

Sudan-Malaysia Political and Cultural Relations

Nadir Ahmed Mohamed Elfaki, Jayum Anak Jawan, Zaid B. Ahmed and Ku-Hasnita Ku Samsu

Department of Government & Civilization Studies Univeriti Putra Malaysia

Abstract: This paper challenges to clarify the effect of political and cultural issues in the bilateral relation between Sudan and Malaysia. Moreover the relationship between the two countries start early in 1973, but it have been witnessed improvement and strengthened after PETRONAS Malaysian Oil Company came to Sudan to investment on 1997. The social activities were playing major role to build the strong relationship between the two countries such as the Sudanese Malaysian Friendship Association (SMFA) which was headed the contract with the Malaysian oil company, PETRONAS to work in the oil fields in Sudan in 1997 and from that time the economic and political cooperation between the two countries was going to improving till now. The researcher collected the data according to the qualitative method by conducting in-depth interview and some government document as a primary data and secondary data using books, articles, magazines, newspaper and etc. the main contribution of this paper that the cultural and political aspects are considered the main factor to improving the strengthen relationship between the two countries and one of this result the diplomatic relations between the two countries which start when Sudan opened the Sudanese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 1991 and the other side Malaysia followed that to open her Embassy in Khartoum in 1999.

Key words: Bilateral relations, cooperation, cultural relationship, social activities, diplomatic.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to explain the cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia on issues of political and cultural ties which are going well between the two countries. Furthermore, the bilateral relations between the two countries have been strengthened and witnessed improvement in different aspects of economic, political and cultural relationship since 1973 to the present.

The paper also clarifies that the governments of the two countries have recognized the need to strengthen the existing friendly relations between them. They have also expressed the desire to promote cultural and political cooperation besides the economic sphere on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. It is believed that such cooperation would serve their common interests and contribute to the enhancement of social development of the people of the two countries. Moreover, it explains the dimension of the political and cultural issues between the two countries which support each one to develop the other.

To elucidate the political relations between the two countries, this paper covers the background of the relationships and foreign policy analysis and also the high frequency of exchange visits and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Added to this, both countries are already members of several international organizations including the United Nations and its specialized agencies, such as Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and International Islamic Financial Market (IIFM). Besides that, both countries support each other in the Security Council of the United Nations when issues arise such as the issue of human rights.

In the issue of cultural aspects this paper elucidates the religious linkages which have grown stronger over the years. Moreover, the two countries have the same religion which is Sunni Islam. Based on this similar religion in the two countries, there is an interaction and contact between the people of the two countries through the Sufi *Tarigah*, the Malaysian-Sudanese Friendship Society in Kuala Lumpur and the Council of the Friendship of the Sudanese Malaysian People Cooperation, plus the exchange of higher education programmes and cooperation programme between the two countries in several fields such as health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper embraces research technique, type of data collection which comprises primary data (in-depth interview) and secondary data and method of data analysis. Qualitative research method was used in the study. This paper used qualitative data-gathering techniques to conduct all information that was obtained pertaining to the relationship between Sudan and Malaysia, which entails political and social cultural matters.

The researcher collected the primary data of this study by interviewing the informants related to the study in the two countries. A total of 17 individuals were interviewed individually by the researcher during the period

Corresponding Author: Nadir Ahmed Mohamed Elfaki, Department of Government & Civilization Studies Univeriti Putra Malaysia
E-mail: NadirElfaki@gmail.com

from 25th September to 25th December 2010. All interviews were conducted on the informant's free time and day.

Qualitative data gathered in this study through interviews were analyzed for content (content analysis). The researcher, after following the process of content analysis, including selection of the unit of analysis, sampling, coding, categorizing, finally as a last part of the study began first to transcribe the words from the recording. The second step involved translating some of the interviews and documents from Arabic to English and then interpreting them and the other data. The interpretation is considered as the most important and a final part.

