

## The Inside Story

**W**hen 'Hussein - The Inside Story' was first published in *The New Straits Times* on July 14 1981, it was hailed as an exposé. For the article by **Zainah Anwar**, former ISIS Analyst and currently Project Director (Musawah), *Sisters in Islam*, revealed many things that only a few were privy to; and it dealt with a man we are all very familiar with but did not really know or understand. It was a remarkable insight into a man whose consistency in personality and principles gives this story an uncanny timelessness. It is no accident that the many tributes published when the Tun passed away on May 29 drew heavily from this article. The following is an edited version of the article.

They say he is slow. Nonsense, say those close to him. He is thorough. It is his sense of fairness, of justice, of the grave responsibility of the office of Prime Minister that make him the meticulous and cautious man he's known to be.

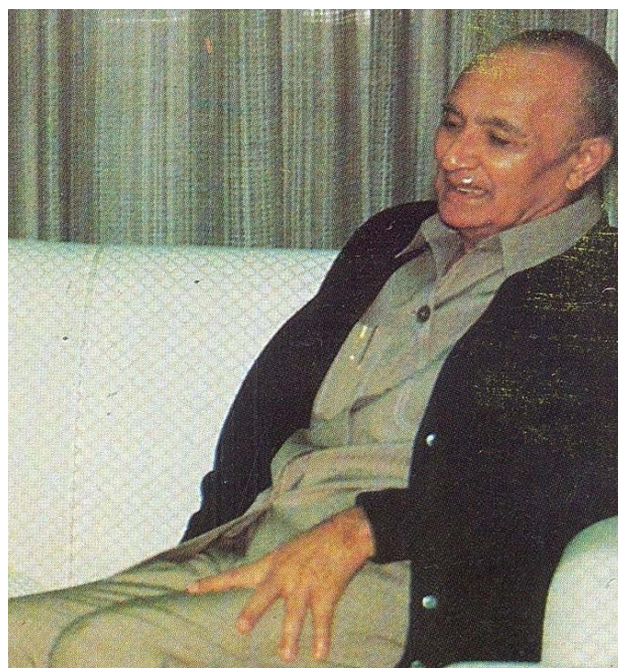
'How can you be anything but cautious when an error in judgment may cause misery to thousands?' he said in an interview.

To understand Hussein Onn, you have to understand the military and legal background that shaped the man, said an aide. He has a no-nonsense approach to the task at hand.

Tan Sri Kadir Yusof, an old friend and former Attorney-General remembered his first encounter with Tun Hussein and his meticulousness during their student days in London in the Fifties. They had lived in the same block of flats and Tun Hussein had one day invited Tan Sri Kadir home to cook chicken curry with him. There, Tan Sri Kadir picked up a pip of garlic, and as he would usually, just smashed it on the table.

'Hussein saw this and exclaimed: What! He then took the garlic from me and started slicing it neatly into small pieces. Then when we were doing the dishes, I noticed how he washed everything thoroughly: the knives and the spoons, and how he would then arrange them neatly on a rack and cover them all with a cloth.'

And then again in Parliament, for two years Tan Sri Kadir sat on Tun Hussein's left when the latter was Minister of Education and Kadir saw the same neatness and sense of order. 'All his papers were



*Tun Hussein Onn*

neatly stacked in front of him, while mine were a mess. And he always had this box with him in which he carried a short ruler, paper clips, eraser and pencils of different colours. He would use the ruler to underline his notes in various colours, according to the importance of the issues involved.'

'I used to borrow his notes and pencils and would just leave them scattered on his table. He didn't like that. He'd immediately arrange everything in order again. That's Hussein, very thorough in everything he does.'

Those who have worked with the Prime Minister knew how carefully he weighed the pros and cons of a matter before making a final decision, be it on

the appointment of a Minister or Menteri Besar, or on a policy. And the pros and cons were not just in his mind. They would be written on pieces of paper to be studied thoroughly, said an aide.

Once a decision was made, it meant he was convinced that all facts available had been considered fairly. And that decision was final.

