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# On the wings of a bird: The anti-colonial struggle in Aden from the perspective of the Arab women's movement, 1955-1967

## ABSTRACT

Although the former British crown colony of Aden, as part of Yemen, is today involved in one of the most hopeless armed conflicts, during decolonisation and the Cold War it was one of the most coveted and disputed areas between East and West. Aden was both geopolitically and economically a central link in the British empire. Yet, in less than a decade, a national liberation struggle succeeded in driving out the British. This liberation struggle was also, to a significant extent, a class conflict in which a strong local trade union movement confronted the colonial authorities. That story is well known. Less well known, and even ignored, is the importance of the local women's movement in this struggle. In this contribution, I want to examine the role of the Aden women's movement within the context of Aden's social and national liberation struggles and, in particular, look at how they developed their activism, what their repertoire was and what resources they managed to mobilize. The gender perspective broadens our view of this anti-colonial movement and brings into the spotlight actors who have received little attention until now.

## KEYWORDS

Yemen  
Decolonisation  
Racism/colonialism  
Trade unions/internationalism Islamic  
Feminism/women's activism

In the mid-1950s, the bipolar world of the Cold War took on an added dimension with the development of a non-alliance movement, of which Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was one of the leading personalities. Driven by Nasser, a strong upsurge of Arab nationalism emerged in the Middle East, which, along with political and military actions against Israel and support for anti-colonial movements in the region, put the Western camp on the defensive.<sup>1</sup>

Within this Western camp, the UK had major interests in this region. Although the British empire was also crumbling here, it remained committed to a few strategic positions.<sup>2</sup> One of these was Aden, a small area, not much bigger than a town, on the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

Between 1955 and 1967, Aden was in the throes of a national liberation struggle which was also a social struggle, and a strong local trade union movement was at its forefront. This anti-colonial struggle is known and has received quite a bit of attention, among labour historians as well. Much less known, and mostly totally ignored, is the importance of the women's movement. This is difficult to understand because the sources<sup>3</sup> are there for the taking, so to speak.

In this contribution I will situate the Aden women's movement in the context of the broader anti-colonial and social struggles, and ask how they were able to act autonomously, notwithstanding the economic, cultural and religious constraints that prevailed in this place and time.

It is possible to develop multiple perspectives here, but I limit myself to class and gender. I look at gender as an independent counter-power that women activists were able to mobilise, hence broadening the national liberation struggle in a way that would not have been possible from a purely class perspective. Gender, then, was an empowering factor in a particularly unfavourable context, both politically and culturally. Aden's women's movement had to develop agency for itself, taking into account multiple boundaries and handicaps. Public expressions of feminism were not obvious. Many women were illiterate; few had economic independence, and paid employment was hardly available. Yet these women found space for their activism. It is therefore interesting to look at how they developed their activism, what their repertoire was and what resources they managed to mobilise.

The focus on the women's movement also allows us to look more closely at the often ignored importance of local ideology and the broader cultural factors that underlay the discontent with the colonial system. Religion was an important element in this, but also language; the inferior position of Arabic in administration and education was a source of shared frustration. The feminism of Aden's women's movement can thus be situated both within Islam<sup>4</sup> – equal rights for men and women – and nationalism. The multi-dimensional activism we see developing here thus transcends the classical narrative of the anti-colonial liberation struggle.

I start this contribution with a brief description of colonial Aden, after which I discuss the development of a militant trade union movement that was fully engaged in the national liberation struggle. Next, I turn my attention to the local women's movement, its emergence and development, their participation in the broader anti-colonial struggle and their own specific input. And finally, I take a closer look at the guiding force behind this movement, the woman whom the British hated so much that they wanted to banish her from the colony, Radhia Ihsan.

## THE BARREN ROCKS OF ADEN

Aden is located on the southernmost point of the Arabian Peninsula. You could describe it as a Gibraltar on the Red Sea: strategically, but also economically, of exceptional importance not because of raw materials, but because of its port, which, in the mid-1950s, grew into one of the world's most important petroleum ports in just a few years. That rapid expansion had come after Iran nationalised its British-controlled oil industry in 1952. This forced the Anglo-Iranian Oil company, which changed its name to British Petroleum (BP) in 1954, to pack up, and it chose Aden as its new regional centre.

This seemed a logical choice. Aden had been a British crown colony since 1936. The administration as a whole was in British hands, headed by a governor who received his instructions directly from London. It was surrounded by a number of sultanates and imamates, led by traditional dynasties. These had the status of British protectorates and thus enjoyed a degree of self-government. Aden – the city and its wider surroundings – together with those protectorates formed an area known to this day as South Yemen. North Yemen, the other part of present-day Yemen, with Sana'a as its capital, had already seceded from the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and was independent. So Aden was small, controllable, fairly isolated and had a port that provided access to the world's oceans. But there was a problem. Aden was also quite sparsely populated, in any case, totally insufficiently for the development and operation of a port and a large-scale industrial complex. The solution was immigration. Massive labour imports from the north and the protectorates, as well as from India, Italy, Lebanon and Somalia, were supplemented by several thousand expatriates from Britain. In a few years, the population doubled.<sup>5</sup>

The British government's<sup>6</sup> policy was to maintain control of Aden, although towards the end of the 1950s there was a form of limited self-government. In response to what was seen as a growing threat from Arab nationalism, London also decided to constitutionally embed Aden in a federation with the protectorates. This put political relations in the colony on edge, upon which the British pursued a repressive and authoritarian policy that cracked down on organisations and individuals who opposed the colonial regime. The lack of institutional

1 Stephen Blackwell. Pursuing Nasser: The Macmillan government and the management of British policy towards the Middle East Cold War, 1957–63. *Cold War History* (4)3, 2004, pp. 85–104.

