

Forging Closer Diplomatic Ties with Muslim Countries: Ferdinand E. Marcos' Foreign Policy Legacy with the Middle East

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Abstract:

The Middle East was a vast region of importance because of its Islamic orientation and oil reserves. The Philippines was directly affected by the events in the Middle East as the country became dependent on oil and its southern part, Mindanao was influenced by the Islamic religion. In the 1970s, political and military upheavals in the Middle East like the Arab-Israeli Wars and the Iran-Iraq War triggered an unstable political and economic situation in the country because of the oil embargo and crisis imposed by the Arab nations. Furthermore, the support of the Middle East countries to the secessionist MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) in southern Philippines precipitated an unstable security for the country. Through the diplomatic initiative of President Marcos, diplomatic ties were established with the Middle East countries that averted the effects of the oil embargo and prevented the separation of Mindanao as a Bangsa Moro Republic under Chairman Nur Misuari. He was the first Philippine President who opened foreign relations with Muslim countries although the Philippines was a predominantly Christian nation. In doing so, President Marcos used the instrumentalities of foreign policy to enhance and preserve the national interest of the country.

Key words: Ferdinand E. Marcos, Islam, Middle East, oil embargo, Organization of Islamic Conference, Philippine diplomatic history, Philippine foreign relations.

Philippine diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern countries have emerged during the President Ferdinand Marcos' administration. Although he was perceived by many as a dictator, his contribution in the field of foreign policy remains influential even until today. The decision to open trading relations with Islamic countries was precipitated by international and domestic factors affecting the Philippines.

The Asia for Asian advocacy of Senator Recto was clearly emphasized in his commencement address at the Manuel L. Quezon Educational Institution on April 10, 1954. He defended and clarified the statement of Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Leon Ma. Guerrero when he said:

Many things shape the life of nations, and some of them have tended to separate us from the rest of Asia. Religion is one, trade is another. A deep affection and trust in America is third. But more permanent, more powerful than all of these is our geographical position, our race, our love of freedom. These things bind us to our fellow Asians forever. (Arcellana 1990, 257)

This pronouncement was clearly seen in the case of the Philippines and the Muslim countries of the Middle East. During his second term, President Marcos was confronted with the twin problems of the rise of Muslim secessionist movement and the oil price hike. In proclaiming martial law, President Marcos cited the threats against the Republic namely the CPP-NPA (Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army), the rightist including the political opposition, and the Muslim separatists. (De Viana 2011, 317)

In 1969, Domocao Alonto and Rashid Lucman formed the Ansar el Islam that was followed by the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) by Nur Misuari in June 1969. (De Viana 2011, 315) The MNLF became a force to reckon with under the Marcos administration because of its affinity with the Muslim nations bombarding the Philippines with diplomatic campaigns to discredit the government in the

Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The primary goal of the MNLF was to establish an independent Bangsa Moro Republic in southern Philippines. It threatened, at various stages, Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity and drained the Philippine economy. (Che Man 1990, 140) The MNLF was directing its diplomatic maneuvers to be recognized by both the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and individual countries. Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia immediately extended humanitarian, moral and religious support to the MNLF.

President Marcos was cognizant of the support given by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the MNLF and the immediate effects of the secessionist movement in Mindanao. He said:

During my recent visit to Saudi Arabia, I was given the assurance by most Islamic states through the Organization of Islamic Conference that the conference would maintain the territorial integrity of the Philippines, and that it had no intention of supporting the Moro National Liberation Front or any organization that seeks to partition the territory of the Philippine Republic. The late Saudi King Khaled Bin Abdul Aziz confirmed the Islamic Conference stand that any solution must be within the framework of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. (Domingo 2007, 103)

By the beginning of 1973, the Muslim movement had achieved some major military successes, controlling large areas in Mindanao. (Noble 1975, 459) The MNLF relentlessly attacked the capital of Sulu on February 7, 1974, which resulted in hundreds of lives lost, combatants and civilians alike. With an armed force estimated at 15,000, the Muslims controlled most of Basilan, Sulu and major parts of Lanao, Zamboanga, and Cotabato. (Kessler 1985, 174) At this juncture, international support was vital for the MNLF. The most vocal support for the

MNLF came from Libya and Iran.¹

Marcos saw the urgency of abating the support of Libya to the MNLF. He instructed his roving envoy, First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos, to visit Tripoli on November 14, 1976 to confer with President Colonel Mu'ammad al-Gaddafi and to establish bilateral relations with his country. The mutual interests of both countries were discussed, including the secessionist objective of the MNLF. On November 17, 1976, the Philippine diplomatic relations with Libya were formally forged.

