

BOOK REVIEW

Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya, by Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015. 228 pp.

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Writings on the radical movement in Malaya are nothing new among historians or postgraduate students at the MA or PhD levels even though these radicals have never been acknowledged by the government. Syed Muhd Khairudin's *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* provides a new view on an old story. The writer begins his story with the demolition of the Pudu Prison on the night of 21 June 2010, which he sees as the end of one physical reminder of political prisoners interned there for the crime of fighting for their country's independence. From this event Syed Muhd Khairudin takes the readers to recall the chronology in the struggles of the Malay radicals, its ups and downs, from the Kesatuan Melayu Muda period until the Angkatan Sasterawan 50 era, the Malay Youth Congress and after the 1955 elections. Unlike earlier writings, Syed Muhd Khairudin's book scrutinises the mobilising concepts (which include ideas, visions and notions) used by the Malay radicals to organise, strategise and to consolidate their movement to achieve independence for Malaya.

The radicals who are also known as the Malay left—a term that denotes the group as anti-establishment, and opposing any form of exploitation on the people is rather broad. They encompass various movements, parties and organisations such as Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), Pembela Tanahair (PETA), Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Merdeka (KRIS), Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM), Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API), Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya (MATA), Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA), Hizbul Muslimin (HM), 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). With different ideologies (Islamic, socialist and communist) the author argues it was mobilising concepts such as *warisan* (heritage), *cita-cita perjuangan* (spirit and the ambitions of struggle), *kesedaran* (consciousness), *kesatuan* (unity), *kebangsaan* (nationalism), *Melayu Raya* (a union of Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia) and *merdeka* (freedom) that united all these radicals. *Warisan* especially of the anti-colonial struggle of Dato' Bahaman, To' Janggut and Dol Said was used by the radicals to mobilise

the people. *Cita-cita perjuangan* refers to the spirit of the Malay radicals representing the aspiration of the people while *kebangsaan* refers to efforts that have to be undertaken to unite the various ideas that form Malay nationalism. *Kesedaran* necessitates the Malay radicals to nurture the idea that the people were oppressed by colonial rule while *kesatuan* serves as reminder that Malaya would never achieve independence without some form of unity. *Merdeka* serves as the mobilising concept that indicates the radicals were committed to the struggle for independence. These mobilising concepts were disseminated through public gatherings/talks, memoirs, novels, newspapers, stage plays such as *bangsawan* which allow the public to scrutinise these radicals from within.

From these mobilising concepts the author takes the reader to the discussion of how the Malay radicals politicise the people. Syed Muhd Khairudin claims it is a mistake to accept that only outside influences like the Young Turks Movement, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, the Thakins of Burma and Indonesian revolutionaries were responsible for the birth of the Malay radicals as if they were passive recipients. This view is quite right as a careful scrutiny of the books and memoirs written by these radicals contain ideas, tactics and agendas to influence the people. Malay schools, English schools, Islamic schools and the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) became locations where nationalist ideas began to take shape while the backwardness of the Malays in all fields were daily conversation topics for Malay radicals. The concept of *Melayu Raya* was used by the radicals to convince the Malays they were capable of running their own affairs. As the first Malay radical party in Malaya the KMM sought to put in place a good relationship with journalists, those Malays who failed to join the colonial civil service and religious teachers especially recent returnees from Egypt. The tactic proved successful for after three years of its formation, the KMM in 1941 set up branches throughout Malaya.

However, the KMM too was afflicted with ideological differences among its leadership that led to cliques within the party. During the Japanese Occupation it collaborated with the Japanese but the party was still disbanded by the invader. Its dissolution widened the rift within the KMM leadership. The occupation was a dark period but it provides a new experience for the Malay radicals through creative works that kept the independence struggle alive. Syed Muhd Khairudin views that these creative works such as newspapers and magazines were used by the radicals to support the Japanese and at the same time to record the sufferings of the people under Japanese rule as well as to popularise the spirit of struggle and sacrifice. For the Malay radicals the war saw the end of *Melayu Raya* after Sukarno declared Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945 without any reference to the Malay peninsula.

Nevertheless the union of Malaya and Indonesia was taken up by the PKMM on 17 October 1945. The PKMM, reiterates Syed Muhd Khairudin,

changed the style of the Malay struggle by opening its door to Malays from all social background, classes and ideological persuasions as long as they subscribe to Malay nationalism. This cosmopolitan outlook is seen in the party goals that was decided during the four day party congress which was attended by communists, royalists, socialists, Islamic preachers, students and others as well as the readiness of the PKMM to recognise other races. The party went all out to fight for independence and to form a united Indonesia Raya; it also used the Indonesian flag as the party flag. In the party's executive committee the communist Mokhtaruddin Lasso was chairman while Dr Burhanuddin was vice chairman and Ahmad Boestamam the treasurer. The PKMM saw communism as unIslamic but they recognised communists notably Musa Ahmad and Dahari Ali as capable mobilisers of the masses towards the idea of freedom. Through the dissemination of its *cita-cita perjuangan* via periodicals and the writings of party leaders the PKMM was readily accepted by the people. By early 1946 the party already had 10,000 members. The withdrawal of the PKMM in 1946 from UMNO rendered the party an important platform for various neglected groups including Muslim activists and Malay women to take an active part in the struggle for independence.

