

Handling the media in the MH370 saga
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COMMENTARY BY THE MALAYSIAN INSIDER

Flight MH370 has caught everyone's imagination since it vanished on March 8 with 239 people on board for a routine flight to Beijing.

It has brought the world's spotlight on Malaysia, and everyone, from the prime minister to the road sweeper, has a theory or opinion about the Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777-200ER that has yet to be found.

Here are a couple of observations about the government's reaction to its handling of the missing plane.

Rosmah, oh Rosmah

It is always about her, good or bad. Always. Oh sure, in a television interview last night, Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor took the customary government line and criticised those who poked holes in Putrajaya's handling of missing aircraft.

Presumably, she was referring to Malaysians who wondered about the prime minister's now-you-see-now-you-don't act.

"Don't throw stones and then hide your hands behind your back. That's cowardice. Don't just talk and not provide solutions," she said in the Bernama TV programme.

Strange accusations since most government critics are in the public eye, from opposition politicians to bloggers to columnists in news portals.

But her comments which really caught the attention were about her. She said that immediately after hearing news of the plane's disappearance, she started praying fervently.

"I was shocked, my knees were shaking, my whole body felt weak. I started fervently praying that the plane would be quickly found."

She also recalled how family members of passengers and crew begged her for answers during a meeting with them.

"I felt helpless... I wanted to help but could not," said Rosmah.

She does not hold any position in government or on the task force searching for MH370, so why is Rosmah going on national television to talk about Flight MH370.

Incidentally, this is not the first time that she has offered views on the episode.

Perhaps her media handlers believe that it would be useful showcasing a compassionate Rosmah; as opposed to the person often portrayed by the opposition, blogs and in Umno circles.

Rosmah is spot on that needless speculation only causes more heartache for those

struggling to come to terms with the loss of loved ones. But surely it is equally unpalatable to milk an incident for a re-imaging exercise. No?

Hisham, oh Hisham

This is the thing about the media, especially real journalists. They are a cynical bunch and when they sense that a newsmaker is stonewalling them, they will poke and probe further.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and his friends in Cabinet do not deal with real journalists most of the time. They have soft questions lobbed to them by very submissive mainstream journalists and editors 365 days in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the minister is king.

He can decide to ignore questions, to kill stories, etc. Those controls disappear once he has to deal with the international press.

Hishammuddin did a decent job when briefing the press in the weeks after the disappearance of MH370.

In fact, some of the minister's media people were pretty pleased, believing that he had finally repaired his image that was damaged by the keris-waving incident and his lacklustre performance as Education Minister and Home Minister.

But most of those press conferences were scripted. Read a statement that covered issues of the day, take a few questions.

When the minister had CNN's Nic Robertson follow him around and pepper him with questions the other day, he was not in his comfort zone. It was not a scripted setting.

The CNN reporter wanted to know if the air force scrambled jets up hours after MH370 went missing.

The minister said this was not the setting for such a question and that he would take questions at a press conference. At a later press conference, he ignored Robertson's question about the army jets.

Here is the thing that is puzzling about a minister who keeps talking about openness and transparency: why can't you answer a simple question?

Is it any wonder that more than 50% of Malaysians believe that the government has not been forthright with information on the missing plane?

Already some members of the government have been talking about the hidden agenda of the international press. Such talk coincided with scathing analyses of the government's handling of the MH370 incident by the foreign media. – April 15, 2014.

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