President Marcos immediately dispatched Undersecretary Cornelio Z. Barbero to Libya for the signing of the Tripoli Agreement with MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari. This agreement became the general basis for ceasefire and autonomy in southern Philippines. From February to March of 1977, Barbero and Misuari worked out for the technical panel the implementing details of a general framework agreement done in Tripoli, Libya. On March 18, 1977, Libyan President Gaddafi submitted to President Marcos a proposal of accord to accelerate the process for autonomy in southern Philippines. With the diplomatic skill, President Marcos announced:

I ordered last April 7, 1981, through Presidential Decree No. 1842, the merger of the executive councils of the Regional Executive Council of Regions 9 and 12 of the autonomous government in Mindanao. This was in accordance with the Tripoli Agreement, to provide for an effective administrative machinery as was agreed upon with the late King Khaled of Saudi Arabia. I also encouraged Muslim leaders to forget their factional conflicts and submit recommendations of qualified Muslim Filipinos for positions in the executive and judicial branches, as well as in the Foreign Service. (Marcos 1982)

¹ Other Muslim countries allowed the MNLF to establish liaison offices although these were already substantiated for the MNLF, compared to the bilateral relations of Muslim countries with the Philippines, the latter obviously carried more weight.



President and Mrs. Marcos and their daughter Imee shown with the Late King Khaled during the State Visit to Saudi Arabia on March 21, 1982.

Trading partnership was lucrative between the Middle East and the Philippines. President Marcos knew that diplomatic relations with the oil rich countries were vital if the Philippines was to continue its path of industrialization. Saudi Arabia became the third largest partner of the Philippines, following the United States and Japan, from 1974 to 1981. From \$90.3 million in 1973, Philippine trade with Saudi Arabia reached \$823,341,000 in 1980 and \$1.01 billion in 1981. (Wadi 1998, 42)² In 1978, Saudi Arabia supplied the Philippines with 19.74 barrels of oil. (Domingo 1983, 231) This increased to 23.15 million barrels in 1979, and increased further to 27.83 million barrels in 1980. (Domingo 1983, 231) In 1980, the Philippines relied on Saudi Arabia for 38.8 percent of her total crude supply. (Ingles 1980, 126)

Saudi Arabia was also a major contributor of development assistance to the Philippines. Development projects in Muslim Mindanao were provided \$127 million by the Saudi Arabian government. Intensive fisheries development in

² Data obtained from the period of 1980 Philippine-Saudi Arabian trade was taken from Benjamin B. Domingo (ed.) 1983. *Marcos Diplomacy: Guide to Philippine Bilateral Relations*. Manila: Foreign Service Institute, 231.

Sulu and Zamboanga, indigenous technology transfer to increase energy, and resource utilization in Muslim areas, agro-reforestation complementation projects, and training of Filipino Muslims for jobs involving technical services and expertise were provided by the Saudi Arabian government. These amounted to \$5,900,000 of additional development assistance to the Philippines. (Domingo 2007, 232)

Kuwait was the second biggest oil supplier to the Philippines after Saudi Arabia. She supplied 12.33 million barrels in 1978, 10 million in 1979 and 9.3 million in 1980. (Domingo 2007, 123) This accounted for the big trade deficit of the Philippines of \$161.3 million in 1978, \$280.4 million in 1979, \$401.1 million in 1980, and \$415.3 million in 1981. (Domingo 2007, 123) Trade between the Philippines and Kuwait amounted to \$416 million in 1981, making Kuwait the 6th largest Philippine trading partner. (Domingo 2007, 123) Furthermore, Kuwait became a major oil supplier for three years starting from the April 16, 1979 agreement between Shiek Ali Khalifa, Oil Minister of Kuwait and President Ferdinand Marcos.

The United Arab Emirates increased its supply of oil to 2.6 million barrels in 1980. (Domingo 2007, 129) Prior to this, the United Arab Emirates' trade with the Philippines only amounted to \$90,635 in 1978 and \$38,865 in 1979. (Domingo 2007, 129) By the 1980s, the Philippines was granted \$17.9 million in loans by the government of the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, continued supply of oil was promised by Minister Sayed Mana Saeed al-Oteibato to President Marcos in the latter part of the 1980s.

On the other hand, Iraq was the 14th largest trading partner of the Philippines. In 1980, Philippine-Iraq trade amounted to \$245.8 million, equivalent to 1.82% share of the total Philippine trade. (Wadi 1998, 42) In the same year, the Philippines had a trade deficit of \$147.6 million, since Philippine exports amounted to only \$49.1 million while

imports amounted to 196.7 million. (Wadi 1998, 42-43)

Iran ranked as the country's 17th largest trading partner. Representing a 1.05% share in overall Philippine trade, a total of \$85.8 million was reached in 1978. However, the total trade between the two countries dropped to \$42.4 million in 1979. (Ingles 1980, 121) As a consequence of her oil imports from Iran, the Philippines suffered a cumulative trade deficit of \$130.1 million from 1977 to 1979. (Ingles 1980, 121) With the oil embargo from Iran in the 1980s, the Philippines had no import while its exports amounted to \$4.81 million and \$7.6 million in 1980 and 1981, respectively.

