

# Countering opposition, generating doubt and mobilising support in rare earth metals-related environmental conflict in Malaysia: the persuasive discourse techniques of a transnational mining corporation and its supporters

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## Abstract

Persuasion, a vital element in commercial marketing, is also an essential tool for the winning and maintenance of political power. Corporations seek to persuade customers to purchase their products and services but may also need to influence wider public opinion and political decision-makers in ways that serve their interests. In this article, we present an account of environmental-related conflict in Malaysia and the use of persuasion in the discourse of an Australian transnational mining corporation and its supporters. We analyse the strategies used by the corporation as it engages in intense conflict with environmental campaigners and concerned residents following its moves to establish the world's largest rare earth metals extraction plant in peninsular Malaysia. Following the political ecology perspective, we note that the efforts at persuasion used by the corporation have been actively backed by the Malaysian state itself. This is not simply a case of environmental conflict but strongly connected to the underlying political economy of Malaysia - a country with an authoritarian regime where corruption and 'crony capitalism' are rife, and public opinion is often ignored or consistently manipulated by government-controlled mass media.

**Keywords:** environmental-related conflict, rare earth, persuasion techniques, Malaysia

## Résumé

Persuasion, un élément vital dans le marketing commercial, est donc l'outil indispensable pour la conquête et le maintien du pouvoir politique. Les sociétés cherchent à convaincre les clients d'acheter leurs produits et services. Mais ils ont aussi besoin d'influencer l'opinion publique plus large et les décideurs politiques pour servir leurs intérêts. Dans cet article, nous présentons un compte rendu des conflits environnementaux en Malaisie, et l'utilisation de la persuasion dans le discours d'une société transnationale minière australienne et ses partisans. Nous analysons les stratégies utilisées par la société dans la Malaisie péninsulaire comme il essaie d'établir le plus grand usine d'extraction de métaux des terres rares dans le monde. Il est en conflit avec les écologistes et les résidents concernés. En utilisant une approche de l'écologie politique, nous montrons comment les efforts de persuasion utilisés par la société ont été pris en charge par l'Etat malaisien. Il ne suffit pas d'un cas de conflit environnemental, mais fortement liée à l'économie politique de la Malaisie - un pays avec au régime autoritaire où la corruption et «capitalisme de copinage» sont très répandus, et l'opinion publique est souvent ignorée ou constamment manipulée par les médias de masse contrôlés par le gouvernement.

**Mots clés:** conflits environnementaux, minéraux de terres rares, les techniques de persuasion, la Malaisie

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## Resumen

La persuasión, un elemento vital en el marketing comercial, es también una herramienta esencial en la conquista y el mantenimiento del poder político. Las corporaciones tratan de convencer a los clientes de que compren sus productos y servicios, pero también pueden necesitar influir sobre la opinión pública en general y sobre los responsables políticos de manera que favorezca a sus intereses. En este artículo, presentamos un recuento de conflictos relacionados con el medio ambiente en Malasia y del uso de la persuasión en el discurso de una corporación transnacional minera australiana y de sus partidarios. Analizamos las estrategias utilizadas por esta empresa en sus relaciones, altamente conflictivas, con defensores del medio ambiente y con residentes preocupados por los pasos tomados por la empresa hacia el establecimiento en la península de Malasia de la mayor planta del mundo de extracción de metales de tierras raras. Tomando la perspectiva de la ecología política, observamos que los esfuerzos de persuasión utilizados por la corporación han encontrado el respaldo activo del estado malayo. Esto no es simplemente un caso de conflicto ambiental sino que está intensamente relacionado con la subyacente economía política de Malasia - un país con un régimen autoritario donde la corrupción y el "capitalismo de amigos" son moneda corriente, y donde a menudo los medios de comunicación controlados por el gobierno ignoran o manipulan la opinión pública.

**Palabras clave:** conflicto medioambiental, tierras raras, técnicas de persuasión, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

Persuasion, a vital element in commercial marketing, is also an essential tool for the winning and maintenance of political power. Corporations seek to persuade customers to purchase their products and services, but they may also need to influence wider public opinion and political decision-makers in ways that serve their interests. Persuasion can be employed in an attempt to prevent the questioning of these interests, or to diffuse organised opposition to these interests. Corporations typically have the financial resources to make use of public relations consultants and lobbyists and are able to make use of the mass media in an attempt to shape their versions of reality. Corporations may even engage in unethical or illegal behaviour vis-à-vis politicians and civil servants (especially in the developing world) in order to further their commercial interests, engaging in questionable financial transactions and bribery.

