

*Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and its Aftermath.* By Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied. London, New York: Routledge, 2009. 185 pp.

Placed outside Singapore historiography, Khairudin Aljunied's work on the aftermath of the Maria Hertogh controversy would have been solid but unremarkable. It would seem logical yet unimaginative to follow the trails of colonial correspondence to piece together British attempts to reimpose order on a shaken city state, rebuild their legitimacy, and prevent further instances of mass violence from occurring. No less than what an established global power would be expected to do, one would think. But as an addition to the emerging corpus of "new histories" of postwar Singapore, *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia* offers a provocative, if still under-conceptualized, new way of approaching the making of modern Singapore.

It is testimony to the magnetic grip of the Hertogh riots on the collective memory of Singaporeans that Aljunied himself did not begin his doctoral research, upon which his book is based, with the intention of studying the aftermath; his governing desire initially was to study the complex set of causes which had led to the violence, as previous commentators had done. Aljunied's encounters in the field — his rebuff by the gatekeepers of the Singapore archives, his reading of the wider literature on mass violence, and most importantly the trails which the colonial records led him — shifted his approach from the prelude to the event to its epilogue. In doing so Aljunied has framed a new research question and made an important contribution to Singapore historiography.

In traversing a well-trodden path, Aljunied identifies four causes of the riots: the circulation of radical ideas, the socio-economic marginalization of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, the sensationalization of the Hertogh court case by the press, and the inept handling of the controversy by the largely-Malay police force and its European superiors (p. 5). Aljunied does not attempt to weigh the relative importance of the causes but discusses them economically

(critics would say perfunctorily) in the first chapter of the book. He then moves on to the bulk of his thesis on the entanglements between the British regime and Muslim community as both sides responded to the riots in their own ways.

The aftermath is covered in five neat (perhaps too neat) and richly detailed chapters, which roughly move from more immediate and reactive measures to policies of wider and more ambitious impact. The chapter titles are taken from the five forms of colonial policy, and although Aljunied maintains an intention to tell the story of how Muslim subalterns utilized the “weapons of the weak” (p. 5), he succeeds better in certain sections than in others. In the first chapter on British proscription, Aljunied unravels its coercive dimension and abuse of power. This presents history empathetically from the Muslim perspective but does not necessarily accord them agency. The second chapter on surveillance highlights the excessive paranoia of the colonial mind; in the narrative, the British emerge as both hard-headed and somewhat inept rulers.

The third chapter on self-criticism exposes the limited nature of the investigations made to apportion responsibility for the riots. Here, one realizes how well Aljunied has departed from the customary fixation with the causes; in discussing the 1951 Report of the Commission of Inquiry, a key document on the causes; Aljunied has rightly treated it as a discursive part of the British policy of restoring their political legitimacy. With the fourth chapter, the book begins to explore the reconstructive side of the British response by examining attempts to rebuild the collaborative political and social networks which had served them well before the riots. Aljunied shows how the colonial regime necessarily built on the autonomous work of community leaders and organizations, which accords some degree of agency to non-governmental actors. The most important chapter perhaps is the final one on reform, where Aljunied discusses British measures to restructure the police force and better manage the social issues of education, marriage, and adoption of children.

In focussing on the British and Muslim responses to the Hertogh riots, rather than the causes, Aljunied has attempted to decentre

“crisis” as a defining trope in the historiography of postwar Singapore. As he rightly points out, the violence of 1951 has become an integral part of the “moral panic” posture and discourse of ethnic governance in present day Singapore (p. 1). His emphasis on the aftermath highlights instead the theme of change and continuity which is a better fit for explaining Singapore’s momentous postwar history. The riots precipitated important changes in the course of colonial governance, some in the social arena; this demands that the historian crosses over from political to social history, as Aljunied has done in the crucial final chapter on reform. Aljunied also demonstrates how the riots helped define the political careers and perspectives of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew, and social and political life in Singapore and Malaya in general (pp. 129–30). This underlines the historical continuities between the late colonial and early post-colonial periods, which in some important ways ought to be viewed as a single continuous era of political and societal transformation.

At the same time, the theme of change and continuity suggests that the concept of the aftermath is inadequate for fully understanding the Hertogh riots. The “aftermath” still stands in the shadow of the causes, limited to the period immediately after the event, while its stories are primarily told from the British vantage point. Although in organizing his chapters Aljunied appears to privilege the reconstructive policies, he does not undertake to further assess their respective importance. More importantly, the Hertogh controversy can have consequences which lay beyond the temporal and conceptual frames of the aftermath and beyond the contiguous British archives. The book, for instance, would do well with a concluding chapter on how the riots have come to attain their iconic status in contemporary Singapore.

One may complain that it is possible to attach too much significance to a singular event. It is insightful, however, to re-examine the landmark events of postwar Singapore not solely as crises as an earlier generation of scholars has done, but as triggers for transformation and catalysts for change. This will tell us, as *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia* has done, something about the nature

of governance in Singapore and the weight of the colonial legacy. The five-pronged British response to the Hertogh riots, covering the major policy areas of concern, provides a foretaste of the comprehensive planning and making of post-colonial Singapore in subsequent decades. The partial failure of the response, too, offers an important insight into how subalterns and minorities confronted the emerging contours of modernity in the postwar period. In this light, Aljunied's effort is deeply original in widening the terms of historical inquiry and seeking a new path into the city state's recent past.

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