

Old fear, new courage to speak out

Ng Tze Yeng, originally published 25 April 2006 in [The Sun](#)

IT was 1987. I knew something big and scary called "Operation Lallang" was happening, but I didn't understand why. I knew that I didn't have my favourite Garfield comic strip because The Star newspaper was shut down. A "hush" was in the air, something else became ingrained.

I think it was then that the habit of obediently, unquestioningly, keeping quiet on issues of government and social justice was inculcated in me. The act of questioning and speaking out meant running the risk of being charged in court; or worse, being hauled away. It didn't help that laws like the Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act, and the Sedition Act could be, and were in my opinion, invoked and enforced without much attention to justice and fair-play.

It seemed to me that what constituted law, and what was enforceable, depended on narrow interests, not on the foundations of democratic society which are: freedom of expression; freedom of religion and the right to assemble. This generalised fear, rational or irrational, demanded obedience - better to keep quiet and be safe than to speak up, and be sorry.

Ironically, in my obedience to be "safe", I re-engaged with issues of social justice and governance through the lecturers and students at the School of Oriental and African Studies. As they shared their work and perspectives in areas ranging from development to gender, an "awakening" happened: the old fears of speaking out gradually diminished as I realised that there is another world out there where we can all make positive changes. Through them, I understood that the role of the government is to serve the public interest; and laws, by-laws and policies should be debated, enacted and enforced on the basis of what the people want and agree to. To attain that, dialogue and debate are needed, which inevitably means people need to speak up. Inspired and feeling alive, I was raring to go.

Upon my return to Malaysia however, my courage was dampened as old fears resurfaced and reasserted themselves and I continued with apathetic existence. It was by chance, or destiny, that I was put in touch with the All Women's Action Society (Awam). Meeting and learning about the journeys of courageous, intelligent and articulate women in the organisation gave me the much needed "home" in which to root my thoughts and activism.

I was very lucky as well that I had, and still have, Awam members patiently guiding me as I grapple with feminism and activism. I think it was through their support and encouragement that I finally spoke out in a published "letter to the editor" in which I expressed my disgust at MAS's discriminatory employment practices against women. I remember the exhilaration of having my voice heard in public, and the astonishment that my views were taken into account. I had finally spoken out.

I have been engaging in issues of social justice ever since, but I do admit though that I still harbour this inexplicable fear when I speak out: either in casual conversation with friends and family; writing letters of protest; signing petitions; participating in marches, or even attending talks.

But I try to calm my fears by drawing strength from what's happening around me. Such as when judges make independent decisions as when the Attorney General's chambers were ordered to provide reasons why it rejected the Party Sosialis Malaysia's application for registration in the interest of national security; seeing civil society and the Bar Council's tenacity in the call for setting up the Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC); the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality's relentless work to legislate a sexual harassment bill and to amend the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories Amendment 2005) (IFL); and residents of Broga and Semenyih protesting against the incinerator project.

I am strengthened in my conviction of the need to work towards transparent, accountable and efficient governance despite my fears when I read about a minister threatening to invoke the Sedition Act against non-Muslims for contributing their opinions to "Muslim issues"; or about the local councils' refusal to allow their accounts to be viewed by the people they serve; about efforts to unilaterally enforce one's standards of morality on others; and insistence on dress codes and interpretation of laws that deny the freedom of religion.

More importantly, I draw strength in knowing that there are many women and men before me who did, and may have been punished for doing, but yet are still doing, what is integral to claiming their rights and in turn, ours as citizens and as human beings. There is something inherently wrong when people live in constant fear of expressing their thoughts and claiming their rights in how their lives should be governed.

Oops. Was I being seditious? But I'm merely following our ex-prime minister's example of speaking out.

The writer is a feminist who's becoming less jaded as she grows older. She's really older than she looks.