

Branding guru calls Najib's PR efforts an 'absolute scam'
The Malaysian Insider
September 21, 2011
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 21 — The creator of the nation branding concept has called the prime minister's use of British publicity firm FBC Media to burnish Malaysia's image abroad an "absolute scam" and a waste of public funds.

Simon Anholt, who pioneered the use of nation branding as a way to measure, build and manage a country's reputation, said that while public relations was needed in the private sector, it was "highly suspect" that a country could up its standing using the same means.

"There's a great deal of evidence around us to show what a waste of taxpayers' money this is," he told BFM Radio in a phone interview this morning.

"First of all, the countries that tend to spend most money on these PR campaigns to fix their image tend to be the rogue nations.

"If you look at the countries that have spent the most money on ambitious PR campaigns, they're the places that are most despised and it hasn't done anything to fix their image at all."

Anholt pointed out that media studies has known for decades that the media cannot change people's perception of a country from worse to better or vice versa but could only raise the profile of its existing image.

For this reason, he said "the last thing" a country with a bad image should do is engage in public relations as increased media coverage would only remind the rest of the world what a "problematic" country or government it was.

"So I'm afraid I think the whole thing is an absolute scam and a shocking and indefensible waste of taxpayers' money," he said.

Anholt stressed that governments needed to understand that when they engaged in foreign policy, economic development or international relations, they risked damaging the reputation of their country, which was worth "much, much, much more" than all other tangible assets combined.

It was the "sacred responsibility" of governments today to ensure their country's good name was preserved and handed down in the same condition, if not better, he said.

Anholt added that countries could only make themselves more relevant to the rest of the world by becoming more useful, and suggested Malaysia tackle shared global issues like climate change, women's rights, terrorism and financial instability to improve its reputation.

"And then I absolutely guarantee that if you do that and you do it well and you do it consistently over a number of years... you will find that you will become a much more widely recognised and more widely appreciated country," he said.

“That’s how reputation is earned. I’m afraid there aren’t any shortcuts to it.”

Last month, Putrajaya was forced to end its contract with FBC Media after an embarrassing exposé revealed that Malaysian leaders routinely appeared in paid-for interviews on global television programmes.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has since engaged the services of a new group of political strategists — including members of the team behind Tony Blair’s “New Labour” — to reinvent the first-term premier as a moderate reformist in preparation for possible snap polls next year.

Najib’s new team of advisers is just the latest in his administration’s penchant for foreign public relations firms.

APCO’s time in Malaysia was marked by controversy after the opposition alleged the public relations firm was linked to Israel.

The Malaysian Insider

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