Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements

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chapter 6

Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time

Helen Ting

This chapter compares the political involvement of two contemporaries, Shamsiah Fakeh (1924–2008) and Aishah Ghani (1923–2013), who grew up in British Malaya. Aishah and Shamsiah shared many similarities in terms of their ethnic origins and childhood education, but their fate and life journeys differed radically as adults. Born into the matrilineal Minangkabau culture, both went through Malay primary schooling and even continued their education in the same well-known Arabic-medium Islamic school in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, which is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4 of this book (Sally White). Both of them were initiated in their political involvement within the left-wing Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), the first Malay political party formed after World War II.1 Both of them also became famous as the head of AWAS (Angkatan Wanita Sedar), the women’s wing of the MNP. Aishah left the MNP after ten months and Shamsiah came in to replace her, staying on with the MNP until it was outlawed.

Subsequently, Aishah joined the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and became its women’s wing leader after independence. Entering the government, she was appointed as the general welfare minister in 1974 — a position she held until 1984, when she retired from politics. Aishah is well known for having promoted
Thirteen-year-old Shamsiah Fakeh with her mother and brother before both siblings left for Sumatra in 1938 to study. Photo from *Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh*, courtesy of Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya

Shamsiah Fakeh, 1960. Photo from *Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh*, courtesy of Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya
Aishah Ghani (standing, middle) with friends at Diniyah Putri School in Padang Panjang, 1937; seated is Ibu Rahmah El Yunusiah, the principal of the school. Courtesy of Arkib Negara, Malaysia

Aishah Ghani speaking at the general election campaign in Kampung Datuk Keramat, Kuala Lumpur, 1964. Courtesy of Arkib Negara, Malaysia
Syariah legal reform by overseeing a high-level committee that negotiated, deliberated and put together a comprehensive set of family laws based on an enlightened interpretation of the Islamic laws. Unfortunately, this set of laws was subverted by conservative religious scholars and officials in various states who were unhappy that she had made polygamy almost impossible for Muslim men. Shamsiah ended up joining the anti-British armed insurrection led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). When a state of Emergency was declared in June 1948, she was confronted with the dilemma faced by many other left-wing leaders: either retreat into the jungle or, like thousands of others, be detained without trial at the pleasure of the colonial power. She became part of the all-Malay 10th Regiment of the Malayan National Liberation Army formed by the MCP in the jungle. In 1957 she was sent by the MCP to further her studies in China, and she worked in the Malay section of Beijing Radio as a broadcaster for more than three years. In 1965 the party sent Shamsiah to Indonesia to do international representation work, but she was detained there for two years by the Indonesian military. In December 1967, she and her husband together with two other comrades were released and allowed to return to Beijing. Influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China, the MCP leaders there became involved in factional conflicts. As a consequence, Shamsiah and her husband were suspended from party membership in 1968 and kept under house arrest for two years. Shamsiah and her family were subsequently allowed by the Chinese government to live as ordinary foreign sojourners rather than be placed under the MCP. After waiting for ten years, their application to return to Malaysia was finally approved in 1994.

Some Methodological Considerations

In this comparative analysis, the most important sources of information are the autobiographies of Shamsiah and Aishah. In 1991 a Malay magazine, Dewan Masyarakat, published a seven-part series of articles on Shamsiah. At that time Shamsiah was in exile in China, waiting for the Malaysian government to allow her to return. The feature was written by Fatini Yaacob, a journalist for Dewan Masyarakat, based on her extensive research and interviews with people who were related to or had worked with Shamsiah at various times. The contents
of the articles, while colourful and informative, should be taken with a pinch of salt. For instance, the background of Shamsiah’s father as depicted by Fatini differs from that described by Shamsiah in her memoirs. Nonetheless, these articles give a feel for the popular image of Shamsiah in the Malay community. As for Aishah, there are a couple of academic works about the women’s wing of UMNO that provide third-person accounts of her life.

In their memoirs, the articulation of the self-identity of Aishah and Shamsiah is undoubtedly intertwined with their lifelong political commitment. Writing about memoirs and autobiography, Mark Freeman has noted that they may be understood as the “re-writing of self” as the autobiographer looks back at the life path travelled from the vantage point of the historical position and perspective he or she has arrived at. While such dynamics of re-interpretation imply that the perspective articulated may not always reflect the original point of view in real time, it is nonetheless a perspective the person has evolved by virtue of successive political decisions, lifelong actions and practices. In this sense, the writing of memoirs can be understood as an attempt at making sense of the self and evaluating the meaning of one’s past deeds as inscribed in the larger sociopolitical context. To a lesser or greater extent, their narratives inevitably reflect or challenge the dominant narrative of Malaysian national history, depending on which side of the political divide their struggle was situated.