2 Toby Matthiesen, *Red Arabia. anti-colonialism, the Cold War, and the long sixties in the Gulf States*. In: *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties*. London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 94–103.

3 Indian Office Records (British Library, London), Foreign Office and Colonial Office Records, National Archives, Kew.

4 Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (eds.). *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.

5 Aden had about 58 000 inhabitants in 1946 and by 1955, the population had risen to 138 000.

6 Between 1955 and 1964, there was a Conservative government, which was succeeded by a Labour cabinet led by Harold Wilson in October 1964.

perspective and the harsh colonial rule, as well as the economic exploitation of a rapidly growing working mass, increased social tensions that spontaneously manifested themselves in the formation of trade unions, which would take the lead in the social and national struggle from 1956 onwards.

## TRADE UNIONS IN THE FRONT LINE

Even in recent publications on the liberation struggle in Aden, one can read that, given “the British determination to cling on, a strong countervailing force was required to secure their removal: this force was Arab nationalism”.<sup>7</sup> When one sees things from this perspective, like this author, one almost automatically concludes that the trade unions exploited the social struggle for the sake of their nationalist objectives. This was exactly the position of the British colonial authorities as well. The question is whether this does not short-change other countervailing forces, such as class, gender and even religion.

It is undeniable that the lack of perspective in a speech by the undersecretary of state for the colonies, on a visit in 1956, was one of the triggers for a first major strike wave, that started on 3 March and lasted almost six months. In all, no fewer than 72 strikes would break out during that period involving a total of some 35 000 workers. The governor, and with him the colonial administration, were surprised by the presence on the ground of a number of unions that immediately took charge of the struggle. The rapid industrial expansion, accompanied by massive labour immigration, gave rise to the spontaneous establishment of trade unions.<sup>8</sup> Those unions were strong in a number of key companies in the petroleum sector and at the port, and at the time had a limited but militant membership of about 4000. During the years that followed, workers in just about all sectors would unite and a number of business unions merged into industry unions. The number of union members rose to more than 20 000. The pattern of development of this trade union movement thus showed strong similarities with that of other industrialised areas, culminating in the creation of a national umbrella, the Aden Trades Union Congress (ATUC). The leader of the ATUC was Abdullah Al-Asnag<sup>9</sup>, who quickly became one of the most charismatic figures of the local resistance to the British. Both in name and structure, the Aden trade union movement was similar to the British one, with whom good relations were also initially maintained.

But the colonial administration saw these unions as vehicles for Arab nationalism and suspected that they were funded from Moscow or Cairo. Indeed, it cannot be denied that there was a certain simultaneity of social actions in Aden with developments in the Middle East such as the Suez crisis, that there was a very strong sympathy for Nasser, and that the Egyptian regime’s propaganda channel, Radio Cairo, was busily listened to and commented on in the city’s working-class neighbourhoods. The British saw this too, of course, and concluded that the social struggles in Aden were fuelled by Egypt because it could not afford a second military front besides Israel. Therefore, according to an analysis of the British

colonial administration in Aden, Nasser resorted to what was described as subversion: “Incitement of local nationalists, through radio, press and agents, to the point where they clash with local authority and their movement can be represented as a ‘struggle’ that calls for outside support.”<sup>10</sup>

From this tunnel vision, any action by the trade union movement that was not limited to the purely industrial was branded as subversion. The response of the colonial administration was primarily repressive, but in addition, a strategy was developed to take the political sting out of the social struggle while keeping the Aden trade unions in the Western camp. For both, cooperation was sought from both British and international trade union organisations. In his secret note after the 1956 strikes, Governor Hickinbotham stated that local union leaders were “inexperienced and immature”, and “what unions need above all now is skilled advice, guidance and training”.<sup>11</sup> The British TUC was asked to send a consultant to Aden, which they actually did, while the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the international umbrella of non-communist unions, also sent a mission to Aden. Also, the International Federation of Petroleum and Chemical Workers (IFPCW), an American-led and funded international trade secretariat that was fully engaged in the anti-communist crusade of the US trade union movement, sent delegates and money. Aden thus became a front in the global struggle between East and West, and the world of labour was one of the most contested front lines in that struggle.

## AN INDUSTRIAL AGENDA?

On the ground, however, this was not the first concern of union members and leadership. The situation of workers in Aden was precarious for several reasons. There were not only the low wages and dangerous working conditions that regularly caused deaths on the shop floor. There was also, especially for the mass of low-skilled migrants from the protectorates and the north, hardly any housing. These mostly single men slept in open-air hotels – a mattress between some half-walls – and were effectively disenfranchised. Dismissal was possible at any time, as was deportation. Indeed, to the British administration, these were aliens with only a limited residence permit that could be revoked at any time, for instance after participating in a demonstration or a strike.

In 1960, after another noisy year of strikes, when the British administration analysed the reasons for those strikes, a very recognisable top five emerged. The number one reason for strikes was wrongful dismissal, which triggered 19 strikes, followed by improvement of working conditions (14 strikes), severance pay (11), reduction of working hours (8) and solidarity with other strikes (7).<sup>12</sup> None reflected an immediate nationalist or political agenda.

There had also been several strikes at BP in 1959 and the administration suspected that these did have a nationalist underpinning. This suspicion was fuelled by the fact that the BP

union leadership not only accepted advice from the Americans and the ICFTU, but also sought help in Egypt, confirming the British belief that they were dealing here with Cairo-driven “subversion” against British interests.

In January 1960, a new conflict broke out at the BP refinery that would last ten weeks. At stake was the demand for a pay rise, which was granted, but the union also demanded free electricity and water for BP workers. The latter demand was rejected by BP management. This demand immediately shows how difficult it is to distinguish between the purely industrial and anti-colonial aspects of this social struggle.

