

Section III: Regional Issues

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Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya

Abstract

This article seeks to redress the established scholarly boundaries that have thus far characterized Malaysian historiography through a detailed analysis of a Malay radical women's movement, the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS). Although much has been written in the last few decades about Malay political activism during post World War II Malaya, radical female groups that emerged during those eventful years, and their efforts to carve autonomous spaces within emerging projects of national liberation has suffered from considerable neglect. By blending the use of colonial and vernacular sources to contextualize the activities of AWAS within the changing social and political landscapes of its time, this article shows that female radical activists in post World War II colonial Malaya were confronted with multiple hegemonies that worked to stifle their development. These hegemonies originated, first, from within their own society in the form of customary conventions and practices associated with class differences. AWAS also had to contend with censure and disciplinary actions from their male compatriots, who regarded them as threats to male dominance in radical politics. Finally, AWAS came under the watchful eye and proscriptive measures of the colonial state that sought to regain its control over its Asian subjects in an age of decolonization. The members of this radical collective struggled to overcome these hegemonies by drawing upon a whole array of relationships and connections to advance their cause, albeit with limited success.

This article attempts to fill a gap in the literature on radical activism in colonial Malaya by reconstructing the history of a women's movement, the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (hereafter AWAS). Until recently, very little attention has been paid to the activities of this select group of Malay women who struggled alongside their male comrades at the height of decolonization in Southeast Asia. The reasons from such historiographical oversight may be found in the traditional conceptualization and presentation of Malaysian and Southeast Asian history. There has been a pervasive assumption among scholars that female radical activism was often overshadowed by the grander politics of independence in the postwar era—spearheaded as it was by charismatic men—who had consciously or unconsciously subsumed women's issues within the rubric and rhetoric of nation-building and liberation for all previously colonized peoples. In this formulation,

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women were left out in the cold as soon as they had served their purpose in the nationalist struggle.¹

It follows then that much of the literature on female activism in colonial Malaya tends to lend credence to the master-narrative that depicts men as the prime movers of great events and Malay women as auxiliaries in the making of an independent nation-state. If this is not enough to relegate Malay women to the footnotes of the male-dominated story of the road towards independence, the works that have been published thus far portray the emergence and growth of radical Malay women's movements in localised and communal terms, sidestepping regional and global proclivities and downplaying the relationships which Malay radical women activists established with their non-Malay sisters-in-arms.²

This article seeks to rescue the history of Malay women in radical movements by reading against the grain of the hegemonic biases of masculinist, communalist and nationalist perspectives that has shaped Malaysian historiography until now. The problem is not that there is a dearth of sources on Malay women radical activism, but rather that these sources have been scrutinized through narrow lenses.³ Less attention, therefore, has been given to Malay women who displayed "radical," "troublesome" and/or "unwomanly" traits in comparison to those who willingly (and sometimes unquestioningly) assisted their male counterparts—as seen in the case of accounts of female activists within UMNO (United Malay Nationalist Organization), the Kaum Ibu—which has already been the subject of two scholarly monographs.⁴ A way around this is to traverse beyond the predetermined path, and explore what is not easily visible in the established historical narrative. By combining the use of vernacular and colonial archival sources relating to Malay women's radical activism and making an effort to remove the blinkers that have determined the types of questions that have been asked, this article promotes a paradigm shift about the roles of Malay women in shaping the independence movement. As will be made clear below, the case of AWAS reveals how Malay female radicals drew upon a broad array of relationships, connections, solidarities and networks operating at the local and supralocal levels to forge a robust organization to advocate both female emancipation and national self-determination. As a collective, they helped to expand the mass appeal of radical movements while influencing the turn of events.

This is not all. In the pages that follow, I shall develop the argument that the history of AWAS was fraught with difficulties and male domination from the time the organization was founded right up to its eventual dispersion. The participation of these Malay women in radical activism against the European colonial order meant that they had to contend with multiple hegemonies from the outset. Their ability to overcome these hegemonies depended largely upon the temperaments of AWAS leaders and their ability to garner the energies of willing volunteers. Following Jean and John Comaroff who drew upon the writings of the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, I use the term 'hegemony' here to refer to a form of power that manifests itself in daily practices as policies, norms, ideologies and cultures that are embedded in the structures of everyday life. Hegemonic practices may be hidden but they are unceasingly felt. They are often "internalized, in their negative guise, as constraints; in their neutral guise, as conventions; and in their positive guise, as values. Yet the silent power of the sign, the unspoken authority of habit, may be as effective as the most violent coercion in shaping, directing, even dominating social thought and action."⁵

In the context of colonial Malaya, the multiple hegemonies which AWAS contended with came from different levels of the socio-political hierarchy, from the high echelons of the colonial establishment, the Malay ruling and upper classes, male anti-colonial activists and even the lowest rungs of the colonized society. Although the persons and institutions that constituted this hierarchy may well have had different and opposing aspirations and conceptions about how their society should be organized, they acted in tandem as powerful engines in the maintenance of a masculinist social order. In other words—and in a rather ironic twist—the colonized and the colonizer tended to coalesce to form a neutralizing agent in the face of radical women's movements such as AWAS. One reason that could account for the coming together of seemingly contending actors in the colonial society has to do with the sexism that pervaded both the Malay society and the colonial state, making both sides unconscious allies against radical women activists.

Before delving into the history of AWAS, it is essential first to consider the wider social context and the various hegemonies which impacted the lives of Malay women in general, in order to better understand the origins, development and subsequent demise of Malaya's first Malay women's radical movement.