From another point of view, we may also understand the lives and self-identities of Aishah and Shamsiah as having been forged progressively by virtue of their continued actions and practices that committed them further to the political struggle they were engaged in. The everyday choices they made and the actions they took not only resulted in their being assigned to different historical positions in the grand narratives of Malaysian national history, but also led them to subscribe to the general political understanding of their immediate community of struggle. By comparing the interpretations of two persons on opposite sides of the struggle, we can gain some insights into the perspectives of actors on both sides of the divide, however partial they may be. In the meantime, for the analysis to do them justice, we need to be attentive to possible variations in terms of their embrace of the general sociopolitical — be they ideological, gender, class and/or ethnic — positions of the respective nationalist movements they participated in.
Historical Context

British Malaya consisted of three different colonial political systems of direct and indirect rule over the Malay states. The states of Selangor and Negri Sembilan, in which Aishah Ghani and Shamsiah Fakeh were born respectively, were part of the Federated Malay States under the indirect rule of the British. The British practised a racial policy of divide and rule, building their political legitimacy as protectors of the Malay people against the Chinese and Indian population who migrated to carry out various new economic functions such as tin-mining and rubber plantation activities. During the first half of the 20th century, the predominantly depressed socio-economic conditions of the Malay population led to a sense of alarm and urgency among the Malay intelligentsia to uplift the community in the face of the more urbanised non-Malay population.

The hardship suffered under Japanese occupation between 1941 and 1945 stirred political awareness among the Malayan population. The predominantly Chinese Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which was formed by the MCP, saw more Malays who were tired of the tyrannical Japanese rule joining their ranks towards the mid-1940s. Fatefully, the brief period of political vacuum after the Japanese surrender and before the return of the British, termed the interregnum period, saw violent Sino-Malay clashes occurring in isolated locations in Malaya due to some overzealous, reckless Chinese leaders of the MPAJA punishing Malays who collaborated with the Japanese. In retaliation, some local Malay leaders such as Kiai Salleh organised paramilitary groups that went about killing Chinese indiscriminately, regardless of whether or not they were MPAJA members. These violent ethnic clashes formed the historical context in which a popular Malay movement emerged against the Malayan Union Plan, the civilian political system proposed by the British to replace the British Military Administration. Inaugurated on 1 April 1946, the short-lived Malayan Union was replaced by the Federation of Malaya on 1 February 1948.

By then, there were three main pan-Malayan political movements in post-war Malaya: the left-leaning MNP, which was formed in 1945; the MCP, which had existed since the 1930s; and UMNO, which was formed at the first Anti-Malayan Union Congress attended by state-level Malay associations throughout the peninsula in March 1946. The MNP was invited to join the Anti-Malayan Union Congress but
Helen Ting withdrew from it after three months. Even though the Malayan Union was put in place as planned, the British authority gave in to Malay pressure and negotiated a replacement with the Malay sultans and UMNO representatives in the form of an Anglo-Malay agreement. This gave rise to the Federation of Malaya, which imposed far more

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>Direct British intervention begins in sultanates on Malayan Peninsula</td>
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<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Britain establishes Federated Malay States</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>Formation of Nanyang Communist Party, renamed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Formation of Malayan Nationalist Party (MNP)</td>
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<td>Mar. 1946</td>
<td>Formation of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)</td>
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<td>Apr. 1946</td>
<td>Malayan Union formed</td>
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<td>July 1946</td>
<td>Tripartite (sultans, UMNO representatives and British officials) secret negotiation begins on alternative to Malayan Union</td>
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<td>Dec. 1946</td>
<td>Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action (PMCJA) formed</td>
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<td>Jan. 1947</td>
<td>MNP resigns from PMCJA and forms PUTERA, before rejoining PMCJA to form AMCJA-PUTERA</td>
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<td>May 1947</td>
<td>Publication of draft Anglo-Malay Federation Agreement</td>
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<td>July/Aug. 1947</td>
<td>AMCJA-PUTERA finalises the People’s Constitutional Proposals for Malaya</td>
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<td>Oct. 1947</td>
<td>All-Malaya strike against the Federation of Malaya Agreement</td>
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<td>Feb. 1948</td>
<td>Federation of Malaya formed</td>
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<td>June 1948</td>
<td>Declaration of state of Emergency throughout Malaya</td>
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<td>1955</td>
<td>Federal Legislative Councillors elected</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>Independence of Federation of Malaya</td>
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<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Formation of Federation of Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Peace treaty signed between Malaysian government and MCP</td>
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stringent conditions in granting political status to the non-Malay population. In response, non-Malays and leftist groups (including the MNP) came together to form a multi-ethnic platform called PUTERA-AMCJA to propose an alternative political system to the Federation of Malaya.

Even before the declaration of the state of Emergency in June 1948, British colonial power had tightened its control over union activities and cracked down massively on leftist sympathisers. MCP leaders and members as well as some of those from the MNP retreated into the jungle to escape arrest and regrouped to take up guerrilla warfare. Malaya was effectively plunged into a civil war.

Incremental political autonomy was granted by the British, in part as a strategy to thwart the anti-colonial political edge of the MCP armed insurrection. In an attempt to cater to a multi-ethnic mix of voters in municipal elections, a temporary collaboration between UMNO and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) gave rise to the emergence of the Alliance, a coalition of UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress. This required the national leaders of UMNO to switch radically from the organisation’s founding rhetoric of exclusionary Malay nationalism to a more accommodating Malayan nationalism in partnership with the Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress. The management of internal contradiction arising from this tension among different factions within UMNO presented a constant and ongoing challenge to its national leaders. It was to the Alliance leaders that the British subsequently handed over the political control of British Malaya minus Singapore.