Political Relations:

The Sudanese foreign relations after independence had been decidedly non-aligned and the country supported the cause of the Third World countries. Its representatives were active in the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, Organization of African Unity (OAU) replaced by the African Union (AU), the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) and United Nations. Therefore, the Foreign Minister in the first government after independence, Mohammed Ahmed Mahjoub, was nominated as the Secretary General of the UN by most of the Afro-Asian countries. At that time, the Malaysian foreign policy was classified as pro-Western. Though the Malayan leaders tried to support the Third World cause in the UN over some issues, many of its stances had provoked the non-aligned countries.

In May 1965, an unofficial delegation, led by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, leader of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), attended the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization Conference at Winneba, Ghana, but its application to join the organization was rejected. In the same year, another delegation to the Non-Alignment Organization Conference at Cairo, Egypt, suffered the same fate (Jayaratnam, 1972).

The relationship between Sudan and Malaysia was actually formed in the early 1970s, coinciding with the change wrought by Malaysia in its foreign policy to trend closer political relations, economic and cultural relations with Islamic countries and countries in the Middle East. At that time the two countries had a non-resident diplomatic representation centred in the bilateral relations of cooperation in regional and international organizations and some exchange scholarships between the two countries. The bilateral relations have witnessed a big jump between the two countries in the era of the Government of National Salvation especially in the context of cooperation and incentives.

On the other hand, Sudan was led by the policy of isolation and sanctions imposed by the United States and Western countries in general, limited by the orientation of its foreign policy towards the Asian continent, especially East Asian countries such as China and Malaysia.

According to the bilateral relations between Sudan and Malaysia, there is common ground between the two countries, notably mostly in the society of Islam as well as the relative similarity of their people. As a result, the similarity of the two countries' foreign policy towards the Western countries and the United States of America in particular, and the emerging issues on the international political arena such as globalization and the reality of a unipolar world system, dominated the course of international relations.

Malaysia in the era of Mahathir Mohammad declared situations in fighting against many of the U.S. policies of hegemony, and sought their leaders to highlight the leading role of Malaysia in the ranks of developing countries. Moreover, Malaysia started to play an influential role in activating South-South cooperation, expand cooperation and partnership between the countries of the developing world (Hamidin, 2007).

Actually, the relations between Sudan and Malaysia during this era were passive, occasioned by confrontation during their participation in the international and regional organizations. It was only in the early 1970s that the two countries started to cooperate in various international organizations, as a new posture occurred in Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Third World countries in general and the Muslim countries in particular. At the same time, Sudan and Malaysia shared identical views over many international issues as both members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The framework for cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia had continued to be within the international and regional organizations. Malaysia and Sudan worked within their regional grouping to map out and organize, through the UN general Assembly, the resolution on the New International Economic Order (NIEO). Since 1973, the developing-world attitude in the foreign policy of both Sudan and Malaysia came into view to take a more influential orientation, mainly on the basis of the national interests of the two countries rather than a radical ideological posture. Their work was consolidated towards an agreement on a code of conduct for a decision on monetary reform favourable to the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Along the same lines and within this framework of mutual understanding, the Sudanese government took a strong stance supporting the ASEAN proposal during the Cambodian crisis, in spite of the reliance of the government at the same time on US economic and military aid (Mansour, 1990).

The promoted political cooperation between the two countries came to be closely examined when the International Monetary Fund took the strange step of declaring that Sudan was non-cooperative because of its inability to pay arrears to the Fund. After that, particularly during the period of 1992-1993, Malaysia played a

