

21 MAR 2003

S'pore-PR

AUTHOR EXPLAINS WHY M'SIA NEEDS BETTER PR

SINGAPORE, March 21 (Bernama) -- Too often, silly side issues on Malaysia have been allowed to grab the international headlines. Why?

Co-author of 'Big in Asia' (2003) Michael Backman said the recent raid on the office of the online publication Malaysiakini was the latest example on why the value of good external public relations "should never be undervalued."

"Unfortunately," he wrote in his commentary published in the local tabloid 'Today', "the grand conspiracy theorists like to pin these things on the very top of Malaysia's government."

"The reality is that often, junior officials, in their eagerness to impress their seniors, overanticipate what should be done," said Backman, who is also author of Asian Eclipse (1999, 2001).

Describing Malaysia as "one country in Asia that underperforms on the PR and information front," Backman cited The Melbourne Age newspaper which had the headline on Jan 22, 'Mahathir raids Internet critic.'

Dr Mahathir, he said, did no such thing. "He probably had no advance warning that the raid was to take place, and yet an Australian newspaper pinned the act squarely on him."

Backman said that although his visit to Perth last week was a brief one, it was long enough for him to see the headline 'Mahathir won't be missed' in a local West Australian newspaper. It was a piece about Dr Mahathir's planned resignation in October.

The report, he said, belittled Dr Mahathir and his achievements and even compared him unfavourably to Indonesia's President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

"The truth is that Dr Mahathir is one of the cleverest politicians in Asia and Malaysians have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity under his rule," he said.

Why do Malaysia and Dr Mahathir attract such headlines, asked Backman.

Too often, he said, government decisions in Malaysia and the processes behind them were not fully explained.

The media, he said, were seen as a foe when it should be seen as a friend, the means by which the government's policies could be communicated and justified.

"Explanations are often too defensive or simply lacking in sophistication."

And yet, he said, journalists were the link between government and the electorate, they were the middlemen of democracies, and they needed to be treated as such.

Backman said that paying too little regard to the PR side of things had allowed two things to happen. It has allowed some journalists to assume the worst motives and to see conspiracies where often there are none.

And it has allowed the Kuala Lumpur gossip mill to work overtime to the point where utterly absurd pieces of malicious gossip, about business and political figures, do the rounds unchecked.

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