Almost a century ago, renowned American political science professor Harold Lasswell (1927: 627) defined persuasion through the use of propaganda as the "management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols", and the purpose for its purveyor as an attempt to " ... intensify the attitudes favorable to his purpose, to reverse the attitudes hostile to it, and to attract the indifferent, or, at the worst, to prevent them from assuming a hostile bent" (p.629). And in a similar vein, a more contemporary definition of persuasion using this method is that it is the

... deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (O'Donnell and Jowett 2005: 7)

De Crespigny (1968) identifies persuasion – which he described as the capacity of one person to influence another person's choices by the production of reasons – along with such devices as coercion and inducement in his taxonomy of political power. Edelman in his essay on the significance of political language reminds us that "...language is the key creator of the social worlds people experience" and he identifies that in politics "...the strategic need is to immobilize opposition and mobilize support" (Edelman 1985:10).

Michel Foucault's work has underpinned forms of discourse analysis, showing the connections between language and power, i.e. how power relationships in society are expressed through language and practices. Originally trained in psychology, Foucault also discussed 'power' in his wide-ranging writings:

Foucault understands power in terms of "strategies" which are produced through the concatenation of the power relations that exist throughout society, wherever people interact ..... these relations are a matter of people acting on one another to make other people act in turn. Whenever we try to influence others, this is power. However, our attempts to influence others rarely turn out the way we expect; ..... the social effects of our attempts to influence other people (often) run quite outside of our control or ken ..... For Foucault, apparently peaceful and civilized social arrangements are supported by people locked in a struggle for supremacy, which is eternally susceptible to change, via the force of that struggle itself. (Kelly no date)

It is important that individuals and community organizations wishing to participate in a policy process understand how persuasion is used by powerful interests if they wish to seek to present information and alternative views. In this article, we present an account of the use of persuasion in the discourse of an Australian transnational mining corporation and its supporters. We analyse the strategies of Lynas Corporation, which was engaged in intense conflict with environmental campaigners and concerned residents following its moves to establish the world's largest rare earth metals extraction plant at Gebeng, near the city of Kuantan on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

We note that this case is not simply one of straightforward environmental conflict but - following the political ecology approach - strongly connected to the underlying political economy of Malaysia. Malaysia is a country with an authoritarian regime where corruption and "crony capitalism" are rife, and public opinion is often ignored or consistently manipulated by government-controlled mass media (Gomez and Jomo 1997).

Following the political ecology perspective, we note that the benefits and costs of this project are highly likely to be distributed unequally. Soil containing rare earth metals is imported directly into the country, processed, and the wastes generated are 'stored' in Malaysia. Profits from the project go into private hands (and even the hands of a public sector regulatory agency through 'profit-sharing') but the environmental and other costs are borne by people living in the areas impacted by the plant. The efforts at persuasion - in the face of controversy - used by Lynas Corporation have been actively backed by the Malaysian state: the project was publicly supported by various government agencies, Ministers and even the Prime Minister Najib Razak himself (Zahiid 2012).

There is a notable philosophical aspect to the political ecology perspective – it differs from apolitical ecological studies by explicitly considering the politics of environmental issues and related phenomena; thus integrating ecological studies with issues studied by social scientists such as conflict, power differentials, and political mobilization (both domestic and international). Political ecologists also address ethical issues and justice, e.g. 'participatory justice', social justice (which social groups benefit and which social groups bear the costs) and inter-generational justice (Veteto and Lockyer 2015).

## 2. Methodology

Public statements by the company were identified beginning from July 2011, when the controversy first erupted. These were drawn from newspaper accounts and web-based company press releases and statements. The online newspapers include the *New Straits Times*, *Malaysian Insider* and *FMT News*. Online comments made by supporters of the project were also perused. Strategic themes in this material were identified and analysed using the framework developed by Pratkanis and Aronson (2001) in their study of tactics used in political propaganda. Pratkanis and Aronson are psychologists who specialise in the study of actual propaganda techniques employed in modern industrial society through the medium of mass communication technology (including in fields such as politics and business). Foucault's notion of unanticipated subsequent developments arising from political struggle and the exercise of power is also considered in our analysis.