major role to support Sudan against the threat from the Western world, especially the US. However, the expulsion was avoided and a new agreement for the installment of payments was agreed upon as a result of Malaysian efforts to assist Sudan inside the IMF (Osama, 2001). Furthermore, the Malaysian government supported Sudan when a sudden threat was directed towards Sudan, as the Government of Sudan (GOS) was involved in the shooting of former President Egyptian Mubarak in Ethiopia that happened in 1995. After the attempted shooting it was alleged that the GOS was involved in training and providing the would-be assassins and sheltering three escapees. Though the Security Council of the United Nations imposed sanctions on Sudan, the GOS denied the charge. As a result, the Security Council endorsed three resolutions, No. 1044, 1054, and 1070 to compel Sudan to hand over the three escapees (Woodward, 1997, p106). The Security Council resolutions aimed to impose sanctions on Sudan by restricting government officials' movements outside the country, reducing the amount of resident representatives of diplomatic missions at Khartoum and prohibiting any high-ranking officials from visiting Sudan. During this period, Malaysia played a main role in mobilizing to support Sudan. Malaysia's efforts concentrated on clarifying that Ethiopia and Egypt gave insufficient evidence to charge Sudan, rather the whole affair was about attempts to impose sanctions on Sudan for its "self-reliance programmes" and its solid stance against "Western hegemony" (Osama, 2001). In addition, Malaysia continued its exertions not only to mobilize and support Sudan, but also to directly be involved in filling the gap after the removal of the most of Western countries from aiding and financing Sudanese development projects. As a result of that, PETRONAS Company and Advance Synergy Sdn. Bhd. invested in and financed the Sudanese oil project.

The cooperation between the two countries in political fields has arrived at its highest profile. Malaysia worked hand in hand with the Sudanese Government to ensure the success of the development projects that the two countries were planning to achieve. Particularly, these projects of cooperation appeared when the amount of Malaysian investment in Sudan increased after the entry of PETRONAS into the oil exploration project from 1995 to the present.

The Malaysian government assisted and supported Sudan in the progress of a peaceful solution to the problem of South-Sudan before the problem was resolved by the signing of the agreement between the government of Sudan and Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Naivasha, Kenya in 2005 called the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). When Sudan signed the Sudan Peace Agreement in Khartoum at the Republic palace on 21st of April 1997 with the majority of the Southern rebellion groups, Malaysia's representative was among the foreign witnesses to this historic moment. Since that time, Malaysia has continued its efforts to help Sudan to achieve peace and settle the conflict in south Sudan. In this approach, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad sent a special envoy for consultation and exchanging of views on the proposed solutions. The Malaysian envoy visited a number of Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) states and South Africa. The summit which was held in Pretoria, South Africa comprised Ugandan President Museveni, South African President, Nelson Mandela, in full harmonization with the Malaysian special envoy. That summit opened the doors for a final peaceful solution to the Southern Sudan problem. At the same time, the Malaysian government repeated the announcement of its support of Sudan having the right over its own territory and the condemnation of any effort that aimed to hamper Sudan from exercising its rights or to open the door to foreign interference (BeladiMagziene, 1998, p 4).

In the course of the bilateral relations between the two countries, it is believed that Malaysia had no intention to play a hegemonic role by supporting Sudan against the Western World for its own cause. In fact, the cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia could be analyzed within the south-south cooperation framework. The two countries shared identical views on different issues and suffered similar problems in applying their own programmes of self-reliance and economic development breaking through the western hegemony. For this reason, Malaysia introduced Sudan to Asian countries, particularly the ASEAN group of countries, which opened a new window for the country to break through the indirect embargo imposed by the western countries since the beginning of the 1990s. The Malaysian Government helped in this region to explain and in the spread of Sudanese resident representative missions in Asian countries, which increased from four to nine resident missions after Sudan opened five embassies in different Asian countries. Moreover, as a result of Malaysia's motivation and help in Sudan's expansion in Asia, Japan invited Sudan to participate in the Tokyo International Conference on Africa Development (TICAD), which was held in Tokyo on the 19th October 1998. Sudan's participation in this conference signified not only the issue of the Western embargo but also the acceptance of Sudan in the Asian community (Nadir Yousif, personal communication, September 03, 2010).

High Level State Visits:

Malaysian officials increased their number of visits to Sudan as a sign of increased Malaysian support to the country. Sudan on the other hand also increased their mission number to support Malaysia. These witnessed more official cooperation in different fields bilaterally between the two countries.

