

DATUK HUSSEIN: SATU KAJIAN PENYEBARAN MAKLUMAT

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Syed Arabi Iddid*
BA (Malaya), MA (Wisconsin)

Prime Minister, Datuk Hussein Onn, announced his official decision not to seek re-election as UMNO'S President on Thursday 15 May, 1981. He cited health reasons for stepping down.

His decision, made when he declared open the Annual General Meeting of UMNO'S Pasir Gudang Division, ended weeks of speculation on whether he would continue to lead UMNO, Malaysia's largest political party, which also means continuing to be the Prime Minister of the country.

The media has been speculating for some time about the impending decision of Datuk Hussein Onn not to seek re-election as President of UMNO.

Datuk Hussein Onn once suffered a heart attack and in March 1981 underwent a coronary by-pass in London.

Rumours and speculations grew rife as preparations were underway for UMNO to hold its Annual General Meeting to elect its President, Deputy President and other officials. Divisions were holding their AGMs and were nominating candidates for the various party positions.

Many divisions were anxiously waiting for Datuk Hussein to indicate his position as they wanted to re-nominate him or some one else for the Presidency.

The speculations in the press led to some divisions nominating the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, to be party president in case Datuk Hussein decided not to seek re-election.

It was possible that the speculations on the impending decision of Datuk Hussein not to seek re-election could have filtered down the grass-root level of the country given the conditions prevailing then. UMNO members were observing his move because his decision was indeed important for the party. Should he decide not to seek re-election, the top-post could then be vacant and if Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was nominated as President, then the post of Deputy President would be for grabs. The keen contenders for the post of Deputy President were the Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and the Education Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam.

This study is to find out the extent to which Datuk Hussein Onn's official announcement not to contest again for UMNO'S Presidency was spread in a particular Malaysian society.

Diffusion of news had been studied in the context of significant news item, such as the death of President J.F. Kennedy⁽¹⁾ and President F.D. Roosevelt⁽²⁾. Studies on how news spread regarding the death of Tun Abdul Razak⁽³⁾ and the death of Malaysia's sixth Yang diPertuan Agong were done by Syed Arabi Iddid⁽⁴⁾.

The study on the death of Tun Abdul Razak was made in Madison, U.S.A. where the Malaysian communication environment was absent. The study on the death of the sixth Malaysian King was made in an urban setting.

*{Beliau sekarang sedang melanjutkan pelajarannya ke peringkat Doktor Falsafah di Universiti Wisconsin, USA }

In various studies on diffusion, those events that were significant and unexpected spread faster through interpersonal communication than through the mass media.

The story on the assassination of President Kennedy is a case in this point. Hill and Bonjean reported that within an hour after the news bulletin, 93% of the population in Dallas had learned of the news⁽⁵⁾. On the other hand, news that was not considered significant spread faster through the mass media. The report by Budd, MacLean and Barnes on the on the Walter Jenkin's⁽⁶⁾ case which was not considered a significant news item indicated that more respondents heard of it from the newspapers rather than through interpersonal communication.

What was most interesting in this study, was the source of information regarding the event. Television was the medium that respondents reported obtaining the news. This was perhaps respondents were mainly rubber tappers, manual or estate workers or were employed during the day and hence would not be able to tune in to the radio. They would obtain information, when they switched on their television sets later on in the day after returning from work.

In this particular study there were already speculations on the impending decision of Datuk Hussein Onn, especially when he returned from London after the coronary by-pass not to seek re-election as UMNO'S President also as Prime Minister. Malaysians were only waiting for the day when he would make the announcement. Even on 10 May, papers were already mentioning that Datuk Hussein would announce his intention not to seek re-election as President of UMNO when he was to be declared open the UMNO Division meeting of Pasir Gudang on 15 May 1981.