As the Federation of Malaya achieved political independence in 1957, the pro-British and staunchly anti-Communist political elites of the Alliance were not interested in negotiating a peace settlement with the MCP. Even though the security forces managed to drive MCP guerrilla forces farther north to the Thai border, they were not able to eradicate the latter completely. A peace accord was signed between the Malaysian government and the MCP leadership only in December 1989 — in Hatyai, Thailand, witnessed by Thai government officials.

Childhood Memories of Aishah

Aishah Ghani was born in 1923 in Kampung Sungai Serai, Hulu Langat, in the state of Selangor. (For place names in this chapter, see maps
Map 8. Malaya
5 and 8.) As the youngest among five children, she was the apple of her parents’ eye. Aishah excelled in studies and received an offer to continue her education in an English convent school in Kajang, a town near her village. Her father strongly opposed this, as he believed studying in an English Christian school would bring about “many sins” (*bersekolah Inggeris akan membawa banyak dosa*). Aishah later recounted that she was extremely sad but had to obey her father’s wish. After having completed five years of primary education in a Malay-language school, she was offered a place at the age of 11 to be a trainee teacher — but her parents rejected that option as well because they did not want her to stay away from home.

Aishah then had to confront her worst fear: her parents wanted to marry her off, as was the fate of most young Malay girls of her age and time. Her mother asked her to prepare embroidered bed linen, an essential item in a Malay bride’s dowry. She protested with all her might, screaming, crying and throwing away materials her mother handed her for the embroidery work. She began a few days of hunger strike, threatening that “something bad” would happen if her plea to continue her studies did not materialise. Subsequently, her Indonesian brother-in-law Abdul Halim, who was a religious teacher, managed to persuade Aishah’s parents to send her to a religious boarding school for girls in West Sumatra. In fact, it was also thanks to Abdul Halim, who believed in the importance of educating girls, that Aishah had gone to primary school, unlike her two illiterate elder sisters.

Aishah also recounted an unforgettable experience that influenced her greatly when she was in grade four in the Malay school: the visit of Miss Kontik Kamariah binti Ahmad. Aishah was impressed by the fact that Kontik, who was in her early twenties, arrived at the school driving a red sports car. Even more impressive, she saw her school principal nodding constantly to whatever Miss Kontik had to say throughout her stay at the school. Aishah mentioned that this experience had given her the belief that in order to advance, besides being educated a woman should be brave in overcoming any resistance. She said that she was “spellbound” (*terpesona*) and “dazed” (*terpegun*) by the thought that a young lady like Kontik could drive her own car and give instructions to a male school principal. Kontik was the first school inspector of the Malay schools in the state of Selangor. She was also the first Malay woman to pass the Senior Cambridge examinations.
Aishah successfully completed grade seven at the Arabic-medium primary Diniyah Girls School in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, within four years (1936–39), despite her very elementary linguistic competence in the Arabic language at enrolment. In 1940 she continued her studies in Kolej Islam, an Islamic teachers’ training college in Padang, but her education was interrupted by the Japanese occupation. She managed to return home and worked briefly as a teacher.

**Shamsiah’s Childhood**

Shamsiah Fakeh was born in 1924, a year after Aishah, in Kampung Gemuruh, Kuala Pilah, in the state of Negeri Sembilan. She was the second among eight brothers and sisters. Unlike Aishah, Shamsiah grew up in poverty. Her father, of Sumatran origin, was a peddler selling vegetables, fish and home-made medicine. Shamsiah recalled that her father was often chased away by the police because he did not have a legal trading licence, and he was once detained in the police station for a few days. In order to supplement the household income, her mother also went from house to house selling cloth to villagers.

In 1938, after her Malay-medium primary education, Shamsiah’s father sent her to an Islamic school in Padang Panjang, accompanied by her younger brother. In her memoirs, Shamsiah mentioned that the school inculcated a nationalist spirit among its young Indonesian students.

Due to the unstable international political situation, her father brought her back to Malaya in 1940 to continue her studies in a recently founded local Islamic school, the Islamic High School in Pelangai — but that did not last long. Within a year the founder of the school, Tuan Guru Lebai Maadah, arranged with the respective parents for Shamsiah to be married to a rich farmer’s son, her classmate. She stopped schooling after her marriage. According to Shamsiah, Lebai Maadah arranged the marriage to get monetary contributions from the parents involved so as to expand his school. Thus, unlike Aishah, Shamsiah was not able to escape the common fate of early marriage. As a rich farmer’s son, Shamsiah’s husband, Yasin Kina, did not work and relied on his parents for financial support. His parents also gave the couple some farmland and built a small house for them. Shamsiah recalled that she had to help with farming activities, which she was not used to. In June 1944, eight months’ pregnant and after being married for three years, she was divorced without any valid reason by
Yasin. Both the children she bore with Yasin died in infancy due to malnutrition.

While Shamsiah felt bitter about Yasin’s inconsiderate treatment, her even shorter marriage with her second husband, J.M. Rusdi, was no better. Rusdi was a womaniser and a spy for the Japanese. He divorced Shamsiah after five months of marriage, again without any valid reason. As a consequence of these two marriages, Shamsiah developed strong feelings about male oppression of women. In addition, she felt sorry that her education had been interrupted by marriage and the poverty of her family.

