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Malaysian Editor Says Najib Curbed Press

BY TOM WRIGHT

A senior Malaysian journalist who quit his job at a leading newspaper said Prime Minister Najib Razak's government has cracked down on freedom of speech as it tries to limit the fallout from a graft scandal surrounding a state investment fund.

Mustapha Kamil, the former group editor of the English-language *New Straits Times*, which is controlled by Mr. Najib's ruling party, took a rare public stance by saying an increasingly authoritarian stand by the government toward media was the reason he quit the newspaper in April. He had worked there for more than 25 years.

Mr. Mustapha initially remained quiet after stepping down, but last week posted the reasons for his action on his Facebook page—an unusual act in the closed world of Malaysian state media.

A journalist's responsibility is "first to the truth," Mr. Mustapha wrote.

Investigators in at least seven countries are probing **1Malaysia Development Bhd.**, or 1MDB, a government invest-

ment fund Mr. Najib set up in 2009 to boost growth. Some investigators have said they believe \$6 billion has disappeared.

Hundreds of millions of dollars originating from 1MDB allegedly moved into Mr. Najib's private accounts via a web of offshore entities, and was spent on politics, jewelry and clothes, *The Wall Street Journal* has reported, citing investigators and bank-transfer documents.

Mr. Najib's government has banned newspapers it controls—which include the *New Straits Times* and the larger-circulation Malay-language *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* newspapers—from covering the 1MDB story, Mr. Mustapha said in an interview.

News releases from 1MDB denying stories in the *Journal* and calling into question its sources would sometimes come to the *New Straits Times* from the prime minister's office with orders to run the statements in their entirety, Mr. Mustapha said. The newspaper did as it was told.

"There are specific instructions to use this or that story, and we're not allowed to ques-



Mustapha Kamil

tion," he said. "Before 1MDB, there was more freedom for us to do our job."

Mr. Najib and the 1MDB fund didn't respond to questions about whether the government pressured media over coverage of the scandal. In the past, Malaysia's government has justified curbing media freedom to report on 1MDB, citing the need to maintain public order.

The prime minister has said the money he received in his account was a political donation

from Saudi Arabia, and most of it was returned. 1MDB has denied wrongdoing and says it is cooperating with the probes.

Mr. Mustapha acknowledged that the *New Straits Times*, which is controlled by Media Prima Bhd., a company owned by Mr. Najib's ruling United Malays National Organization, always faced some curbs on free expression.

Those limits, though, have narrowed considerably in the past year since Mr. Najib began to fight allegations about taking money from 1MDB, he added.

"It was not this frequent and not this authoritarian," Mr. Mustapha said of previous media controls.

James Chin, a Malaysian academic who heads the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania, disagrees that the level of pressure on state-run media from the government has increased under Mr. Najib. He said the government of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad regularly closed newspapers.

But the 1MDB scandal has rolled on for so long—hurting the ruling party's image—that it is starting to cause fissures

between Mr. Najib and editors from newspapers that should support him, Mr. Chin said.

Some independent news outlets, like the Edge Media Group, have also faced pressure from Mr. Najib's administration after reporting critically about the 1MDB scandal. Last year, the government said it suspended *The Edge Weekly* and *The Edge Financial Daily* for two months because of the company's reporting on the scandal. *The Malaysian Insider*, another online news site owned by the Edge group, said it was blocked by the government in March and decided to shut down amid falling advertising revenue.

Mr. Najib's administration has cracked down on criticism of 1MDB in other ways. Last year, a former ruling-party politician was arrested on charges of economic sabotage after he called for an investigation into 1MDB. He was later released on bail.

Mr. Mustapha said on Facebook that the Pulitzer Prize committee's decision in April to cite *The Wall Street Journal* as a finalist in international reporting for its coverage of 1MDB was a factor in his decision.

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MUSTAPHA KAMIL