Studies on the spread of significant and unexpected news indicate that receivers were most likely to spread it among others. In the studies on the death of President Kennedy and the death of the Malaysian King nearly 70 percent of the respondents told one another on

the news that they have heard. This study indicated that only 25 percent of the respondents told their friends or spouses of the event.

One can infer from this study that news must be significant and unexpected for it to be diffused faster and wider through interpersonal communication. In the case of Datuk Hussein's Onn's announcement, the news, although significant, was by no means unexpected, hence the announcement was heard more through the mass media than through interpersonal communication.

Since television in Malaysia is a night medium, imparting of news could only be amongst family members as respondents frequently watch television in their own houses.

This study also indicated that the respondents obtained important news from the newspapers or/and television and not from the Radio.

This study is perhaps different from previous studies on two aspects:

- (a) the announcement by Datuk Hussein not to seek re-election as UMNO's President (and also to continue as Prime Minister) was not unexpected. Malaysians believed that it was only a matter of time before he officially announced his decision not to seek for re-election.
- (b) the respondents were village people, who were exposed to the mass media.

Hence in a significant but expected event, there is a likelihood that news on this event would spread faster and wider through mass media than through interpersonal communication, at least given a rural setting.

For the purpose of this study, a kampung, 27 miles South of Kuala Lumpur was chosen. The kampung was accessible by road, had water supply and electricity.

The 103 houses in the kampung were built over a disused mining area in 1973 and disturbances.

The village is peopled by Malays. All the

houses had radio/transistor sets and many had televisyen sets.

Survey Research of Malaysia reported that in 1980, 53% of the rural adult population listens to the radio the previous day. A total of 44% of the rural adult population watches television the previous day.

A total of 48 respondents was chosen for the present study. Male household heads were chosen and if they were not in, female household heads were substituted.

The survey was due on the evening of 16 May, that is on the day after Datuk Hussein Onn made his announcement.

Previous studies in diffusion were made mainly in an urban setting and were mainly focused in significant and unexpected events. In this study a rural area was taken and the event was, though significant, but was anticipated.

The study was interested to know when and how respondents in a rural area learned of Datuk Hussein Onn's official announcement not to seek re-election as UMNO's President.

The present study found that the majority had already learned of Datuk Hussein's intended decision to resign many days before the official announcement. People were in fact braced to accept the inevitable. Newspapers were the only medium that were spalshing news quoting unconfirmed sources that the Prime Minister would not seek re-election as UMNO's President.

In this study, a total of 37 respondents heard the news on 15 May 1981, citing television as their source of information. Only one resident heard the news from Radio Malaysia.

It must also be stated that 21 respondents reported having already heard/read speculative news on Datuk Hussein's seen's intended decision to resign, many days before 15 May 1981, meaning that the official announcement was hardly surprising to them. A total of 12 of them even heard the news either a week before or even earlier from reports in the press. Among the respondents who read speculative news on

Datuk Hussein's resignation before 15 May 1981, newspapers were cited as the main medium of information.

A total of 11 respondents heard the news of Datuk Hussein's announcement on Saturday 16 May 1981, the very next day, and newspapers were their source of information.

It was evidenced that newspapers and television were cited as the main sources of news for different reasons. Those who obtained the news from the press prior the official announcement either obtained a speculative story or read the announcement a day later after the event. Those who obtained the news from television heard the announcement on the very day itself.

Reactions to the resignation by Datuk Hussein Onn was accepted with "regret", "sadness", or "sorrow".

Asked what would happen to Malaysia regarding the announcement made by Datuk Hussein Onn, respondents did not think anything unfortunate would happen to Malaysia. Only two respondents felt that there would be a power struggle within UMNO.

In many diffusion studies, attempts were made to find out whether respondents spread the news to others once they knew the information. The aim was to find out the behavioural aspect of news-imparting among friends or family-members.

This study found out that news-imparting among the respondents were very minimal. Only 15 out of the 48 or 25 percent of the respondents told their friends or spouses.

Reference

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