Malay Women, Socio-Political Transformations and Multiple Hegemonies in Colonial Malaya, c. 1945–1948

The end of over three years of Japanese rule in 1945 signaled a new era for Malay women in colonial Malaya. This was particularly evident in four main overlapping areas: education, employment, migration and activism. Although the Japanese had disrupted female education as most schools were closed down during the occupation, the infrastructure and frameworks that were established and set in train by the British as well as by other non-state actors such as Muslim reform groups since the 1900s were revived during the immediate postwar period. Malay parents who lived through the war saw the disadvantages of illiteracy as Malaya entered into a rapidly-changing modern capitalist economy. They also saw literacy and the knowledge of the English language as status symbols in a society that was recovering from the ravages of war. This, along with the government policy of extending educational opportunities, led to more Malay females entering vernacular, religious or English-medium schools at a rate that far exceeded the trends in the prewar period.⁶ By 1947, more than three thousand Malay women were reported to have attended English-medium schools, with four times that number attending vernacular and religious schools. Ten years later, the number of Malay girls enrolled in formal education had expanded tremendously such that 20,617 were reported to be attending English-medium schools.⁷

This rapid growth in female education had implications for the types of employment which Malay women could secure for themselves. With better qualifications, Malay women were able to secure jobs as teachers and office workers, enabling them to move away from traditional non-paid work at home and on plantations in the rural areas. Higher educational achievements among Malay females also meant that there was a higher prevalence of migration to the urban areas. Malay women who were in search of social mobility and ladders of opportunity took on jobs in hundreds of new towns and urban center created by the colonial state as part of its campaign to hasten the pace of urbanization in the

colonies. By late 1940s, 14 percent of the Malays in Malaya lived in towns and urban areas. Malay women constituted slightly less than a third of these rural-urban migrants, who generally gravitated to towns in states that were predominantly Malay, such as Kelantan, Trengganu, Negri Sembilan and Pahang. In highly urbanized cities of Singapore and Penang, the majority of the population and migrants remained largely Chinese.⁸

The progress in education, changes in employment opportunities and rural-urban migration among Malay women had a great impact on their outlook in life in general and to their attitudes towards politics in particular. Malay women were exposed to modern ideas of egalitarianism and female emancipation, which sensitized them to the injustices of colonialism and made them self-conscious of their marginal social position.⁹ A landmark event that heightened the awareness among Malay women of their crucial need to engage in political activism was the Malayan Union episode, which played out from December 1945 to the closing months of 1946. British attempts to create a union of Malay states which would inevitably relegate the status of the Malay monarchs to mere figureheads were met with strong protests from a cross-section of the Malay community in Malaya. The debates over the Malayan Union proposal did much to generate nationalist sentiments and oppositional politics in the colony. On March 1, 1946, 115 representatives from forty-two Malay groups came together to form the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). Malay women featured significantly in the protests staged by UMNO. In one instance, a twenty-five-year-old schoolteacher by the name of Zaharah binti Abdullah spoke at a protest rally in Johore, exclaiming that “[w]e women were greatly surprised when we were completely ignored by Sir Harold MacMichael. We will not agree to a MU [Malayan Union] whatever happens. We make our protest strongly. We will work with our men to regain our rights. In short, we don't like the union.”¹⁰ Zaharah was not the only woman who came out strongly in the open to attack the political edifice of the time. A British colonial officer noted that:

In towns, there were demonstrations with 5,000 to 10,000 people standing in front of us. But the most remarkable thing of all—by far the most remarkable thing of all—was the part the women were playing in this great national movement. In the 14 years I lived in Malaya, I scarcely ever spoke to a Malay woman. But today, they go up on political platforms and make speeches; unmarried girls make speeches through microphones that would not have disgraced anybody in this Committee. That has all happened in the short space of six months. If one can say there is such a thing as a national movement, then here it is.¹¹

Such unprecedented developments regarding the role of Malay women within their society did not mean that the hegemonic structures, cultures and norms that regulate gender relations had been completely removed or that radical female movements such as AWAS were allowed to flourish. Rather, Malay women in colonial Malaya were entangled in multiple hegemonic processes that could not be easily broken by way of their involvement in politics, radical or otherwise. The first form of hegemony confronting female Malay activists came from their own society. The twin forces of local customary conventions and class differences did much to assign Malay women to a secondary and private sphere, while asserting the notion that women active in public life could only fulfill roles that were complementary, but never alternative, to men's. According to the Malay

customs (*adat*) that prevailed in the postwar period, women were expected to be unassuming and yielding at home and in public. Although women were allowed to take part in political activities and to express their views freely, they were also made to realize that members of their community would inexorably view them with suspicion and hostility.¹²

The few Malay women who became involved in public activities were often admonished from the outset that they would not be permitted to hold high offices. Such customary practices were buttressed by class divisions. Only women hailing from the elite class in the Malay community were allowed by their families and communities to be involved in activist work.¹³ This had implications on the ways in which radical female activists (such as those who belonged to AWAS) were viewed by the Malays of their time. Aside from being confronted with a lack of support and participation from the majority of elite Malay women in colonial Malaya, their peasant and working-class backgrounds as well as the customs which governed them meant that AWAS members were vulnerable to derision for being upstarts, as well as being accused of transgressing the established boundaries of Malay femininity by the men and women of their community.

Above and beyond the forces of customs and class divisions, female activists also faced another line of hegemonic practices that ironically originated from within their own ranks. Because female Malay political movements in colonial Malaya usually grew out of their parent organizations, such as the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM, or the Malayan Nationalist Party [MNP]) and UMNO, and because patriarchal tendencies still had a strong hold even among the most progressive male anti-colonialists, female activists were susceptible to censure and criticism whenever they were perceived as overstepping the limits of their designated functions as auxiliaries for male nationalists. Viewed in that light, I concur with the observations of a feminist scholar that one of the insurmountable obstacles to female emancipation in Asia throughout the epoch of high colonialism and decolonization was the “in-built conservative bias in many reform movements.”¹⁴ William Roff, the doyen of studies on Malayan nationalism, has made this point in the sharpest terms by stating that Malay women in particular have for many decades substantially outnumbered men within membership of political movements. They “have played a hugely important part both in getting out the vote and in voting, not to mention in other respects. The failure of male party hierarchies to recognize this importance and to respond with anything like an appropriate number of electoral candidacies, senior party posts, and cabinet offices seems to have diminished little with the years and to have been replicated in all respects within Malaysian Chinese and Indian political organizations.”¹⁵ It would not be excessive to suggest that party leaders from a whole spectrum of political leanings in colonial Malaya consciously placed limits on the roles and activities of women activists in order to avoid challenges to their authority.

