

Review Essay

Searching for the *Rakyat*

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A People's History of Malaysia: With Emphasis on the Development of Nationalism, by Syed Husin Ali. Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre & Pusat Sejarah Rakyat Berhad, 2018. Pp. 194. ISBN 9789672165101.

The goal of writing a people's (*rakyat*) history can be likened to an elusive search for the people itself. This rather paradoxical statement is not lost to a historian whose core values in scholarship eschew the elite-centric world of the so-called victor's narrative or the equally skewed, alternative narratives that favor only the stories of the oppressed and the marginalized. "Balance" sits at the center of this approach to writing history, noting the distinguished, if not highly variegated, contributions of individuals, organizations, and movements on the basis of class, gender, race, religion, ethnolinguistic background, and many other sources of plural Malaysian identities. As Syed Husin Ali thoughtfully admits, writing a people's history is fraught with methodological challenges. Ancient stone inscriptions extoll only the lives of great *rajahs* or *sultans*. Archives hardly *archive* the masses. The developmental trajectory of national cultures often ignores the contribution of certain regions to national life. The same holds true in varying degrees for women, students, and minorities. As such, the people's historian must rely on other methods such as the collection of oral histories, and insist on the proactive inclusion of the stories of cultural minorities, women, and other marginalized sectors (p. 14).

It may be proffered that Syed Husin Ali's search for a people's history of Malaysia has met some degree of success. This is best seen in his inclusion of the "nonusual" actors in Malaysia's story of nationalism in the face of colonial rule, such as the following: Dol Said of the Naning Resistance; Datuk Sagor and Seputum of the Perak Resistance; Datuk

Bahaman and Tok Gajah of the Pahang Resistance; Tok Janggut of the Kelantan Resistance; Haji Abdul Rahman Limbong of the Terengganu Resistance; Mat Salleh and Antanum of the Sabah Resistance; and Rentap of the Sarawak Resistance. These aforementioned local actors are either hardly or never mentioned in orthodox histories of Malaysia.

Syed's consistent reference to Sarawak and Sabah in the different periods of Malaysia's history is part of this "balanced" approach to history writing. The same may be said for sections devoted to the actions of nonconservative forces (see non-United Malays National Organization and non-Barisan Nasional) such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), and the Barisan Alternatif (BA; Alternative Front). Some space in the tome was also given to the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the more recently organized Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), and the Bersih (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil; Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) movements of the 2000s.

Unfortunately, a 177-paged book, excluding references and the indices, cannot truly provide a comprehensive history. The book's brevity works to its disadvantage in spite of Syed's caveat about it being simply "a preliminary step to writing a more complete and carefully researched people's history" (p. 1). For instance, the historical evolution of the Malaysian conception of "citizenship" as presently anchored on its Constitution warrants a lengthier discussion if one intends to truly understand who the *rakyat* are.

Malaysia's plural society traces its early beginning to the British importation of labor from India and China for the purpose of manning the Malayan Peninsula's rich tin mines and rubber plantations (p. 5-77), leaving the Malays in their *kampong* (settlements) to engage in the traditional occupation of farming and fishing. Upon independence, a plural society, albeit nonmulticultural (p. 137), has emerged in the country. Divisions are reflected, if not, as some scholars say, exacerbated by constitutional provisions that recognize "the special position of the *Malays* and natives of the States of Sabah and Sarawak" (Malaysian Constitution, Article 153, Section 1). This society was, during the earlier period, characterized by an ethnic division of labor and an accompanying condition of economic inequality, resulting to ethnic conflict, which violently exploded during the Emergency of 1969. To uplift the economic status of the Malays and other indigenous peoples (i.e., *bumiputera*), the New Economic Policy (NEP), consisting of affirmative action provisions, was adopted in 1971. This was continued by the National Development Policy (NDP) that was

promulgated in 1991. Many non-Malays and non-indigenous peoples point to this continuing policy as one that effectively establishes and maintains a political system that divides the people into privileged and nonprivileged classes. The Malaysian rakyat may therefore be seen as a divided people whose histories are, likewise understandably, perceived to be divided. In such a manner, politics bleeds into the history-making of a people.