The accounts of the police infiltrators who followed the strike closely and were present at the union meetings teach us what was going on the ground. The leader of the union at the BP refinery was Albulla Ali Ubaid, born in Aden in 1930, and employed as a clerk in the planning department of the BP refinery.<sup>13</sup> The British themselves described him as “the most genuine trade unionist in Aden”, which did not prevent them from arresting and jailing him after a strike. During the BP strikes of 1959 and 1960, his speech was nevertheless quite nationalistic. He told his members that “the company was exploiting their country and they must prepare for a long strike”.<sup>14</sup> He also explained the demand for free electricity and water: “British employees paid nothing for electricity and each one gets 10 000 gallons of free water for their gardens and for washing their dogs.” Water and the way the British handled such a scarce and vital supply were symbolic not only of colonial exploitation but also of the colonialist’s disdain for the local population. National and social struggles were intertwined and one provided fuel for the other.

### *“The volatile nature of the Arab”*

Racial segregation and discrimination against the local population were mainstays of British colonial rule. The inhabitants of Aden had to conform to a form of racial-ethnic ranking, with British expatriates claiming the most privileges in all areas. This was true in housing, healthcare and education, as well as in terms of status and access exclusively for British to social and cultural amenities. Natives of India, often employed in the colonial administration, followed in the second row, followed by those born in Aden. Adenese individuals and families, if they conformed to the British regime, could enjoy economic benefits and qualify for certain administrative positions. At the very bottom came the mass of immigrants from Arab areas, who provided the cheap labour needed by the industry and were virtually without rights.

This racial outlook also coloured the way the British colonists viewed the phenomenon of trade unions. They saw these unions as tools in the hands of a foreign regime, particularly Egypt, and not as advocacy agencies that stood up for their members. It was the colonial administration’s contention that unions pursued a political goal “under the guise of industrial

relations”. In doing so, they exploited the nationalism of “an emotional and excitable Arab population”.<sup>15</sup> For Governor Luce, too, the local trade union movement was “emotional and rather irrational”<sup>16</sup>, and political extremists exploited the tensions there. This, combined with “the naturally volatile nature of the Arab”, could lead to deterioration in labour relations at any time.<sup>17</sup>

According to British diplomat Kennedy Trevaskis, the union was the surrogate of the tribe for an Arab, and unions for workers who had emigrated from Arab territory performed the same function as the “tribe” they had left, with the union leader fulfilling the role of tribal leader, to be followed unconditionally “not as industrial leaders but as guardians of their social and political security”. These organisations were therefore, in his eyes, not real trade unions.<sup>18</sup>

From this superior position, colonial policy aimed to “guide” the Arab population to what they saw as more developed forms of industrial relations, such as prevailed in the motherland where unions, in their view, behaved more responsibly.

For unions, this implied learning how a mature and responsibly operating trade union movement worked in the UK. Both the administration in Whitehall and the colonial authorities therefore sought rapprochement with the British TUC, which indeed sent a delegate to the colony for several months. His intention was to assist the unions whenever there was a labour dispute and advise them in negotiations. On the spot, however, he found little confidence among the leadership of the trade union movement in Aden and concluded that “as a stabiliser I have been of more use to the Government than to the Trade Unions”.<sup>19</sup>

The British attempts to keep the ATUC in the Western camp made little impact, insofar as the ATUC also accepted invitations from the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and established contacts with a number of national trade union confederations from behind the iron curtain. At the same time, the ATUC also became an active partner of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU), headquartered in Egypt. These non-Western contacts were viewed with suspicion by the British colonial authorities, who reinforced the belief that the ATUC was a political vehicle driven by foreign opponents.

On the strike front, after a short relatively quiet period, a new trade union offensive had begun in 1959 with 84 strikes, some of which caused major economic damage at the port and British Petroleum. The colonial authorities then took advice from a British expert on industrial relations, who was of the opinion that, given the “immature behaviour” of the unions, strikes should be banned unless a mediation process had been gone through beforehand. This resulted in an ordinance (a local law) that indeed made mediation compulsory.<sup>20</sup> The British administration thus tried to force the unions to

7 Spencer Mawby, British policy in Aden and the Protectorates, 1966-1967. Last outpost of a Middle East Empire. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p.3.

8 John Chalcraft, Migration and popular protest in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s. International Labor and Working-Class History 79 (Spring), 2011, pp.28-47.

9 Abdullah al-Majid Al-Asnag, (Sana’a 1934 - London 2014). His name is often written as Al-Asnaj in British sources. I choose to use the spelling of his name as on documents signed by him.

10 Memo: Policies of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt towards Aden colony and protectorate. National Archives (FO371/120528), August 1956.

11 Secret memo, governor Aden to Secretary of State for the Colonies. (British Library IOR/R/20/B/2397), 15 March, 1957.

12 Memo, Review of the industrial relations situation in Aden colony during 1959/1960. (British Library, IOR/R/20/B/2877).

13 File Abdullah Ali Ubaid. British Library (IOR/R/20/B/2877).

14 Report H. Conway, Security Liaison officer, Aden. 7/03/1959. British Library (IOR/R/20/B/2885).

15 Memo, Political aspects of the trade union movement in Aden Colony. British Library (IOR/R/20/B2877) 1956.

16 Letter from Sir William Luce to Sir Vincent Tewson, 14/11/1958. Modern Records Centre, TUC archive, (Mss.292/956.8/5).

