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# AL-SHAJARAH

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The journal is published twice a year, June-July and November-December. Manuscripts and all correspondence should be sent to the Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Shajarah*, F4 Building, Research and Publication Unit, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), No. 24, Persiaran Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Taman Duta, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All enquiries on publications may also be e-mailed to [alshajarah@iium.edu.my](mailto:alshajarah@iium.edu.my). For subscriptions, please address all queries to the postal or email address above.

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**Muhammed Haron (2018), *Connecting South-South Communities: A Narrative of South Africa-Malaysia Relations*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Lady Stephenson Library.**

*Reviewer:* Danial Yusof. ISTAC-IIUM

While introducing critical theory in international relations (IR), Marcos Farias Ferreira referred to the works of the radical IR scholar, Robert W. Cox. In it he posits that unlike the realist approach, critical theory views IR not be in isolation from social forces. There is a need to view global politics (here I would suggest that this applies to comparative politics and area studies as well) as a construct that evolves through the complexity of state, sub-state, trans-state forces in economic, cultural and ideological spheres i.e. a combination of the material and ideational in acquiring legitimacy, emancipation and political order.<sup>1</sup> The author of this book adopts this approach. Muhammed Haron is a full Professor in Religious Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana. He obtained a Doctorandus Degree in Semitic Studies from the Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam, and his doctorate in International Relations at Rhodes University, South Africa. His other publications include *The Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Relations* (2006), *Going Forward: South African-Malaysia Relations* (2008), *South Africa's Muslims: Annotated Bibliography* (1997) *First Steps in Arabic Grammar* (2007), *Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa* (2009), and *Muslim Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa* (2016), among others.

In writing on the ties between South Africa and Malaysia over a period of 25 years (1991 – 2016) using the approach of critical theory, this reader agrees that Muhammed Haron has in fact utilised the appropriate narrative in describing the historic and ideological struggle of South Africa against apartheid, the release of and

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<sup>1</sup> “Introducing Critical Theory in International Relations”, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-critical-theory-in-international-relations/>

presidency of Nelson Mandela, the building of economic and diplomatic ties between the countries since then, the moral and financial support of Malaysia for the ANC (African National Congress) and its establishment as a political party, and the role of CSOs (Civil Society Organization) in fostering cultural relations. The narrative reflects a mutually reinforcing South-South bilateral relationship of the marginalized and so-called developing countries of the era bound by their conviction of a moral struggle and a just international order. It gives a more or less systematic overview and fair evaluation over more than twenty-five years of relations between two so-called South Middle Powers, namely South Africa and Malaysia. This book discusses them within their respective regional structures and their respective diplomatic and commercial connections. Its narrative also ensures originality in going over issues that would have generally be omitted by typical International Relations approaches. In this context, it gives weightage to cultural contacts that brings forward the usually unexplored role of non-state actors in international affairs. While the ideas put forward by South Africa and Malaysia's political leaders are expectedly based in their specific national and broad regional philosophies, the book also deconstructs the narratives of the 'African ways' vis-à-vis the 'Asian ways' in maintaining and sustaining state-to-state relations within the two regions. This author uses Critical Theory as a relevant framework whilst acknowledging various developments in International Relations, will be of interest to scholars and researchers in especially the Social Sciences and Humanities who focus on critical theory, area studies, comparative politics, post-colonial studies and development studies.

Muhammed Haron writes at commendably and at significant length on the theoretical and comparative framework of South-South relations before explaining South Africa and Malaysia in their respective regional organization i.e. the SADC (South Africa Development Community) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asia Nations), and the sustainability of bilateral ties via commerce and CSO activism. He then proceeds to discuss sovereignty and nation-building challenges in the international community before concluding that the bilateral relations between South Africa and

Malaysia provides story-telling, especially with the inclusion of religious and cultural activism that is crucial to provide their respective nations with a sense of identity, coherence, and unity vital for a dynamic understanding of IR. While the detailed theoretical framework and the role of the countries in their respective regional organizations that underpins the book is highly useful for graduate students of IR, it does beg the question of the appropriate format of the manuscript. I would argue that in its existing format, the book's structure resembles more of a graduate dissertation and could have benefitted from a less academic format.

Chapters 1 to 3 on South-South narrative, theoretical framework, and regional organizations, totally 108 pages could also have been trimmed down. The spirit of the book is also as such that perhaps a coffee table edition would be warranted as a celebration of south-south cooperation and the warm bilateral ties between the two countries. Of course, these are mere suggestions to formatting and type of publication and does not detract from the importance of the book in promoting a crucial and revisionist narrative on the issue of political development and the status quo of the international order.

The book is most effective at applying critical theory as it does in chapter four in describing the collectivism of the South against a social sciences and development studies that was arguably built upon the vestiges of empire and sustained as a new form of imperialism of the North. In chapter six, there is a refreshing departure from the usual structural approach of IR as Muhammed Haron reminds readers of the exploits of Tan Sri Professor Ismail Hussein and GAPENA (Malaysian Federation of National Writers Union) in bringing spotlight on Malay communities in diaspora i.e. the Cape Malays. Most crucial in chapter seven is the reflection of more recent leadership challenges afflicting both countries i.e. the author mentions Zuma and Najib by name:

“Will the two nation-states’ respective administrations have their nations on their minds and their peoples’ interests in their hearts? Will they as middle power nation-states remain committed to the South? Will they be able to weather the socio-political and economic storms that lie ahead? Will their new political leaders

work with one another the way Mandela and Mahathir cooperated? (of course, the matter as it were was that Mahathir became Prime Minister again in 2018) Will the current and future leadership be able to get rid of the tainted images that were regrettably left behind by Zuma and Najib? Who will be the ones to demonstrate that they possess the necessary character traits to lead their respective nation-states? And will these two political leaders eventually work towards forging a strategic partnership between their nation-states?" (page 319)

At the end of the book, the author reiterates that the narratives of South Africa and Malaysia between 1991-2016 illustrates that stories about the South i.e. the disadvantaged and marginalized peoples' experience and their steps towards sustainability and sovereignty provides a revisionist account for a fuller understanding of IR and development studies. Notwithstanding tangible constructs such as nation-states, sovereignty and corresponding interests and the generation of socio-political and economic ties and activity – the intangible i.e. role of ideology, charisma, the inter-personal dynamic and idiosyncrasies of future South Africa and Malaysia leaders will provide as much weightage to the future narrative their relations.

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