Central to Malaysia's identity politics is the manner by which "Malay" is defined in the Malaysian Constitution as "one who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, and adheres to Malay customs" (Malaysian Constitution, Article 160, Section 2). Privilege is therefore closely related to religion and ethnicity. In Malaysia, a Christian Malay, unlike a Christian Chinese, is an administrative impossibility, if not a complete oxymoron. Within this discursive box of categorization, Jose Rizal, the Philippine national hero who is usually referred to as "the greatest Malay who ever lived," can never be "Malay." Given the evolution of ethnic or what is still obsoletely termed in Malaysia as "racial" categories, and given the special place occupied by Islam as the country's official religion (Malaysian Constitution, Article 3, Section 1), it is understandable for non-Malays, especially the Chinese and Indians, as well as for non-Muslim indigenous peoples, to feel like members of an underprivileged "othered" class. In the state of Sabah, economic pull factors combine with identity politics to create a powder keg-like tense situation that slowly but surely teeter-totters toward crisis. Syed appears to oversimplify the Sabah situation as one that is created by economic pull factors brought about by the establishment of oil palm plantations and other developmental projects:

Many migrants were brought in to fulfill these needs. In Sabah, most of the labour migrants were from the Philippines. But the number of Filipinos who were brought in to work is said to be fewer than those who have been encouraged to enter Sabah for political purposes, especially to become illegal voters. The population of Sabah in 1970 was 651,000 but it increased to about 929,000 ten years later. In 2000, the population of Sabah jumped to 2.45 million people... (pp. 159–60)

The Sabahan discourse on migration, legal or otherwise, as revealed in various articles and commentaries in the local press, points to the confounding effect of migration on Sabah's ethnic and religious

composition. Apart from the rather statistically incredible population growth of the state, many point to the influx of Bajau (i.e., Sama) and Suluk (i.e., Tausug) migrants as causes for the dramatic shifts in the Christian-Muslim ratio in the state's total population. The Bajau and Suluk migrants effectively constitute a transnational overlap of ethnicities found on both sides of the Malaysian-Philippine state sea borders, making monitoring by state authorities extremely difficult. The porous and literally fluid space of the *tanah air*—the land and waters of the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas—constitute their ancestral habitat, way before the Philippine and Malaysian states defined or quarrelled about territorial domains. Clearly, the demographic history of the rakyat holds serious implications for the politics of place. Once again, such implications cannot be deeply discussed in the highly limited space of what appears to be an intentionally abbreviated volume.

What is most impressively discussed in the book is the courageous narration of events surrounding the fall from grace of Anwar Ibrahim, the erstwhile friend-turned-enemy-turned-friend of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The friendship initially soured upon the coming of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Some actions taken by Anwar at the time were apparently seen by Mahathir as being pro-World Bank, which he then linked to the growing opposition to his regime (p. 147). Anwar was eventually accused of being “pro-US and pro-Israel” (p. 147), and eventually charged and imprisoned for “sodomy and corruption” (p. 148). Syed mentions that “foreign and local legal observers considered [the trial] one-sided and unfair” (p. 148), publishing in this very same tome, photos of Anwar's badly bruised face resulting from being beaten up in prison. Undoubtedly, this reference, replete with visual aids, will not sit nicely with Mahathir, who most recently has patched things up with Anwar, and who, at the age of 93, has managed to become the world's oldest prime minister upon ousting the scandal-ridden government of Najib Razak and UMNO-BN (United Malays National Organization–Barisan Nasional), the party and alliance that he nurtured to achieve near-total domination of Malaysian politics in the past two decades or so. These recent events are most unfortunately not part of Syed's book. However, given the heady mix of the rakyat's persistence for reform and democracy, the very real variable of human mortality, and Mahathir's resilience in the face of “the slings and arrows of outrageous fate,” Malaysia's continuing past can never be less than interesting.

As Syed offered “a first step,” we must all await *many more* in his continuing search for a people’s history of Malaysia. We hope to see more women in marked contrast to the single solo photo of a woman in the person of Shamsiah Fakeh (p. 12), and the shared photo of Wan Azizah with her husband, Anwar Ibrahim (p. 147). We also hope to see the individual faces of the youth, whose faces were visually absent, despite allusions to their great contribution to the development of nationalism in the country. We wait with hope for we know that scholarship is a cumulative and collective task. As many more follow this route, a clearer image of Malaysia’s history will surely emerge.

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Reference

Constitution of Malaysia. 1957. Retrieved from <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/>. Accessed on 6 February 2019.