. At the extraordinary session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism on 3rd April 2002, Malaysia has deliberately emphasized objectives to be achieved that a collective response of the OIC countries to combat terrorism is highly needed as well as the role of converting the misperception of associating Islam with terrorism.

Malaysia's approach toward global peace and security is clear in the sense that "the world must deal with these misguided people not just by hunting them down but also by removing the course of their anger and frustration".

The Well-Being of the Islamic World

In another aspect, Malaysia has proposed the use of the gold dinar to strengthen, especially the weak economies of the Islamic countries. An interaction with a cross section of society in Malaysia did reveal that the gold dinar system is desired and workable, provided the Islamic countries decide to work on it and subsequently adopt the system. The system is seen as an alternative to using the US Dollar.

Several international fora were held in order to promote the idea. The first was when Dr. Mahathir mooted this idea in a dialogue with bankers, traders, academics and financiers on the application of the gold dinar at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) on 29 April 2002. Consequently, an international seminar on "Gold Dinar in Multilateral Trade" organized by IKIM on 22-23 October 2002 in which Dr. Mahathir delivered a keynote address on the issue. The other was a two-day conference on 2-3 November 2002, where several OIC members such as Bahrain, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Kuwait together with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) launched the Islamic Financial Service Board (IFSB).

The establishment of IFSB was considered a significant step for the international player in Islamic finance. It is firmly believed that when the Islamic banking would offer higher rates, many people would switch their deposits to this system from the conventional banking system. This is a good indication in the development of Islamic finance and banking which directly benefit Muslim countries at large.

Conclusion

Islam has remained an important component of Malaysia's foreign policy since independence. The policy was in part designed to pursue her socio-political, economic and security interests within the Islamic and non-Muslim world and partly a reflection of her strong commitment to the cause of Islam and the Muslim Ummah internationally. Given the complex nature of her internal socio-economic, political, cultural and religious condition, the Islamic content of her foreign policy is inevitably shaped and influenced by these factors.

Throughout the period of the four prime ministers, the focus on Islam in Malaysia's external relations has been consistent and continuous. The emphasis however, vary according to the complex interplay of various internal and external dynamics which could pose a threat to the country's stability, the ruling party's position *vis-à-vis* the Islamic opposition or Malaysia's status and standing in the international

community.

As is the case with other newly independent developing states, the personalities and 'world view' of the various prime ministers do play an important role in deciding how much weight should be given to the Islamic content and how it should be projected onto the international scene.

The close nexus between these internal and external variables has reinforced the perception that the Islamic card is often used as a convenient tool by the ruling government to enhance its Islamic credential *vis-à-vis* other Islamic opposition groups internally. Her Islamic foreign policy could thus be seen as merely an extension of these domestic political considerations.

Within the broader context of the Ummah however, there appears to be a clear pattern of continuity and consistency in Malaysia's active involvements, commitment and support of various policy initiatives to promote and protect the interests of the Ummah within the region and internationally. The numerous policy posture and stands on issues ranging from political, economic, security and religion to humanitarian relief, aid and technical assistance outlined in the paper are illustrative of this. Malaysia's high standing and acceptance as a moderate, democratic and progressive model Islamic state by the Muslim and non-Muslim world today bears testimony to the success of the strategy.

Notwithstanding her consistent emphasis on Islam and the cause of the Ummah, Islam's influence on her foreign policy decision however has remained subservient to Malaysia's broader strategic and security considerations on matters of 'high politics' which are critical for her survival as a nation in the international community.

The pursuits of the Islamic cause internationally were clearly exemplified through Malaysia's active participation in multilateral institutions like the OIC, and bilaterally with individual Arab and Non-Arab Islamic states, during the period. Similar strategies could also be seen within the region and beyond where Muslim minorities exist.

Consistent with her believe in the principles of moderation, non-

interference and peaceful resolution of conflict, Malaysia was careful to pursue these concerns through diplomatic-political means rather than force. The strategy has won her the overall respect and trust of these countries despite the occasional hiccups in the relationship with them.

Malaysia's deft use of Islam in her foreign policy has not only reaped moral and material rewards in terms of respect, investments and assistance from the wealthier members of the Muslim world but also increasing acceptance among the Ummah and the non-Muslim world as a potential model and leader that could lead the Ummah out of its present state of weakness and disunity in the new millennium.

Given the remarkable success of the strategy and the continuing interplay of domestic and external developments on the Islamic content of her foreign policy, Malaysia's current active involvements in the affairs of the Ummah is not likely to see any drastic change in the future. Against the backdrop of the 911 tragedy and its adverse effects on Islamic nations and Muslims everywhere, Malaysia's efforts to project the more moderate, democratic and progressive side of Islam internationally can be expected to be more pronounced in the future.

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