However, the declaration of the Emergency destroyed the dream of the Malay radicals to pursue the idea of independence. In fact, many of them either followed the militant path by joining the communists so as to avoid detention or to join UMNO. The Maria Hertog case that erupted in May 1950 provided an avenue for the radicals to garner the support of Muslims but the hope of starting a revolution failed to resonate with the Malay masses. Following the emergency many of these radicals were incarcerated and detained by the colonial police. Unlike other writings on the radicals, Syed Muhd Khairudin examined how imprisonment and colonial prison became a transformational experience for these Malay radicals where the mobilising concepts mentioned earlier like *cita-cita perjuangan*, *Melayu Raya* and *merdeka* were tested. Syed Muhd Khairudin sees the colonial prison as providing a new space for these radicals to restructure ideas and movement for their very survival and to achieve their political aims in a more effective manner. Based on memoirs of imprisoned radicals and colonial documents such as prison reports, Syed Muhd Khairudin discusses how these radicals negotiated their everyday life in prison amidst the strict disciplinary regime which tried to banish radical ideas among the detainees or British spies amid them while at the same time keeping alive the idea of independence which they would pursue upon their release. The radicals used various tactics but the most important one was the cultivation of a harmonious relationship with senior prison staff through which they were able to publish magazines which were used to spread their ideas. Through these means the imprisoned radicals were able to set up an underground information network. But tension still existed with the prison management which saw the radicals becoming more organised. Hence a threat

to the British. In the end the prison became a new space of tension between those pro-British detainees and the radicals while the latter even held a demonstration in protest against prison management. After their release from prison the radicals still had the opportunity to plan for merdeka through the literary movement ASAS 50 although it might not be as influential as the PKMM, API or AWAS. Meanwhile UMNO continued its political dominance while the declaration of independence in 1957 mitigated any attempt by the radicals to resurrect its past glory. As stressed by Syed Muhd Khairudin, marked ideological differences among former PKMM, API and AWAS members prevented any attempts to unite the Malay radicals while the declaration of independence on 31 August 1957 effectively ended the *Melayu Raya* dream. The role of the Malay radicals in the formation of Malaysia, however, were carried out after independence through PAS and the PRM.

One interesting feature of the book is the discussion on Malay women notably AWAS in Chapter 5. Syed Muhd Khairudin has examined multiple hegemonies that have to be negotiated by AWAS not only from British colonial rulers but also from within their own party. Interestingly the efforts of AWAS to become a platform to fight for women emancipation and to establish male-female equality was seen as a threat by the PKMM leadership. AWAS even went to the extent of criticising PKMM leaders for their lack of courage. AWAS had also undergone intensive military training in the jungle which was organised by the PKM (or Malayan Communist Party, MCP) and API. With the proclamation of the Emergency, AWAS was subjected to similar treatment as meted to other radical movement with many of its members fleeing into the jungle to join the communists.

Syed Muhd Khairudin claims the move to join the MCP did not mean AWAS members were freed from any form of sexism or in other words, the MCP was no different from the Malay radicals in terms of their overall approach towards women. Despite claims by these women that they managed to gain freedom within the MCP, none of them had held any high ranking office within the party. This means there was still bias within the communist movement and this explains the prevalence of male dominance in the Malayan political movement including the MCP. This statement is debatable as within the MCP, women leaders like Suriani and Ah Yen (real name Wu Rui'ai) were able to rise to become important strategists within the party. Suriani was tasked to coordinate the march of the 10th Regiment from Pahang to south Thailand in 1953. In 1955 she was appointed member of the regiment's senior officer corp. Her highest achievement came in 1975 when she was appointed as member of the MCP central committee. In the same year she also replaced Abdullah CD as head of the 10th Regiment after the latter fell ill. Ah Yen was appointed party advisor in the peace negotiations that involved both the Malaysian and Thai governments in 1988. But the number of women

in high party echelon was small with only the smart ones who managed to rise up to that level.

Overall, the book is highly readable, full of invigorating debates and passionately written. Looking at the Malay radicals from the inside, Syed Muhd Khairudin managed to portray them as agent of change and makers of history (he called them the productive people in history). The book also managed to reinstate the radicals in their proper place in Malaysian history and hence should be read by all those interested in our national history.

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