

Taib's suit affects public's right to know
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The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) is concerned that the Chief Minister of the largest state in Malaysia, Abdul Taib Mahmud is suing online news site Malaysiakini, and two opposition leaders from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) for defamation.

The Sarawak Chief Minister has alleged that he was defamed by the series of articles alleging corrupt practices in the timber trade involving his family members in the state, which was published by Malaysiakini and distributed by PKR to the public.

Malaysiakini and the two PKR leaders, state chief Wan Zainal Wan Sanusi and Stampin branch chief See Chee How were served a writ of summons of the suit on May 31. Abdul Taib Mahmud also indicated an intention to sue the Malay-language daily Utusan Malaysia over publication of a related article.

CIJ notes with regret that the suit will send a chilling effect across all media and jeopardise their duty to report issues of public interest. As a public figure, the Chief Minister should be accountable to his electorate and ready for media scrutiny. The defamation suit also harms the Chief Minister's credibility by sending the message that he discourages accountability and that critics must be silenced.

In order to protect journalists and the public's right to know, CIJ recommends amendments to the defamation law to respect the following:

- * Public officials should not benefit from special protection under the defamation law
- * Public bodies should not be able to bring defamation suits
- * No one should be held liable in defamation for statements which are true
- * Protection must be accorded to reportage of public interest based on facts available at the time
- * If the journalist has followed professional standards with regard to 'reasonable publication' he/she should not be liable

We also urge the Chief Minister to withdraw his suits against the press and answer to the public the questions raised in the articles.

The writer is executive director, CIJ.

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