

A Dear Friend in Dhaka: 50 Years of Malaysia–Bangladesh Relations

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As Bangladesh celebrates its 50th year as an independent nation, one is also reminded of how Dhaka has remained an all-weather friend and ally to Putrajaya for also, almost half a century. Next year will mark 50 years of Malaysia–Bangladesh relations since Malaysia recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign nation in 1972. In the 21st century, Bangladesh has evolved rapidly to become a force to be reckoned with – it is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and it is set to graduate from “least developed country” status to “developing country” by 2024.

The five decades of Malaysia–Bangladesh relations can be best described with one word, resilience. Throughout the years, there has been genuine effort and initiative to continuously enhance cooperation, be it through trade and investment, labour mobility and capacity building. Ties with Dhaka are unique and indispensable, forged over years of “working at the relationship”, overcoming hurdles and hiccups along the way. Seeing how Bangladesh is making waves on the international stage only reiterates its commitment to collaboration, growth and prosperity – a shared vision for Malaysia in the new decade.

A challenge for both Putrajaya and Dhaka during the pandemic was undoubtedly the issue of the Bangladeshi workforce in Malaysia. The situation was rife with uncertainties, particularly with regards to the undocumented workers, the return of workers with permits into Malaysia and also the difficulties that came with adapting to the new normal.

As Malaysian borders remain closed to foreigners due to the pandemic, this challenge may well be an opportunity in disguise to rework labour mobility policies and perhaps even develop a contingency model, in partnership with Bangladesh. With close to one million Bangladeshi citizens in the country and Malaysia being the largest market for Bangladeshi workers in Southeast Asia, developing a working plan with Dhaka to prevent future untoward events would be mutually beneficial.

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s congratulatory letter to Malaysian Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in March last year reaffirmed the camaraderie and good will that exists between Dhaka and Putrajaya. She not only highlighted the common goals that both countries are striving for, but also the scope for greater cooperation and opportunities to deepen bilateral ties.

PM Hasina’s mention of the Rohingyas in the letter brings to light the role both Malaysia and Bangladesh have played thus far in standing in solidarity with the persecuted Rohingyas. In 2019, the Rohingya

Solidarity Organization (RSO) estimated more than 1.6 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Malaysia, on the other hand, houses a total of 200,000 Rohingya refugees. While this support to the Rohingyas has been extended on humanitarian grounds, it is clear that the pandemic has greatly exposed the difficulties in functioning as a refugee hub – for both Dhaka and Putrajaya.

In June 2020, when a boat ferrying Rohingya refugees arrived on Malaysian shores, the immediate response from Putrajaya was to send them back to Bangladesh. Dhaka, however, reiterated that there was no obligation whatsoever to take back the 269 Rohingya refugees that arrived on that boat. This imprudent exchange between Putrajaya and Dhaka could have been avoided if both countries acknowledged that this issue was and remains to be a shared challenge, to this day. In fact, Malaysia is considered the main destination for Rohingya fleeing Bangladeshi refugee camps. Early this year, dozens of Rohingya, mostly women and children, were caught as they arrived by boat in Malaysia, seeking to reunite with their husbands. It is alarming to note that since 2017, thousands of Rohingyas have paid smugglers to get them out of Bangladesh to reach Indonesia and Malaysia.

With Myanmar now under the control of the Tatmadaw since the *coup d'état* in February 2021, the refugee issue is poised to only get more complicated. As the two countries that host the largest number of Rohingya refugees in the Southeast and South Asian regions with working knowledge on cross-border movement, Malaysia and Bangladesh should work in synergy to manage the influx of asylum seekers and possibly, refugee resettlement.

Putrajaya has already articulated its desire to engage the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist with resettlement in a third country while Dhaka has called on European Union (EU) member states to provide support. A Putrajaya–Dhaka partnership to develop a more structured, holistic roadmap to manage the refugee issue will be better equipped to garner international support in the long run. Malaysia's position as an ASEAN member state and Bangladesh being the most prominent Rohingya host country will further legitimise such a partnership in the eyes of the international community. It must be stressed that while both Dhaka and Putrajaya might have made clear the position of not taking in more Rohingya refugees, the developments in the Rakhine State may culminate in precisely this, as an unintended consequence. Hence, the challenge is current, and a joint approach from Putrajaya and Dhaka could be a game changer.

Malaysia and Bangladesh are also part of a number of multilateral mechanisms of cooperation, the D-8 being one of them. The 10th D-8 Summit 2021 that took place from 5-8 April was hosted by Dhaka. The theme this year, "Partnership for a Transformative World: Harnessing the Power of Youth and

Technology” is timely, considering the role of the youth and significance of digitalization in the post-pandemic world.

The Dhaka Declaration and the D-8 Decennial Roadmap for 2020-2030 which were adopted in the summit will guide the work of the D-8 and ensure lasting cooperation between the D-8 member states. Putrajaya has proposed the possibility of having Reciprocal Covid-19 Vaccine Certificate Recognition among D-8 member states to speed up the reopening of hardest-hit sectors. For Putrajaya and Dhaka, this could potentially address the urgent issue of suspended labour mobility.

The D-8 member states have also highlighted the importance of a preferential trade deal to enhance ties and facilitate post-Covid-19 economic recovery. It is worthy to note that Putrajaya and Dhaka have also been in talks for a bilateral free trade agreement, though discussions have been put on hold for the time being. It is crucial that both countries utilise existing multilateral frameworks to cooperate in areas where bilateral partnership may seem ineffectual or arduous, to say the least.

The exponential growth of Bangladesh since 1971 stands testament to Dhaka’s perseverance and belief in playing to its strengths i.e. a favourable manufacturing ecosystem, sustainable agrarian economy, people-centric policies which focus on poverty alleviation and equitable foreign policy. In its enduring and somewhat perhaps, stereotypical relationship with Dhaka, it is possible that Putrajaya has not fully capitalised on various other vistas of cooperation.

In Malaysia, labour mobility has dominated the discourse on relations with Bangladesh, so much, that the view of this South Asian neighbour may not reflect current realities. Bangladesh’s growing prominence in the region presents an opportunity for Malaysia to diversify its own relations with Dhaka and also possibly facilitate its greater involvement with ASEAN.

Bangladesh’s unfolding success story is a fitting tribute to ‘Bangabandhu’ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation. Spirits are high in Dhaka after the recent centenary birth celebrations of the remarkable Bangabandhu – a moniker for Rahman, meaning “Friend of Bengal”. As the golden jubilee of Malaysia–Bangladesh ties approaches, the hope is that both countries truly internalise the importance of these bilateral relations and manifest this into tangible, mutual benefits in the years to come. After all, Putrajaya too, is a friend of Bengal.

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