

Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya

By Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied

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Radicals tells the story of a group of radical Malay men and women 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 would risk imprisonment or death. Their ranks included teachers, journalists, intellectuals, housewives, peasants, preachers, and youths. They formed, led, and contributed to the founding of political parties, grassroots organizations, unions, newspapers, periodicals, and schools that spread their ideas across the country in the aftermath of the Great Depression, when colonialism was at its height and evident in all areas of life in their country. But when their efforts to uproot foreign dominance faltered in the face of the sanctions the state imposed upon them, some of these radicals chose to take up arms, while others engaged in aggressive protests and acts of civil disobedience to uphold their rights. While some died fighting and hundreds were incarcerated, many lived to resist colonialism until their country attained its independence in August 1957, all of these Malay radicals were devoted to becoming free men and women and to claiming their right to be treated as equals in a world riddled with prejudice and contradictions.

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied's innovative study brings to light the less charted and unanalyzed terrain of the radical experience—becoming and being radical. He argues that the experiences and histories of radicals in colonial Malaya can be elucidated in a more nuanced way by interrogating them alongside evolving local and global circumstances and by analyzing them through the lenses of a set of overarching and interconnected mobilizing concepts—a set of ideas, visions, and notions that the radicals used to reason and justify their advent—that were internalized, lived, and utilized in the course of their activism. These mobilizing concepts were their weapons and armor, employed to organize, strategize, protect, and consolidate themselves when menaced by the tentacles of the colonial state as they embarked upon the agonizing path towards independence. Those interested in Malaysian history, colonial history, radical movements, and resistance groups will enjoy this fascinating study.

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Editorial Review

Review

“This new and very well-written history provides an incredibly useful resource for scholars working on Southeast Asia, and Malaysia in particular. . . . A required purchase for libraries with Southeast Asia collections. Highly recommended.”

—*CHOICE*

“This is a highly readable and valuable contribution. Scholars of Indigenous responses to colonialism would be interested in this twentieth-century example of a radical anti-colonial movement in a different corner of the British Empire, where groups of native Malay intellectuals and activists articulated their own visions of modernity and nationhood to contest colonial and male patriarchal discourse.”

—*Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*

“The story of the Malay radicals has never been told so fully and so vividly; the author has pieced together a fascinating history which he tells with considerable compassion. Though the history of the Malay radicals may, as the author suggests, be seen as a history of losers, if we never know about those who lost, we may never have a proper appreciation of those who won, and the recent emergence of a more pluralistic politics in Malaysia suggests a need to have the fullest understanding of the emergence and shaping of Malay political consciousness as charted in this book. The prose is exceedingly readable (and often almost lyrical).”

—Carol Tan, SOAS, University of London

"[This book] is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the field of Postcolonial Studies."

—*Postcolonial Text*

"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."

—*International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*

"This is a highly commendable study of Malay radicals: Malay men and women who fought against colonialism in present-day Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. The author (Aljunied) tells the stories of ordinary people (focusing on the Malays of then Malaya and Singapore) doing extraordinary things."

—*Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*

About the Author

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied is associate professor in the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore.

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