**Common Political Roots Going Separate Ways**

Aishah Ghani and Shamsiah Fakeh shared a common starting point in their experience of political initiation in a turbulent post-war era, when anti-colonialism was on the rise but Sino-Malay conflicts prevented a united anti-colonial nationalist movement.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Aishah was employed as a lead writer by the MNP for its party organ, *Pelita Malaya*. She was initially highly enthusiastic about MNP’s anti-colonial cause. Besides holding publishing responsibilities, she was also asked to head the women’s wing, AWAS. As the head of AWAS, she followed party leaders — in particular Ahmad Boestamam, who headed the male youth wing, API (Angkatan Pemuda Insaf) — to various corners of British Malaya to mobilise popular support for MNP and recruit women villagers into AWAS. When Aishah left MNP after ten months, Shamsiah came in to replace her.

Shamsiah explained later that she encountered and became attracted to the anti-colonial discourse of the MNP during her Islamic studies in Bagan Serai, in the state of Perak, after the war. In her memoirs, she said, “It was from here that I began to be attracted to the nationalist struggle or the struggle to demand independence.” With the blessings of her father, she was able to follow closely seminars and public forums organised by both the MNP and UMNO. She got to know some of the MNP leaders, and once she even stood up and gave a spontaneous speech at a public meeting organised by the MNP.

When she became the women’s wing leader, Shamsiah also followed other party leaders to various places around the country to rally people to the cause of anti-colonialism, to expand party membership
and to form local branches. Shamsiah was highly spirited and a gifted, fiery speaker. She was able to utilise her religious knowledge in her speeches, quoting verses from the Quran and the Prophet’s Hadith. She became a well-known anti-colonial Malay woman leader. She was also a member of the MNP Central Committee from December 1946 until the party was banned in 1948.

Why did Shamsiah stay on in the MNP and then continue her anti-colonial struggle in the MCP, while Aishah left the MNP within less than a year? How did they explain their successive course of nationalist commitment?

A closer look at the underlying logic of how Aishah and Shamsiah explained their nationalist commitment reveals that they reflect fairly standard themes discussed by those on both sides of the political divide. The disagreement with armed struggle as a means to achieve national autonomy and the rejection of Communist ideology are the two main lines of argument used by Aishah to explain why she left the MNP and, correspondingly, to portray UMNO in a positive light.

In her autobiography, Aishah mentioned that from time to time she was sent by the MNP to attend training courses or meetings together with other party leaders in secluded places. After attending them, her doubt regarding the political orientation of the MNP grew. She talked about a meeting in which there were joint discussions with “a lot of” Chinese on how to get support from the Malay population. She asked the MNP leadership why Chinese were present at an MNP meeting, but she did not get a clear answer. In one course the speaker talked about the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the success of the Communists in spreading their influence, and their future plans for Southeast Asia. She mentioned that only God knew how she felt at that time, and that she “surrendered” to Him to spare her from going astray.¹⁷ She did not explain why she was so anxious but seemed equally uncomfortable with the fact that the course was held in a desolate slum area inhabited by Chinese farmers and pig-rearers as by the fact that the speaker was advocating the Communist takeover of Southeast Asia through armed revolt.

In early July 1946, after ten months in the party, Aishah decided to quit the MNP when it wanted to send her to Ipoh, in the state of Perak, to take charge of the northern region. She rejected the offer and informed the party that she wished to stop her work at the MNP and withdraw her party membership. She then joined Radio British
Military Administration as a Malay-language broadcaster. The official reason Aishah gave to the MNP party leadership for leaving was that she was getting married to Abdul Aziz bin Abu Hassan. Aishah also gave a second reason in her autobiography. She said that she had lost faith in the MNP’s struggle. She felt that party leaders were too ambitious (cita-citanya ingin menjangkau awan) and hence did not exercise discretion over whom to befriend or build political alliances with. She noted that the MNP leaders did not believe that British colonialism could end by mere persuasion and hence believed that armed struggle was inevitable and were prepared for it. After the above-mentioned course on the Russian Revolution, she recounted that she argued with a party leader on the wisdom of armed insurrection. Her position was that the Malays in Malaya did not need to start a revolt to secure independence, especially since revolt would entail the loss of lives. She was also critical of MNP leaders’ “fantasy” of setting up a Melayu Raya empire (which would encompass both Indonesia and Malaysia) in the form of a republic.

Shamsiah, on the other hand, emphasised in her memoirs the anti-colonial credentials of the MNP and MCP, and contrasted them with the complicity of UMNO with the colonial power and the latter’s initial reluctance to use the slogan of “merdeka” (meaning independence). In defence of the armed struggle of the MCP, she also quoted Samad Idris, a journalist-turned-UMNO politician who in his memoir described his involvement in Barisan 33. Barisan 33 was a relatively unknown paramilitary cell annexed to UMNO youth, with plans to secure firearms and attack police stations, that was secretly organised in the 1950s. Even though the plans were not realised, Shamsiah asked why this plan by UMNO youth for an armed uprising against the British was acceptable to UMNO while Malays involved in armed struggle under the leadership of the MCP in the jungle were branded as “Communist terrorists”.