Presidential diplomacy played an active role in pushing the relations between Sudan and Malaysia in all areas. As a result of this, Mr. Omar El-Bashir, President of the Republic of Sudan on an official visit to Malaysia in 1991 signed a number of conventions followed by the signing of other agreements. After that visit, the cooperation between the two countries in political spheres witnessed a rapid development, which resulted in the opening of a Sudanese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. In addition, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia visited Sudan in May 1998 and also signed on other conventions. That visit to Khartoum by Mahathir was the first for a Prime Minister from a non-African country, to visit the country after the Security Council's resolution restricting high-ranking officials from visiting Sudan. On the other hand, this visit showed of the close cooperation between the two countries and indicated high level of interest which had been built in different fields between Malaysia and Sudan. Also, the President of the Republic of Sudan, Omar El-Bashir visited Malaysia again in 1999 to participate in the "Smart Partnership" Dialogue in Langkawi and held meetings with the Malaysian leadership. Meanwhile from 28-29 of June 2002 in Khartoum, the meetings of the Ministerial Committee under the chairmanship of the Sudanese and Malaysian foreign Ministers were held. The meeting discussed the course of relations between the two countries in all areas and resulted in the signing of two agreements (FadlAbdalla, personal communication, October 21, 2010).

Mr. President of the Republic of Sudan El-Bashir paid his third visit to Malaysia in August 2002 to participate in the "Smart Partnership" Dialogue conference on the island of Langkawi. At the end of the conference he made a special visit to Kuala Lumpur where he held a dialogue with Malaysian businessmen.

In October 2003, the President of Sudan visited Malaysia for the fourth time to participate in the Tenth Summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference held in Putrajaya, and met the leadership of Malaysia during that Conference. Then he followed this with a fifth visit in August 2007 to participate in the "Smart Partnership" Conference in Langkawi where he met with the former Malaysian Prime Minister and discussed ways to develop bilateral relations between the two countries in all fields.

In April 2007, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi visited Sudan and he argued against the imposition of sanctions on Sudan during his state visit to Khartoum as Malaysia's position at that point was the chair of the OIC. This statement attracted wide attention and Sudan's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) led by President El-Bashir had looked to the OIC for international support. After returning from that visit, Badawi in his position during that period as the Chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference addressed many leaders of Islamic states and the General Manager of the Islamic Development Bank to establish a mechanism to contribute to the development of Darfur, besides emergency humanitarian aid. To follow up the interest shown by Abdullah Badawi, a special envoy was appointed.

On 18 May 2005, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, made an important visit to Sudan on the invitation of the Ministry of Energy. During that visit, he met Omar El-Bashir and made a presentation about the Malaysian experience in economic and social development to the leaders of the state and presented a technical lecture to workers in the oil sector. He was awarded a senior medal of recognition by the President El-Bashir for his efforts in promoting the bonds of cooperation between the two countries. This is the second visit by Dr. Mahathir, following his first in May 1998.

In addition, Malaysian Foreign Minister, Dato' Sri Anifah bin Haji Aman sent a message of congratulations to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Sudan, Ali Karti, when he assumed the post. The Malaysian Foreign Minister said in his message to Karti that he was sure that the friendly relations between the two countries and the two peoples of Sudan and Malaysia would be consolidated and further developed in the future to serve the interests of the peoples in the two countries.

The Malaysian Minister pointed out in the message that he looked forward to working closely with Karti to continue strengthening the friendship and cooperation relations between the two countries in the coming years as well as wishing progress and prosperity for the people of Sudan (FadlAbdalla, personal communication, October 21, 2010).