British colonialism, as manifested in its highly-developed juridical, educational, social and political structures and institutions, constituted the third hegemonic force that stood in the way of Malay women radical activists such as those who joined AWAS. It is now a truism to argue that colonialism was, in essence, a masculinist enterprise supported by an androcentric vision of the colonized society. The main aim of European colonial rule in Malaya was to ensure that the subjects remained compliant and useful to imperial will and this was achieved by constructing the image of “effeminate,” “childlike,”

“emotional,” “unreasonable,” and “instinctive” natives. Such images were purportedly internalized by the local populace through education, social reforms, propaganda and other forms of knowledge transmission.¹⁶

Female activists, then, had to wrestle with a double colonization—that is, in order to improve the condition of Malay women, they had to dispel the myth of the diffident natives which, when grafted onto the already established masculinist practices in Malay society, meant that Malay women were viewed by the colonial rulers as the most marginal of the marginals. Furthermore, by contravening both colonial and traditional axioms, women's movements such as AWAS were constantly threatened with proscription should they pose a threat to the colonial state, while they also risked the hostility of the male-dominated leftist movement that they belonged to. How then did the women of AWAS circumvent these hegemonies? Who were their leaders and where did they come from? What were the types of activities they organized and how did they ensure cohesion within their ranks? Where did AWAS derive its strongest support? Did AWAS come into partnership with other non-Malay movements, and, if so, why did they forge such alliances? In addressing these and other related questions, this article aims to stimulate reflection and interest on radical women movements in Malaya and beyond, their ideals and travails as well as their struggles for recognition, social justice and empowerment as disadvantaged groups in colonial societies.

Troubled Beginnings

Multiple and conflicting accounts surround the origins of AWAS, but there is little doubt that the chief architect behind the emergence of the movement was none other than the postwar leader of the Malayan Nationalist Party (MNP), Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy. Impressed and influenced by the strategies undertaken by anti-colonialists in Indonesia and India, and himself a product of a matrilineal society in Sumatra, Dr. Burhanuddin envisaged that the setting up of a women's wing within the MNP could help to expand mass support for the party. Women, after all, constituted more than half of the total Malay population in the country.¹⁷ To exclude them from the battle for self-determination, Burhanuddin and other leaders of the MNP reasoned, would be to overlook a vast pool of talent and resources that any male-driven independence movement could benefit from. It could be argued that the resolve to recruit female membership was motivated largely by the declining popularity of the MNP during the 1940s rather than a real commitment to openly tackle women's issues.¹⁸ Hence, though the women's section of the MNP was a pioneering organization that inspired the birth of other Malay women's political movements, it was regarded by its male creators as useful only to the extent that it would help to bolster the image and legitimacy of the male leadership. Such practices were, certainly, not unique to Malayan liberation movements. In many parts of the decolonizing world of the 1950s and 1960s, women were recruited precisely for the purpose of lending additional strength to male dominated organizations, rather than to even out inequalities between men and women.¹⁹

It was soon felt that a separate women's wing should be established. This development was born of the internal conflicts between the MNP's top brass, more specifically between Dr. Burhanuddin and Ahmad Boestamam; the latter advocated radical actions to rapidly transform the colonial situation while the

former urged caution to avoid drastic reprisals by the regime. Arguably, AWAS came into being due to Ahmad's yearning to gain influence over a larger group of youths above and beyond the militant wing he had already established—the *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* (Generation of Awakened Youth, also known as API). The name *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (Generation of Conscious Women) mirrored API's aspirations while invoking the spirit of the legendary 1930s radical Indonesian women's movement, the *Isteri Sedar* (Conscious Women), which was opposed Dutch imperialism and a strong advocate of women's participation in politics.²⁰ The acronym AWAS (which is pronounced the same as the Malay word *awas* which means “beware”) served as the battle cry of the organization to be yelled along with a clenched fist with an index finger pointing to the sky during public events and mass parades. For members of AWAS, these performative acts were a symbolic warning to the colonial powers of the awakening of Malay women and their resistance to all forms of oppression.²¹

AWAS's ideology was a mix of modernism, leftism, and anti-colonialism dressed up in familiar symbols drawn from Malay culture and Islam. There is nothing unique to this, as Reynaldo Ileto has shown in his seminal study of grassroots movements in the Philippines. Anti-colonial leaders and ideologues in colonial Southeast Asia recognized the utility of appropriating traditional signs and language and combine them with those of modern ideologies as part and parcel of their endeavour to mobilize a wide range of social groups for contentious politics.²² The degree of adherence to each of the elements that made up their hybridized ideology differed among AWAS members, in accordance to their socio-religious backgrounds and individual dispositions. Collectively, however, the members held the view that customary practices and conventions regarding the social position of Malay women had to be abolished to make room for the education of more Malay women. AWAS also believed that women should be allowed to make their own life choices in matters relating to occupation, marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, AWAS promoted the active participation of Malay women in politics and endeavoured to make AWAS members aware of the vital roles they could play in the struggle for independence. The main aim of political participation, in the minds of AWAS's members, was to free Malay women from what they perceived as the shackles of domesticity. Women should rise from being parochial, ignorant and tongue-tied. AWAS members believed that the position of women in Malay society was comparable to the Malay proverbial image of “a frog under a coconut shell (*katak bawah tempurung*).” AWAS also aimed to serve as a unifying platform for Malay women in the struggle for female emancipation and to establish the equality of men and women as enjoined by Islam. This would be achieved by gaining freedom from colonialism, by force if necessary.²³ This component of its ideology was closely connected to the ultimate objective of API. Known for its motto, *Merdeka dengan Darah* (Freedom through Blood), the core leaders of API maintained that full independence could only be realized through armed struggle, as exemplified by other formerly colonized peoples across Asia and Africa. Training in arms and guerrilla warfare tactics were organized for API's core activists.²⁴

The ethnic undertone of AWAS's ideology is one area that requires some elaboration here. Insofar as AWAS members did establish relations with other non-Malay organizations in Malaya, the movement remained firmly committed to its primary mission of advocating for the interests of Malay women and less for

the interests of women of other ethnic groups. AWAS members saw Malayness as the locus of its identity and campaigning for the rights of Malay women as the mainstay of the group's activities. In so doing, they were mired in the ethnic frame of reference that was institutionalised by the British. This was one of the insurmountable weaknesses of radical and leftist movements in the history of Malaya. The ethnic bias that defined the ideology of groups such as AWAS became a restraining factor for its growth and also inhibited the levelling of the cleavages between the Malays and other ethnic groups and between men and women in society.²⁵

