

Sarawak Report founder not rattled by threats following 1MDB reports

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By Elizabeth Zachariah

Clare Rewcastle-Brown is not one to be easily intimidated. Despite receiving death threats and warnings to stop her exposes, the founder and editor of whistleblower site Sarawak Report said she will not be cowed.

Rewcastle-Brown, however, said that she now has to think twice about which countries would be safe to visit and which are not.

"The main threat at the moment seems to be Malaysian government ministers who are dreaming up excuses to arrest me around the world and extradite me to 'face justice' in Malaysia'," she told The Malaysian Insider in an exclusive interview.

"It has made me think twice about where would be safe to visit and where not.

"After all, there are some countries where certain authorities seem to be able to be bought into detaining and harassing innocent people and I do not think certain Malaysians are above hiring such services."

But, the 55-year-old feels that her best protection would be to continue to be open and "have nothing to hide".

"I am in good health, so it would be pretty suspicious if I keeled over right now," she added.

Sarawak Report, which Rewcastle-Brown started five years ago, has been credited for its critical reports on debt-ridden state investment firm 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), leading to a multi-agency investigation into the company.

Rewcastle-Brown has also been accused of interfering in Malaysia's affairs, and attempting to "colonise" the country through Sarawak Report's exposes on scandal-ridden 1MDB.

She was also alleged to have tampered with 1MDB documents as part of a scheme to topple Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who is also finance minister and 1MDB's advisory board chairman.

The Sarawak Report website has also been blocked by Malaysian Internet regulators since a week ago, on grounds that its contents on 1MDB could destabilise the country, while Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said that Rewcastle-Brown may be extradited to Malaysia to face legal action for interfering in the country's sovereignty.

Rewcastle-Brown expressed dismay at being barred from entering her native Sarawak, which she described as being "beautiful and full of kind people".

"You always carry something of the place where you grew up and I feel a great affection for Sarawak and Sabah. I do feel aggrieved at being banned from Sarawak, but I also know there are many others who have to put up with similar injustices and I am lucky to have somewhere else to go and to be in a position to say something about it."

Below are excerpts from the interview:

Q. What was your childhood in Sarawak like? What do you remember about it?

Very happy – strong memories of a beautiful country and kind people. Went to school in KK (Kota Kinabalu) and climbed Mt Kinabalu aged 8 years old in flip flops! Lots of tree climbing, time at the beach etc.

You went back to the UK when you were 8 years old and have been there since. Do you ever see yourself as being part Sarawakian at least?

You always carry something of the place where you grew up and I feel a great affection for Sarawak and Sabah. I went back to school in the UK, but our family was very international and worked in many places, which I would visit. My parents settled in Spain, but I headed to London, where I have lived and worked since.

How do you feel that you have been barred from entering your home state?

I do feel aggrieved at being banned from Sarawak, but I also know there are very many others who have to put up with similar injustices and that I am lucky to have somewhere else to go and to be in a position to say something about it.

Would you say that you grew up in a privileged environment? If yes/no, can you explain?

A kid with food on their plate and a good school to go to is privileged compared with very many others and I had both. We were far from rich, but I had the advantage of a family who moved around in their work, so I got the chance to go to different places in the world and meet different people. No luxuries though and I had to make my own entertainment a lot of the time as a kid – usually through books.

What was the idea behind the setting up of Sarawak Report?

I wanted to put my energy into something I felt was important and neglected and which I cared about. The Borneo jungle has largely been destroyed by greed and arrogance, but we don't want it forgotten or what happened to be unrecorded.

The people who suffered as a consequence deserve justice and if we can retain some

of what is left of one of the world's most important areas of natural heritage and the most bio-diverse environment on the planet it would be a job well worth doing for everyone. That was my motive – doing something is always better than doing nothing.

Why are you doing what you do?

I had a bit of time as I had given up my full-time work when my children reached school age. As they got older, there was a window for me to look at this situation that had always concerned me in Sabah/Sarawak.

I got a chance to get stuck back in when I visited an environment conference in 2006. I don't think I anticipated quite the level of commitment it eventually turned into, but I have a tendency not to do things by halves.

Are your family members supportive of what you do?

Thankfully, yes, they are very supportive under the circumstances, if a bit bemused. But, they have had to put up with rather a lot through the years. Radio Free Sarawak spent its first six months operating out of our dining room and in a London flat there is never much room to spare!

My boys say I turned into a bit of an “absent mum”, but being teenagers they can't kid me they didn't find that to be more of an advantage than the other way around! Also, as a journalist I could have earned quite a bit over the past five years one way or another, but this took up my time instead.

What made you take up the 1MDB issue?

I am always interested in a good expose that explains why things have gone so wrong in East Malaysia. I had already revealed a great deal in the way of similar scandals in Sarawak and Sabah, which had been completely ignored by (Datuk Seri) Najib Razak's federal government.

The Petrosaudi buy-out of UBG bank had caught my eye, like that of many others, because it was so shady and unconvincing. Jho Low (Low Taek Jho) was openly connected with that series of deals and increasingly his role at 1MDB was being revealed by other journalists as well as his staggering ostentation and wealth.

When I discovered during Christmas 2014 that The Wolf of Wall Street's US\$100 million production was being bankrolled by Riza Aziz (Najib's stepson) and his friendship with Jho Low in Hollywood the connections seemed interesting indeed.

I dug up information about Riza's multi-million dollar properties in New York and Beverly Hills and started asking questions. It led from there.

In the expose of 1MDB, what has been the scariest and the most exhilarating experience so far?

I try not to get scared unnecessarily about things. There have been lots of exhilarating moments journalistically – those times when that piece of the jigsaw falls into place at last and you know you have solid evidence for your story!

What do you do to unwind when you're not writing/investigating?

I like to do exercise and my husband and I like hill walking. We are off to Scotland for a couple of weeks soon, like most summers. It's very fresh up there and you can walk miles without bumping into a soul.

Would you visit Malaysia in the future?

I probably should check what the latest I have been accused of is! But, there are far, far more people who have been extremely generous and kind about what I am doing in the famous Malaysian way.

So, of course, I hope that things will get better and that my exposes will be eventually received as useful information by the powers that be. In which case I would love to go back and visit (just a small matter of removing me from the immigration blacklist!). – August 2, 2015.

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