

Najib-Taib's public relations move overseas backfires
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Packaged TV productions extolling the virtues of Malaysia and Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud have embarrassed some of the world's leading television networks after they were found to have been paid for by the Malaysian government as part of a massive public relations campaign.

According to Sarawak Report, the news programmes are being produced by Fact Based Communications, a London-based company also known as FCB Media, that describes itself on its website as an "European-based media and entertainment group specialising in television format creation, production and distribution."

The story was posted on the Sarawak Report blog earlier this month, but appears to have escaped the notice of the mainstream media. However, the US television network CNBC announced on Aug 4 that it was cancelling World Business, a programme that airs in Europe and Asia, after the network learned that FBC Media was found to have a contract with Taib and had paid US\$70,000 (RM210,000) to the Apco Worldwide public relations firm to lobby in Washington, DC on behalf of the Malaysian government.

CNBC World has carried 10 interviews by FBC chairman Alan Friedman with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak over the past two years.

The BBC also said it was pulling any FBC-created content pending an investigation. In addition, according to the US-based website Politico, CNN International was criticised for "lobbing softball questions" at Najib a week after Malaysian police arrested hundreds of protesters in the Bersih 2.0 rally on July 9. John Deferios, the host of CNN International, was previously president of FBC Media. CNN denied any bias.

Friedman visited Taib twice in Kuching, Sarawak, to formulate a contract that "promised to "transform the international image" of the Sarawak chief minister, who has suffered from horrendous publicity in the wake of convincing allegations that he had funneled billions of dollars from illegal timber sales out of the state into companies owned by his family in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Taib is being investigated by Swiss authorities on allegations that he has stashed millions of dollars in Swiss banks. Malaysia's Anti-Corruption Commission has announced it would investigate the charges as well.

Taib, who has served as Sarawak's chief minister for three decades, said he would step down after state elections earlier this year. Reportedly, both Najib and former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad have urged him to leave office. However, after his party won the state elections, he appeared to be balking at stepping down.

Propaganda disguised as news

According to FBC Media's website, the company's syndicated stories reach more than 300 million television households in seven languages in 100 countries and more than 30 of the world's leading airlines.

As television news bureaus have continued to contract because of declining revenues, networks have been farming out more and more of their news feeds to organisations like FBC Media, some of which produce out-and-out propaganda for governments and corporations that is disguised as news. The stories are rarely if ever identified as having been produced at the behest of corporations or countries that paid the media agencies to produce them.

In an exhaustive 2006 study, the US-based Center for Media and Democracy identified 77 television

stations in the US that collectively reached more than half of the US population using "video news releases," or public relations videos from PR companies, without disclosing their source. The clients, according to the centre, included General Motors, Intel, Pfizer and Capital One.

"In each case, these 77 television stations actively disguised the sponsored content to make it appear to be their own reporting. In almost all cases, stations failed to balance the clients' messages with independently-gathered footage or basic journalistic research. More than one-third of the time, stations aired the pre-packaged VNR in its entirety," the centre said.

A request to speak to FBC Media chairman Friedman was deferred by an aide who said all requests were to be routed to Friedman's email address. An email sent to Friedman wasn't answered immediately.

However, the website says FBC Media's "team of senior-level executives provides one-on-one strategic communications advice and support to government and corporate leadership as well as one-stop management of media buying and media partners. The team, the website said, "handles all relations with news channels and media partners in order to maximise prices, discounts and value for money for its clients.

"These face-to-face meetings with editors and senior representatives from leading publications ensure that our clients' events stay firmly on their radar."

Elements of the process, the website said, include "Proactive news stories: managing the news agenda; Reactive news stories: reacting to the news agenda; Forward features: influencing the news agenda."

Millions of ringgit paid to FBC Media

Malaysia, according to Sarawak Report, is at the forefront of that trend. Television networks that have carried stories about Malaysia and particularly Sarawak include CNBC, CNN and BBC World, which is supported by the British government. All have carried programmes by FBC Media, containing items promoting their multi-million dollar PR clients.

Taib is paying FBC Media RM15 million annually to produce its reports, according to the website. Sarawak Report singled out BBC World's 'Develop or Die' series, which concentrates on Malaysian palm oil and the claim that "sustainable development is being used increasingly as a convenient argument by those in the richer world to protect their global economic dominance."

Najib was said to have recommended FBC Media's PR services to Taib, the website says, although it doesn't reveal how it learned that information. It added that Najib, former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and a number of Malaysian companies including the giant conglomerate Sime Darby are also FBC clients. The website carried a picture of Abdullah being interviewed by Friedman over a bottle of wine on Italian television.

Sarawak Report quoted PKR secretary-general Saifuddin Nasutian as revealing that Malaysian budget records show that between 2008 and 2009 RM57.68 million was paid by the Prime Minister's office to FBC Media to conduct a "Global Strategic Communications Campaign" for the Malaysian government. RM29,337,650 was paid out in 2008 and RM28,350,000 in 2009.

The Malaysian government's supplementary budget 2010, the website said, specifies "an amount of RM28,350,000 to pay the cost of agreement to implement the project Global Strategic Communications Campaign between the Malaysian Government and FBC Media (UK) Limited for the year 2009.

A further RM42 million was spent in 2010 on "Public Affairs and Government Services and Strategic Communication, Public Relations and Press Outreach", according to the latest supplementary budget.

The contract advocated that the campaign last for three years, but for the first year alone FBC's services have amounted to RM15 million, plus expenses, the website said.

For this Friedman is said to have offered a campaign across prime TV, online and print news media platforms "designed to convince international viewers that the chief minister's government of Sarawak has been beneficial in bringing development to the people of Sarawak."

For a further charge of RM162,000 a month, Sarawak Report reported the FBC Media contract also offers a separate campaign using online sites and "special blogging" in order to "provide a blanket of positive coverage" about Taib and Sarawak in the Western media.

- Asia Sentinel

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