The first leader of AWAS was Aishah Ghani, and it was during her brief leadership of AWAS that the organization gained visibility and momentum. Born in Ulu Langat, Selangor, and a graduate of a religious school in Padang, Sumatra, Aishah was among the many women of that time who benefited from the change in Malay attitudes towards female education and employment choices. Her secular and religious education helped her get a job as a journalist for MNP's newspaper, the *Pelita Malaya*. She applied her wealth of experience with great success during her public talks and visits to towns such as Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Ipoh to recruit Malay women into AWAS. The choice of Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Ipoh was not random or accidental; these places were deliberately chosen to attract female audiences, including women of all ages. To be sure, these places were deeply affected by the profound changes brought about by the constant flow of foreign labor and rapid urbanization during the interwar years. Malaya's painful experience under Japanese occupation added to the transformative processes that were already in place. But, at the same time, the period also ushered in a new awareness about gender relations and the roles and position of women in society. In these long and painful months under Japanese rule, Malay traditions were challenged as people sought to cope with the agonies of wartime scarcity. This ultimately contributed towards the empowerment of women.²⁶

Speeches by Aishah and other AWAS members emphasised the urgent need to reform the dire state of Malay women. They called for the end of the tyranny of irresponsible men whose discriminatory attitudes and practices towards women contributed to the weakening of Malay society as a whole. Colonialism must be put to an end, they explained, but this could only be achieved if men and women were regarded as equal partners in the making of a liberated and just society. Each of the mass events organized by AWAS ended with a dramatic closing parade, with AWAS and API members dressed in white uniforms to symbolize unity and fraternity, as well as the purity of their goals and mission. Nationalistic songs were sung urging the Malay people to wake up from their slumber and work towards the union of Malaya and Indonesia into one country, called "Indonesia Raya." Flags and placards with words such as *Merdeka!* (Independence!) and "API, AWAS, GERAM" were carried by the leaders of these processions.²⁷

The membership of AWAS grew as Aishah and her small team of young women travelled and canvassed for support throughout Malaya. By the end of 1946, 610 Malay women had enrolled as members, with the largest numbers coming from Ulu Langat, Port Swettenham and Malacca. Although this was an encouraging figure given that AWAS started with less than a dozen core activists, the rate of growth in membership did not bode well for a radical movement that was aiming to overthrow the colonial government. The majority of Malay women

held reservations about joining the organization because politics was regarded as a male province and because women who engaged in political activities were often viewed with disdain. Still, it is interesting to explore the reasons why Port Swettenham, Ulu Langat and Malacca provided the most new members for AWAS.²⁸

The first explanation is to be found in the sociological make-up of the Malay female population in these three towns, where half of the total number of Malay females was within the age group of fourteen to twenty-five years. Having gained access to literacy and education while being exposed to modernist and liberal ideas, these women were more open to the notion of female emancipation and the thwarting of gender bias as propagated by AWAS. Islamic schools were aplenty, established even in the outermost fringes of these three towns. These schools were linked to a network of other similar institutions in various parts of Malaya and Indonesia and functioned independently of the mainstream British educational system. Ideas about gender equality germinated from these sites of learning, and for the many graduates of religious schools who were keen on propagating what they had learnt, AWAS came as a blessing and a much needed platform. More importantly, Port Swettenham, Ulu Langat and Malacca were time-honored hubs for the spread of nationalist and anti-colonial ideas in the 1940s. Trade unions and Malay civic organizations established in these towns were vigorous in their demands for social and legal reforms, and these activities were given extensive coverage by the lively press of the time. The existence of Sumatran and Javanese settlers and wayfarers, whose revolutionary experiences had informed them of the importance of encouraging a liberationist spirit among the young, smoothed the path for female youth participation in AWAS's activities.²⁹

As AWAS grew in numbers and strength in other Malay states, so did the countervailing forces that served to hinder its advancement. The significance of AWAS is suggested by the evidence that the colonial authorities began paying increasing attention to its activities. Surveillance activities directed against AWAS intensified and reports written by the British intelligence service pertaining to AWAS's activities expanded from short notes to detailed coverage of the statements made by the leaders and the nature of their activities. Although no recommendations were made about the governmental actions to be undertaken against AWAS, it is obvious that the colonial state was becoming increasingly apprehensive about the radical aspirations of the group. The British devoted more resources to obtain crucial information about the organization by hiring more Malay informants.³⁰ It was found that the extremism among the youths of API was augmented by the speeches made by AWAS leaders. For example, in a joint meeting held by API and AWAS, an AWAS member from Temerloh, Che Yah binti Pakeh Besar, declared her staunch support for API and promised to train her volunteers towards achieving "independence with bloodshed."³¹

The British were even more concerned about the close links between the communists, Indonesian revolutionaries and members of AWAS and the API. The President of a local Chinese Women's association which was said to have communist links was personally invited to grace the inaugural meeting of an AWAS branch at Kuala Lipis in July 1946.³² Political and oratory courses organized by members of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) were also made compulsory for selected AWAS and

API activists. One of these MCP organisers was Abdullah C.D., who was also a member of the MNP. These sessions featured discussions of Marxist and communist literature, and the instructors (some Malay and some non-Malay) taught the participants about the success of the Bolshevik revolution and other revolutions. These courses sometimes lasted for as long as nine days.³³

Born and bred in a distinctively Malayo-Islamic community, and herself a witness to the brutal killings of Malays by the communist-led Malayan People's Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA) following the fall of Japanese rule, Aishah (like many of her close associates) was perturbed by the Marxist sympathies shared by the key leaders of the MNP and their attempts to encourage Malay women to internalize what she saw as a "foreign ideology." Although they were radicals and feminists, the AWAS members who shared Aisha's concerns could not accept the total annihilation of the monarchical system in Malaya as proposed by the communists. The reconciling of Marxist ideas with Islamic theology promoted by MNP leaders such as Abdullah C.D. was problematic for some female radicals for Islam was regarded as being superior to all ideologies by most Malays. This fact, along with the *kerajaan* (Malay kingship) and non-association with communism, were the key characteristics that defined what it meant to be a Malay female anti-colonialist. Aishah and her followers' ideas of Malayness should be probed further at this juncture. It is a consequence of their enculturation, growing up in a society where the kings (*rajas*) of the Malay states were seen as the unifying factors and cornerstones that held the fabric of the Malay society together, much as Islam was regarded as a marker of Malayness.³⁴ To most Malays, the disappearance of the monarchies from the Malayan landscape was unthinkable and unfathomable because they regarded the *rajas* (kings) as the pillars of the Malay society, even though those pillars could well require a radical reformation to ensure their continuing relevance.

