

# The Mahathir impact

*Profile*

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By MURUGESU PATHMANATHAN

OVER the course of the last decade, since Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed assumed the premiership, the linkages that Malaysia has with the world community has undergone substantial and significant changes.

Although to a large extent, Malaysia has kept its foreign policy along the lines laid down in the 1970s, many observers have noted significant developments in the policy directions arising from the Prime Minister's leadership.

These changes come out in high profile when we compare the sub-

stance of Malaysia's foreign policy with that of her Asean neighbours. The meeting of Dr Mahathir with Mr Nelson Mandela in his capacity as chairman of the Commonwealth, and the recent visit of President Yasser Arafat to Malaysia, manifest both symbolically and substantially the variation in emphasis and nuance that are contained in the conduct of Malaysia's foreign policy.

Since 1981, Malaysia has undertaken an activist and strong stand on a variety of issues which have projected the country onto a

high visibility in international affairs.

The participation of Malaysia in the Non-Aligned Movement, its active involvement in the United Nations peacekeeping efforts, its strong and unequivocal stand on South Africa on the issue of apartheid, its push for a new international regime for Antarctica and its determined and vigorous stand on the international dadah trade, are all issues which have given the nation an outstanding profile in the internationally community and various forums such as the United Nations, the

Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth, Asean as well as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

A great part of it is due to the personal commitment, interest and direct involvement of the Prime Minister in very many of the major issues confronting the international community. This is not unusual or extraordinary. Malaysian Prime Ministers have had a tradition of a very strong interest and involvement in international affairs. These have included Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn.

Once the Tunku was quoted as having said that he is happiest when he is his own Minister of Foreign Affairs. This has also been the characteristic of many Third World leaders.

What sets Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir apart from some of his predecessors is the extent to which he has carved out a strong niche as a spokesman and statesman of outstanding calibre on Third World issues. He has also distinguished himself in a number of ways from his Asean and South-East Asian counterparts by his involvement in issues relating to Africa and Third World development.

In diplomatic circles he is considered as one of the outstanding articulators of Third World development issues. A prominent example of this is the question of South-South cooperation. The South Commission in which Malaysia played a key role in its establishment, is currently headed by the former President of Tanzania, Mr Julius Nyerere.

of top level diplomats ably deployed by the nation's political leadership. A spirit of able Ministers of Foreign Affairs have since 1981 supervised the policy and routine operations of the country's foreign missions.

In the pursuit of a new emphasis on Third World issues and questions, the Prime Minister has demonstrated an incisive capacity for a long-range vision relating to the problems of the developing nations and seeking to generate solutions to some of these problems. Both practicality and philosophy have marked his views on international trade issues and national economic development.

### Vision

The adage that while new friendships should be made, old acquaintances should not be forgotten is equally true in Malaysia's foreign policy. The fundamentals that have acted as guidelines in the conduct of Malaysia's foreign policy in the past, such as Asean regional cooperation, its involvement and strengthening of the Islamic Community through the OIC and its support of the Commonwealth, have all been sustained.

Asean has constituted a primary corner stone for Malaysia's foreign policy particularly in its effort to further regional economic cooperation and to seek a solution to the tragedy that is Cambodia. In the world of Islam, Malaysia has developed a unique role of having strong bonds of friendship with all the members of the Islamic community in spite of prevalent antagonisms and hostilities among some of its

### Involvement

Active involvement in international diplomacy, both at the regional and global level in the last couple of years has boosted the national image of Malaysia as a dynamic component in the international political system.

These have included the chairmanship of the International Drug Conference in June 1987 by the Prime Minister, the election of Malaysia as a member of the United Nations Security Council, the chairing of the Unesco General Assembly by Encik Anwar Ibrahim, the Minister of Education in October 1989, and its involvement in the United Nations peacekeeping activities such as Untag (United Nations Transistene Group in Namibia) and Unimog (United Nations Mission Observer Group) in Iran-Iraq are all manifestations of Malaysia's activism in foreign affairs.

This dynamic role in world and regional affairs has to a great extent been aided by the successful combination of political leadership and the able back-up of the organisational and diplomatic resources of a very well trained and efficient core of diplomats and administrators at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other governmental agencies who are directly engaged in the planning and execution of the nation's foreign policy.

This layer of administrators and diplomats at the upper echelons have, in the execution of their role as the implementors of the nation's foreign policy, observed strictly the cardinal canons of civil service neutrality and anonymity without detracting from the spirit of national commitment.

In many ways, the country is fortunate in having an extremely well trained and competent core

members.

On the issue of Palestine and the struggle of the Palestinian people, Malaysia's commitment has been strong, clear and continuous. The evidence for this was only too glaring during the visit of President Yasser Arafat when he expressed his heartfelt appreciation for Malaysia's strong and continued support in the cause of the Palestine people.

Malaysia's engagement with Commonwealth affairs has had a rocky start at the outset of the Mahathir administration but this start has only served to bring about a more liberal and friendlier fostering of linkages between Malaysia and the Commonwealth. The CHOGM meeting in October 1989 was a clear manifestation of the Prime Minister's capacity of commitment to the ideals and modalities of the Commonwealth. The leaders of the Commonwealth were unanimous in their tribute to his capable chairmanship of the 1989 CHOGM meeting.

The Prime Minister took a strong and personal interest in the meticulous planning and organisation that went into CHOGM 1989. For a leader who had undergone serious surgery hardly six months ago, the capacity to discharge the strenuous chairmanship of CHOGM 1989 was truly a profile in courage.

The period since 1981 has witnessed the leadership of Dr Mahathir bringing Malaysia directly into the mainstream of international political issues. In this involvement Malaysia is today a primary spokesman for the interests of the developing nations and the causes of human rights, whether it be the blacks of South Africa or the just struggle of the Palestinian people.