On 22 November 2010, TunDato' Seri Zaki bin TunAzmi, Chief Justice of the Federal Court of Malaysia visited Khartoum on an official visit. The visit was at the invitation of his counterpart, the Chief Justice of Sudan, Jalal-Eddin Mohamed Osman. During the official visit, TunZaki attended several meetings with the senior members of the Sudanese Judiciary including the Deputy Chief Justice of Sudan and senior judges of the Supreme Court. They exchanged legal views and ideas to improve the Judiciary delivery system including introducing the latest technology used in Malaysia for court proceedings (E-Kehakiman). The Supreme Court Judge and Head of Training Department of the Judiciary who accompanied the delegation remarked that the visit of the Malaysian Chief Justice was in the context of exchanging expertise between the two countries in the judicial field. Moreover, the visit pointed out that the meeting with the Malaysian Chief Justice tackled the future of the relationships. He also expressed the Malaysian judiciary's readiness to continue cooperation with the Sudanese judiciary, especially in training of Sudanese judges in Malaysia.

Further, in 1999, based on formal relations between Sudan and Malaysia, the Malaysian Government sent its diplomatic staff to open the Malaysian Embassy in Khartoum for the first time, despite the decision of the

United Nations to decrease the number of diplomatic missions in Sudan (Nadir Yousif, personal communication, September 03, 2010).

Sudan had earlier opened its Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 1991 after the first visit of the President of the Sudan to Malaysia. In addition, Malaysia also helped the Sudanese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to extend its diplomatic mission to represent Sudan to countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, Singapore and Brunei in October 1997. Furthermore, the Sudanese Ambassador in Kuala Lumpur presented his credentials to the King of Thailand and was fully recognized as the representative of Sudan in Thailand. After this recognition, the total trade between Sudan and Thailand increased one hundred percent. Also, a lot of Filipino companies showed their interest to invest in oil exploration. The Sudanese Minister of External Affairs then visited Brunei in May 1998 and discussed with the Sultan of Brunei the Brunei investments in Sudan (Ahmed Abdbagi, 1998).

In general, the political relations between Sudan and Malaysia were viewed to benefit only Sudan. However, if we look further there happens to be a mutual benefit for the two countries even though the benefit was not all that substantial. Moreover, the two countries had shown consistently, their mutual support of each other especially in the international arena where they provided mutual support on issues like human rights among other things (Nadir Yousif, personal communication, September 03, 2010).

The high level of cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia in the international organizations led each country to support matters related to the other. Along the same lines, both countries shared equal views on themes that have great impact on their development programmes or their political identification, such as human rights issues and their implications. Regardless of their agreement with the moral principles of the UN, the two countries stood powerfully in opposition to the misinterpretation of these principles in the name of western domination.

Beyond the direct cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia in political fields, this relationship entails another dimension in its political sphere. This dimension is the economic sphere which the writer will go to write in it in another separate paper. The economic sphere is a very important field of this study in answering the major question on how Malaysia assisted Sudan in the development of its economy according to the bilateral relations between the two countries.

The economic element in this relation was manifested in practical terms when Sudan started its oil exports in August 1999 with Malaysia helping to finance and execute such vital projects. Politically, oil exports have great value for Sudan and its effects are spread to varied fields beyond the economic one. It should be noted that Sudan's foreign relations witnessed confrontational policies towards European countries especially after the announcement of the beginning of its oil production and export. At the same time, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) took the decision that Sudan was no longer a non-cooperating country for the first time since 1986. From this point of view, the cooperation between Sudan and Malaysia had yielded a very significant result and was a historic breakthrough in south-south cooperation.

Cultural Relations:

Sudan and Malaysia share a similar Islamic culture and heritage, which gives the relations between them a unique additional dimension. The first contact between the people of the two countries is believed to have started long ago during the travel of Malay pilgrims to Mecca. Through these contacts a Malay pilgrim named Tappal brought to the east coast state of Kelantan in west Malaysia, the Sufi "*tarikah*" of "al-Ahmadiyah al-Idrisiyah" which he adopted from some of Sheikh Ahmed bin Idris' students in Mecca. In the 1920s, another pilgrim named Haji Mohammed Saeed adopted the "*tarikah*" and had the permission to spread it to peninsular Malaysia. A lot of Malays were initiated into the "*tarikah*" by Haji Mohammed Saeed in his home state of Negri Sembilan and he kept teaching the "*tarikah*" principles until he died in 1927. He was succeeded by his son, Abdullah, who expanded the "*tarikah*" into other states in Malaysia and further into Singapore. Since those times and until today, the contact between the branch of "*tarikah*" in Malaysia and their leader of Sheikhs in the Sudan has never been broken. Also, the students visited Sudan for the sake of meeting their Sheikh, and the leader of Sheikh himself visited Malaysia several times. In July 1999, Sheikh Ahmed bin Idris, the leader of "*tarikah*" visited Malaysia where he met his students and followers and invited many Malaysians and Singaporeans to adopt the "*tarikah's*" method. In addition he presented a lecture at the International Islamic University Malaysia on Sufism in Islam (Osama, 2001).