In one of the feature articles about Shamsiah in Dewan Masyarakat, the central concern of its author, Fatini, was how such a great, dedicated female anti-colonial nationalist steeped in Islamic knowledge could embrace Communism. Fatini seemed to equate Communism simplistically with atheism, or the rejection of Islamic belief. She suggested that Shamsiah “imbibed Communist ideology” even as her nationalist spirit remained strong. A surrendered MCP member interviewed by Fatini claimed that Shamsiah admitted to being a
“Communist representative”, who according to him had to fulfil three conditions: be an atheist, be loyal to MCP, and have strong discipline and understand Communist philosophy and struggle.23

Referring to the Dewan Masyarakat articles, Shamsiah wrote in her memoirs: “In actual fact, I am not a female leader of the Communist Party of Malaya or a famous female public figure. I am just a woman fighter (pejuang wanita) who struggled against the British for the independence of my homeland and for the emancipation of women.”24 She claimed that she was seen as a Malay woman leader who headed the first progressive women’s body in Malaya (AWAS) that was not afraid to fight the colonial power.25 She was proud of what she had done and urged the readers of her memoirs to differentiate between the colonial era under the British and the era after independence.26

Aishah did not join UMNO immediately after she left MNP in 1946. She explained in her autobiography that she concentrated on her work as a radio broadcaster and the new family she was building. She joined UMNO only in 1950, when she began to work part-time in order to be able to take care of her two young children. Upon joining UMNO, she was immediately assigned as the secretary of the women’s wing of the local branch. From the following year until she went to London for further studies in 1955, Aishah was a regular member of the women’s wing delegation to the UMNO general assembly.

How do we make sense of Aishah Ghani’s commitment to the cause of Malaya’s political independence when, after five years of active political involvement in UMNO, she left the country for further studies just as the country was about to deliberate on its first majority-elected federal legislative council? And how should we understand her perspective in terms of political commitment when she rejected the UMNO president’s request to return from London to lead the women’s wing of UMNO in 1956?

Aishah mentioned in her autobiography that in 1956, after she completed her English language courses and just as she was about to start her journalism course, the UMNO leader Tunku Abdul Rahman met her in London. He told her that Khadijah Sidek, the leader of the women’s wing, had been expelled from the party, and he asked Aishah whether she was willing to return to Malaya to replace Khadijah. She refused straight away, explaining to him that she needed to remain in London to complete her journalism course. She commented that the Tunku’s query strengthened her resolve to equip herself with as much
knowledge as possible so that she could become an effective leader of consequence rather than feeling handicapped in the face of bigger challenges.  

These actions make one wonder whether Aishah perceived the role of the UMNO women’s wing as subsidiary and secondary in achieving independence: she did not think it worthwhile to heed the Tunku’s request and abandon her journalism training. Indirectly, Aishah explained her stance by proposing a different role for herself. She quoted the Tunku as telling Malayan students in London that although the initial objective of struggle to achieve independence might not take too much time, translating this independence into meaningful reality (mengisi kemerdekaan) would then become a heavy responsibility and would take a long time. Aishah seemed to understand this goal as raising the status of the Malay people to the same level as non-Malay Malays. When she landed at the airport in Kuala Lumpur upon her return from London in December 1958, she mentioned that she praised God for the fact that her homeland had achieved independence, and that she as the daughter of this homeland had returned from her sojourn overseas to contribute to the struggle to mengisi kemerdekaan.

It is reasonable to deduce from the above that Aishah was a very rational, determined, even politically ambitious person. From her youth, she seemed to know exactly what she wanted and worked hard to ensure that she could achieve it. While the great majority of UMNO grass-roots members communicated mainly in Malay, it was the English-educated male elites who dominated the national leadership of the party. Aishah seemed to aspire to become part of the English-educated political elites at the top; she was not content with being just a mediocre politician due to her lack of knowledge and exposure. The Tunku emphasised English proficiency as one of the conditions for an UMNO leader to be chosen as an electoral candidate. It was not difficult for Aishah to figure out that should she master English and acquire a professional qualification, she would be well placed — even ahead of some of her Malay-educated male colleagues — to rise up the ranks to the national level.

The Ethnic Dimension

With regard to UMNO’s political orientation, Aishah found the “method of struggle to demand independence pursued by the Malay
leaders in UMNO more convincing”. She believed that the Malay people were still in a position of weakness and that if they demanded something with force, they would face negative consequences. While she acknowledged both UMNO and MNP as Malay nationalist parties aiming to liberate the country, she found the struggle of UMNO “more honest and pure”. It is notable that she described UMNO’s struggle as fighting for the future of the Malay people rather than for all Malayan people.

In her memoirs Aishah sounded as though she was addressing only Malay readers, despite having been a cabinet minister for a decade. Malaya for her was confined mainly to the Malay community. Her struggle focused on the emancipation of the Malay people rather than decolonisation of the people of all ethnicities in Malaya at that time. In her memoirs, she expressed her unease when mingling with non-Malays in the meetings or training courses conducted by the MNP. It may even be argued that she looked upon non-Malays with a certain degree of mistrust and hostility. Instead of acknowledging the negotiation of independence from the British as the joint efforts of a multi-ethnic united front, she contended that “it was the Malay people who had fought for independence”.