Some primary analysis (i.e. interviews conducted face-to-face or via e-mail) was carried out but this was limited to environmental activists, concerned Kuantan residents and politicians critical of the project. Discourse analysis was carried out by identifying individual phrases from the material collected or perused, and assigning these to the categories of propaganda techniques described by Pratkanis and Aronson. More attention was paid to the techniques which were used more often (e.g. name-calling). The results section of this article focuses on propaganda techniques that were used more frequently by Lynas management and its supporters.

### 3. Background

Operational since early 2013, the world's largest rare earth extraction plant is being built over several phases in Malaysia. Construction began in the 2000s but was stalled by the global financial crisis, resuming when world rare earth prices rose in 2010 following export restrictions on Chinese supplies imposed from 2009, at which time international financing was offered to complete the plant (Bradsher 2011). Raw material for the plant (lanthanide concentrate) is shipped from its source at Mount Weld in Western Australia and processed in Gebeng near Kuantan, the capital of the state of Pahang, a city with a population of over 500,000 people (Figure 1). Some 22,000 tonnes per annum of rare earth metals are to be produced initially (Lynas Corporation Limited 2011a). By 2016, the main output was praseodymium/neodymium (NdPr).



Figure 1: Location of Kuantan in Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia)

This project is highly controversial in Malaysia. The corporation was first awarded a 'temporary operating license' (TOL) permitting the plant to operate at a reduced capacity for two years and subjecting its operations to terms and conditions, as well as monitoring by the Malaysian authorities. This TOL was especially contentious since previous applications by Lynas for an operating license were rejected at first by the AELB because of the absence of a satisfactory long term radioactive waste management plan that included a "permanent disposal facility" (SM Mohamed Idris 2012). Subsequently, it was awarded a Full Operating Stage License (FOSL) (Santiago 2012).

Previous experience with rare earth processing in Malaysia has not been favourable. A factory at Bukit Merah in the state of Perak, operated by Mitsubishi, was eventually closed in 1992 due to health problems experienced by its workers and local residents, and following strong local protest. Radioactive thorium hydroxide was detected, a byproduct from its processing of rare earths, and decontamination operations are still being carried out (Sahabat Alam Malaysia 2005). This has become a very expensive waste relocation and treatment operation.

Both the Lynas Corporation and the Pahang state government maintain that the Lynas Advanced Materials Plant (LAMP) does not pose a public health risk since it will emit low levels of radioactivity, and wastes from the extraction process can be disposed of safely. They say its raw material have very low levels of radioactive material compared to the Bukit Merah Mitsubishi plant. It is also argued that there are significant economic benefits for Malaysia from the plant (Curtis 2011). It should be noted that rare earth metals play an essential role in high technology manufacturing and are an important component of 'green' technology like electricity-generating wind turbines.

Moreover, proponents claim that some of the wastes generated can be made into synthetic gypsum for plaster board and cement, magnesium-rich gypsum fertilizer and carbon-enriched Mg (magnesium) gypsum fertilizer for rejuvenating acidic soils (Lynas Corporation 2011). The company maintains that residual wastes can either be "disposed safely in a secure municipal landfill" if the Department of the Environment deems them to be non-scheduled wastes or "disposed at a licensed facility" if classified as scheduled wastes (Lynas Corporation 2011). As of 2016, it appears synthetic gypsum applications are still not in production (Lynas Corporation 2016).

Critics are not persuaded by these arguments. They stressed that the substantial volumes of waste will include radioactive materials such as thorium and uranium, posing significant risks to public health and this could expose the public to unnecessary radiation (Santiago 2012). Since health risks relate to the 'dose-response relationship' (i.e. greater exposure to ionizing radiation will cause greater damage to the human body), exposure to radiation should be avoided whenever possible. Sceptics have challenged the corporation to produce a long term radioactive waste management plan as recommended by a consultancy team from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which was brought to Malaysia to investigate the proposals for the plant (Woon 2013).