Parliamentary Institutions, Political Parties and Civil Society Organization:

Both countries have a federal system of governance based on the distribution of power between the states, although Malaysia has a good federal administration governance system as good as if not better than Sudan's which is why the latter plans to follow the Malaysian experience. There is close cooperation between the two countries at the parliamentary level as both are members of the Union of the Parliaments of the Islamic countries. Furthermore, the two ruling parties of the current governments exchange visits, participating in public conferences and support each other on several issues domestically internationally. Sudan and Malaysia are also in the World Federation of Muslim Women in the Youth Council of the World which is led by Mohamed Ali

Rustam, Chief Minister of the state of Malacca who is also one of the Vice-Presidents of the ruling party, UMNO and its information chief. The National Union for the young people in Sudan is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Council of the Global Youth. Moreover Sudan has hosted the Fourth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council at the end of February 2005, chaired by. Mohamed Ali Rustam.

Sudanese Malaysian Friendship Association (SMFA):

There are similarities and common features between the people of Malaysia and Sudan in terms of social structure. Furthermore, this unity of the Islamic culture and the common links led to the membership of both countries in the OIC as well as other Islamic activities such as the system of Islamic banking.

In 1992, the Sudanese government mobilized its forces to execute a foreign policy that would encourage friendly relations and an open door policy for foreign investment. One of the main forces used in this process was the non-governmental friendship societies, which the government reorganized in the council for International People's Friendship (CIPF). As a result, a new structure of the Sudanese-Malaysian friendship society that attempted to strengthen the relations between the people of Sudan and Malaysia was realised following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Sudan and their Malaysian counterpart. The Memorandum of Understanding stipulated the promotion of further relations between the two countries, through the exchange of information and experiences, facilitating the movement of businessmen and commodities between the two countries (Nadir yousif, personal communication, September 03, 2010).

There are two ways that will help to bring about the type of overlap and create a mutual relationship between the two countries, namely, the Sudanese Foreign Ministry, which is the official body to develop a foreign policy with the regional, different global countries and international organizations, notably the Federation of Malaysia. And the other side is the Council for International People's Friendship (CIPF), which is the arm of the Sudanese People's Diplomacy.

The CIPF is a combination of 62 associations under which the popularity of friendship with the peoples of the world, the Sudanese Malaysian Friendship Association (SMFA) is a branch. The SMFA was established in 1995 and continues to this day to run activities connecting the people of Sudan and Malaysia.

The second party, which helped to link the relationship between the two peoples, is the Council of Peaceful Coexistence between Religions in Sudan and which has close relationship with the CIPF of Sudan and also with the Council of Peaceful Coexistence between Religions in Kuala Lumpur. The objectives of these councils is to create a balance between the different religions and to live together peacefully in society to promote and deepen the social peace between religions in various societies that have different cultures and religions such as the Malaysian community and that of Sudan.