17 Ibid.

18 Kennedy Trevaskis, Shades of Amber, A South Arabian episode. London: Hutchinson, 1968., p.155

19 Report of TUC deputy Dalgleish, 28/07/1958. (MRC, TUC archive Mss 292/956.8/5/).

20 Debate in British parliament: Aden (Industrial Relations). UK Parliament Hansard, 22 May 1962. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1962-05-22/debates/4086f1cd-69aa-437b-9177->

cooperate with the employers and the local authorities, thereby forcing them into an impossible position. The leader of the British TUC, George Woodcock, realised this and warned Duncan Sandys, the secretary of state for the colonies, that “an ordinance of that kind was bound to drive the unions into politics”.<sup>21</sup> But the British government held firm. The intention, according to the governor, was to “monitor and guide” the unions towards what he called “healthy industrial relations”. In doing so, he wanted to put an end to what he described as the “irresponsible use of the strike weapon”.<sup>22</sup>

As expected, the Adenese unions reacted to the curtailment of their rights and launched a series of one-hour warning strikes, which culminated in a general strike on 15 August, 1960. The night before, a large meeting was held, attended by 5000 people. The British authorities explicitly noted the presence of 200 women at this meeting.

Despite the ordinance, things remained unsettled in the colony during 1961. In a December 1961 strike at the BP refinery, the leader of the union and ten members of its board were arrested and later sentenced, to four months in jail for the leader and six weeks for the others. This led to worldwide protests from both Western-minded and communist union internationals, who raised the issue with the International Labour Organization (ILO).<sup>23</sup> This was a clear escalation in which the British administration deployed “exemplary punishment” as a key element in a military strategy.<sup>24</sup> This punishment included, in addition to imprisonment, corporal punishment and deportation. That the British hand was not exactly soft is proven by the fact that the intelligence service in Aden “resorted to interrogation techniques later suffered by Irish republicans”.<sup>25</sup>

The social struggle thus landed in a political phase. The impossibility of organising strikes and the repression toward union leaders led the ATUC to effectively establish a political wing, the Peoples’ Socialist Party (PSP), in July 1962.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, the British leadership had achieved what they said they wanted to avoid. The social and political struggles became one and indivisible.

## SUFFRAGETTES AND NATIONALISTS

British colonial Aden could be described as a kind of police state, with a highly developed apparatus of repression, restrictive legislation that curtailed basic rights such as free speech, a partisan judiciary and an administration not mandated by the people. Within this, an intelligence service was also active, keeping a close eye on opponents and monitoring developments on the ground through infiltration and snitching.

It is the reports of these services that explicitly mention the presence of a sizeable group of activist women who not only participated in, but in some areas even led, the anti-colonial struggle.

Women’s participation in the labour market in Aden was low. In 1955, only ten per cent of adult women worked outside the home.<sup>27</sup> These were women engaged in paid employment under a contractual relationship. In addition, many women were active in the non-formal circuit, as paid or unpaid household help, as employees of small businesses, and in the fairly extensive prostitution network.

Women who performed paid work ended up in a number of sectors, such as administration, care and education, but there was also an underclass of very poorly paid female workers, usually maintenance workers, in the industrial sectors. British sources describe them as “sweepsters”. But besides a limited supply of paid labour, there were other factors that made women’s participation in the labour market more difficult.

Aden was not only a racially segregated society, but strong gender segregation also prevailed. Purdah<sup>28</sup>, which significantly limited women’s participation in public and economic life, applied in a number of communities. And there were further obstacles that hindered women’s access to the labour market. These had to do with the substandard quality of education for women and the large number of illiterates. For them, only poorly paid and underemployed jobs were available.<sup>29</sup> These additional forms of discrimination that were partly situated within a cultural-religious framework led to an active local women’s movement facing a situation that limited their agency on top of colonial realities.

Despite these constraints, a number of women’s associations were active in Aden. As early as 1943 there was a women’s club, which recruited mainly from the more “emancipated” families with migrant backgrounds and British expatriates.<sup>30</sup> From the early 1950s, a number of women from Aden also started participating themselves, which quite soon created a conflict as these women did not accept the patronage and paternalism of British women. They wished to be able to set their own agenda and respond to the needs of the local population. As a result, in 1956 – after a disagreement over a fund-raising campaign in support of the Arab victims of Port Said<sup>31</sup> – there was a split. The immediate effect of this split was that the more progressive or nationalist women’s organisation began to take a more activist stance and also began to manifest itself in the public arena. Led by local women, the club campaigned for women’s right to education, and organised debates in which male intellectuals also participated. There were also actions directed against “the veil and headscarf

(hijab)”.<sup>32</sup> In 1959, they organised a public demonstration against the hijab in which six women – four unveiled – marched through the streets of Aden, followed by thirty others in cars. A press release was also issued denouncing the “headscarf and hijab as an obstacle to participation in social and political life”.<sup>33</sup> Such public action by women was unprecedented and therefore caused a stir.

But the women’s organisation also played an active role in growing Arab nationalism and opposition to British colonialism. The British government’s support for Israel and increasing Israeli aggression towards the Palestinians was additional grist for the mill of a rapidly developing Arab nationalism in which this women’s movement began to participate fully and actively. The women launched a boycott of French and British products and became active in support campaigns for Egypt. When the British governor’s wife visited their club, the women dressed in black as a protest against colonial rule. This increasing Arab self-awareness was also reflected in the club’s name change when it renamed itself the Arab Women’s Society in August 1961, with the motto “one nation, one responsibility”.<sup>34</sup>

But this nationalist activism was not shared by all women. Women from families favourable to the British – as a rule women from the more prominent families – continued to be active in their own Aden Association for Women, which would not participate in anti-colonial resistance. By its own admission this club had 470 members, mostly Arab women. There was a board of eleven women, two of whom were of European origin and one of Indian origin. However, they continued to work “to raise the social and cultural standard of women in Aden”<sup>35</sup> and received support from the colonial administration. The secret service assessed them positively (unlike the Arab Women’s Society, which was described as “purely political and nationalistic”<sup>36</sup>): “There is nothing of an adverse nature know against this association”, although it was added that, with Mahia Nagib, the editor of the monthly women’s magazine *Fatat-Shamsan*, they did have a “militant suffragette” on board.<sup>37</sup> This became apparent when Mahia Nagib explicitly called for women’s voting rights in connection with local legislative council elections. According to her, women should be allowed to be elected and also hold executive positions in this body because “The Adeni women was in no way less competent than the man”.<sup>38</sup> But exactly here was a fundamental difference of opinion with the Arab Women’s Society, because for the latter, the legislative council was an instrument in the hands of the British occupier. Together with the trade union movement, the more militant women’s organisation therefore called for a boycott of these elections and actively participated in strikes, demonstrations and protests to support this boycott. Still, the image remains of a very active and empowered, though divided, Aden women’s movement that fought on more than one front

and managed to mobilise a significant group of women.

