

Malaysia's commitment and support to the Islamic cause has, however, been perceived differently by various groups. Many contest that the role of Islam in Malaysian foreign policy should not be viewed as a major shift towards the ideologization of religion in International relations. Many suggest that Malaysia's support for the Islamic cause is largely due to its cautious pragmatism and humanitarian concern rather than to its religious commitment. For the government, it is indeed undeniable that co-religionism has provided domestic political mileage for the ruling Malay party, and UMNO leaders have also given the Palestinian plight an international dimension, not just an Islamic focus, because it involves universal human rights.

The pluralist nature of the Malaysian society has, however, posed a dilemma for UMNO. While on the one hand, the party has to accommodate the multi racial aspirations of the National Coalition (BN), it consistently needs, on the other hand, to demonstrate its commitment to Islam in order to maintain the support of the Malay-Muslims. Therefore, being pragmatic, the government has to support the Islamic cause in order not to offend the Malay religious sensibilities, and local UMNO politicians and leaders have consequently tended to emphasize their loyalty to the Malay and Islamic expectations. This dilemma has triggered PAS, with its forthright commitment to Islam, to charge UMNO with little and reluctant support for Islam, and to denounce its presumed "excessive leniency" in yielding to the demands of its non-Malay and non-Muslim parties in the National Coalition.

In analyzing Malaysian attitude and role to the Islamic cause, I venture to argue that Malaysia was more politically and symbolically committed to the Islamic cause notably the Palestinian issue. Significantly, Malaysia's stance on the issue was consistently in line with that of other OIC member-states, and on the same track with the international community, especially as represented in the United Nations. For instance in case of Palestinian issue it does not seem to be comparable with that of the Arab nations. For the Arab nations, the Palestinian issue has definitely become part and parcel of their daily lives, and was perhaps their most important concern. Hence their role in it is doubtless more remarkable and significant than that of Malaysia whose acquaintance and commitment is, rather recent,

and of more political nature, though the religious factor played a role in igniting the sympathy of the Malay-Muslims with the Palestinian tragedy.

The study also suggests that the role of the Malaysian government concerning the Palestinian issue was largely motivated by pragmatic considerations resulting from an interplay between various factors: political, economic, religious and humanitarian. They have been, first and foremost, to maintain instrumental in mobilizing support among the Malay population. Secondly, they help to preempt and diffuse Malay-Muslim opposition especially that of PAS, and, thirdly, they enhance the image of Malaysia within the Islamic world, through its membership of the OIC. Closer ties with the Muslim world, especially with the Arab nations, have, moreover, provided greater commercial, trade and investment opportunities for the country's various development plans. Within the Malaysian context, 'Islamism' has also come to be seen as a catalyst that could pressurize the government to be more sensitive and responsive to the Palestinian issue, since its claim to uphold democracy dictated due attention and consideration to public opinion in any policy formulation. The Malaysian government was, therefore, bound by these pragmatic considerations to maintain a pro-Muslim and a pro-Palestinian attitude in its foreign policy.

Though many claim that Islam has never been an overriding factor in Malaysia's support of the Islamic cause, its role in this respect is indeed, highly commendable. It is hoped that in the near future Malaysia will engage more constructively in the Islamic issue, especially by giving its religious dimension top priority. This aspect of religiosity should, no doubt, be seriously taken into account since Islam is the main political force in Malaysian politics. It is only with the full realization of the direct relevance of Islam that the Islamic issues could be resolved comprehensively. The ideals of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity, if understood properly, would motivate Muslims in Malaysia and elsewhere to assist their brothers all over the Islamic world.

It may be presumed that Malaysia in the foreseeable future place a greater emphasis on Islam in its International relations. This will certainly be so when the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)