

BOOK REVIEW

Connecting South-South Communities: The Narrative of South African-Malaysian Relations, by Muhammed Haron. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 380 pp.

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Comparative studies of states and their international relations are worthy tasks that scholars have undertaken in myriads of ways, which is what Muhammed Haron's eight chaptered book, *Connecting South-South Communities: The Narrative of South African-Malaysia Relations* has done. It is an illuminating text on regionalism and the impacts of regional influentials in international relations, with a specific narration of South Africa-Malaysia Relations. The book begins with Muhammed Haron's justification for writing it, which is to decipher the relationship that has been forged, over time, by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Of course, the relations between Malaysia and South Africa as regional influentials also constitute the primary focus of the book, which is an offshoot of Haron's doctoral dissertation.

Fundamentally, the issue-specific focus of each of the eight chapters in the book makes it an easily readable text, which is also full of detailed descriptions built on extensive research on South Africa-Malaysia relations and their place in their respective regional groupings. Haron demystifies the pertinent issues of regionalism, around which states all over the world have pursued regional integration and, of course, alliance formations and connections between and among regional groupings as we have seen between the European Union and

ASEAN for over four decades. Haron uses the Critical Theory framework to narrate South Africa's and Malaysia's stories, which are also situated within their respective regions. The book reveals in detail how both countries have concretised their relations since 1991–2001, improved their trade links between 2002 and 2016, enhanced their middle power status, and galvanised their natural resources endowment to promote the interests of the developing world.

There is a reasonable assumption that global competitiveness is the most significant trend of this new millennium. However, the opportunities and challenges that the new paradigm of the global economy poses have driven countries' frantic efforts to integrate their economies within their regional neighbourhoods. States have also striven to establish more considerable and more viable regional economic communities for the enhancement of international trade across regional power groups instead of advancing their individual state's interests. Haron's book reflects these realities with the case studies of South Africa and Malaysia and the regional organisations to which they belong. To this end, the author evaluates South Africa-Malaysia relations and SADC-ASEAN relations from the 1960s but with particular emphasis on events from 1990 onwards i.e., post-apartheid South Africa.

In its eight chapters, the book considers the state-to-state and people-to-people relations that South Africa and Malaysia have forged, especially since the emergence of the post-apartheid government in South Africa. As documented by Haron, the state-to-state relations between South Africa and Malaysia nosedived during the apartheid era, while the only links was the support given to the freedom fighters under the African National Congress (ANC) by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)-led Malaysian government. Haron narrates well the roles played by Malaysian Prime Ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957–1970) and Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003) in supporting ANC's liberation struggle. Malaysian leaders, especially Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, reportedly leveraged their country's economic advantage to aid the freedom fighting efforts of ANC, while further building on South African-Malaysian relations in the post-apartheid era.

However, full diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries became normalised following the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the establishment of an inclusive democratic political system in South Africa from around February 1990. With the entrenchment of a democratically elected government of South Africa in May 1994, headed by Nelson Mandela, South African-Malaysian relations became firmly cemented. Then Malaysian leader Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad,

vowing to deepen South-South relations, ensuring continuous diplomatic and economic ties between both countries. Haron's revelations about the role of Malaysia during the ANC liberation struggle against the apartheid system has provided balance to historical accounts on South Africa's dawn of democracy. Other than support from Cuba and Nigeria, not much else is known of the foreign support that the South African freedom fighters received. Haron's book provides information about such neglected perspectives, potentially sparking more debates on Africa-Asia relations since the 1955 Bandung Conference.

As Haron chronicles, people-to-people relations between South Africa and Malaysia have also been manifested in activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as cultural groups and religious organisations – a lesser-known practice in inter-state relations. As Haron reveals, from 1993, with generally little or no government support, the South African cultural groups and religious bodies organised activities in cooperation with their Malaysian counterparts, thus resulting in an upsurge in socio-cultural and religious ties between both countries. However, Haron calls the readers' attention to the insignificance of South African-Malaysian people-to-people ties in both countries' diplomatic radar screens. On the Malaysian side, however, Haron tells us of generous government funding for the organisations involved in helping them achieve their goals.

In showcasing how South Africa and Malaysia and their respective regional communities have adopted more or less related inspirational styles for the attainment of goals and dreams, Haron takes us through the philosophical posturing of both South African and Malaysian leaders and how this was brought to bear upon the construction of regional identities in ASEAN and SADC. Specifically, Haron highlights the working relationship between these two regional communities as an essential backdrop to understanding and appreciating the bilateral ties between South Africa and Malaysia as representatives of the global South.

The book is a welcome development in South African-Malaysia relations. It signifies the importance of Asia-Africa relations in the context of emerging economies of the global South. Nevertheless, this book, being primarily a historical account, has only limited contribution in the analytical terms of proffering a new framework, perspective or theoretical finding to expand the theoretical fields of international relations and foreign policy studies. The book's excessive focus on the roles of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, without updating readers on the current state of affairs in

the bilateral foreign relations between both countries, may leave contemporary analysts disappointed. Nothing is said, for instance, on developments during the administration of Dato' Sri Najib Razak with respect to Malaysia's relations with post-Mandela leaders of South Africa.

Haron's book may also be subjected to criticism from the angle of post-colonial studies, about how we understand and investigate South-South relations. Given its over-reliance on state-centric analysis, the book's discussion tends to marginalise people-to-people relations, thus consigning those with no direct access state patronage to the periphery of the system in both countries. The book's emphasis on economic motivations or profits, and the extractive economy in particular, renders it unable to capture the diversity and more complex intersections between South Africa and Malaysia beyond the economic motivations of the state-centric analysis. It sorely misses out the social, political, cultural and people-to-people-centred relations, therefore neglecting repercussions arising from the increasing number of citizens of both countries who are working and doing business with one another, for example South Africans studying in Malaysian universities as against Western universities.

The criticisms above are not meant to belittle the book's importance. But it could have been better to consider discussions on the current events of the two countries' bilateral relations beyond the traditional international relations perspective. The book's presence in itself makes a significant contribution to redress the existing limited literature of the relations between both countries. On the whole, therefore, the book embodies an elucidation of the neglected perspectives on the South-South relations and the aftermath of South African emancipation from the scourge of apartheid in its conduct of international relations. With his use of simple language, the author elegantly simplifies the subject matters for the general reader. The provision of pictorial illustrations is a plus for the book. Laypersons, as well as International Relations and Political Science students focusing on Afro-Asian relations, African and Asian Studies, foreign policymakers, and any interested foreign service officer would find Haron's *Connecting South-South Communities: The Narrative of South African-Malaysian Relations* not only informative but also intellectually stimulating.