

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>4</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. 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 providing guidelines for Malaysian Islamic diplomacy. Islam, with the passage of time, has gained a greater role in the politics of Malaysia as a result of serious and deepening intra-Malay rivalry, particularly between UMNO and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). Therefore, UMNO under the leadership of successive Prime Ministers, has responded to the pressure by taking up a number of steps to promote the role of Islam in Malaysia as well as Malaysian foreign policy.

Malaysia from Tunku up to the leadership of Dr. Mahathir, continued its commitment to use Islam as an important policy tool to help, protect, promote and secure Malaysia's national interests within the international world of Islam. 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 OIC (Organization of Islamic

(London:Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-11

<sup>4</sup> See, Federal Constitution Malaysia, Article 160 (2)

Conference). Through a thorough study of the role of Islam in Malaysian politics, one may conclude that Islam in Malaysia since independence has been increasingly politicized, domestically and internationally. Indeed, Islam, as a bastion of Malay identity, has considerably influenced the domestic policies of the Malaysian government. The exact degree to which Islam influences Malaysian foreign policy has yet to be investigated, but it is reasonable to assume that such an important component in the national life and character of the Malays do have some influences. Since Islam plays a remarkable role in the national life, it inevitably exerts considerable influence in its external attitudes and politics.

#### **ISLAM IN MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: AN OVERVIEW**

Since the achievement of independence in 1957, Malaysia has played an increasingly important role in international affairs. This was formalized by its membership in the Commonwealth of Nations, and subsequently in the United Nations Organization. In a democratic country like Malaysia, foreign policy must reflect the aspirations of the people for peace, security and development. As discussed earlier, Islam plays an important part in the national life, as it is closely linked to the ethnic identity of the politically-dominant Malays.

Therefore, Islam is an important factor in contemporary Malaysian politics, especially in mobilizing the Malays for political action, and in the formulation of foreign policy. Significantly, Islam has for long been a component of Malay political culture, and