In 2010 the SMFA, under the umbrella of the Council for International People's Friendship (CIPF) met three times with the Malaysian delegations. The purpose of these meetings was in connection with economic trade. There was a brainstorming session between the two sides of Sudan and Malaysia on the issue of peaceful coexistence between religions. The outcome of these meetings was to benefit from the experiences of Malaysia in achieving the economic, social and cultural rights and increase the investment opportunities for Malaysians in Sudan. Also, one of the most significant results of these meetings was the contract with the Malaysian oil company, PETRONAS to work in the oil fields in Sudan. Following the signing of an agreement between Sudan and PETRONAS, the Malaysian national petroleum giant started oil extraction activities in Sudan in October 2010 (Alhadi Abdul Samad, personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Social Activities Exchange:

After November 1995 when the society held the "Sudan week" in Kuala Lumpur, many of the goals of the Sudanese friendship society were achieved. The "Sudan week" in Kuala Lumpur contained two kinds of activities: the first activity displaying the Sudanese investment opportunities and was demonstrated by public companies operating in commercial banks. Besides that a number of meetings were held between the representatives of the Sudanese economic sector (Cotton Company, Oil-Seeds, Bank of Khartoum Group, Nilien Bank Group) and their Malaysian counterparts. These meetings came up with initial agreements in the investment field whereby Malaysian investors could also contribute to the development of Sudanese resources in general and particularly the agricultural sector (Sudanese Comprehensive National Strategy, 1992).

The second kind of activities displayed during the week was the cultural activities. The week was accompanied by shows from the Sudanese national folklore troupe and many Sudanese singers, besides exhibitions of the Sudanese cultural heritage, folklore and wildlife. This cultural activity helped the Malaysian visitors to know more about Sudan and Sudanese cultures.

Several universities in Sudan and higher education institutions participated in the "Sudan week". Some agreements were concluded on cooperation in the field of higher education including cooperation between the University of Khartoum and International Africa University and the Malaysian Universities in the field of exchanging of scientific experiences and joint cooperation (Beladi Magazine, 1998). Furthermore the Malaysian friendship society played a major role in encouraging relations between Sudan and Malaysia, particularly in the

economic sphere. In 1995 one month after the “Sudan week” in Kuala Lumpur, the chairman of the Malaysian-Sudanese Friendship Society visited Sudan. He was accompanied by several Malaysian investors for talks with the Sudanese banks and public corporations on investment options as had been agreed at the meeting during the “Sudan week”. Besides that, concerted efforts were made by the Malaysian society to hold a “Malaysia week” in Sudan to reflect Malaysian culture and economic activities for the benefit of the Sudanese. The society is also works in facilitating Malaysian students to Sudan to learn the Arabic language and Islamic Studies and Qura'n Sciences (Osama, 2001). There is another area of cultural interaction between Sudan and Malaysia by way of a student exchange programme.

In 1996, Dr Abdel Hameed Othman, a Minister in the Prime Minister's office, agreed to offer a partial scholarship to 20 teaching assistants from different Sudanese Universities to pursue Master or PhD degrees in many Malaysian Universities. In addition, many agreements between Sudan and Malaysia were concluded to implement similar programmes.

The community of Sudanese in Malaysia is playing a distinct role in promoting relations between the two countries. This community comprises mainly lecturers in different Malaysian Universities who came to Malaysia for the first time to teach the Arabic language and Islamic Studies. Now the fields have broadened include engineering lecturers and skilled workers in various fields. Also a large number of students (postgraduate-undergraduate) are doing their studies in different government and non-government (private) universities in Malaysia, estimated to be more than 3002 in 2010 (Nadir Yousif, personal communication, September 03, 2010).

The interaction with the Sudanese community members resident in various Malaysian cities is one of the results of the promotion of relations between Sudan and Malaysia. This cultural interaction made Sudan a well-known country in Malaysia. Besides, the various activities that the Sudanese community in Malaysia held for the public and in various Malaysian universities were well organized and reflected a positive image of their country, while creating awareness of Sudanese culture among Malaysians.

Furthermore, good relations have already been established between the Sudanese and the Malaysian businessmen, professionals and political leaders. This relationship started during their studies together in the United Kingdom or in other parts of the world (Osama, 2001).