President Marcos' diplomatic move to establish links with Middle East countries has proven to be significant to the Philippine economy. There were 18 diplomatic and consular posts in Africa and the Middle East. This diplomatic maneuver was in line with President Marcos' 8-point Foreign Policy Guidelines in 1976 particularly the third and the eight:

We seek closer identification with the Third World, all the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America particularly in the uplift of the poor and the establishment of a New International Economic Order. We support the Arab countries in their struggle for a just and enduring peace in the Middle East in accordance with relevant resolutions of the United Nations. (Domingo 2007, 107)

With this diplomatic initiative, the Philippine government was able to establish ties with Muslim counties sympathetic to the MNLF, provide imports of oil necessary to uplift Philippine economy, reconstruct and develop Mindanao, and appoint qualified Muslims to strategic government and diplomatic posts to avert the secessionist sentiments of the Muslims in Mindanao.

As president Marcos wrote: The historic bonds that link the Filipino people and their brothers in the Islamic world have been further strengthened with the redirection of Philippine foreign policy toward the Middle East. (Marcos 1982, 25) This

was manifested more clearly when the ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a policy statement on November 18, 1973, defining our standpoint of the Middle East dispute. (Marcos 1982, 25) The key elements included (Marcos 1982, 102-103):

1. A condemnation of Israel's occupation of Arab lands as an act of aggression in violation of the United Nations Charter;
2. A declaration of Philippine support for UN Security Council Resolution No. 247, dated 22 November 1967, calling for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all occupied Arab territories, the termination of all claims or states of belligerency, recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of all states in the area, and the right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threat or acts of force.
3. A call for the restoration of legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

These pronouncements of the Marcos administration bolstered the strong diplomatic maneuver to lessen the repercussion of the of the oil embargo imposed by the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries on October 1973 against the United States and its allies including the Philippines. This was done because of the American support to Israel during the 1967 "Six Days War" and the 1973 "Yom Kippur War."

Be that as it may, the Philippines was able to lessen the effects of the oil embargo and oil crisis of the 1970s because of President Marcos' idea of opening diplomatic ties with the Muslim countries. During the Marcos incumbency, several diplomatic posts were established including: Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Abuja (Nigeria), Amman (Jordan), Ankara (Turkey), Baghdad (Iraq), Beirut (Lebanon), Cairo (Egypt), Doha (Qatar), Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Kuwait City (Kuwait), Manama (Bahrain), Muscat (Oman), Nairobi (Kenya), Pretoria (South Africa), Riyadh (Saudi Arabia), Tehran (Iran), Tel Aviv (Israel), and Tripoli (Libya).

Conclusion

The worldwide oil crisis brought by regional conflicts in the Middle East also badly affected Philippine economy. To serve as economic cushion for the sudden oil price hike and oil embargo, diplomatic relations were established with Muslim countries in the Middle East led by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the establishment of Philippine-Middle East relations paved the way for averting the oil embargo and oil crisis created by the Arab-Israeli Wars and the Iran-Iraq War.

President Marcos had concrete plans for maintaining domestic peace through foreign policy. The communist insurgency was ravaging the Philippine countryside in the 1970s. Alongside this was the Islamic secessionist movement in Mindanao. These local upheavals resulted in the collapse of the Philippine economy, complicated by certain international events like the sudden oil price hike. Marcos inked closer diplomatic pacts with Muslim countries in the Middle East, an unprecedented move among Philippine presidents because our country is predominantly a Christian nation. He felt that diplomatic ties with the oil-rich Muslim countries would avert the effects of the oil crisis and pacify the secessionist Muslims in southern Mindanao.

President Marcos read the international and domestic realities very well in the 1970s. The eventual result was the prevention of the economic collapse of the Philippines because of the oil embargo and crisis brought upon by the Philippines' close alliance with the United States. Marcos knew that by forging ties with the Muslim countries, the Philippine economy would stabilize. Domestically, the Philippines was ravaged by the Communist insurgency and secessionist movement in Muslim Mindanao. The close diplomatic relations with the Middle East averted the possible separation of Mindanao into an independent Bangsa Moro Republic because President Marcos convinced the Organization of Islamic Conference that

autonomy was needed instead of the declaration of independence. The Muslim countries of the Middle East allowed the Philippine government to solve its political and religious difference with the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front in Mindanao resulting in a peaceful settlement of the issue.

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