In terms of the claimed economic benefits of the project, critics are also sceptical, arguing that these are tempered by the twelve year 'tax holiday' granted by the Malaysian Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI), making the economic benefits less attractive. They say the plant has limited labor requirements (approximately 350 workers, including unskilled ones), and it will negatively affect real estate values in the Kuantan area. Procedural irregularities in the approval process for the project have also been pointed out by critics (SM Mohamed Idris 2012).<sup>2</sup>

A further concern is the proximity of the plant to the Balok River which flows into the South China Sea. Given that the water table is near to the soil surface, and the area is susceptible to monsoonal flooding, radioactive wastes as well as the chemicals used in the extraction process could pollute nearby waters (Bacon 2012). This would have a negative effect on both the fishing and tourism industries, both of which are important to the local economy. For all these reasons, citizen resistance to the project remains ongoing and fierce.

For the corporation, it is imperative to "immobilise opposition and mobilise support" and the main ways to do this are through seeking to counter current and potential objections to its facility, while at the same time convincing the public about its claim that one of the benefits of the project will be its catalytic role in the establishment of a rare earth-based high technology industry in Malaysia. It seeks not only to influence public opinion in Malaysia but also international observers able to follow developments remotely. Of equal importance is ensuring that the governmental authorities (Pahang state government and the Malaysian federal government) are persuaded that the project is economically desirable and does not expose the population and environment to unacceptable levels of risk.

However, the strength of the political backlash and ferocity of resistance to the project from politicians representing the area and grass-roots groups, particularly in 2011-2012, took the corporation's upper management by surprise, and forced them to take action to counter this resistance. Such action included the use of 'persuasive discourse techniques' in the battle for public opinion. The rest of this article will critically discuss the techniques used by the corporation and its supporters.

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<sup>2</sup> Lynas claims 600 workers today (Lynas Corporation 2016).

#### 4. Persuasive discourse techniques used by the corporation and its supporters

##### *Name calling: attaching a negative label to opponents*

Neutral observers of the conflict between the pro-Lynas camp (Lynas Corporation and its supporters, henceforth labelled as the 'pro' camp) and the anti-Lynas camp (henceforth labelled as the 'anti' camp) would most probably view the controversy as one between a transnational corporation seeking to profit from high prices for rare earth metals, and residents of the Kuantan metropolitan area who are concerned about negative environmental, health, and economic effects.

However, it seems that some from the 'pro' camp have attempted to paint it as much more than this. The 'pro' camp include the Pahang state government; the Malaysian federal government and its Ministers such as those from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation; the Ministry of International Trade and Industry; the Ministry of Health; and government regulatory bodies such as the Atomic Energy Licensing Board. For example, those who oppose the project have been accused of being politically-motivated. In other words, they are accused of using the issue to gain political support through a "concerted political campaign" (Shukry 2012). This accusation has been thrown at Fuziah Salleh, the Opposition politician (and Member of Parliament for Kuantan, 2008-) who has been most prominent in giving her support to grassroots groups working against the plant such as SMSL (Save Malaysia, Stop Lynas), the Stop Lynas Coalition, and *Himpunan Hijau* (Green Gathering).

A related accusation is that the issue has been used to promote 'anti-government' feelings, i.e. animosity toward the Pahang state and Malaysian federal governments. The state government has approved the project and the federal government and its top political leaders have provided political support (Zahiid 2012). Both Pahang and Malaysia are ruled by the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, a coalition of conservative and ethnic-based political parties dominated by the United Malays National Organisation or UMNO). A more serious and divisive charge is the attempt by certain quarters to paint the 'anti' camp as being funded by foreigners, an accusation with treasonous connotations. This is divisive in the sense that Malaysia has a relatively large ethnic Chinese minority (about 25% of the total population) and the accusation (unproven) is that China is channelling funds to the 'anti' camp in Malaysia in order to stop production and thus prevent competition with Chinese rare earth companies.

Another negative label is that of 'anti-development' or 'Luddite', where people who oppose the plant are accused of standing in the way of economic progress and blocking Malaysia from moving upstream in terms of the development of a rare earth-based high technology industry. Proponents of the project argue that the technological spin-offs for Malaysia will be significant even if the plant is just restricted to extracting rare earth metals from imported raw materials (Syed Nadzir 2011).

##### *Glittering generalities: important-sounding words that have little or no real meaning*

In political debate and political propaganda, important-sounding words are often used to persuade fence-sitters that certain actions should be carried out. This is also the case in debate over economic development and the environment. For example, a high-ranking company executive claimed that the company will be a "global leader in rare earths for a *sustainable future*" (Lynas Corporation Limited 2011b). There is no further clarification of what the term "sustainable future" means in the context of the controversy. In the eyes of Kuantan residents associated with groups such as SMSL, the huge amount of toxic and radioactive wastes that will be produced by the project would be a grave threat to the future of the region in the first place!

