

Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied

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Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied's *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the field of Postcolonial Studies, which has tended, at least as it is practiced in English departments, to ignore Southeast Asia. Aljunied, an historian of Islam in the region, here writes against the grain of most histories of Malaya's radicals, a group of people "from ordinary social backgrounds who chose to oppose foreign rule of their homeland, knowing full well that by embarking on this path of resistance, they risked imprisonment or death" (Aljunied 4).¹ Most historians tend to weave Malay's radicals into a nationalist narrative that casts them as brave yet impotent heroes, a maneuver that draws attention away from how they appropriated critical thinking and practices from outside of the country, and even other parts of Southeast Asia. Most histories of colonial Malaya, in Aljunied's view, are also constrained by contemporary "moral orthodoxies" (5). Drawing on an anti-colonial archive that includes memoirs, Aljunied avoids such pitfalls in his own history of the radicals, addressing in the process the important roles that Islamic culture, women, and incarceration played in struggles for independence.

Significantly, Aljunied does not view the radicals as a failure despite the fact that their movement had largely fragmented before independence, which was finally achieved in August 1957, roughly a decade after the radicals had splintered into disparate groups (161). Rather, he attempts, as do many historians before him, to redeem the radicals without reverting to nationalism, ethnic and regional parochialisms, intellectual reification, or collective biography (Aljunied 5). Focusing on the processes of becoming as well as the experience of *being* a radical in colonial Malaya, Aljunied elucidates the value of the radicals, not just as important voices in the history of anti-colonial struggle in Malaya, but as models for postcolonial resistance. He asserts that in standing up to colonial rule, the radicals "helped lay bare the devices of colonialism" and created "spaces and methods," not to mention hybrid vocabularies of resistance (5). In some ways, the story of the fallen heroes who preceded the radicals exemplifies the value of failed movements: the radicals themselves were inspired by "the failed wars against foreign rulers" that characterized earlier eras even as they felt "the loss and defeat" of these failed wars deeply (7).

Aljunied offers a brief history of late-nineteenth-century Malaya before delving into his history of the Malay radicals, arguing that despite the negative feelings that the remembrance of failed wars

invoked, the memories of these wars also inspired them to reinterpret the past and embrace new, often secular, ideologies (7). Through the lens of the seven mobilizing concepts that the radicals internalized—*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)—Aljunied places the radicals within a larger context: transplanted from the constraining ambit of national space into a space of hybridity in which local meets global, the radicals come into view as people both of and not of Malaya.

The radicals' appropriation of ideas and practices from elsewhere illustrate two key points that are crucial to understanding how Aljunied's history of this group departs from others. First, the radicals engaged with Islamic cultures in Malaya, South Asia, and the Arab world. Second, in engaging with a broader Islamic world, and in synthesizing their interest in Islam with Malay nationhood, socialism, folklore, and "Western currents of thought," they embraced ethnic, national, religious, and ideological hybridity, effectively refusing the concept of *bangsa* (race)² (8). The mobilizing concept of *warisan*, or heritage, itself exemplifies the need to think beyond rigidly defined categories, since the cultural memory of past failures drove the radicals' own critical praxis.

Aljunied's book is divided into six chapters, each elaborating a key moment in the history of the radicals. While all of these chapters are crucial for understanding the history of the radicals, Chapters Five and Six are notable. Most historians view women's participation in anti-colonial struggle in Malaya narrowly, focusing primarily on women who readily accepted rigidly defined gender roles and subservience to male authority (138). In Chapter Five, however, Aljunied sheds light on the efforts of women to agitate for greater gender equality by challenging male authority (146). In their view, rethinking gender politics necessarily preceded the end of colonial rule. In Chapter Six, Aljunied examines the much-neglected years of incarceration experienced by the radicals once their various parties and organizations had fallen into disarray as a result of the Emergency. Incarceration, he argues, was part of the experience of being radical in colonial Malaya for many, and it facilitated new strategies of resistance (165).

Radicals is a finely written critical narrative that highlights the importance of listening to those voices in histories of anti-colonial resistance in Malaysia that have been traditionally downplayed. Aljunied's use of the same concepts that mobilized the radicals, moreover, is successful as a way of structuring the narrative and highlighting the inadequacy of parochial frames. The Malay radicals constituted a diverse group of individuals who cannot be isolated from the other anti-colonial movements that were happening around the globe. They are part of a much larger story about anti-colonial resistance, even as they have their own story, forged in the peculiar context of colonial Malaya.

What is missing in Aljunied's account is a sense of whether or not Malays who did not identify as heterosexual participated in radical politics, and to what extent, if at all, they were able to clear a space for themselves within collectives in which dominant Islamic attitudes toward alternative sexualities must have prevailed. The question of LGBTQI (or *khunsa* or *mak nyah*³) participation is, perhaps, doubly pertinent when one considers how the Minor Offences Act of 1955 exerted powerful changes in the experiences of Malays two years before the declaration of independence. *Radicals* is permeated throughout by a heteronormative bias, underlining the need for accounts that acknowledge voices in history that are even more minor than that of radicals whose gender identities and sexual practices defined them as heterosexuals.

Where Aljunied might also have elaborated further is on the tendency in dominant Malaysian historiography to describe the radicals as inept, often disorganized, and ultimately unrealistic freedom fighters, the consequence of seeing them “only in the context of the eventual triumph of Anglophone and British-sponsored political elites” (191). A better sense of the historical debates that provide the context for Aljunied's own intervention is not needed for scholars already well versed in this period, but for others working in the field of Postcolonial Studies, for whom this book might be one of their first introductions to this period in Malaysian history, more detail would clarify the stakes of this important project. Indeed, *Radicals* should be an excellent resource both for scholars already working on Malaysian history, society, politics, or culture and for those who would like to broaden their knowledge of anti-colonial thinking and praxis in Southeast Asia.

Notes

1. The term “radical” was self-ascribed. As Aljunied points out, this group was also known as the “Malay left”—“a term that emphasizes they were anti-establishment and opposed to all forms of exploitation of the masses” (12).

2. The concept of *bangsa* is not to be confused with European conceptions of race, which drew on biology to classify groups. *Bangsa* expresses common ground among people in relation to territory, language, and culture. Aljunied explains that “[t]his expansive use of the word [...] was a product of a selective appropriation of European thought to fit with local ideas of ethnicity” (28-9).

3. These are examples of local terms in Malaysia for identities that approximate but may not entirely fit the Western LGBTQI categories. “Mak” translates as “mother,” and “nyah” as “feminine,” so that someone who identifies as “mak nyah” would be seen as a transwoman in countries such as the United States. In the Hadith of Islam, “khunsa” signals ambiguous sex, approximating the “intersex” category used in the West.