

27/09/2003

Malaysia's role in revitalising OIC

Shaikh Mohd Saifuddeen

THE 10th session of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) will be taking place in Putrajaya between Oct 11 and 18.

Again, after the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit earlier this year, international eyes will focus on Malaysia.

Malaysia's active participation in NAM and the OIC is based on the country's inclination towards the policies of neutrality and non-alignment. These policies are important in maintaining and maximising the international contacts and favourable world opinion should an international or regional crisis threaten to spill over into the region.

This is true to the fact that Malaysia observes the doctrine of non-interference in other countries' sovereignty. It is a policy of the Malaysian Government that any international issue which relates to domestic affairs of a particular country should not be interfered with.

Of late, Malaysia is seen to be creating a bridge between the OIC and NAM. The trend seen in the first few years of the 21st century, in particular beginning 2003, gives the indication that Malaysia is taking an active and proactive role in mobilising both organisations in solidifying solidarity among the member countries.

As of 2003, Malaysia also holds the distinguished position in the international arena as it simultaneously leads both organisations. Doubtless, much more needs to be done by Malaysia in rejuvenating and reactivating the OIC.

Since 1969, Malaysian involvement within the United Nations (UN) and action on issues with an Islamic dimension have generally been guided by the OIC. The Malaysian commitment towards the OIC has been consistent over the years. Malaysia has carved a niche for itself as an activist member in political, economic, and technical issues affecting the Islamic community.

Despite Malaysia's dissatisfaction over internal disunity among member countries in the OIC, Malaysia has been consistent in promoting ideas and means to make the OIC a more effective organisation.

At the OIC Conference in Casablanca in 1993, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his speech to the OIC proposed "the formation of an Eminent Persons Group to look into ways by which the organisation could be made a more cohesive and effective association for Islamic countries and more relevant in a post-cold war global context".

The issues of Islamic solidarity within the OIC are the prime agenda as far as Malaysia is concerned.

The lack of interaction among the countries has resulted in the organisation becoming a reactionary device rather than pro-active mechanism to solve conflicting issues.

The problems that exist among the countries are such that they react separately within the framework of national interests, rather than utilising the OIC for voicing a "unified" opinion on international issues.

Many of the Muslim countries have depended on other developed nations to preserve and pursue their national interests. When it comes to promoting Islamic solidarity, they pursue their own national interests in accordance with the agenda as laid down by the Western powers.

Besides having different approaches towards implementing their own agenda, the initial focus within the OIC is based on the will to forge solidarity.

Instead of mere lip service on the issue of disunity in the Muslim

world, it is important for Malaysia as the chairmandesignate of the OIC to pursue a different approach in tackling this problem by concrete actions and measures.

It would also be equally imperative that the Muslim world begins to rely on and co-operate with one another in solving their problems.

As a member of the world community, Malaysia believes that, together with the rest of the world, it has a responsibility in the preservation of global peace and security.

At the extraordinary session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism on April 3, 2002 Malaysia deliberately emphasised objectives to be achieved - that a collective response of the OIC countries to combat terrorism was needed as well as the role of converting the misperception of associating Islam with terrorism.

Malaysia's approach toward global peace and security is clear in the sense that "the world must deal with these misguided people not just by hunting them down but also by removing the cause of their anger and frustration".

On the economic front, Malaysia has proposed the use of the gold dinar to strengthen the weak economies of the Islamic countries. An interaction with a crosssection of society in Malaysia did reveal that the gold dinar system is desired and workable, provided the Islamic countries decide to work on it and adopt the system. The system is seen as a viable alternative to using the US dollar.

After all, if a unified Europe could use the euro, there really is no reason for a unified Muslim world not to use the dinar. Several international forums were held in order to promote the idea.

The first was when Dr Mahathir mooted this idea in a dialogue with bankers, traders, academics and financiers on the application of the gold dinar at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) on April 29, 2002.

Consequently, an international seminar on "Gold Dinar in Multilateral Trade" was organised by Ikim on Oct 22-23, 2002 in which the Prime Minister delivered a keynote address on the issue.

The other was a two-day conference on Nov 2-3, 2002, where several OIC members such as Bahrain, Pa-kistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Kuwait together with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) launched the Islamic Financial Service Board (IFSB).

The establishment of IFSB was considered a significant step for the international player in Islamic finance.

It is firmly believed that when the Islamic banking offers higher rates, many people would switch their deposits to this system from the conventional banking system. This is a good indication in the development of Islamic finance and banking which directly benefits Muslim countries at large.

Islam has remained an important component of Malaysia's foreign policy since independence. The policy was in part designed to pursue its socio-political, economic and security interests within the Muslim and non-Muslim world and partly a reflection of its strong commitment to the cause of Islam and the ummah internationally.

Given the complex nature of its internal socio-economic, political, cultural and religious condition, the Islamic content of its foreign policy is inevitably shaped and influenced by these factors.

Within the broader context of the ummah, there appears to be a clear pattern of continuity and consistency in Malaysia's active involvement, commitment and support of various policy initiatives to promote and protect the interests of the ummah within the region and internationally.

Malaysia's high standing and acceptance as a moderate, democratic and

progressive model Islamic state by the Muslim and non-Muslim world today bears testimony to the success of the strategy.

Islam's influence on its foreign policy decision, however, has remained subservient to Malaysia's broader strategic and security considerations on matters of "high politics" which are critical for its survival as a nation in the international community.

The pursuits of the Islamic cause internationally were clearly exemplified through Malaysia's active participation in multilateral institutions like the OIC, and bilaterally with individual Arab and non-Arab Islamic states, during the period.

Similar strategies could also be seen within the region and beyond where Muslim minorities exist, such as Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Africa and the former Soviet republics.

Consistent with its belief in the principles of moderation, non-interference and peaceful resolution of conflicts, Malaysia is careful to pursue these concerns through diplomatic-political means rather than force. The strategy has won Malaysia the overall respect and trust of these countries despite the occasional hiccups in diplomatic relationship with others.

Malaysia's deft use of Islam in its foreign policy has not only reaped moral and material rewards in terms of respect, investments and assistance from the wealthier members of the Muslim world but also increased acceptance among the ummah and the non-Muslim world as a potential model and leader that could lead the ummah out of its present state of weakness and disunity in the new millennium.

Against the backdrop of the Sept 11 tragedy and its adverse effects on the Muslim world as well as Muslims everywhere, Malaysia's efforts to project the more moderate, democratic and progressive side of Islam internationally can be expected to be more pronounced in the future.

* The writer is fellow at the Centre for Economics, Social Studies and Technology, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim)