

Inside job? How PKR got information on NFC

MalaysiaKini.com

February 9, 2012

Aidila Razak and Salhan K Ahmad

Months since the scandal broke out, PKR has yet to slow down on its rate of exposes. Only yesterday, it revealed that the owners of NFC are also owners of two more luxury condominiums in Singapore, falling just short of saying the properties were paid for with NFC funds.

How do they do it? Who are the people feeding PKR with all the information? Director of strategy Rafizi Ramli talked to Malaysiakini in an interview last week.

The relevant sections of the interview transcript are as follows. Content has been edited for clarity and language. This is the second of a three-part interview.

How did PKR get the information on NFC?

This is the beauty of NFC. Perhaps never before did we realise the importance of whistleblowers. We started off not knowing anything, I have to admit that.

All we had were public documents available through public searches and our two objections initially was the fact that it was given to a company owned by a minister's family, with no background in the industry. Number two, they did not meet the target despite having two or three years.

No details. All the juicy exposes, we didn't have it. We were quite persistent and out of the blue, you started getting more and more information just through email, or sometimes people just drop a piece of paper.

Such information is just general. Sometimes they're just numbers, sometimes just rumours. If you search on the Internet, there are a lot of rumours on NFC, where they had their properties, etc. It was really based on this.

Then we had to do the other 50 percent corroborative work. We really had to track down where the properties were and confirm they are their property.

In the case of Singapore, it is quite easy. You can do a search with the authorities. Just that.

But I did have a PDF copy of the cash payouts which is from a whistleblower, whom I still don't know to this day.

How do you know it is genuine?

That's why as I said 50 percent of the work is on our part. You take the cashbook. You see some money coming in and going out and that could be corroborated. In the case of the loan, for example, that can be corroborated with their financial statements filed with ROC (Registrar of Companies).

Likewise, from those cash payments, we saw four payments to Banda Raya Developments Berhad. It was a mistake (for them) as they actually put down 'One Menerung' there. We just went there and started asking around, and a lot of people would just say, "Yeah, Shahrizat has one condo here." You ask people in Umno and they say it is an open secret.

So another 15-20 percent of it is actually our gut feeling and the risk that we took.

We took the risk when we came forward to say we have evidence. Because if you want to have complete

documents, I don't think you will ever get everything.

But as you keep doing exposes, one after the other, there was no objection. In fact (NFC) admitted some of the things. I think that really confirmed that the cashbook that the whistleblower gave to us is genuine.

After that, it was just a question of picking out big items. The ones we can corroborate, we'll expose. If we don't have second or third documentary evidence, then we can't do anything about it.

Where did you get the cashbook? Was it before or after the Auditor-General's Report?

It was all after. Chronologically, we have been speaking about NFC even since 2010 but it never caught fire. It was always a question of (taking) RM250 million and giving it to a minister's family.

When the Auditor-General's Report came out this year, true enough, they didn't specifically mention misappropriation by NFC but it confirmed that it did not meet its target. That I admitted.

The next day, Public Accounts Committee chairperson Azmi Khalid said PAC will look at this. So we panicked. I have to tell you. We were like, "Okay, if they call us, and we don't have anything. It will look really bad on us." That's when I said: "Okay lah, the least we could do was to go down and check on the farm site."

I went, undercover. They're upset about this because I went there under the guise of being a rancher wanting to buy cows. We interviewed people working there and realised they only have at the time 1,000-plus cows. At that time, it was only a question of target.

The next day, Datuk Seri Noh Omar in Parliament announced that it was a success by achieving about 8,000-plus cattle in three years. So again we were panicking, as we had to challenge (that).

We did some searches and found this document from the Veterinary Department on the (project's) target. It was after we challenged Noh Omar's assertion that the target was met that people started to come forward. So that was the turning point.

If Noh Omar (left) hadn't gone to Parliament and said that 8,000-plus cattle was a national success, it could have died there.

The rest is followed through from there and we still get pointers. Please check over here, please check over there, but I don't have a PI (private investigation) agency so I can't do all this.

So it's a bit of theatrics as well. When you actually came out with it, it sounded like you had a whole dossier of documents to prove it.

As I say, it's gut feeling. When we said dossier of documents, by then we accumulated some. By then we were quite convinced. By the time we did the first expose that they received RM250 million, we already knew about 'One Menerung' and we were already tracking the Singapore condominium. So we had documents but not inside documents.

We had company searches, we knew the kind of companies they already had in Singapore and so on. We had a few pointers about how much money was transferred to all the other companies. It was right to say we had a dossier of documents but it didn't come from the inside, it was accumulated by our own work.

How about the talk about the condominiums? When did that emerge?

We knew (about them) purely from the cashbook. After Noh Omar's (assertions of project success), I received the cashbook. I glanced through it quickly... and tried to pick up payments that did not fall into place. Payments for condominiums, and to high-end property developers certainly did not... make sense

with a company of that sort.

We only knew this when we had the cashbook but we went down (to check). I think we took two or three weeks after the first press conference to expose it.

Frankly speaking... we had to judge the mood and our own comfort level with whether we were to go all the way or not. I was hoping that Shahrizat would come clean early on so we didn't have to go through this, because it was exhausting on both sides.

We had to run around like a PI and I didn't know how long we could do that. But she did not respond and when there was no response from them, we just had to keep the pressure up. And we kept taking the risk. If we were just 70-80 percent confident of something, we expose it.

Besides the PDF copy of the cashbook, did the whistleblowers give you any more documents?

No, that's all. The rest was just corroborative work.

You mentioned that someone slipped you a piece of paper.

Yes, someone dropped a piece of paper which said a lot of things. For example, they bought houses there, they did this. But then again, a lot of (the information) when we did the follow-up... we were not confident.

The (cashbook is) the one document from inside NFC which I think is really, really genuine. That's why I released it. The rest may also be right but like I said, until we are 70-80 percent confident and we have seen other documents (to corroborate) and it made sense... otherwise we don't go near.

NFC says there are a couple of disgruntled former employees who could have leaked information to you. Were you in contact with them?

No, I don't think so. Could it be him? I don't know, cause the email is 'lembu'. I didn't go and check, who are you and so on.

Although I have a feeling it's not him or them because they were under scrutiny and surveillance. They have to face, by now, criminal charges. If it was them, it would be more details. If they were willing to take a risk to blow the whistle, I don't think they'd just give us one cashbook. I think they would have given us more.

People keep asking who are these people and so on. When you look at NFC, so many people went in and out. It's not necessarily true that they were operating smoothly in the last three or four years. There were a lot of contractors in, a lot of consultants in, the turnaround of the staff too at one point was quite high and anyone of this could have had the information.

We cannot discount civil servants either because NFC was under a viability study. They would have access to the cashbook because in order to ascertain the business viability they would have to look at the financial records. Most of the time people would have gone through cashbook, it's a good place to start.

Would there be more juicy things coming out?

There will be more, because as I say things keep coming up and we try our best to follow up.

Again, all these anonymous emails coming in. I was informed that NFC are doing lots of things behind the scenes to shuffle assets to cover their tracks. There could be transfer of assets, there could be corporate restructuring.

NONEI don't think they bother any more about opposition supporters or those who have made up their

minds about NFC. They are quite concerned about their own supporters (in) Umno now.

So I think they want to make sure that everything is in order so they can start a new media campaign and say, "Look, in terms of structure (we) are all accountable to the government, (we) are not private companies, etc".

So it's not like they are lying idle. They are doing lots of things. So when these things are happening now, people are coming with a lot of tip-offs. Some (of the tip-offs) point to certain things we feel is worth sharing with the public, but it's a question of timing.

Sometimes it is about how fast we can make sure the information is genuine.

You will continue doing this despite the lawsuit?

So many people called to asked if I received the papers. Have the lawyers for Shahrizat served the summon papers? I have not (received them) so until you receive the papers, as far I'm concerned we'll continue.

Even if I receive the papers, and (Shahrizat) asks for a court injunction, we'll still have to go to court and it will take some time. So I think we'll continue with exposes as we go along.

Until the court tells you to stop?

Until the court tells me to stop, but even if they do, there are always other people who can speak. It doesn't have to be just me. I don't think it is going to have an impact on the rate we are doing things.

I think it's luck more than anything. But I think this is what is most interesting about all this. Put aside the jokes about 'lembu' (cow) and so on. I think people come forward more readily, and offer information more readily. So far all the exposes that we have done prove the information is genuine, but (the whistleblowers) will remain anonymous.

So I think there is some kind of culture forming up in Malaysia, which is a good thing. NFC is a great reminder to anyone in public office or government departments that they cannot hide things any more.

There are suggestions that the people behind the tip-offs are the disgruntled beef cartel.

(Laughs) I wish. (Laughs) I mean, no, I wish NGOs could raise money and pay PIs to do this investigative work. But no.

There are certain things I cannot disclose here, and I know the police and MACC are investigating on all angles. And NFC are hell-bent to find out who are the whistleblowers because they don't want any more exposes.

But the way the emails are written tells me it is neither the cartel (laughs) nor disgruntled employees. But I think it's best I keep it to myself.

This story about the beef cartel is taking a very ugly turn. Instead of answering the real issue of misappropriation of funds, Umno - and Umno cannot wash its hands on this because the (claims come from) their blogs - through the publications of people associated with them, who openly accuse this as another racial issue.

Supposedly a beef cartel controlled by non-Malays is trying to sabotage a Malay set-up. I don't think on the ground people are really concerned (about this).

The ones who are really angry, I don't think is the beef cartel. It is actually the Malay smallholders who know how hard it is to get assistance from the government. And suddenly you give (NFC) RM250 million.

They have attempted to do their level best to turn this into a racial issue, just like any other things, but fortunately I don't think it is gaining ground.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/188604>