Before 1996, the Malaysian community in Sudan consisted of only a few students that studied in the Africa International University in Khartoum. Gradually, the number of students increased and in 1999, the number reached 145 students, with 100 at Africa International University while the others were studying Arabic language and Qur'an and Islamic studies in special institutions. These students carried out many activities to introduce their national culture and heritage to Sudanese society.

After the entry of PETRONAS to Sudan the number of Malaysian families that came into Sudan also increased. In 1997, 200 Malaysian families settled in Khartoum and the number reached 300 in 1999 (Nadzri, 1998, May 18). The increasing number of PETRONAS professionals and skilled workers created an impression of interaction between Sudanese and Malaysians. The ties between these people are very strong via their Islamic beliefs, which promoted the link between the two nations in the first place. There was a rapid increase in the number of Sudanese and Malaysians visiting each other's country and there is now mutual respect and friendship among many Sudanese and Malaysians in Malaysia or in Sudan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are many social and cultural activities carried out between the two countries in the cultural sphere such as increasing the number of Sudanese students doing their postgraduate studies in different fields in Malaysian universities. At the same time, there are many Malaysian students studying at African International University, Omdurman Islamic University and special institutions in Sudan learning the Arabic language, Islamic sciences and Qura'n. Moreover, the Malaysian-Sudanese Friendship Society in Malaysia and the Sudanese Malaysian Friendship Association (SMFA) in Sudan play a major role in promoting relations between the two countries. But the efforts of the SMFA, which established the economic relations are one of the reasons that the Malaysian oil company PETRONAS came to Sudan to work in the oil fields in 1997. Economic relations between Sudan and Malaysia are considered the result of efforts of the Sudanese People's diplomacy made by SMFA.

The exchanges of official visits between the two governments established the Embassy in Sudan and another one in Malaysia. Through these embassies the bilateral relations between the two countries grew stronger especially in political, cultural and economic aspects.

In the political sphere, both countries share similar views on different international issues and support each other's cause at international roundtables. The high point in political relations was the official exchange visit between the two governments of the countries starting from the era of Dr. Mahathir Mohammad followed by the era of Abdullah Badawi. These exchanges of official visits between the two governments established the

Embassy in Sudan and another one in Malaysia. Through these embassies the bilateral relations between the two countries grew stronger especially in political, cultural and economic aspects.

Conclusion:

The political and cultural spheres in any kind of relations such as multilateral relations between several countries or bilateral relations between two countries base on international cooperation relations among nations, is very important in the system of international relations.

The bilateral relations between Sudan and Malaysia in the political and cultural spheres began in 1970. These relations have been cemented by many social, cultural political and economic initiatives over the years that have strengthened these bilateral relations. Sudan's multilateral relations have also been boosted by the activation of it oil extraction activities in collaboration with notable international oil companies (IOCs) like the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Malaysian national petroleum company, Petroliaam NasionalBerhad (PETRONAS) (Sudan Oil & Gas Report, 2009).

Politically, the Government of Sudan (GOS) has maintained its political ties with the Malaysian Government in a relationship where Islam has been of primary importance in promoting economic relations (Large, 2008). Furthermore, the two countries have high exchange visits, diplomatic relations and support each other on international issues such as human rights. Consequently, they also support each other through the international organizations that both countries in which both countries hold membership.

In the cultural sphere, the cultural relationship between the two countries played a major role to create the economic relations between the two countries through the activities of the Sudanese Malaysian Friendship Association (SMFA) under the umbrella of the Sudanese association known as the Council for International People's Friendship (CIPF). Besides that, the exchange and cooperation in education programmes between the two countries and the benefits of the scholarships that Malaysia provides to the Sudan Government in various fields such as the Malaysian Technical Cooperation programme (MTCP) have also played a big part in the development of the bilateral relations between Sudan and Malaysia.

According to the bilateral relations, there is a common ground for Sudan and Malaysia, most notably in the society of Islam and the relative similarity of their people. The similarity of the foreign policies of the two countries towards the Western countries and the United States of America in particular, especially in the emerging issues in the international political arena such as globalization and the reality of a unipolar global system, that has dominated the course of international relations in recent times.

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