

BOOK REVIEW

He who is made Lord: empire, class and race in postwar Singapore, by Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, xii, 260 pp., S\$35.90 (paperback)

This is a book about the decolonisation of Singapore between 1958 and 1963, centred on the creation, symbolism, and role of its new head of state, the *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* (literally, 'He who is made Lord of the State'). For almost 140 years (1824–1963), Singapore was a British colony. The movement towards self-government began in the mid-1950s with the convening of the Rendel Constitutional Commission and the resultant Rendel Constitution under which a 21-member Legislative Assembly was created. The pace of development, fuelled by a rising tide of nationalism, led to a series of three constitutional talks (1956, 1957, and 1958) culminating in the attainment of internal self-government in 1959. Up to this point, the head of state was the Governor, the Queen's representative in the colony.

As a significant step towards self-government, the British wanted to transform the office of Governor into that of British High Commissioner, who would represent *both* the Crown (as titular head of state) and the British government (as head of the executive branch of government). The delegates representing Singapore at the constitutional talks disagreed and demanded that the future Crown representative should instead be an apolitical, non-British, local-born 'Malayan governor-general'. This is the backdrop of the unfolding drama documented and discussed in this significant new book.

Mohammad Suhail documents and critiques the creation of the office of the *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* and the process of selecting its first office-bearer in this brief but richly textured volume of five chapters. This book is exceptionally well researched and covers an important segment of Singapore's recent past that has received scant attention. The five chapters are organised thematically. Chapter 1 provides what the author calls a 'theoretical scaffolding' for understanding the place of the *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* in the context of Singapore's decolonisation. Chapter 2 offers a more conventional linear chronological description of the origins and development of the office. In the following three chapters, Suhail pursues the three discursive frames of 'empire', 'class', and 'race' in unpacking this complex office by examining the ambiguous nature of the office by asking if the *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* acted as a representative of the British Crown or of a nascent democratic Malayan entity (Chapter 3); if the office and the person of Yusof Ishak (Singapore's first and only *Yang di-Pertuan Negara*) was a symbol of a commoner or a privileged elite (Chapter 4); and finally, if Yusof Ishak, the Malay head of state, served as a multi-racial or communal icon (Chapter 5).

In making his arguments concerning the creation and role of the *Yang di-Pertuan Negara*, Mohammad Suhail unveils a panoply of little-known facts about this facet of Singapore's independence journey. We are taken on a dramatic ride through the many intrigues involved in creating the office, especially since sovereignty over Singapore remained with the British. How would the post, as Singapore's titular head of state, sit alongside that of the Queen, who was the head of state of Great Britain? Indeed, the constitutional conundrum resulting from this new office almost delayed its coming into operation, with the Queen only giving formal approval for its creation on 30 November 1959, just three days from Yusof Ishak's swearing-in ceremony.

Controversy also plagued the search for a suitable Malay title for the head of state since the title ‘*Yang di-Pertuan*’ was exclusively reserved for royalty. Then there were the machinations behind finding and nominating a suitable person to fill the office, including the failed plan to nominate Tunku Ya’acob (half-brother of then-Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman) as the first *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* and the attempt by Tunku Muda, direct descendant of Singapore’s Sultan Hussein, to stake a claim on the new office. Indeed, there was even talk in some quarters about restoring the Singapore Sultanate.

This book is organised thematically rather than chronologically, and this perhaps explains a certain amount of repetition in the narrative. The questions posed and critiques offered are certainly significant and important, but they could have been folded into a more linear and chronological narrative with a final chapter to tie up the various themes. This would have avoided the rehashing of some of the same points and arguments the author makes along the way. And for readers unfamiliar with Singapore’s political history, jumping back and forth between the years could have been avoided or, at the very least, should have been minimised. I also found the first chapter, festooned with political theories, rather hard going, especially as I could not figure out where this theorising was leading. At points, I thought the author may have been trying too hard to state his case for the importance of this investigation with language unnecessarily bordering on the sensational.

Yet, the subject speaks for itself. It is a good book, and what the author has to say is important. Highly recommended.

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