### A foolish woman

Arab Women’s Society’s anti-British actions brought them into the sights of British intelligence, which began to monitor their doings. In doing so, they particularly targeted the organisation’s chairwoman, Radhia Ihsanullah.

Radhia Ihsanullah Umar was of Indian origin, born in 1933 in Jeddah and immigrated to Aden with her family at the age of five. Her father had been born in Punjab in 1884 and owned the Ihsan hotel in Crater, the central district of Aden. So the family clearly belonged to the upper middle class, and Radhia received a good education. She would later teach Islamic law<sup>39</sup> but it is not clear what was her initial formation.

Ihsanullah first appeared on the British radar in 1956 when she collected for the “Martyrs of Port Said”. In the years that followed, Radhia Ihsanullah fully committed herself to the anti-colonial struggle. According to the British, she was “always in [the] forefront praising Arab nationalism and denouncing any anti-Arab British acts”, making her “Aden’s most prominent female nationalist”.<sup>40</sup> The head of the British police in Aden described her as “a well-known leading agitator, especially among students in Aden, and her influence among her followers is surprisingly strong”.<sup>41</sup> Her activities were not limited to the women’s movement; she also became a prominent member of the trade union and worked as a journalist for the trade union magazine *Al Amil (The Worker)*. The members of the union for miscellaneous industries elected her assistant treasurer, and she also became a member of the executive committee of both the ATUC and the party, the PSP. This made her the only woman on these boards and the only woman to hold such prominent positions.

But while they had to acknowledge that she was influential, the British could not appreciate her commitment at all and just about everything she did or said was looked at from a negative point of view. The British stated that she “regrets not being pure Arab, but through her activities [she] hopes to win popularity with Arabs”. This was the case, for instance, when she changed her name from Ihsanullah to Ihsan. According to the intelligence chief, she did this “to make it appear that she is Arab, not Indo-Arab, which she actually is”.<sup>42</sup> Another explanation is also possible. Indeed, Ihsan refers to one of the three basic tenets of Islam: “virtue through constant attention to and awareness of God”, so it could well be that by changing her name she was aiming to reinforce her Muslim identity.

Her actions were also negatively framed. When the Arab Women’s Club clashed with the British woman in charge of the socio-cultural centre, who prohibited certain activities, it was

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21 Memo, meeting of TUC General Council with Duncan Sandys. 22/10/1962 (MRC, TUC archive Mss 292B/956.8/3).

22 Dispatch from Governor W.H. Luce and Iain Macleod, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 22/04/1960 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2877).

23 Borivoj Romic, Confederation of Trade Unions of Yugoslavia, to ILO, 6/01/1962 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2886)

24 Spencer Mawby, op. cit. p.353.

25 Jonathan Bloch and Patrick Fitzgerald. British Intelligence and Covert Action. London: Junction Books, 1984, p.132

26 Spencer Mawby, op. cit. p.79.

27 Susanne Dahlgren. Contesting Realities. The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010, p.50

28 The term comes from the Persian word *parda*, meaning curtain. Initially, it referred to the hangings that separated the female quarters in a house from the male quarters. Its meaning includes various ways of separating the female from the male space and ensuring that women do not come into contact with “inappropriate” men. It can also refer to veiled clothing.

29 Susanne Dahlgren, op.cit. p.79

30 Susanne Dahlgren, op. cit. p.114.

31 During a failed invasion of Port Said in November 1956 by a coalition of British and French troops, attempting to liberate the Suez Canal, hundreds of Egyptian soldiers and civilians died.

32 Amel Nejib al-Ashtal. A long, quiet, and steady struggle: the women’s movement in Yemen. In: Mapping Arab Women’s Movements. A Century of Transformations from Within. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012, p.203.

33 Amel Nejib al-Ashtal, op. cit. p.203.

34 Amel Nejib al-Ashtal, op. cit. p.204.

35 Report by K.G.F. Irwing, head special branch, 19/12/1962 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2813).

36 Memo of the Director of Security, 12/01/1963 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2813).

37 Report by Irwing, op. cit.

38 The Recorder, 7 January, 1962.

39 Shafika Al-Gumae. Women and Politics in Yemen. Unpublished dissertation, San Diego University, 2012, p.33.

40 H. Conway. Memo 15/08/1960 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2877).

41 File Radhia Ihsanullah ‘Umar (BL, IOR/R/20/D/289).

42 H. Conway 1960, op. cit.

described as a “cattish attack” by “an unbalanced woman of Indian origin who has lately been trying to set herself up as a leader of Arab nationalism among the women of Aden”. “A foolish woman”, the education department chief wrote; “she should not be taken at all seriously”.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Fighting for the future.*

That picture was not confirmed in the reports of informants who noted Radhia Ihsan’s words at her numerous public appearances. The language was obviously harsh and militant, but also laced with poetry and references to Arabic literature. The central line, in many of her speeches, was that of unity; the common struggle of men and women for the liberation of their country. The image she used here was that of a bird, which also needs two wings to fly.

