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Opportunity to revive an old Yemeni relationship

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MORE than 500 years ago, the first traders from a region that was once called Hadhramaut arrived in Malaysia. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in a speech last year: "You are the first Western people to reach the Malay peninsula."

Today, the arrival of President Ali Abdullah Saleh marks the first time ever that a leader of Yemen - which was a part of ancient Hadhramaut - visits Malaysia and the first official visit by a Yemen Head of State for 1998.

The earliest reference to Islam in Malaysia is of a Hadhramaut missionary, Sheikh Abdullah, who arrived in 1136 and is said to be responsible for the conversion to Islam of the ninth Sultan of Kedah, Maharaja Derbar Raja, who then became known as Mudzaffar Shah.

Ambassador Mohamed Taha Mustafa, the first resident Yemen ambassador to Malaysia, says: "The traders and merchants of Yemen are credited with bringing Islam to Southeast Asia.

"The Yemeni were the first people to follow Prophet Muhammad without the shedding of blood and among the first 'army' of the Khalifahs to spread Islam to the world peacefully."

Fouad Hayel Saeed, the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Yemen to Malaysia, says: "The fact that the Yemeni are responsible for the spread of Islam is significant because the form of Islam shown then was peaceful, gave importance to tolerance and for the natural progress of science and technology."

A Wisma Putra official says they preached the meaning of Islam and that is why the spread of Islam to this region is not sectarian.

He also says since that time, Yemen and Malaysia have had a long-standing relationship and there has been continuous links and contacts of affinity. People from both countries have remained in each other's countries.

"There is a large number of Malaysians who are of Yemeni descent, at least 100,000 people. Notable among them is the Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and many top people in the corporate world," says Fouad.

Prior to 1990, Yemen was two separate countries - North Yemen and South Yemen. With the unification of Yemen there are no divided Muslim countries in the world. Yemen is now also the most populous Muslim state in the Middle East.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh is credited to be the man who brought about unification and since then has pursued national reconciliation and reconstruction.

President Ali has a fresh outlook to international relations and is trying to build the country's foreign relations.

Yemen has applied to become a member of the Commonwealth. They are also the only Arab member of the Indian Ocean Regional Co-operation which was set up two years ago.

The other members are Australia, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Tanzania.

Mohamed says Dr Mahathir is well known and much respected in Yemen because of Malaysia's economic achievement as well as the people of Malaysia who have made this country successful.

"At the moment, Yemen is at the level Malaysia was in the early 1980s -

trying to attract investors to the country. We would like our brothers to help us in many fields, especially in trade, investment and economic reforms," he says.

Accompanying the President on this trip are around 50 "modern-day traders and merchants" - more precisely, prominent businessmen from Yemen.

"We would like to follow in Malaysia's footsteps and learn from your experience," says Mohamed.

Yemen has vast potential in energy resources, especially in oil and gas. They are traditional trading partners with Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and the southern regions of Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Yemen is strategically located at the entrance of the Red Sea and this makes it a natural gateway to these countries.

According to Mohamed, Yemen recently launched the Aden Free Zone and would like to attract Malaysian businesses to invest there. Aden is a port area and is located 300km from the capital, Sanaa.

To attract foreign investors, Yemen has set up the Higher Authority for Investment which is similar to the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, where all services will be under one roof.

"Products manufactured in the free trade area are allowed to be distributed locally as well as to the Middle East. Companies will be exempted from tax for 15 years and that foreign companies will be allowed 100 per cent ownership," says Fouad.

The ambassador says there is also a great potential in the tourism sector. There are a large number of tourists entering Yemen because of its rich culture and long history.

"The Queen of Sheba is that part of the world and the first dam ever constructed in the world - Mareb Dam - built more than 3,000 years ago is in Yemen. Both are mentioned in the Quran," says Mohamed.

He adds that tourists who are interested in diving are also visiting Yemen as the country has more than 2,000km of shore, from the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea.

At the moment, Yemen does not have the facilities to cater for the influx of tourists to the country and would like Malaysian companies to invest in this sector, says the ambassador.

The Yemeni have investments in Malaysia, including Multitape Industries Sdn Bhd which produces audio and videotapes and has an annual sales of RM10 million.

Another is Pacific Interlink Sdn Bhd, which trades in a whole range of commodities, specifically palm oil and timber to the Middle East and Trinity Containers & Warehousing Sdn Bhd which is involved in container warehousing.

According to Fouad, there are many more Yemeni companies in Malaysia but these three are the biggest. Sadly, Malaysia has not tapped into the potential of doing business in Yemen, he adds.

Petronas used to be involved in the exploration of oil and gas but stopped three years ago. It is currently negotiating for the possibility of a resumption of work in Yemen.

Perhaps this visit by President Ali will revive the traditional and historical ties that were created in the 12th century and bring about mutually beneficial economic prosperity in the 21st century and beyond.

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