

Does 1MDB boss like tai chi?

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Many a question has been asked about 1Malaysia Development Bhd or 1MDB and few direct answers have been forthcoming. But maybe this is normal and the controversial company is simply misunderstood by the public at large, who may be overlooking its tremendous progress over the past six months.

Say what you will about that controversial company 1Malaysia Development Bhd or 1MDB, but it has come a long way in the past six months or so. Doubt me? Consider one area where they have grown by leaps and bounds: media engagement.

In this respect Malaysians have been fortunate enough to witness the growth of 1MDB, a journey not too different from that of a baby learning to talk.

At first, a baby doesn't talk — it just cries when it feels pain or discomfort. After some time it begins to realise the noises from the giant slaves at its command aren't random at all and instead are part of a complex communication system called language.

Then the baby starts to make its own noises to respond. It mimics whatever is said to it, though incoherently. Eventually noises gives way to syllables and then full words. Before you know it, the baby is grown up and wants in on your will.

And this similarity from what we have seen with 1MDB is also why we may be placing too high an expectation on the company. In doing so we have not given credit to the exceptional progress it had made in engaging the media and the public at large over the past six months.

Of myths and legends

To the average Malaysian news reporter, 1MDB's media relations team used to be what the Loch Ness monster is to the Scots: the stuff of legend.

They never answer anything you ask them. So much so you sometimes wonder if they even have a media relations team — if there was one, they're obviously missing a crucial part of the job description. That or someone botched the writing of said job

description terribly. Like the underlying brilliance of 1MDB's investment strategy and the strategic part of its strategic development moves so far, this will likely be an eternal mystery.

In any case, it was baffling to the average Malaysian journalist because most of the time public relations people spam your inbox, call you incessantly and stalk you on WhatsApp to get some space in the newspaper. Although to be fair, it is their job to do so and their bosses have good reason to want publicity.

Public-listed companies want to boast about their margins last year. Businesses want customers to hear about their latest product and mortgage their homes to buy it. And government agencies want to remind people they exist and are doing things, albeit sometimes as ponderously as the iceberg that sank the Titanic.

Not 1MDB, though, apparently. You get a feeling they just wanted to be left alone. So it was tremendously heartening when Arul Kanda rode into the picture and started doing interviews left, right and centre.

A big-time important company like 1MDB going from a stone wall of silence to having a media-friendly boss? To the last man Malaysian business reporters died and went to heaven, though you probably didn't notice — it'd be awkward to put 'heaven' as the dateline.

(To-date however 1MDB had not spoken to KINIBIZ, which had been pursuing and reporting the company's trail of activities since 2013, in a face-to-face interview despite numerous requests.)

Why 1MDB needs time

Of course people remain disappointed despite this shift, though for a new reason. But this is simply due to overly high expectations, maybe.

The good thing is 1MDB's media relations team is no longer mythical, responding to queries and issuing statements every other day it feels like. So is the government these days, taking to Parliament and live television to talk about the company.

But direct answers to direct questions are still elusive, much like the Loch Ness monster. Where the company used to shut its ears and sing to itself in the face of questions, it now breaks out the tai-chi moves at every turn. Ask one simple thing and they'll ramble on about a minor point.

Some examples:

Question: Why is 1MDB scrambling for cash to repay loans? Official account statements say it has billions in cash lying around somewhere. You have so much in assets, you say, so where is the income they are supposed to generate?

Answer: Oh, 1MDB's assets value exceed its liabilities. Now go away.

Question: Hey, come explain why you invested money in these places where the return is so much lower than the interest rates for the money in the first place.

Answer: Oh, our famous big-time auditors signed off our accounts without any qualification, i.e. they say no problem with our accounts. Now go away.

Question: So prime minister's written approval needed for Terengganu Investment Authority (TIA)'s every move. Is this still true now that TIA has morphed into 1MDB?

Answer: You know that document you read that clause on? It's been publicly accessible record for a few ringgit per printed page for years so don't say it's "leaked". Wasn't under Official Secrets Act or anything, you know. Now go away.

Maybe the important point to consider is 1MDB is relatively new, just born in 2009. It's practically a baby in company years. And the way it has engaged the media so far reflects how it still needs time to fine-tune its grasp on talking and speech.

After all babies takes time to learn how to do things adults take for granted. What baby is born able to talk coherently, independently manage the logistics of transporting food into its mouth and flush the toilet straight out of the womb?

The one exception may be North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un, who [claims to have invented the burger](#) among other things, but that is beside the point.

For 1MDB, clearly in the past six months it has rapidly advanced to the mimicry and random syllables stage, speaking in baby terms. In time it will learn to respond properly to questions from the adults who love and care for it.

In the meantime all we can do is keep calm, keep talking to it and change its diapers frequently. Until, of course, it decides to grow up overnight and start giving simple, straight answers to simple, straight questions.

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