At a mass meeting on 13 August 1960, attended by at least 3500 people, Radhia Ihsan addressed striking workers and led a group of 150 women. She denounced the low standard of living of working-class women – “They toil for handfuls of food and a frock to wear” – and blamed the government and companies for not wanting to raise the living standards of the workers. Therefore, she said, “Go on with your strike. March on, blessed by God. We are supporting you, in every house you will find refuge and care.... We wish to co-operate with you and liberate this land”.<sup>44</sup>

A few years later, in May 1963, at another mass union demonstration, she quoted Egyptian poet and politician Mahmoud Sami el-Baroudi, a great name in Arabic literature as well as one of the iconic fighters of British colonialism. Clearly, Radhia Ihsan saw the social and national struggle as a whole, and in doing so, she was on the same track as the trade unions, as articulated by Nassir Sallami of the education union: “Behind the capitalists stands the colonialists who do not want to improve our standard of life. Therefore it is colonialism that we must fight first”.<sup>45</sup>

But this anti-colonial struggle was not limited to the economic sphere as far as the Aden women’s movement was concerned; for them it went much wider. “We are fighting for the future of a new generation”, declared Radhia Ihsan at a February 1962 meeting of the Arab Women’s Club attended by 120 women, at which the substandard quality of education was denounced.<sup>46</sup> Radhia Ihsan and her fellow supporters therefore fully supported the student strikes that added a new dimension to the anti-colonial struggle from early 1962.

The protests had started in the girls’ college, part of the British-led public education system. The girls protested against their poor education and inferior diploma and were supported in this by the women’s movement. The protest movement spread to other schools, including the college for boys, and during demonstrations in the streets of Aden, clashes with the police occurred. The student protests had a serious impact on public life in the city, and the authorities were forced to close the schools. In addition to the students themselves, parents

were also involved, of course, and it was impossible for the authorities to ban such strikes with legislation. The only other options were repression and the closure of the schools, which did not silence the protest but rather escalated it.

The school strikes also put a finger on the wound of the colonial system – not only the fact that both the curriculum and leadership were in British hands locally, but also the inequality between the different ethnic groups were denounced. Gender inequality was another thorn in the side. A pamphlet distributed by the Arab Women’s Society stressed that education was a matter for every citizen of Aden because it was about “the future of coming generations on whom rests the task of building the homeland”, therefore demanding that “all Girls schools to be run of the same syllabus as the Boys schools”.<sup>47</sup> The discriminatory treatment of the local Arab population and certainly the inferior position of Arabic as a language reinforced the anti-British sentiments with which these school strikes too became a part of the national liberation struggle, just as Radhia Ihsan and her followers had wanted.

Radhia Ihsan’s house became the command centre from where the actions were coordinated by a mixed committee of girl and boy students. This too was unseen. The student protest continued for about eight months and, with the women’s movement as a link, would realise a broadening of social and political resistance.

The school protests also give us insight into the means of action used by the women’s movement. Besides strikes and demonstrations, there was much focus on forms of peaceful resistance that could reach a wide audience. To this end, symbolic actions were sometimes carried out, such as putting up black flags or wearing black clothes and black armbands. But one of the most widely used means of action were handwritten pamphlets containing both appeals for support and denunciations of the colonial regime. And in addition, there was the trade union magazine *Al Amil*, which also had a wide circulation. In a sharp May 1962 article in the midst of the school crisis, Radhia Ihsan complained that “the Englishmen always thinks he is right in our country...there always stood in our way (female) foreigners from the State ruling our country and from the Commonwealth who are always obedient to their white masters”. Again, the colonial administration’s comment was that her tone was “aggressive, unbalanced and hysterical”, and they closed with the cynical comment: “I wonder if a holiday in South Africa will do her any good”.<sup>48</sup>

### UNWANTED

In just a few years, Radhia Ihsan had emerged as a central pivot of the national liberation struggle in Aden. She was active as a journalist and a trade union militant, she led the actions of women and students and, in addition, as chairwoman of the Arab Women’s Club, she had a broad group of activist supporters. Her influence extended beyond the colony and

she was a well-known figure in the Arab world, adding an international dimension to the national struggle through regular contacts and trips abroad. A brief glance at her diary confirms this. In March 1960 she participated in the Afro-Asian Women’s conference in Cairo; in June 1961 she undertook a tour of several Arab countries to recruit financial support for the Women’s Club; in September 1961 she participated in a second congress of Afro-Asian Women in Port Said, after which she travelled on to Cairo. From 1962 she was regularly in Sa’naa and Taiz, and in 1963 she went to Moscow for a meeting of the International Women’s Federation.

The local authorities were particularly annoyed with her and wanted to get rid of her, so the plan arose to expel her from the colony. The British governor of Aden justified this intention as follows: “She is rabidly anti-British and pro-Egyptian, and loses no opportunity of fomenting disturbances. Her continued residence in Aden is, in my opinion, most undesirable.”<sup>49</sup>

Since Radhia Ihsan was not born in Aden, according to the British, she could be denied entry to the colony after a trip abroad. In March 1963, this plan was presented to Duncan Sandys, the British minister for the colonies, and permission was sought, which came promptly: “no objection to the proposed action”.<sup>50</sup> A first opportunity arose when Radhia Ihsan attended a United Nations sub-Committee meeting in Sana’a in May 1963. But the plan ultimately fell through because she was already back in Aden while the UN was still in Yemen, and the British did not want to risk that. A second opportunity followed just a month later when she travelled to Moscow. But the issue had apparently got some people in London thinking anyway, because she did not actually have a valid passport for any country, and if she was no longer allowed to enter Aden, then, as a British citizen, she could not be prevented from coming to London. And that was not seen as an option because it was feared she would turn to the British parliament with all the political domestic consequences for the then-Conservative government. And so the proposal was put away for the time, pending a better opportunity.<sup>51</sup>