Said Tan Sri Kadir: 'Be it a Cabinet or Umno Supreme Council meeting, Hussein would hear out everybody whenever there was a difference of opinion. He would ask everyone to speak out. If there was no consensus, he would postpone the decision. At the next session he would try and get as close a consensus as possible. Then he would decide. 'Once he's made that decision, it's hard to change his mind.'

That is the meticulous Hussein Onn. It was common knowledge that he went through all his speeches and important papers with a six-inch ruler to ensure that he did not miss out the important points, which he then proceeded to underline with a red pen.

His aides tried to cut down his speaking engagements because they knew how much time and trouble he took for every speech. 'He has never accepted a draft without making corrections to them. Any speech that he gives is his speech,' they said.

Once, said an aide, they had worked from 8pm to 1am on a speech for an important conference. 'Five hours for a 10-minute speech,' said the aide. 'He wants to make sure that everything he says is worth saying,' he continued.

'He goes over the choice of words, the structure of a sentence. He'll ask you what's the significance of this, what's the significance of that. He'll ask if you're clear about this sentence because he is not. And we would reconstruct the sentence.'

He'll call you at night to clarify the figures used. 'Where did you get them?' he would ask. His

meticulousness, said this aide, even went to the extent that he would spell out complicated words phonetically. He would write out the phonetic spelling neatly above the word.

Another aide recalled how they had laboured for 15 minutes over a single sentence of a speech for an important visit by a foreign head of state.

'Things, he would say, have implications,' said this aide, 'So he looks at all the possible interpretations to make sure what he says is what is really intended. As a result, Datuk (as he was then) Hussein has never had to retract anything that he has said.'

The Prime Minister's reluctance to speak off-the-cuff with the Press was also due to this sense of responsibility: whatever he said would affect many and would be considered by many more.

'If he speaks off-the-cuff,' said the aide, 'he would have no time to see the implications of what he has said.' Tun Hussein often said that it was all right for his Ministers to speak because if they made any mistake, he being at the top, could clarify them. But if he were to make the mistake, there would be no one above him to repair the damage.

Another general misconception of Tun Hussein was that he was closed, and aloof, very unlike the Tunku with his breezy, carefree style, or the Tun [Razak] with his close network of loyal friends. As Prime Minister, said Tan Sri Kadir, Tun Hussein was careful to treat everyone under him equally so that no one could say he favoured any particular person.

'He did not want any Hussein clique.... Everyone under him was equal.' As Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Shahrir Samad, who was Tun Hussein's Parliamentary Secretary from 1976 to 1980, said: 'The rapport was based on respect and trust, not based on closeness.'

He said it was at first upsetting for the Ministers, who were used to seeing Tun Razak so often, to suddenly find that they couldn't do likewise with the new Prime Minister.

Many accused him of doing all the work alone, saying he was not a delegator, and that that was why he was slow. But to those who knew him, Tun Hussein was the greatest delegator of all.

The day-to-day running of the Ministries, the implementation of projects, the petty squabbles over portfolios were not his concern.

He would make the major decisions and policies, and he always took responsibility for these. He had said, 'you can delegate work, but you cannot delegate responsibility.' He was irritated by the petty problems and squabbles brought before him. 'He does not want to interfere in them,' said an aide. He does not like people to pop in and out of his office.'

Within a few months of taking office, Tun Hussein made a ruling that anyone who wanted to see him had to send a note to him first indicating the matter to be discussed so that he could prepare himself for the meeting.

'He considers "I'll think about it", and "I'll look into it" meetings useless and a waste of time,' said the aide.

'He doesn't like people to come over and discuss matters over which he has no authority and he does not like to be caught by people who bring up problems for him to solve on the spot. He does not like to get involved in the petty squabbles and rivalries between Ministries.'

*It's just not his style to indulge in small talk, not even on long flights to foreign destinations*

Time was too valuable for him to waste over matters that could be solved without his interference. He also had no time to *borak-borak* (engage in idle chat), as an aide put it. 'Maybe that is why people say he is aloof. It's just not his style to indulge in small talk, not even on long flights to foreign destinations. But once you get to see him, he'll give you all the time you want. 'Sometimes too much time,' says the aide. 'Because he is too polite to shoo you out of his office. It's not his style to grab your hand, shake it and walk you to the door.'

