

Islam, being the official religion of the country, is thus protected and subsidized. Significantly, Islam has for long been a component of Malay political culture, and thus represented a symbol of legitimacy for the ruling Malay party, UMNO, from its formation. Commenting on the importance of Islam in Malay culture and Malay politics, it is by no means an exaggeration to suggest that religion and religious consideration are of great importance in the foreign policy making of Malaysia.

Islam is certainly a unifying force in the Malay community as well as among the Islamic world community. This feeling of kinship in Islam is, therefore an attitude of mind, which if not exercising undue influence on Malaysian foreign policy formulation, will at least be taken into account when evaluating foreign policy alternatives in order to achieve the realization of a particular national aim (Widdowson, 1976).

Malaysia being a Muslim country with a sizable Muslim population and Islam as its official religion would have to show special concern and support to Muslim affairs and issues throughout the world. The spirit of ummatism, which advocates one single integrated Muslim community unseparated by boundaries of race and worldly ideologies, has made possible the gathering of Muslim countries in a number of organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Malaysia is indeed by no means an exception.

Malaysia's emphasis on the co-religionists' issues could be seen in her firm stands on the Palestinian issue, the Russian aggression on Afghanistan, the Gulf war, the conflict in Bosnia and the struggle of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. On the OIC as well as the UN levels, we note Malaysia uncompromising support to all Islamic gatherings and causes.

The basic premises for Malaysian Islamic diplomacy were certainly laid down by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia who was also the first Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Since the era of the first Prime Minister, Malaysia has actively supported the cause of Islamic nations, particularly on the platform of the OIC, and courageously voiced out the Ummatic causes in the

UN gatherings. In many occasions, Malaysia has contributed much in terms of providing ideas and suggesting solutions with respect to issues affecting the Ummah, and the world community at large.

The feeling of Islamic brotherhood triggered the Malaysian government to involve itself in important Islamic issues such as the Palestinian issue, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Bosnian conflict, the Iran-Iraq war and the problem of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. The Islamic-Ummatic orientation of Malaysia has become the basic motivation for Malaysia to support the Islamic cause. This could be best exemplified by the Palestinian cause, which is perhaps the oldest and the most pronounced Islamic issue to the Malaysian government. All the Malaysian Premiers have contributed significantly to the Palestinian struggle, morally, materially and through other means.

Malaysia's preoccupation with the Palestinian issue is perhaps the earliest among other Islamic issues. Malaysia's stand towards the Palestinian struggle and the Zionist regime could be noticed ever since the early days of independence under the premiership of the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Another Islamic-humanitarian issue that gained much attention from the Malaysian government was the plight of the Afghan Muslims who were victims of the Soviet aggression.² The armed Soviet intervention in Afghanistan on December 27, 1979 was formally condemned by a vast majority of the UN member states, including Malaysia, as an act violating the principle of international conduct as enshrined in the UN Charter. The concept of Islamic fraternity was another factor that motivated the Malaysian government to support the Afghan cause.

One important event that paved the way for a growing attention to Islam in Malaysian government policies in the late sixties under the administration of Tunku Abdul Rahman, was the occurrence of the riots of May 13, 1969 (Camber 1983). They led to a growing Malay-Islamic re-assertiveness and hence, as far as foreign policy is concerned, were instrumental in a slight change in favor of Islam and the Muslim nations. The May riots, later described by Tunku as the 'darkest period in our national history', were, doubtless, a serious

²Islamic Herald, vol. 12, no. 4, 1988, p.29