After inducting a younger recruit, Shamsiah Fakeh, and introducing her to the MNP and API leadership as a possible candidate to preside over AWAS, Aishah tendered her resignation towards the end of 1946, citing her upcoming marriage and her obligations to her new husband as her reasons for stepping down. In reality, Aishah had become disillusioned with the MNP and the radicalist movement and so did several other members of AWAS who resigned with her. Given their uneasiness over Aishah's constant objections to communists and communism, MNP leaders accepted her resignation without hesitation. Aishah and her pioneering AWAS team left the movement entirely and steered clear of any involvement in female activism for some months before some decided to join UMNO.³⁵

It is enticing to read this episode as evidence of "sexism" that seemed so much more indomitable within Malay radical movements in comparison to their non-Malay counterparts. Recent research on the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), for example, suggests that women in that movement "enjoyed greater freedom, higher self-esteem and greater confidence, both as women and as a committed party of guerrilla members."³⁶ And yet, one must be careful not to push the argument too far to the extent of concluding that sexism was abolished completely in the MCP or that the MCP was a direct opposite of the Malay radical movements of its time in terms of its overall approach toward women. For all the freedom which women in the MCP enjoyed, it is clear that none of these women had ever held office in the upper ranks of the MCP's leadership and this attests to

the fact that men still maintained the upper hand in terms of power in movements in Malaya, including communist, leftist, ethno-nationalist, or anti-communist movements.³⁷

Fortifying the Movement

The resignation of pioneering members marked a new phase in the history of AWAS and its subsequent metamorphosis into an independent group of its own making. At the helm of the organization of at least eight hundred members was Aishah's designated successor, Shamsiah Fakeh. Unlike Aishah, Shamsiah's life was dominated by agonizing crises which made her increasingly determined to rage a radical battle against gender subordination in the colonial society. Her marriage at the age of seventeen ended when her husband abandoned her while she was pregnant with their second child. Both children died, and as soon as she began to start life anew with her second husband, he was discovered to be an informer for the Japanese invaders. Divorce eventually led her to participate in anti-colonial activities.³⁸

Aishah had made a strategic choice in nominating Shamsiah as the new leader of AWAS. She must have recognised the fact that Shamsiah was a living representation and embodiment of the plight of many Malay women of her time, especially in the realms of marriage and divorce. The median age at marriage for Malay women in Malaya in the 1940s was below seventeen years. Relations between husbands and wives, particularly in non-matrilineal Malay societies, were akin to a servant-master relationship, or else like that of an obnoxious father to a child. Siti Mariam Idris, who later became a female member of the Communist Party of Malaya, describes this situation vividly:

I got married when I was 14 years old; my husband was 25 years old. Life changed after marriage. My father no longer beat me. I left him. . . . Although my father stopped beating me, my husband started to beat me instead. It was just as bad. My husband was not good to me either.³⁹

Another problem facing Malay women was the widespread practice of easy divorce that stemmed largely from the fusion of *adat* (customs) and localized Islam acting upon the already downtrodden community. Men in their twenties whose wives were generally far younger than they would seek to enter into polygamous marriages within the first three months of marriage if no signs of pregnancy were evident.⁴⁰ Female infertility was a cause of shame for women and their families, and this fact, along with conflicts between the spouses and members of extended families arising from the men's decision to remarry, often led to divorce. High divorce rates among Malays were also related to the kinship structure of the Malay society. The close ties that were maintained by women with their own families even after marriage meant that divorce was seen as unproblematic for the reason that the estranged women and their children would be taken care of by their parents or relatives after separation. It should be added that social structures also played a big role in encouraging divorce and early marriages. In the rural areas of Kelantan and Trengganu as well other eastern Malay states where education and literacy were markedly low during the 1940s, Malay parents considered the marrying of their daughters to religious teachers, village officials and Arab

merchants as honourable acts. In many instances, women were forced into these marriages, and these types of marriages were especially prone to divorce and polygamous marriages.⁴¹

Acutely aware of these problems, Shamsiah's first task upon assuming the leadership of AWAS was to ensure that the key members of the organization shared her vision of a reformed and independent Malay woman. She appointed a new committee and district leaders who were unflinching in their advocacy of female emancipation and anti-colonialism. They were also expected to be exemplary in their conduct and speeches. The outstanding activists who were enticed to join AWAS included Sakinah Junid (AWAS Perak), Aishah Hussain (AWAS Selangor), Sawiyah Jalil (AWAS Perak), Mariah Ahmad (AWAS Singapura), Che Zaharah Noor Mohammed (AWAS Singapura), Siti Norkiah Mahmud (AWAS Benta), Khatijah binti Ali (AWAS Ipoh), Zainab Mahmud (AWAS Tanah Melayu) and Siti Aishah Mat Nor (AWAS Lebuk Kawah).⁴² The biographies of each of these female activists have yet to be written and their tireless efforts in popularizing AWAS among the urban and rural Malays are deserving of studies in their own right. Suffice it to state here that these women shared some common characteristics despite their diverse sub-ethnic backgrounds and outlooks.

Their shared characteristics included their youth and their familiarity with both urban and rural areas. All of them were below the age of twenty-five, with no prior experience in organizational work. Their ability to garner support for AWAS and their willingness to find ways to recruit new members into the burgeoning organization by trial and error tells us a great deal about how strongly they felt for the cause of female emancipation and the degree of their idealism. The second commonality was their relative exposure to both rural and urban areas of Malaya. While some of these women had rural origins and others came from urban areas, all of them were acquainted with the differing conditions and the peculiar natures of both urban and rural societies. This should not come as a surprise if one recalls that Malays in the 1940s typically had relatives spread across the rural-urban divides of Malaya and Singapore. Malays were a peripatetic people who tended to move "to Singapore from the Peninsula and elsewhere in the archipelago; and to and from the Middle East to complete the pilgrimage or to pursue a religious education."⁴³ Mobility was the rule of the day and kinship ties cut across political and administrative borders.

It was for this reason that AWAS members in urban towns in Perak and Singapore did not find it difficult to address crowds in the rural areas of Malaya, even though they may not have traced their own origins to these places. Their backgrounds, travels and social interactions had informed them of the unique challenges of Malay women in a variety of settings, especially those who came from an *adat perpatih* (matrilineal social organization) background or otherwise and the concomitant impact of colonialism upon the female Malay peasants in particular. Yet, knowledge of places and peoples in themselves would not suffice without the strength of familial ties which the members of AWAS exploited. They recruited daughters, sisters, wives and/or distant relatives and friends and used these ties to bind them together in the organization.⁴⁴

AWAS members wanted to do more than merely complement API's grand dreams of bringing Malayan youths into their fold. As the number of new members into the organization grew by the day, Shamsiah, Sakinah and other

district leaders felt that more energy should be directed towards making AWAS autonomous and self-sustaining, while maintaining close affiliations to the other Malay leftist organizations in the country. The first step towards that objective was to raise funds and acquire provisions for the organization. Villages were asked to donate a minimal sum of ten cents each day from the profits earned from tapping rubber. Appeals were also made to female padi farmers to set aside a cupful of rice for AWAS members. There were times when jewellery and other valuable items were donated or pawned to pay for the rental of AWAS offices.⁴⁵ These generous donations would not have been made if not for the grassroots and social welfare efforts of AWAS activists. They participated in helping peasants to cultivate their fields and rear their poultry, thus challenging colonial stereotypes prevalent at that time regarding the “passive” and “domestic” Malay woman.⁴⁶ As one keen female observer recalled:

They (AWAS and API members) planted padi (i.e. rice) together. With the money obtained from the sale of the padi, they were able to buy things. The women's group was beautiful. They each had the spirit of Datuk Bahaman and Mat Kilau. They were both ancestors of our Malay women comrades. They hated the colonisers.⁴⁷

AWAS members also joined the daily congregational prayers in mosques and organized *kenduri* (mass feasts), using these occasions to spread awareness about anti-colonial activities. Classes were also held to expose the womenfolk to social and political issues in the country and the world over as well as to eradicate illiteracy among Malay women. In Temerloh, Pahang, a private company was established to encourage women to engage in handicrafts and then to sell their products in the markets. In Singapore, AWAS Treasurer Che Zaharah came into the limelight when she declared her intention to establish a new organization to combat the desertion and exploitation of Malay women in many parts of Malaya. Named the Malay Women's Welfare Association (MWWA), the organization would press for major reforms and help divorcees. Fifty female Malay school teachers pledged to join the MWWA in October 1947 and they planned to create awareness about the plight of the womenfolk through cultural activities and advocacy work.⁴⁸

AWAS activists also organized and participated in activities that involved their non-Malay compatriots. They acted and sang in *sandiwara* (dramas), *Bangsawan* (Malay opera) and stand-up comedies which were attended by people of different ethnic groups. The themes of anti-colonialism, the suffering of colonized peoples and the heroic deeds of female leaders dominated these stage performances.⁴⁹ Members of the Chinese community were also invited to attend AWAS meetings. In one of these meetings held in Malacca in October 1946, three hundred men and dozens of women from various ethnic groups participated in a mass procession. The texts of banners that were carried by AWAS and API members read: “Down with the Imperialists” and “Malaya and Indonesia are One.” One AWAS member declared during the congress that AWAS and API would both struggle for independence through bloodshed. ‘A youth will not be permitted to marry an AWAS girl unless he is prepared to sacrifice his life for independence.’⁵⁰ These words were provoking and prophetic and they indicated a new turn towards greater radicalism for AWAS in the months that followed.

The Road to Militancy

The bold move made by the leaders of AWAS in asserting their autonomous space within the anti-colonial cause and the political scene is indicative of the mood of the age. Throughout Malaya and other parts of Southeast Asia, female activists were making their presence felt in anti-colonial politics. In Burma, for example, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) led by General Aung San acknowledged women's right to vote, regardless of whether they were literate or illiterate. Women participated in political activities alongside men; indeed, they were the more aggressive supporters of AFPFL, as exemplified in the Women's Freedom League which had branches throughout the country. Closer to home in Malaya, female UMNO members who were undoubtedly moved by the popularity of AWAS came together to propose the setting up of a separate women's wing which was later to be called the Kaum Ibu UMNO. Little wonder then that 1947 and early 1948 have been described by two eminent historians as 'heady days for Malay radicals' and for anti-colonialists throughout Asia.⁵¹ These were momentous times that provided crucial opportunities for female anti-colonialists to push the limits of their advocacy and cement their rightful position in a male dominated world. In taking such a posture, radicals groups such as AWAS also provoked the colonial state and the Malay leaders who would swiftly take action against them.

At the rhetorical level, AWAS leaders attacked male dominance in all spheres of life and their inept leadership, while making known that AWAS members were second to none in the battle for independence. AWAS demanded that Malay women must "not die in their beds but must die in the battle for Malaya's freedom."⁵² Zainal Mahmudi, Secretary General AWAS, said that Malay women in the prewar years were more interested in beautifying their fingernails with henna than fighting for independence. With AWAS's encouragement, they would soon be more than "prepared to bathe in blood if the occasion arose." At the meeting in Bentong, an AWAS member stated "we are under the rule of the British which claims to guarantee our security, but instead the people are being dominated and are suffering. We are forced to accept the Constitution which completely disregards the voice of the people."⁵³

These rhetorical stances were consistent with the more general transformations that were in motion within the organization and the exposure of the leaders to movements and ideas emanating from overseas. By January 1947, the number of active members had grown rapidly to 1,490 women from all walks of life.⁵⁴ Viewed comparatively against other Malay women's organizations at that time, the AWAS membership base was relatively large. Most Malay women's organizations during this time did not have more than one thousand active members. The Kaum Ibu UMNO, a rival organization to AWAS, suffered a decline in membership only a few months after its founding owing to restrictions imposed by male leaders against women delivering speeches at rallies.⁵⁵ The growth in membership experienced by AWAS prompted the organization to confidently motivate API members to lead rallies and to independently organize its first congress from October 10-12, 1947, at the Queen's Theatre in Selangor.⁵⁶

The congress was attended by about twenty-four representatives of branches from all over Malaya. Male leaders from the MNP and MCP as well Chinese representatives were invited to deliver speeches, but the AWAS leaders were in the

spotlight. It was stressed that AWAS's main objective was to raise the social and political status of Malay women in Malaya. Illiteracy amongst Malay women was still wide-spread under the colonial government, and AWAS planned to educate the Malay women by establishing People's Schools (*Sekolah Ra'ayat*) that would be managed by anti-colonial activists. The other purpose of the People's schools was to teach children of peasant and working class families to have a democratic outlook and a spirit of self reliance, as well as a will to destroy colonial exploitation and an appreciation of the glory of national independence and the dignity of manual labor. The idea of such schools did not originate from AWAS. Earlier permutations of the People's Schools were developed in West Sumatra and they served as hubs for the spread of nationalist and anti-colonial ideas since the 1930s.⁵⁷

AWAS also affiliated itself with the World Federation of Women's Associations and the Indonesian Red Cross and provided financial support for these organizations' activities. In the realm of politics, AWAS formed a core component of the PUTERA-AMCJA (Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat-All-Malaya Council of Joint Action) and was involved in the constitutional proposals tabled before the colonial government.⁵⁸ PUTERA-AMCJA was a first-ever inter-racial coalition of leftist political parties and social organizations in Malaya. The coalition demanded equal rights for anyone who regarded Malaya as their home and produced an alternative constitution, dubbed the People's Constitution, in opposition to the British enacted Constitutional Proposals for the newly-created Federation of Malaya. AWAS participated in the deliberations on the constitution and the hartal that was declared on October 1947. These activities were significant because AWAS was the only Malay women's organization to participate in such a historic example of inter-racial civil resistance towards British policies.⁵⁹

The growing prominence of AWAS and the multiplying effect of its mobilization invited a range of responses from those whose authority was put to question, thereby leading to tensions and contestations. The members of API, for that matter, were challenged by AWAS members to the extent that they attempted to stabilize patriarchal power above and beyond organizational work. This is unsurprising given that gender relations "are always arenas of tension. A given pattern of hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic to the extent that it provides a solution to these tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions."⁶⁰ Stabilization of patriarchal power was indirectly achieved through the marriage of Ahmad Boestamam to Shamsiah Fakeh. This was a union of the leaders of two leftist organizations that encouraged many others to follow suit, thus bringing the members closer together. The other effect of this marriage was that it pushed API members into taking on a more militant stance than ever before to exhibit their masculinity in the face of the belligerent posture of AWAS members.

In July 1947, API became the first political party in colonial Malaya to be banned and this was enough to convince some members of AWAS to terminate or at least minimize their involvement in leftist activities. AWAS branches in Singapore and many parts of Malaya became temporarily inactive after the banning of API. Plans for injecting new life into these branches were put forward by AWAS leaders with only minimal success. Some AWAS members even opted to switch sides and join UMNO.⁶¹ The banning of API also raised suspicions among Malay parents and leaders about AWAS's ideological inclinations. In Ulu

Langat district where AWAS had gained a strong following, opposition against the organization mounted as heads of villages refused to permit their *anak buah* (dependents) to indulge in what they termed “useless diversions.”⁶²

A deeper consequence of this rising tide of animosity against AWAS was that it provided the necessary conditions for hardcore AWAS members to attack the entire spectrum of colonial, pro-colonial and even anti-colonial leadership in Malaya. By the beginning of 1948, AWAS members had launched fervent critiques against Malay royalty and Anglophone Malay elites. An AWAS leader, Zainal Mahmudi, was reputed to have said that the Sultans and UMNO had forced an oppressive form of government upon the Malays through the establishment of the Federation of Malaya.⁶³ The leaders of the MNP were not spared from AWAS's critiques. AWAS leaders scorned the MNP leaders for their lack of moral courage. “It is easy to shout Merdeka but very difficult to translate it into action,” quipped one AWAS leader who sent a letter of reminder to the General Secretary of the MNP.⁶⁴

Interestingly, MNP leaders did not seek to relieve AWAS leaders from their positions despite the strong statements made against them. They must have realized that to remove these influential activists from their leadership positions would result in a major split in the party, in addition to possibly alienating a large number of Malay women. AWAS was thus left to its own devices. New branches were opened in northern Malaya as well in other places, such as Sungei Buloh and Tanjung Karang. Shamsiah herself made tours throughout Malaya to inspect all the branches. The AWAS Headquarters at Ipoh was also moved to Seremban, partly due to Shamsiah's attempt to maintain a critical distance from the MNP Headquarters based in the same town. So palpable was the rift between AWAS and MNP that British intelligence saw both organizations as being completely at odds with one another.⁶⁵

But AWAS had by then suffered from fissures that developed within its ranks and the resignation of many members who felt that the movement was growing too radical and affiliating itself too closely with communist movements. Still, AWAS leaders sought to increase their contacts with non-Malay and regionally-based movements in an effort to widen the organization's support base and maintain its visibility in the eyes of the public. On March 8, 1948, AWAS joined the International Women's Day celebrations together with other women's organizations in the country. This marked the first occasion of the left wing's celebration of Women's Day and saw the attendance of one thousand Chinese, Malay, Indian and Indonesian women activists in Singapore. The newly-appointed Secretary of AWAS Singapore, Marliah binte Ahmad Dadab, also reported that AWAS's connection with Indonesian female movements had become closer than before. AWAS branches throughout Malaya were recognised in Indonesia. Marliah served as the publicity agent for the Indonesian feminist magazine *Karya* and had forwarded copies of this publication to the central leadership of AWAS.⁶⁶ AWAS leaders also attended meetings organised by Chinese and Malayan trade union leaders in support of their causes. As increasing numbers of AWAS members attended these meetings and the courses conducted by communists such as Alimin Prawirodirdjo and Sutan Jenain, the sense of respect shown to the MNP leaders progressively waned.

