

Najib, Taib told to explain FBC links
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In light of the continuing silence by the Sarawak government and Putrajaya over the alleged hiring of another public relations firm to glam up their image, PKR has called upon both to come clean.

"We would now like the Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak to come clean and explain how hundreds of millions of ringgit in taxpayer money is being funneled not towards the national image, but for the interests of his party," said the party's communications director Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad (left) in a statement.

He stressed that both Putrajaya and Kuching must now disclose their role and the extent of what he termed an "illegal" public relations campaign.

"What is in dispute here is not the practice of hiring media advisory or public affairs firms, but rather these firms' use of paid content to unwarrantedly bolster the image of certain governments at the expense of objective reporting," he added.

While Putrajaya has reportedly terminated its contract with public relations firm and production company FBC media limited of Britain, following an expose by Sarawak Report, neither Putrajaya nor Kuching has denied or admitted to the allegations.

The expose alleged that both Putrajaya and the Sarawak government were alleged to have paid FBC hundreds of millions of ringgit for strategic communications services and the production of friendly content for their governments.

'Contravenes media laws and ethics'

"Something is clearly in contravention of fundamental media laws and ethics," reminded Nik Nazmi.

The broadcast of programmes produced by FBC, while under the Putrajaya and Kuching payroll, may be against guidelines on conflict of interest for broadcasters, which excludes producers with inappropriate outside interests that undermine the integrity and impartiality of the content.

The controversy was first highlighted by Sarawak Report, a portal founded by journalist Clare Rewcastle-Brown (left), who is the sister-in-law of former British prime minister Gordon Brown.

It claimed that FBC was paid millions of ringgit by BN politicians to glam up their image overseas.

This was verified by the entries in the government's Supplementary Budget 2010 which showed that FBC was allocated RM28.35 million for work on a 'Global Strategic Communications Campaign' ordered in 2009. The company had received RM29.34 million the previous year.

Documents filed with the US House of Representatives in 2008 also showed that FBC contracted the Washington-based American lobbying company Apco Worldwide.

It had paid more than US\$80,000 in 2008 for the purpose of 'raising awareness of the importance of policies in Malaysia that are pro-business and pro-investment as well as [showing] the significance of reform and anti-terrorism efforts in that country'.

Following the expose, media establishments such as the BBC and CNBC have suspended all programming commissioned from the company pending investigations.

Britain's communications regulator, the Office of Communications, is also looking into claims of bias and impropriety in FBC programmes.

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