So precious was time for Tun Hussein that he often got his wife, Tun Suhaila, to read the morning papers to him even while he was shaving, said a close family friend. An introvert, Tun Hussein was also an early riser. He did all his reading at home, taking back with him all the papers that he had to read and study for the next day's series of meetings and work.

What he had for breakfast was enough to last him the whole day, said his aides. He worked through lunch. It was only when he knew he would be working late that he would send his driver back home for his lunch, which he would take in his office, alone and probably reading at the same time. Otherwise the tidbits that he would munch on at meetings were enough to see him to the end of the day. There was also the big flask of coffee that he would take to work. He would sip his coffee, rather than drink it. So the coffee usually became cold. But that did not seem to bother him.

What would strike one most about his office was its simplicity, from the plain brown wood panelling to the thin, worn green carpet. But it was his chair that said it all. No high-backed shiny leather swivel chair for this Prime Minister. It was just a plain black vinyl low-backed swivel chair with an old cushion crushed askew at its back.

There were no trappings of power.

Nothing plush, nothing ostentatious. His table, his chair and the four equally plain ones opposite him were all from his Deputy Prime Minister days. The

carpet in his office was to be changed when he took over, but he said, never mind, it still looked ok. And so it remained.

On his long, narrow table are arranged, neatly and in order, a small travelling clock, an electric calendar, an ashtray (he used to smoke heavily until his operation), two jars, one filled with pens, the other pencils, another glass ashtray filled with paper pegs, clips and pins, a stapler and a long wooden ruler — all arranged in a neat line.

But his important tools would sit just by his right arm — a plain yellow plastic box that held a short but sharp pencil, an eraser, an old penknife to open his private mail, a simple soft pen to sign letters with and his famous six-inch ruler -- a well-used white plastic ruler now covered with red ink on both sides from all the underlining that he has done.

On the walls hung the three valued mottos of his life. One in bold black print said simply: 'My job and yours are to build the country's future'. This hung on the pillar facing the long table where he conducted his meetings with Cabinet colleagues and his aides.

On another pillar hung a saying from his military academy days in India, in the early forties. 'The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time; the safety, comfort and welfare of the men under your command come next; your own safety, comfort and welfare come last, always and every time. '

On the wall next to the seats where he entertained his guests hung a motto reflecting his legal training. 'The advocate ... reconciles his interests with the eternal interests of truth and justice.' There is not a shred of doubt in the mind of anyone of Tun Hussein's integrity, honesty and dedication. Said one aide who has worked for several other Ministers: 'I've never worked for a man more dedicated and sincere than Datuk Hussein. All he does is in the interest of the nation. That man's integrity is unquestionable. It's unbelievable.'

It is Tun Hussein's disinterest in personal glory or in power per se that made him state clearly to his aides that he does not ask them for personal loyalty, but loyalty to the office of the Prime Minister. 'This is a rare quality in a leader,' said Datuk Shahrir (who once served as Tun Hussein's political secretary).

'This means we don't pamper him, we don't hero-worship him. His concept of loyalty means you don't hide anything from him. We tell him everything and he makes us maintain our objectivity.'

'We don't hide the bad news just because we don't want to hurt his feelings or we don't want him to lose sleep. That's what personal loyalty means and it leads to feeding your leader with wrong information.' But not for Tun Hussein. 'Even when he makes an appointment, he never asks whether the person he is to meet would support him or work against him?'

He never exacted personal loyalty. He stressed integrity and honesty. 'The moment he catches somebody abusing his trust, that would be the end of the relationship. He believes that without your integrity and honesty, you're nothing but an opportunist.'

And now true to his word, this man, who has said that he would resign if he cannot give 100 per cent to his office, was truly leaving.

A lesser person would want to hang on to power and let his deputy do the work. But not Tun Hussein Onn, the disciplined soldier, the just lawyer and above all a statesman of unquestionable integrity.

When he was asked what he was doing back at work when he was supposed to be taking a three-month complete rest, he had said: 'But how can I? I am the Prime Minister, I cannot sit at home and rest.'