

## **Rumbling in my belly**

*Ng Tze Yeng, originally published 23 August 2006 in [The Sun](#)*

My old friend fear paid me a visit over the last few weeks. After reading about the success of the Article 11 forum in Johor Baru, despite the omnipresent threat of violence, I thought we were finally on the right track in moving towards a transparent, accountable and civil society.

We're capable of holding open and intelligent public discussions! Then it hit.

First was the directive from Pak Lah to stop all public discussions on religiously sensitive issues. Then came the information minister's warning to the media on reporting "sensitive" issues of race and religion.

Finally, more erosion on the freedom of expression came with a warning to bloggers.

The general irrational atmosphere of fear came creeping back. So when I got a chance to take a much-needed break from this reality, and to treat the sick churning feeling in my belly, I took it.

I was ecstatic, to say the least, when an e-mail titled "Yes, Broga incinerator project off: Ministry" greeted me when I tuned back on. It finally happened, things do change for the better! The Broga incinerator was a RM1.5 billion project that purported to process the daily 1,500 tonnes of waste from the Klang Valley. Initially planned to be in Puchong, it was relocated to Broga in 2002 after residents in Puchong mounted a protest, which included threats to unseat the ruling government MP in the upcoming elections.

The residents of Broga, too, mounted a protest, citing it as a threat to the environment and to public health. The residents also challenged the claims made by the government that the technology and planned location of the incinerator was safe. Environmental issues were of utmost concern because it was violating the Environmental Impact Assessment's (EIA) recommendation: being too near the mostly residential farming community and the Semenyih water catchments that provide water to the Klang Valley.

The campaign to demand accurate information on the project soon evolved into taking the government to court. Mobilising the local community and concerned citizens, petitions, talks, press conferences were actions Broga residents took to claim their rights. Actions no one thought a sleepy village would take.

Despite the lack of official media space given to the issue, the story of Broga incinerator got out through the independent media. Soon, other splinter groups started to mobilise; a documentary titled *Alice Lives Here* made by a group of courageous young women told the story of their struggle. The ripple effect took shape in petitions signed at international conferences; a letter-writing campaign to the government, the press and stakeholders - especially the University of Nottingham; copies of the documentary were distributed informing the unknowing. So after four years, and a fascinating journey of citizens' mobilisation, the project is scrapped. In theory.

In theory ... because despite the Housing and Local Government Ministry's confirmation reported on the Internet media that a termination notice to the project contractors (Japan's Ebara Corporation and Malaysian company Harta Summa), there has yet to be an official announcement in the mainstream media. Pessimism leads me to finish the story this way: Denials on the status of the project will be made; warnings to the media; the accuracy and credibility of online news will yet again be scrutinised, citing the need for current laws to be tightened.

The government's capability to see through promised projects will be brought back yet again into the limelight and smatterings of debate in public. Perhaps?

However, optimism leads me to finish the story this way: The happy ending began when individuals started to find their voice, to use that voice and mobilise that capacity to effect social change for the better. Though the results might not be immediate - the happiest ending is knowing that the fire in the belly is still burning.

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