In her autobiography, Aishah expressed her admiration for and agreement with the controversial book written by Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the aftermath of the racial riots of 13 May 1969, *The Malay Dilemma*. She referred to non-Malays freely and indiscriminately as “immigrants” (pendatang) and wrote approvingly of Mahathir’s reference to Malays as the “definitive people” of Malaya. According to her, “immigrants” needed to respect the policy of the land and not go overboard in demanding their rights.

Perhaps, like many among the Malay population, Aishah had a perspective on the Chinese population in Malaya that was skewed by the sporadic Sino-Malay violence that broke out during the interregnum period. She talked about some ruthless and arbitrary atrocities committed by “a group of Chinese” belonging to the MPAJA. Noting that many Malays fell victim to Chinese, she related how she and her relatives had heard her neighbour screaming for help one night in August 1945 and the following morning the neighbour and his son were found to have been killed. Even though she acknowledged that some villagers said it was not the MPAJA that had killed them but the rubber tappers who previously worked under the neighbour, she apparently did not think so.
It is revealing to read her commentaries on the Anti-Malayan Union Movement. She mentioned that Malay papers reminded Malays that if they did not bravely do something to oppose the Malayan Union Plan, they would be faced with consequences worse than the Japanese oppression. She noted that with the implementation of the Malayan Union Plan, “all the people will be given the same rights regardless of their descent, and all will be called ‘Malayan’”. This argument that all Malayan people being given the same rights would result in “consequences worse than the Japanese oppression” makes sense only if Sino-Malay distrust and hostility are presumed. Notably, among all other leaders who spoke at the Anti-Malayan Union Movement Congress, she quoted Kiai Salleh, the leader of a Malay paramilitary group that indiscriminately killed members of the Chinese population, including defenseless women and children.

Aishah’s narrow Malay nationalistic political perspective on Malayan nationhood coincided with the generation of UMNO politicians who rose from the time of Premier Abdul Razak after the racial riots in 1969. Aishah rose to become the women’s wing national leader with the changing of the guard from Tunku Abdul Rahman to Abdul Razak. On the other hand, if this was her perspective of nationalism, it is understandable that she felt uneasy in the MNP and with the ambiguous association with the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party and preferred instead UMNO as the vehicle of her political activism.

Shamsiah, on the other hand, appears to have been far more ethnically inclusive in her perspective. From her childhood world of Malay culture and Islamic studies, her political involvement seemed to have widened her horizon and contacts with people of other ethnic communities. In her memoirs, she did not seem to judge or react to people based on their ethnic origins. She never commented in any negative sense on the Chinese community or her Chinese comrades, or on the predominantly “Chinese nature” of the MCP. She did not use the pejorative term *pendatang* (immigrant) to refer to non-Malays as did Aishah (and probably many other Malays of her time).

It was Fatini’s articles that referred to Shamsiah’s initial public contact with “the Chinese” (synonym for the author with “Communist”) in a negative sense. Apparently Aishah Ghani, as one of Fatini’s informants, suggested that Shamsiah might have been exposed to Communist ideas in the context of the PUTERA-AMCJA campaign,
when she appeared frequently in public with a couple of Chinese women leaders of mass organisations that were seen as fronts for the MCP.\textsuperscript{43} PUTERA-AMCJA was formed to campaign against the Federation of Malaya Agreement (proposal of a political structure to replace the Malayan Union), forged between the British colonial power and UMNO and Malay rulers in 1947.

Shamsiah, on the other hand, described the PUTERA-AMCJA collaboration as playing an important and positive role in the history of the struggle against colonialism. She referred to the coalition as the first to provide a platform for cooperation and unity of all ethnic communities in Malaya, preceding the multi-ethnic Alliance coalition.\textsuperscript{44} She stressed that AWAS, representing progressive and politically conscious Malay women, was proud to be part of the historic PUTERA-AMCJA cooperation.

There is also the question of how the predominantly Chinese MCP regarded Shamsiah. Fatini was told by her informants, former comrades of Shamsiah who surrendered, that Shamsiah was greatly respected by Chinese MCP members and leaders even though she apparently did not occupy any important official position. In his interview with Fatini, Ahmad Salleh\textsuperscript{45} argued that Shamsiah must have abandoned her Islamic faith or else she could not have become someone trusted by the MCP Central Committee.\textsuperscript{46} He insinuated that she might have been used by the MCP as a public front to demonstrate the goodwill of the MCP towards the Malay people.

Apparently in response to this report, Shamsiah explained in her memoirs that as a branch level committee member, she was not entitled to carry a pistol and a hand grenade. However, Musa Ahmad, the chairman of the MCP at the time, told the 10th Regiment that she was given the honour of being able to do so as a sign of respect for the leader of AWAS, that is, she stressed, in her capacity as a Malay woman. According to her, Musa said that the MCP was worried that its good name might be tainted if she got killed and the enemy found that she did not have a firearm.\textsuperscript{47} In fact, the political importance of the all-Malay 10th Regiment cannot be underestimated. The regiment refuted the allegation that the MCP was a “Chinese party” and the shaping of Malay public opinion by British propaganda that caricatured its struggle as a Chinese insurrection. Yet it appears that it was not only the ethnic dimension that mattered in the case of Shamsiah but the fact that she was a woman as well, as she herself stressed.
The Gender Dimension

Both Shamsiah and Aishah faced issues concerning the quality and availability of women leaders in their respective organisations. Aishah spoke about the challenge to find suitable members for local women’s wing committees, let alone for heads of those committees. She acknowledged the lack of political ambition among the Malay women who joined UMNO in the name of strengthening Malay unity and helping the party to win as many electoral seats as they could. More detrimentally, some of those in rural areas also frowned on other women who indicated their readiness to play a more active role in the party. Most early local women’s wing leaders were older housewives whose husbands were men of wealth or status, such as village head, school principal or district officer. Aishah described their political knowledge and understanding as “very moderate” and pragmatic.