To fend off criticisms of its lack of a Long Term Waste Management Plan and Permanent Disposal Facility or PDF, Lynas claims that it has plans to "recycle" and "re-use" its "by-products" or "residues", i.e. wastes. Their plans to process and incorporate wastes into products like plaster board, cement and fertilizer for sale to the public are unrealistic. Knowledgeable consumers are unlikely to knowingly purchase

products that contain radioactive material and be subjected to unnecessary radiation (Lynas Corporation 2011).

Lynas calls its project the Lynas *Advanced Materials* Plant (LAMP). It is important to note that 'rare earth metals' are particular kinds of metals used to make wind turbines or smart phones. It is incorrect to call rare earths 'advanced materials.'

*Transfer: attempt to transfer the prestige of a positive symbol to something else*

Earlier in the controversy, the Malaysian authorities invited a team of experts from the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) to come to the country in order to evaluate the project. The IAEA team visited in 2011 and recommended that the project be continued subjected to the conditions that there should be a Long Term Waste Management Plan and that a Permanent Disposal Facility (PDF) for the wastes should be built (IAEA 2011).

The 'pro' camp subsequently claimed that the IAEA has confirmed that "the design of the LAMP is compliant with international standards" while ignoring the IAEA recommendation to build a permanent disposal facility for waste disposal. They also downplayed an allegation of shoddy plant construction published in the *New York Times*, which reported on container vessels and pipework, and how "engineers said they felt a professional duty to voice their safety concerns" and "provided memos, e-mail messages and photos from Lynas and its contractors.... but insisted on anonymity to avoid the risk of becoming industry outcasts" (Bradsher 2011).

*False analogy: two things that are dissimilar are portrayed as being similar*

Defenders of the project claim that the level of radiation its wastes will emit is similar to background radiation, or to eating a banana. Even if this dubious claim is true – critics have pointed out that the piling up of wastes for "temporary storage" onsite will increase the level of radiation emitted – there is a vast difference between unavoidable exposure to radiation versus avoidable exposure to radiation; and voluntary exposure versus involuntary exposure to radiation.

Exposure to background radiation is unavoidable unless one moves away from the vicinity. Prolonged exposure to low level radiation is a threat to the health of vulnerable groups including children (Wakeford, Little and Kendall 2010). However, plant workers and especially the nearby residents of Gebeng will be involuntarily exposed to avoidable radiation. Critics also pointed out that dust containing radioactive material can be carried out by wind into the surrounding Kuantan metropolitan area and beyond (Cardosa 2011). It should be noted that the plant is built next to the Balok River which flows just a short distance into the South China Sea.

*Testimonial: getting prominent personalities to support a position*

One of the oldest and most commonly used strategies in political persuasion is to get prominent personalities or 'experts' to support or endorse one's position. The 'pro' camp, with the active assistance of the Malaysian authorities, has used this extensively. They mention a nuclear scientist (who is also a Member of Parliament from the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party or PAS) who supports the project. Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed has also given his support to the project (Mahathir Mohamad 2012).

The IAEA experts that were invited to go to Malaysia to evaluate the project did not include any medical or public health experts, environmental scientists or social scientists (IAEA 2011; Table III.1 Review Team pp. 50). Subsequently, the Malaysian authorities presented endorsements of the project from government-linked organisations such as the Academy of Sciences Malaysia. However, the politically-independent Malaysian Medical Association continues to oppose it (Cardosa 2011).

*Card-stacking: slanting a message by omitting key words or statistics that are unfavourable*

The corporation uses the euphemism "residues" to replace the more appropriate term "wastes." It also calls its on-site short term waste storage facility a "Residue Storage Facility" (Lynas Corporation 2011). Project supporters completely avoid mentioning the threat posed by uranium in the wastes and also the issue of the non-radioactive but toxic wastes that will be produced. They also ignore the fact that the production of 22,000 tonnes per annum of rare earth elements will result in huge amounts of wastes. It should be mentioned that at full capacity, the LAMP plant is ten times the size of the earlier rare earth plant built at Bukit Merah in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia which was closed down by court order after causing radiation-related morbidity and mortality among nearby residents (Sta Maria 2011).

