

Chapter 2  
**THE ATTITUDE AND COMMITMENT OF THE MALAYSIAN  
GOVERNMENT TOWARDS ISLAM IN THE FOREIGN  
POLICY (1957-2003): AN ASSESMENT**

Anidah Robani

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### INTRODUCTION

Malaya gained its independence on August 31, 1957. According to the new Merdeka Constitution, Islam was made for the first time the official religion (Sheridan & Groves, 1967) for the entire Federation, including Penang and Malacca as well as the Malay states. Article 3(2) provides that the Malay states' rulers will be in charge of Islam in their states. But in the states of Penang and Malacca, where there is no dynastic rule, governors of these states are not entrusted with religious responsibility. Instead, this duty is assumed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong who acts as the ruling Monarch for the federation as a whole.

From a historical study of Malay politics, one may notice that Islam has increasingly become a vital political force because of its significance to communal and political identity of the Malay-Muslims (Nair, Shanti 1997). According to the Constitution of Malaysia, Malay means "a person who professes the Muslim religion, speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs".<sup>1</sup> This definition clearly signifies a strong correlation between religion and ethnicity in Malaysian polity, thus paving the way for the emergence of Islam as a potent political force in Malaysia domestically and internationally.

This paper does not intend to examine comprehensively the Malaysian foreign policy. Specifically it attempts to analyze the Islamic dimension in the formulation of Malaysian foreign policy. Its main emphasis is to identify its prime mover, is it driven by international humanitarian mode or Islamic orientation at large?

Significantly, Islam represents a symbol of legitimacy for the ruling Malay party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Since its formation under the leadership of Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO has been successful in

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<sup>1</sup> *Federal Constitution Malaysia, Article 160 (2)*