This was clearly not her idea and ideal of a woman political leader. Aishah’s reference point might well have been the young, modern and English-speaking Miss Kontik, whom she encountered as a primary school pupil. This might explain the reason for which she decided to leave everything behind to further her studies and master English so as to become a different type of female political leader.

Elsewhere, Aishah mentioned that she was elected consecutively 12 times (1960–72) to the Supreme Council of UMNO without having to campaign much for herself, which was indeed a feat as a female UMNO leader. Interestingly, she mentioned that based on her experience, a woman who wished to become a division chief needed to have strong male supporters. She also said that besides having loyal and skillful supporters, such a candidate needed to fully understand politics as a “game” and be confident that she had mastered well the art of this “game”; and yet be wise enough to know the pitfalls to avoid.

Shamsiah, on the other hand, approached the issue of women’s participation in politics from a different angle. Given her very down-to-earth and humble perspective of herself and her service to the cause of decolonisation, she empathised with and instilled a sense of mission among her followers. According to her, her message to them was very simple. She would explain that under the yoke of colonisation, the (Malay) people remained poor and low in knowledge. Only when they had a free and independent country would it be possible to build the nation and bring prosperity to society. Using stories
about the Prophet Muhammad’s wives who sought knowledge and actively conducted various activities outside the home, she encouraged village women to develop their potential and leadership qualities and to go beyond shouldering household responsibilities. She also reminded them to pursue independence hand in hand with men, likening men and women to the two wings of a bird: the lack of one would cripple movement.\(^{53}\)

Her former comrade in AWAS, Aishah Hussein, recalled that they used to walk three or four kilometres in the rural area of Sungai Long, near Kajang, to recruit women villagers as members. Shamsiah also organised programmes for these women with the aim to conscientise them, such as literacy, cooking and sewing classes, so that they would be confident and know how to conduct themselves in public functions. In order to broaden their world view, those women who knew how to read were asked to buy and read newspapers. These women members also participated in fundraising efforts to support the political activities of AWAS in particular and MNP in general.\(^{54}\)

Shamsiah explained that her nationalist struggle for independence had made her aware of the oppression of women. She believed that the struggle for men’s liberty depended on the same for women. In effect, she noted that while women suffered from all kinds of oppression due to the feudalist, capitalist and imperialist systems, they were also oppressed by men because of traditional customs and religious rules. As an example, she gave her experience of being divorced by her first husband without a valid reason when she was eight months’ pregnant.\(^{55}\) Shamsiah described the responsibility of raising the living standard of women, achieving equal rights for men and women, and liberating women from the chain of oppression as a big and heavy responsibility to be accomplished over the long term. Achieving the independence of her homeland, for her, was the first step towards the liberation of women.\(^{56}\)

Despite her belief in women’s liberation, Shamsiah took a controversial step in her third marriage. She married Ahmad Boestamam, the head of API, as his second wife in December 1946, six months after she started working at the MNP.

Fatini described Shamsiah’s third marriage thus: “This was the most sensational marriage in the history of the Malay nationalist struggle. Boestamam and Shamsiah — the API chief and AWAS head — they were a great match!” Nonetheless, her subsequent comments
were damaging: “But just as her previous marriages, this marriage also ended in failure. What was wrong with Shamsiah?”57 When asked, Ishak Hj. Muhammad, a one-time president of MNP, criticised Shamsiah, saying that she “likes to get married” and was “mad about men” and even wanted to elope with Ahmad Boestamam.58 Nonetheless, her other former comrades defended her. Wahi Anuwar, her fourth husband, said Ahmad was “a bit egoistic and got carried away by his ego”.59 Another unnamed informant referred to Ahmad as follows: “Boestamam’s ego is too high. He does not like to be challenged and does not obey any leaders.”60 It appears that Ahmad might have been interested in Shamsiah from the beginning. He may have felt “challenged” when Shamsiah teased him about the shortcomings of API’s contribution to the party, and decided to “tackle” her by making her his wife.61

In her autobiography, Shamsiah defended her decision to marry Ahmad Boestamam as a way to learn from him:

At that time I was aware that even though I had high morale for the struggle my ideological and political maturity was still low. I was still green and lacking experience in struggle. This is not something strange. While I needed to learn by doing, I also needed help from people who were experienced. I thought I would get a lot of help from Ahmad if I married him.62