Lynas has persistently mentioned the benefits of the project, particularly job creation (Yow 2011) while avoiding the negative externalities completely, i.e. negative impact on the beach tourism and fisheries industries that employ a lot of people in the Kuantan metropolitan area.

*Repetition of claims: keep on repeating a claim even when it has been shown to be completely untrue*

Another tactic used in political debate is to keep on repeating a claim even when it is untrue in the hope that this will generate doubt in the minds of less well-informed people. This is more likely to work if the person making the false claim has some standing in the eyes of the larger community. Members of the public who witness 'scientific experts' disagreeing on a particular topic may conclude that there is a lack of scientific consensus on the issue – unless they are aware that financial or professional conflicts of interest among 'scientific experts' may result in such a situation.

Some of the 'pro' camp continue to claim that the wastes are not radioactive, although radioactive material such as thorium and uranium are in the wastes. Lynas even submitted a document titled *Document 1: Radioactive Waste Management Plan* to the Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB), a regulatory agency of the Malaysian government. A related tactic is making the claim that the wastes will be less dangerous than the wastes produced by the earlier Bukit Merah rare earth plant which was closed down by court order (Sta Maria 2011).

One strong supporter of the project, a medical doctor by profession, even made the claim that the health threat from thorium in the waste is negligible. He has also been an outspoken critic of the anti-Lynas camp (Chan 2012). This is in spite of the easy availability of authoritative material from public health authorities such as the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (2007) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA) warning the public of the health hazards posed by radioactive material such as thorium dioxide and thorium.

*Disruptive counter-argument: sidestep an issue when one is unable to address it*

One of the authors of this article engaged in debate with a 'pro' camp writer over the safety of the project. When the 'pro' camp individual (an irregular columnist with the now defunct online publication *The Malaysian Insider*) was unable to refute the argument that a huge amount of wastes (including toxic wastes containing radioactive thorium and uranium) will be generated in the process of extracting up to 22,000 tonnes of rare earth elements per annum at the plant when it is in full operation, he claimed that it will only add 1% to the amount of scheduled wastes in Malaysia. He also conveniently ignored the fact that this huge amount of waste will be produced and very likely be stored (or even dumped) in one geographical region of Malaysia alone. In the political ecology literature, this is a matter of environmental justice (Temper, del Bene and Martinez-Alier 2015).

*Create cognitive dissonance in opponents: trying to make opponents feel psychologically uncomfortable*

Another tactic used by the 'pro' camp is to accuse 'anti' camp people of being hypocritical for their use of computer and communications equipment that contain rare earth elements (no author 2012). This



strategy is used to create 'cognitive dissonance' or feelings of psychological discomfort in 'anti' camp people.

The counter-argument of the 'anti' camp is that they have nothing against rare earth metals *per se* or the use of rare earths in the production of high technology equipment. In fact, the health risks posed by rare earth metals, although not negligible, are probably low (Hirano and Suzuki 1996). The real issue is why the corporation chose to build the plant to extract rare earth metals, and thus generate the huge quantity of waste, in Malaysia when the source of the raw material is Mount Weld in Western Australia. It would be more logical to process the raw material nearer the source and to store wastes in an unpopulated region of Western Australia. The suspicion is that Gebeng and the Kuantan metropolitan area will be used as a cheaper, permanent dump site for the wastes generated.

*Decoys: attempting to deflect criticism onto other parties*

'Pro' camp people make the claim (in comments posted online) that there are other plants in the Gebeng industrial park that are emitting toxins into the surrounding area too. Although this argument is technically correct from a public health point of view (since Gebeng is already a major site for industrial production in the Kuantan area, including petrochemical complexes), it can be viewed as simply an attempt to deflect criticism onto other parties. Also, some of the wastes produced by the rare earth extraction plant are different, i.e. they consist of radioactive material such as thorium and uranium with very long half-lives. This necessitates safe storage and disposal for generations and generations to come within a Permanent Disposal Facility.

*Foot-in-the-door technique: step by step penetration in the face of strong resistance*

Because of the fierce resistance coming from politicians such as Fuziah Salleh and from grassroots groups, the foot-in-the-door technique was employed by the corporation and its supporters in the Pahang state government and Malaysian federal government to attempt to achieve their ultimate aim of getting the plant fully built and into operation.