Radhia Ihsan, no doubt ignorant of the British plans, had not given up her peaceful resistance and, with the Arab Women’s Club, opted for a method of action that was difficult for the British to counter: the sit-in, a method of action that had also been used during the student protests. The first major sit-in began on 27 December 1963 at the Asqalani Mosque, and lasted for 24 days. This sit-in mobilised the local Muslim community and led to widespread solidarity with the protesting women. And because the mosque was the venue, the local authorities could not intervene. When, after some concessions from the administration, the action was lifted and it immediately became clear that these promises were not to be kept, a new protest followed in February 1964. This time, the women chose the administrative headquarters of the board as their target. There, of course, the police were able to intervene and after two

days, they put an end to the action. Non-violent resistance was nipped in the bud again and again.

### TERROR

Although the unions continued to oppose the curtailment of their rights, from mid-1962, a significant new element was added that created a literally explosive situation. According to Governor William Luce, the British wanted to secure their economic and strategic position in the area “for the foreseeable future” by merging the colony with the surrounding protectorates. This led to negotiations in London that resulted in the creation of the federation of South Yemen. For Aden’s anti-British activists, this was unacceptable, not only because it perpetuated British rule, but also because it would make Aden part of an area in which traditional dynastic rulers would still have a lot of influence, while they preferred secular rule as in North Yemen, where the Imam had been expelled.<sup>52</sup> The British also refused to consult the people of Aden on this merger, reinforcing the feeling that everything was decided from above in London. The Aden trade union, which now also had a full-fledged political arm in the PSP, rebelled against this and launched a fierce protest campaign. On 24 September 1962, the PSP/ATUC and the Arab Women’s Club organised a large protest demonstration against the merger talks in London. The demonstrators gathered at the Ihsan hotel and then marched in seven processions, one led by women, through the city streets.<sup>53</sup> It was a banned demonstration that ended in a confrontation with the police. The British authorities took advantage of this to declare martial law and imprison the leaders of the anti-British protests. Among them was Radhia Ihsan, who was sentenced to ten weeks’ imprisonment, six of which she would serve. After her release, she wrote a razor-sharp article for the Yemeni newspaper *Fatat-ul-Jezirah*, testifying about the shocking prison conditions.<sup>54</sup>

Martial law on top of existing regulations virtually deprived local activists of any possibility of peaceful resistance. Fierce protests against this course of action were immediately staged from Western trade union circles as well as from Egyptian and communist quarters. The protest against the British even reached the United Nations General Assembly, which adopted a resolution on 11 December 1963 demanding the immediate release of the arrested “nationalist leaders and trade unionists” and a halt to all deportations.<sup>55</sup>

But the arrest of the leadership of the movement and the promulgation of martial law also paved the way for the most radical nationalist elements. On 10 December 1963, a bomb attack was carried out against Kennedy Trevaskis, the British High Commissioner of the federation. It left one dead and dozens injured, including Trevaskis. The British responded immediately and harshly, arresting 52 people while more than

43 J. Hartley, director of education to acting chief secretary. 13/03/1960 (BL, IOR/20/B/2813).

44 H. Conway, 1960 op. cit.

45 Police report of general meeting. ATUC, 31/10/1960 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2867).

46 Confidential report of R Waggit, Special Branch. 5/02/1962 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/2813).

47 Translated from the Arabic pamphlet of the Arab Women’s Society. (BL, IOR/R/20/B/3125), 1962.

48 Comment on a translated article. 15/5/1960 (BL, IOR/R/20/B/28132).

49 Telegram from Sir. C. Johnston to Secretary of State for the Colonies. 1/03/1963. National Archives, Foreign Office (FO 371/168620).

50 Ibid.

51 Telegram to Sir C. Johnston. 24/06/1963 (National Archives, FO 371/168620).

52 This led to an indirect conflict between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which continued to support the ousted Imam, while Egypt supported the new regime.

53 Amel Nejib al-Ashtal. Op. cit. p.204.

54 File, Radhia Ihsanullah Umar (BL, IOR/R/20/D/289).

55 United Nations Digital Library. A/RES/1972, XVIII.

200 others were deported.<sup>56</sup> The entire top leadership of the unions and the PSP were arrested and deported to a prison outside Aden. Among them were Abdullah Al-Asnag and Radhia Ihsan. The authorities acknowledged that the arrests did not immediately mean they suspected those arrested of the attack, but rather that the authorities felt that the “PSP posed a security threat”.<sup>57</sup> Once again, these arrests sparked a global outcry. To protest against her detention, Radhia Ihsan went on hunger strike. Women’s and student organisations from Europe, the USA, Australia and socialist countries responded by sending protest telegrams to the UK government and the High Commissioner. Her family also protested and publicly expressed concern because of her health, whereupon her sister Zakia was also arrested.<sup>58</sup> After a dramatic call from her family that she was ill and her life was in danger, she was released, although the prison administration claimed that nothing was wrong.<sup>59</sup>

#### *The phase of the gun*

The conflict in Aden now really entered an armed phase, with attacks against British troops and local police forces. It was the start of a terror campaign not only against the British, but which also became an internal power struggle for control of a future administration. The violence also reached trade unions and civil society organisations. The National Liberation Fund (NLF), which led the armed struggle, managed to seize power in a number of trade union organisations and also targeted the leadership of the ATUC and the PSP.<sup>60</sup> The NLF, according to Trevaskis, resisted the domination of “non-tribal Adenis”, including trade union leaders such as Al-Asnag, who indeed lost control and was forced to flee Aden when the threat increased. On 7 October 1965, Abd Al-Malik Ismail, the leader of the General Petroleum Workers’ Union, used radical language on the Voice of the Arabs. According to him, it was now up to the armed struggle: “It is the stage of our destiny, it is the stage of the gun, the bazooka, blood and internment camps”.<sup>61</sup>

