

stronger actions ranging from a break in diplomatic ties⁶⁰ to a review of the water supply agreement with Singapore.⁶¹ In response to these widespread demonstrations organized by various civil society groups, the government temporarily withdrew its High Commissioner from Singapore, and the relations between the two countries were strained for a while. Another bold and commendable step taken by the Malaysian government was its decision of 12 January 1989 to elevate the office of the PLO in Malaysia to a full fledged Embassy of the state of Palestine.⁶² This movement clearly confirmed the government aggressive posture in supporting the *Intifadha*, and was in line with its previous recognition of the state of Palestine.⁶³

The elevation was, in fact, yet another reflection of Malaysia's strong and unequivocal support to the just demands of the Palestinians for self-determination and independence. Remarkably, the Islamic issues, particularly the Palestinian Issue, during the Mahathir administration, had been receiving an overwhelming attention from the government and public. It is apparent

⁶⁰ Submitted to Acting Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaiddin from the UMNO Youth, see New Straits Times, 22/11/1986.

⁶¹ *Utusan Malaysia*, 21/11/1986. On the day of the visit, the People's Action Committee headed by a well known Malaysian poet and writer Dr. Usman Awang comprised of the UMNO Youth, PAS, the Chinese based Party, DAP, PSRM and various civil society organizations and including PERKIM, ABIM, PKPIM, trade Unions launched a protest demonstration in front of Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur and handed a memorandum of protest which condemned the visit.

⁶² *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1989, vol 22, no. 1, p.5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

that Mahathir's commitment to Islamic issues was even more pronounced and assertive than that of his predecessors. Inevitably, the co-option of Anwar Ibrahim in the government intensified the collaboration between government and the civil society groups, particularly ABIM and PERKIM, on the *Ummatic* issue.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's commitment and support to the Islamic cause has 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 coreligionism has provided domestic political mileage for the ruling Malay party, and UMNO leaders have also given the Palestinian plight an international dimension,⁶⁴ 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

⁶⁴ Shanti Nair, *op.cit.*, p.214