Although the company has not come up with a satisfactory Long Term Waste Management Plan and it has not built a Permanent Disposal Facility, the Malaysian regulatory authorities first granted it a 'temporary operating license' (TOL) but (supposedly) with additional conditions imposed. It should be pointed out that both the TOL and the subsequent FOSL were granted in spite of the lack of a permanent disposal facility for the long term storage of hazardous wastes, and in spite of the Lynas project not having undergone a Detailed Environmental Assessment, or a Health Impact Assessment.

Furthermore, approval was given to begin operations although an additional condition that comes along with the granting of the TOL (i.e. wastes are to be shipped back to Western Australia) has been totally rejected by Australian government officials. The Minister of Mines and Petroleum of Western Australia even declared that "Australia does not support the importation and storage of other countries' radioactive waste" (Sta Maria 2012), notwithstanding the fact that Lynas is an Australian transnational corporation with headquarters in Sydney (Santiago 2012)!

This led Charles Santiago (2012), another opposition Member of Parliament and critic of the Lynas project, to declare that:

It is clear the UMNO-led government is doing everything possible to allow Lynas to start its operations .... clearly the government is facilitating the operations of Lynas, despite strong protests and going back on its own guidelines.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Controversy over the project is ongoing in Malaysia. This is because operations actually began in early 2013 after the award of licenses, although the plant is producing at reduced levels because of currently low rare

earth prices. Street demonstrations against the plant have diminished in number since their peak earlier in the decade, but some of the 'anti' camp groups have continued their attempts to shut down the plant through the courts.

Political persuasion techniques have been used extensively in this battle over the rare earth extraction plant. This project can be regarded as a case of corporate interests and their allies attempting to 'defend the indefensible' using the persuasion techniques of political propaganda. This is especially so in light of Malaysia's previous experience with Mitsubishi's much smaller rare earth plant at Bukit Merah, and China's ecological disaster in the Baotou area because of wastes from rare earth extraction, which now include a tailings lake that has high background radiation (Maughan 2015).

Pratkanis and Aronson's framework is a useful tool for the analysis of such techniques. This framework, arising from their work in psychology, describes commonly-used propaganda techniques in contemporary industrial societies. Such techniques are used to counter political opposition; to sow doubts about the claims and even the credibility of critics in the eyes of third parties (especially neutral observers), and to mobilise stronger support from vested interests and their allies. Thus, the application of this framework to the case of the Lynas rare earth plant enables us to better understand the strategies and techniques used by its supporters.

However, the Lynas controversy is not simply a case of straightforward environmental conflict but - following the political ecology approach - it is strongly connected to the underlying political economy of Malaysia. Malaysia's economy is led by an authoritarian regime with non-competitive awarding of government contracts to politically-connected businesspeople. Government control of the mass media is pronounced, meaning that policies and development projects are often introduced in a top down, non-consultative manner. Most residents of Kuantan were, in fact, not aware of the project until it was investigated and reported in a foreign newspaper - the *New York Times* (Bradsher 2011).

The unusual nature of the project - where soil containing rare earth metals is imported directly into the country, processed, and the wastes generated are 'stored' in Malaysia - coupled with a long 'tax holiday' granted to the corporation, has given rise to public suspicion that there may also be corruption involving public officials. At the very least, there is financial conflict of interest when a particular Malaysian regulatory agency (i.e. the Atomic Energy Licensing Board) engages in 'profit-sharing' with the company. This profit-sharing scheme entails the transfer of 0.05% of Lynas' profits to the AELB. The AELB claimed that the funds will be used solely to verify Lynas' waste management studies by independent experts (Yow 2012).

Finally it should be pointed out that in spite of all the efforts at persuasion made by the corporation, its supporters and the Malaysian government, public opinion toward the project is not positive. The green movement in Malaysia has been given a shot in the arm because of the Lynas controversy (partly because of demonstrations by anti-Lynas activists and the reporting done by independent online media), and Opposition politicians have been elected to public office as Pahang State Assembly representatives and Members of Parliament for Pahang in significant numbers. This included the General Election of 2013 in the Kuantan area (Welsh 2013). Thus, a Foucauldian analysis of power reveals that attempts made by one party to influence others can run outside the control of the first (Kelly no date). This is certainly true in the case of the struggle over the Lynas rare earth plant - as indicated by the unanticipated strengthening of the Opposition parties in the Kuantan area of Pahang.

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