His words were followed by deeds. In February 1966, Ali Hussein Qadhi, who acted as ATUC chief in Al-Asnag’s absence, was murdered in his home. According to British intelligence, this assassination was intended to liquidate the “moderate” leadership of the ATUC, paving the way for the radical elements of the NLF.<sup>62</sup> This campaign of terror within the unions would take the lives of dozens of militants. The NLF also had strong contacts in the Eastern Bloc and took advice from East German officials.<sup>63</sup> In Marxist-Leninist tradition, it tried to make the most of the revolutionary potential of the trade unions. To do this, the “moderate” leaders first had to get out of the way, physically if necessary. By the end of 1966, this process was largely complete and the leadership of the trade union movement was in the hands of the radicals, who immediately severed all ties with the Western unions.<sup>64</sup>

So, with escalating violence, figures such as Al-Asnag and Radhia Ihsan suddenly became moderates. This was now also understood by the British, and talks were initiated with Al-Asnag for a transfer of power, but it was too late. In November 1967, the British had to flee Aden and power passed into the hands of the NLF, which would install an East German-style regime with the Peoples’ Republic of Southern Yemen. The new regime in Aden was soon recognised by Egypt, Yemen and Syria, which marked the de facto end of western-minded civil society organisations, as opposition was not tolerated.<sup>65</sup>

Both Abdullah Al-Asnag and Radhia Ihsan left Aden. Al-Asnag settled in northern Yemen, where he held key government positions and became foreign minister three times. However, after being involved in an uprising from the south, he was sidelined and had to leave Yemen. He would pass away in London in 2014. Radhia Ihsan left the colony and did not return to Aden until 1992, after the unification of North and South Yemen. She had been in voluntary exile for more than twenty years. On her return to Aden, she gave an interview in which she named one of the central fault lines that fuels the conflict to this day: “There are conservative forces who want to return Yemen to the times of the Imamate. These see a threat in the liberated, educated and self-confident women”.<sup>66</sup> She again left Aden, however, and returned to Sana’a, where she died in 2020.

#### CONCLUSION

The struggle to free Aden from the colonial yoke proves that different forms of resistance and organisation can reinforce each other to become a revolutionary force. That nationalism ultimately prevailed does not diminish the contribution of other countervailing forces. Besides class, gender was prominently present, with a broad-based and deeply rooted women’s movement. This women’s movement managed to develop an agency that took into account what were described as “customs and traditions”, despite constraints and obstacles. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the initial public protests against the cultural-religious rules that significantly hindered women’s participation in public and economic life fell silent as soon as the women’s movement began to participate fully in national resistance to colonialism. This does not mean that this women’s movement deemed women’s rights subordinate, but by focusing on education and more specifically education for girls, it found a militant agenda that was compatible with and even strengthened the social and national ones without controversy.

Although this women’s movement was radical in word and to some extent in deed, it remained non-violent. Its repertoire was broad, broader than that of trade unions, and

managed to mobilise an important section of the population, especially students, their parents and women who were not in salaried employment. The women’s struggle was therefore characterised by a broad social agenda, non-violence and social stratification. On top of this came an international connection, mainly with other women’s movements and the surrounding Arab countries, and notably there were close contacts with international communism.

Was the terror avoidable that eventually succeeded in making the British pack their bags faster than they would have liked? Perhaps so. By gradually depriving the social movements in Aden of any form of resistance, through repression, legislation and administrative obstruction, the British ensured that moderate forces that initially didn’t believe in violence lost the battle to the radical nationalists who preached terror as the only legitimate solution. When the British realised this, it was too late, and in the end, the vibrant civil society in Aden also became victims of a liberation that did not bring liberty.

Finally, this story is also an invitation to (re)look at anti-colonial historiography within the field of labour history from a gender perspective. It allows us to develop a multifocal view that does justice to social movements whose visibility in history is less obvious, though whose presence on the ground was therefore no less decisive ■

56 Memo on Aden, TUC. 16/12/1963 (MRC, Mss 292/B/956.8/3).

57 Memorandum of conversation between TUC delegate and W.H. Formoy, Colonial Office. 2/01/1964 (MRC, Mss 292/B/956.8/3).

58 Memo by ICFTU delegate Ivar Noren. 20/01/1964 (MRC, Mss 292/B/956.8/3).

59 Handwritten comment on a telegram of Zakia Ihsanullah, 22/01/1963, File Radhia Ihsanullah, (BL, IOR/20/D/289).

60 After merging with several other liberation movements in early 1966, the PSP transformed into the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (Flosy), which would join the armed struggle.

61 Police memo on radio broadcast by Abd Al-Malik Ismail. 7/10/1965 (BL, IOR/R/20/D/168)

62 Telegram from the High Commissioner to the Secretary of State of the Colonies., 24/02/1966 (BL, IOR/R/20/D/257)

63 Miriam M. Müller. A Spectre is Haunting Arabia: How the Germans Brought Their Communism to Yemen. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015, p.252-254.

64 BP Refinery Aden. Employee Relations Report. (National Archives, CO 1015/1240) 1967, p.3 (National Archives, CO 1015/1240)

65 Report of a meeting of the British and American Labour Attachés on Arab Labour Developments. Beirut, 28/01/1968 (National Archives, Colonial Office, CO 1015/1240).

66 Interview by Safa’ Ali Ibrahim. After 20 Years, Radhia Ihsanullah Has Woken Up and Spoken. 14 Uktubr, 20/04/1992, cited by Susanne Dahlgren, op. cit. p.165.