

Malaysia's Anti-Opposition Bloggers
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By Our Correspondent

Does Kuala Lumpur have a home-grown version of China's '50-centers?'

Is Malaysia getting its own version of China's so-called 50-centers, the legions of Chinese bloggers who monitor websites and reply to criticism of the government for money?

Ahiruddin Attan, the Kuala Lumpur-based pro-government blogger who writes under the name "Rocky's Bru" says last September he pulled together friends to set up what he calls a small news portal called The Mole with the idea "to give certain balance to the reports of Malaysiakini, Malaysian Insider, Malaysia Today."

In Ahiruddin's view, "there are too many anti-establishment, anti-government sites in Malaysia."

The Malaysian Insider reported last year that the government had provided US\$10 million for the project. Other reports circulating in Malaysian political circles say the bloggers have been provided with US\$10 million by the United Malaysia National Organization, the country's biggest political party, and another US\$10 million from the Malaysian billionaire Syed Mokhtar al Bukhary to follow the proliferating anti-establishment news organizations that are thronging Malaysia and state the government's viewpoint.

But, Ahiruddin said in a telephone interview: "That US\$10 million is totally crap. There is no truth at all in it. We are really small." A former editor of a variety of UMNO publications including the Business Times, The Malay Mail and The Sunday Mail, he says he derives his current income from his continuing directorship at the Mail, a Kuala Lumpur-based daily tabloid. To reports that he had bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle with his new-found wealth, he snorted. The Harley, he said, is 12 years old.

Despite Ahiruddin's denials, other sources insist that at least 10 to 15 people are involved in the effort, with government support.

Because all of Malaysia's mainstream media, including newspapers and television, are owned by its ruling political parties the country has generated perhaps the most vociferous opposition Internet news portals in the region, with some, including Malaysiakini and the Malaysian Insider, providing professional coverage of the government.

Although government officials grit their teeth over what the news portals publish, they have adhered to a pledge made by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to leave the Internet censorship-free. Mahathir made the pledge in 1995 to promote the international development of his multi-media Super Corridor, which was designed to attract high-tech industry across the globe. In 1998, the government allowed Malaysiakini to begin operations.

The result, along with the proliferation of news sites, most of them anti-government, has been an explosion of readers who gather their news from the Internet. According to Freedom House, a whopping 55 percent of Malaysians had access to the Internet in 2011. And, the NGO said: "In the watershed elections of March 2008, the ruling National Front coalition lost its two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969. In addition, opposition parties won control of five of the country's 13 states, including those with relatively high Internet penetration rates...Together with the growing popularity of independent online news outlets, the use of the Internet for political mobilization was widely perceived as contributing to the opposition's electoral gains."

"Any blog that is registered, we will pick up their story automatically, we only pick up some stories to follow up, to do follow-through," Ahiruddin said. "Talk about a blog war room is totally crap."

The so-called "50-cent party" arose in China in 2005 when Nanjing University officials hired students to search bulletin boards for undesirable information and counter it with comments friendly to the Communist Party. The price for each entry was said to be half a yuan (0.8 US cents) although varying prices have been paid by different Chinese organizations.

The result has been a deluge of comments, not only on Chinese bulletin boards but almost any Internet publication across the globe that contains stories about China. Any even-mildly negative story about China on the pages of Asia Sentinel is certain to generate swift and angry replies charging a pro-US bias, calling attention to the once-dominant history of western colonizers in China and decrying US interference in international affairs.

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