She also defended her position as the second wife by saying that from a religious point of view Islam allowed polygyny, and that she maintained a good relationship with Ahmad’s first wife, Rabitah. Shamsiah blamed her subsequent divorce with Ahmad on his mother and elder sister, who did not approve of her.63 Fatini’s sources mentioned that Shamsiah was unhappy that Ahmad Boestamam, when convicted of sedition for his writings, sought donations to pay his fine in order to avoid going to jail. She felt that it would have been better for him to suffer in prison rather than beg for people’s sympathy to bail himself out.64

Another more serious accusation against Shamsiah was made by Musa Ahmad, the former MCP chairman who surrendered to the Malaysian government in 1981. He claimed that Shamsiah threw into the river the child she bore in the jungle with her fourth husband, Wahi Anuwar. Shamsiah denied this in her memoirs. She described the difficult situation she was in after giving birth and struggling to keep
her infant son with her. Her hiding place was attacked several times by the British Army. Lacking rest and proper nutrition, she had no milk to feed her baby. So in the end she allowed her comrades who saved her to take him away to be adopted by a family in the nearby village. However, she found out after three years that her baby had been killed by them. When the MCP leaders found out about it, they punished those who were involved after consulting with her. This episode illustrates the dilemma of a woman freedom fighter, who despite doing all she could to save her baby still ended up losing him while she soldiered on with her political struggle. The fact that Aishah took leave from political involvement for a few years after her marriage is perhaps, in a mild sense, the reverse of Shamsiah’s bitter experience of the “domestic tension” often faced by women involved in political activities.

**Conclusion**

The lives of Aishah and Shamsiah are embedded in the larger historical and ideological struggle for independence in British Malaya, and are marked by social conflicts that remained unresolved for decades even after independence. Their private lives and political involvement were also profoundly marked by the cultural norms and religious practices of their ethnic community as Malay and Muslim women. In their own ways, they sought what they understood as the acceptable way to self-emancipation and struggled to enlarge that space.

While knowledge of the wider historical context is indispensable for us to understand more fully the story of their struggle, and how their political involvement gave meaning to their identity, their life experiences also enable us to gain insights into how — as social agents of change on two different sides of the political divide — they participated in and contributed to the ongoing struggle through their respective localised, situated practices. As noted by Roxana Waterson, analysing personal narratives at the intersection with history helps us to understand what it was like to live through “interesting times” and gain insights into wider social and political processes. It is this diversity and distinctiveness of individual experiences, offering particular points of view while reflecting the workings of the larger structural forces, that could be the unique contribution of biographical studies to enriching historical understanding.
Notes

1. In Malay the party is called Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya.

3. According to Zainah, soon after the adoption of this version of the Muslim family law act in 1984 in the Federal Territories, a Syariah judge allegedly asked a woman who objected to her husband taking a second wife as to whether she wanted to obey the laws of Aishah Ghani or the laws of God (Zainah, “What Islam, Whose Islam?” p. 245). Given that Islam comes under the purview of the state, each state’s Islamic authority subsequently resisted amending its Muslim family law act accordingly, or enacted a watered down version of the template legislative proposal. For a brief discussion on this, refer to Helen Ting, “Gender Discourse in Malay Politics: Old Wine in New Bottle?” in *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension*, ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 75–106.

4. According to an informant, the MCP subsequently reinstated their party membership and apologised to them.


10. PUTERA stood for Pusat Tenaga Rakyat, which was a coalition of several Malay grass-roots organisations as well as the MNP; AMCJA stood for All Malaya Council for Joint Action and was a coalition of an assortment of Chinese and Indian grass-roots organisations as well as chambers of commerce, etc.


13. Ibid.


16. Ibid., p. 29.

17. Aishah, Memoir Seorang Pejuang, p. 23.

18. Ibid., p. 31.

19. Ibid., p. 23.

20. Ibid., p. 35.


23. Ibid., pp. 28–30.


25. Ibid., p. 37.


28. Ibid., p. 46.
Personally, she regarded mastery of English as the key to a much wider horizon and limitless knowledge. She wrote that previously she felt extremely unhappy with her inability to handle conversations in English, especially when she was confronted by situations that required such a skill. When she worked as a radio broadcaster, she constantly needed to translate the news from English into Malay before reading it, which was a very frustrating experience for her. This resulted in an inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence. Ibid., p. 53.

She argued that since UMNO was formed through the sacrifice of numerous Malay associations, it was only proper that UMNO give priority to the Malay population, which was far more backward than other ethnic groups. Ibid., p. 101.


Ahmad Salleh was suspected of being a spy in the guerrilla forces. He admitted that he came out of the jungle with a telegram from the Tunku assuring him that he would not be prosecuted.


Ibid., p. 111.

Ibid., p. 112.


Fatini, “Shamsiah Fakih Ke Bagan Serai”, p. 27.
Wahi helped her to deliver the baby but parted with her after being attacked by the army. Based on the rumours spread by British intelligence, the MCP was misled to believe that Wahi Anuwar surrendered himself. Shamsiah was upset that Wahi betrayed the cause and became a renegade. That ended Shamsiah’s fourth marriage.

Her testimony was confirmed by an informant of Fatini, Abdul Rahman Abdullah, who was then tasked to assist her but lost her when attacked by British troops (Fatini, “Benarkah Shamsiah ‘Wakil’ Komunis?”, p. 27).