

BOOK REVIEW

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied. *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya*. Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015.

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Malay radicals have not been given the recognition they deserved either through the national narrative or by the Malaysian government although individually leaders of this group like Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, Ishak Haji Muhammad and even Ahmad Boestamam have been accorded some form of recognition since 1957, notably through museum displays or by states like Pahang and Sarawak. This issue was first publicly raised by Jaafar Hussin in his autobiography *Kebenaran* (The Truth) which was published by Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka in 1989. Syed Muhd Khairuddin provided various reasons for this situation including what he termed the "Indonesian cum socialist-centric" perspective that placed the Malay radicals in the context of revolutionary developments in Java-Sumatra which provided them ideas, programs and so forth. What emerged from *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* is a more balance account of the Malay Left. In short, Syed Muhd Khairudin had rescued them from their peripheral place in the official narrative and placed their legacy in its rightful position in Malaysian political history.

Syed Muhd Khairudin who teaches at NUS' Department of Malay Studies, provides a fresh insight into the Malay radicals who "identified themselves with the local Malay society and sought to address the anxieties and concerns of that community through several movements, parties and organisations." These radicals were influenced by various concepts including the anti-colonial legacy of the 19th century, *cita-cita perjuangan* (spirit and the ambition of struggle), *kesedaran* (consciousness), *kesatuan* (unity), *kebangsaan* (nationalism), *Melayu Raya* and *merdeka* (freedom). They drew inspiration from a variety of sources including modern Turkey, India, Burma and Indonesia (Dutch East Indies) while the brand of socialism they espoused were clothed in Malay and Islamic garb.

The PKMM were the first to popularise merdeka that came with a particular way of salutation when its members meet one another.

The Malay Left embraced a variety of individuals from specific groups which Syed Muhd Khairudin identified as the following: Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), Pembela Tanah Air (PETA), Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesian Merdeka (KRIS), Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM), Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API), Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya (MATA), Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA), Hizbul Muslimin, Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS), Barisan Tani SeMalaya (BATAS), Pemuda Radikal Melayu (PERAM), Gerakan Angkatan Muda (GERAM), Parti Komunis Malaya (PKM), Parti Rakyat Malaya (PRM), Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), Parti Islam SeMalaya (PAS) and Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50). Individually they ranged from the more well-known Ibrahim Yaacob, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, Ahmad Boestamam, Aishah Ghani, Shamsiah Fakeh, Abdullah CD and to lesser known names like Jaafar Hussin and A Samad Ahmad. Mainstream Malay nationalists might be uneasy with the inclusion of radical Malays from the PKM although many of them actually held multiple positions in both communist and non-communist organisations. It was due to these connections that colonial officials branded many Malay radical movements as communistic, which have remain uncorrected. PKMM, API and AWAS, just to name a few, come under this category. Syed Muhd Khairudin describes these groups as the awakened generation who were hell bent of rescuing the Malays from their wretched position under colonial and unfettered capitalism. They burst into the scene in the late 1930s through the KMM which secretly pursued independence from Britain; they survived the traumatic Japanese Occupation and were at the height of their popularity and influence after the occupation until decimated by the Emergency regulations which were enforced in June 1948. According to Syed Muhd Khairudin, a third of the group were interned in detention centres located in various parts of the peninsula. Many escaped into the jungle to join the PKM's Tenth Regiment or escaped to Singapore to pursue other vocations. Kamaludin Muhammad immersed himself in literary pursuit under the pen name Keris Mas while another comrade also from Temerloh became a well-known film star under the name of Roomai Noor. Many joined United Malays National Organization (UMNO) but many more simply left politics and remained forgotten. By the 1950s the radicals were taking different routes; Abdul Ghaffar Baba who joined UMNO went on to become Chief Minister of Melaka and later Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in the 1990s. Boestamam and a few others formed the Parti Rakyat Malaysia which failed to resonate with the electorate while another smaller group led

by Keris Mas formed the well-known literary society ASAS 50. Their postwar leader Burhanuddin left socialism to embrace the kind of Islamism promoted by PAS which he led.

One notable omission was Abdul Aziz Ishak. An enigmatic figure, he was the only Malay Left (he was member of the KMM and GERAM) who was included in the first Tunku cabinet in 1955 and again in 1957 until he resigned in the early 1960s (others claimed he was dismissed) and later detained under the Internal Security Act. Aziz was all for the empowerment of the rural peasants but his ideas and presence in a cabinet that pursued capitalist policies was a contradiction.

A major strength of the book is the sources consulted which ranged from unpublished colonial records located as well as the published ones in the Public Record Office (British National Archives), private papers located at the Rhodes House in Oxford, US National Archives and Arkib Negara Malaya. The author had also referred to the 1905 Pahang Annual Report. This particular series of reports are important materials for those interested in Pahang history before 1941. Syed Muhd Khairuddin had also referred to the relevant newspapers including those published by the radicals like *Suara Rakyat* (Voice of the People). Equally important are the various studies or publications he had consulted including the memoirs of the Malay which were published by the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press. This series cover individuals like former Malay communists Shamsiah Fakeh and former PKMM and trade unionist Abdul Majid Salleh. Kudos to the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press although at one time such recourse was questioned by a segment of the Malay intellectuals. These memoirs remain neglected in Malaysian history writing.

Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya is divided into six chapters excluding a neat introduction and the conclusion which touches on the radicals' legacy in Malaysia. The chapters are aptly titled indicating close connection with the arguments of the book. Syed Muhd Khairudin questions the various assumptions about the Malay Left and much to his credit replaced them with a more convincing viewpoint. Some of the issues raised are new such as the mobilisation of Muslim activists and Malay women in Chapter 5 or how the radicals come to term with imprisonment in Chapter 6 despite the myriad restrictions of the colonial prison system. Both Chapters 5 and 6 are thought provoking. The former touches on the linkage with religious teachers and *pondok* students notably those of Gunung Semangol rendering the radical line more acceptable to the Malay masses. It was this linkage that made the Malay radicals a potent force feared by conservative and feudalistic Malays and the colonial bureaucracy alike. The radicals also sought to build a women's section (AWAS) although AWAS

leaders have to negotiate multiple hegemonies—the high echelons of the colonial establishment, the Malay ruling and upper classes, male anticolonial activist including those from within its parent organisation the PKMM and the lowest rung of the colonial society in their effort to empower Malay women. Syed Muhd Khairudin might be correct when he points out that there are not many studies on AWAS while history undergraduates were less attracted to undertake research, points out that although there was focus on the first AWAS leader Aishah Ghani. Chapter 6 discusses how the Malay radicals negotiated imprisonment so as to keep their struggle alive and how they continued their form of resistance while in prison. Upon release from imprisonment many continued to push the radical agenda albeit in modified form despite limitations imposed by the new independent government of Malaya.

The book is well researched; its author is extremely well informed of the debates on the Malay Left and related issues. The sources whether archival or secondary sources were impeccable and the prose made reading a real pleasure. In the last analysis *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* is highly recommended for those seeking a more balanced view of Malaysia's political history.

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