Shamsiah Fakeh was again crucial in this regard, jolting the MNP leaders to be consistent in adopting a policy of non-cooperation towards the colonial

government. "It is," she says, "to be regretted that the MNP has not seen fit to alter its formal method of struggle. The masses have progressed far in comparison." She went on to query,

Are we being influenced by rightist opportunism? If so, such influence should be immediately scrapped so that we will not become tools of the imperialists. If that happens, I shall withdraw myself from the party. There will be no compromise on the part of AWAS.⁶⁷

By then, AWAS members were already receiving intensive military training and jungle survival courses conducted by MCP and API leaders. Militancy was regarded as the best means to annihilate colonial rule and preparations were made to achieve immediate independence. In participating dutifully in these training sessions and anticipating an outbreak of war, AWAS militant members, much like the women guerrillas of the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines during these years, had completely ruptured the image of Southeast Asian women as being domesticated and less prone to taking up arms in defense of the homeland.⁶⁸ Together with ex-API members, AWAS members formed a guerrilla force to engage Siamese troops in defence of Muslims in South Thailand. The group came under the command of Ahmad Boestamam who opted to situate the headquarters of the guerrilla force at Kampong Temenggong, Perak. An AWAS member by the name of Hamida binti Haji Sanusi was a core member of the guerrilla force, who along with other female activists, were already hiding arms and explosives in their houses.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, on April 5, 1948, Ipoh AWAS Secretary Che Katijah Tais told her members that a revolution was looming in the horizon. Chinese communists would soon dominate the world when the revolution was complete, and AWAS would flourish in the new global order.⁷⁰ Che Katijah's faith in the victory of communism was an example of the ultra-radical visions to which some AWAS leaders subscribed. Race and origins were no longer pertinent when freedom was at stake. In fact, AWAS members were more hopeful about their non-Malayan counterparts in the last push towards militancy. During the May 20th celebration of Indonesian Independence, an AWAS member openly stated that she was "very disappointed at the difference between the women of Malaya and the women of Indonesia. The latter, she said, took an active part in the struggle for independence, while the former were content to stay in their kitchens."⁷¹

Shamsiah was reprimanded by the MNP leaders for allowing her members to make such comments and for her callous disregard of the party's leadership. She was requested to explain what she had done to AWAS and was told that the MNP leadership was against AWAS's independence and its militant posture. She was also warned that disciplinary actions would be taken against her should she refuse to comply with the rules governing the party members.⁷² All this had, however, come too late. Neither Shamsiah nor AWAS were willing to compromise in their opposition to the hegemony of male power, whether colonial or otherwise. In June 1948, the British declared the Malayan Emergency that lasted for twelve years. Within a few weeks, more than one thousand seven hundred Communist sympathizers and leftist leaders were detained.⁷³ This was the death knell of AWAS. The organization fell into disarray as many of its members fled

into the Malayan jungles to launch a revolutionary war shoulder to shoulder with their comrades in the Communist Party of Malaya.⁷⁴

The demise of AWAS created a vacuum in female radical activism in colonial Malaya. This vacuum was filled by the Kaum Ibu UMNO, which welcomed former AWAS activists to join the organization and rally for female equality and independence from colonialism. In fact, Kaum Ibu UMNO began to take on some of the activities and ideals that were articulated by AWAS, urging the government to provide higher tertiary education for females and initiating reforms in marriage laws. Membership of Kaum Ibu swelled to more than ten thousand by the early 1950s. As its confidence grew in part due to the impetus given by former AWAS members and sympathizers, the organization also came into direct conflict with religious leaders who argued that women were too involved in politics and forgetting their basic roles in the family. These concerns were rebuked by Kaum Ibu UMNO leaders; one of them argued that: "If women take part in politics, men will be inspired to work hard,"⁷⁵ a statement that bore striking parallels with those expressed by the leaders of the defunct AWAS. By the mid-1950s, radical women's activism in Malaya reached a crescendo when the head of Kaum Ibu, Khatijah Sidek, was sacked by UMNO Johor Bahru division for breaching party discipline. It was the start of a long drawn-out battle between Malay female activists in UMNO and the beginning of the end of female radicalism within UMNO itself. As Kaum Ibu succumbed to the multiple hegemonies that bore down upon it, so too did other female radical movements that were struggling to take shape in colonial Malaya. By the eve of independence in August 1957, Malay female radical activism had become a thing of the past and the passions that attended them had come to pass.

Conclusion

This essay has taken the first steps towards filling the enduring gaps in Malaysian historiography. In telling the story of AWAS, I have shown how these women were confronted with multiple hegemonies that emanated from within their own society, from the movements to which they belonged and from the colonial power that sought to regain its control over the populace in an age of decolonization. These hegemonies were not necessarily physical or material but their presence in the forms of religious dogmas, cultural practices, rhetorical violence and legal norms, were powerful enough to serve as serious obstacles in the way of female anti-colonial movements. AWAS evaded these hegemonies by building new alliances, by speaking truth to power and by showing that women could take their fates in their own hands regardless of the forces that were acting against them. Through the activities they led and the commitment they displayed, the women of AWAS brought the history of female activism in Malaya to a whole new level. AWAS became prominent and inspired the growth of other women's movements in its time and thereafter. It was the first women's organization in Malaya to confront colonialism on an unprecedented scale, while acting at the same time as a check and a counterbalance for its own parent organization.

In hindsight, the eventual downfall of a radical female movement such as AWAS was somewhat predictable given the barriers that stood in the way of its progress. The organization was a casualty to the processes that were determined by men who sought to exercise dominion and control over any far-reaching attempts

to promote gender equality. More than that, AWAS did not fully overcome the ethnic cleavages that determined the minds of even the most radical of anti-colonial activists. Despite efforts to forge relations with other non-Malay women's groups, AWAS did not completely break free or join a Pan-Malayan women's movement that was race-blind. This in itself was limiting because it placed AWAS in a precarious position of depending on support from Malay women who had reservations towards its aims and causes. Still, the brief yet influential career of AWAS and the willingness of its members to stand up against all odds provide us with lessons that are timeless and universal; namely, that in the most iniquitous of political systems and in the most hegemonic of societies, women have devised powerful means to preserve their integrity and have found novel ways to effect change in the interpretations and governance of their everyday lives.

Endnotes

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