

COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN MALAYSIA

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Executive Summary

Southeast Asia is a fast-developing region, and its energy decisions are critical to the next decade's global effort to reduce carbon-emitting fossil fuels. Yet little is known outside the region about the specific media narratives that shape national energy debates in each country. This critical knowledge gap is what Climate Tracker and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security wish to fill, with an analysis of energy-related media coverage in five countries across Southeast Asia.

This report on Malaysia is the fifth in a series of reports covering the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. It has been supported by the Stanley Center under the collective title *Fueling the Tiger Cubs: How Southeast Asia's Media Is Covering Coal's Last Frontier*, a multicountry media analysis led by young journalists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Each of the Southeast Asian countries in our study has a unique media landscape with different challenges and opportunities for energy reporting. The past two years have seen incredible changes in Malaysia's government and energy landscape, which resulted in shakeups in energy reporting as well. After decades of energy policy shaped by the Barisan Nasional coalition, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government acted to further liberalize the press as well as the energy sector, passing 80 energy initiatives in 2019 generally seen as conducive to renewable energy growth. The start of 2019 saw many renewable energy articles in all of Malaysia's leading media outlets. More than 87.5 percent of these framed renewable energy technologies positively, a trend that continued into 2020.

Press liberalization meant that leading news outlets, many owned by the former government, were more **emboldened in publishing opinion pieces criticizing the status quo** and Malaysia's reliance on fossil fuels. From January 2019 to August 2020, 46 articles across

six news outlets framed coal as "dirty" and "backwards." Only 18 of these were opinion pieces from columnists or energy experts.

The Star stood out for publishing five op-eds from columnist **Mangai Balasegaram**, who repeatedly made the connection between coal and climate change. Overall, however, there were still slightly more articles that framed coal positively (52) as an indispensable part of Malaysia's energy mix—after all, **coal still contributes 44 percent of Malaysia's energy capacity**. Notably, 88 percent of these 52 articles quoted only business and industry representatives, showing a clear lack of diversity in included viewpoints.

After two years in power, the PH government **lost control of parliament in February 2020, and shortly after, the prime minister resigned**. As the country slowly adjusts to this political turbulence and a rising **debt crisis**, it is still unclear what energy and media policies will be like post-2020 and how this might impact reporting on Malaysia's energy future.

Overall, our Malaysian researcher, Ili Nadiah Dzulfakar, examined 344 articles across six news outlets—the *Star*, *New Straits Times* (NST), the *Malaysian Reserve* (TMR), the *Edge*, *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT), and *Malaysia Kini*—and came to the conclusions below.

Key Takeaways

- Malaysia's leading media outlets are nearly evenly split in their portrayal of coal, with 46 percent of articles framing the fossil fuel positively and 40.7 percent framing it negatively.
- The positively framed articles depict coal as an indispensable part of Malaysia's economy and cite **ultra-supercritical (USC) coal technology** as evidence that coal can be made "clean." All news outlets studied ran some articles with a positive frame for coal except for *Malaysia Kini*, an independent outlet created to counter the dominance of large media corporations. Three-quarters of articles supporting

coal development do so by exclusively quoting from business representatives and industry insiders—showing a clear lack of diversity in viewpoint.

- Articles critical of coal either pointed out its environmental impacts or depicted a particular project, such as the 1,000-MW **TADMAX power plant in Selangor**. Nearly 40 percent of these articles were opinion pieces from newspapers' editorial staffs or guest columnists.
- A handful of columnists who criticized coal showed a distinct awareness of climate change. For example, Mangai Balasegaram, author of five op-eds connecting coal and global warming in the *Star*, wishes the climate-change angle would be broached more in coal reporting. Balasegaram is a consultant for the World Health Organization and a member of the Clean Energy Wire network.
- For renewable energy, positive frames clearly dominated, making up 87.5 percent of all renewable energy articles. If we exclude big hydro from the mix, the positive frame is even greater, at 99 percent. Negative frames are limited to four articles published by the *Star* and the *Edge*.
- When the PH coalition took power in 2018, the newly formed Energy, Environment, Technology and Climate Change Ministry (MESTECC) planned several energy reform measures, which included more-supportive renewable energy policies. Discussions about these policies formed the core of renewable energy reporting in the first six months of 2019. Echoing the ministry's stance, journalists framed renewable development as essential to "**diversify the fuel mix**." Two other positive article frames, mostly applied to solar power, painted renewables as pushing local economic development and reducing Malaysia's carbon emissions.
- Four articles from the *Edge* and the *Star* stood out for framing renewables as risky investments. Three of these were opinion pieces arguing that the government's renewable energy targets were too high and that renewables can never replace fossil fuels as Malaysia's baseload power.
- Like solar and wind, small-scale hydropower projects were framed positively as renewable technology that could bring economic growth to rural areas while being friendly for the environment. Traditional hydropower dams, however, were **criticized as being destructive to the local environment and indigenous culture** in two-thirds of the articles written on this topic.
- Business interests were heavily represented in energy coverage, with 30 percent of published articles including public-relations (PR) content. Editor Shannah Teoh of the *New Straits Times* spoke of a direct relationship between PR firms and editors. "PR firms, they reach out directly to editors...to get into editors' minds and [make them] see it as an important story to assign," she said.
- More than three-quarters of 344 stories ran in the business/money/economy sections and reflected a predominantly business frame. Noting the downside to this, a reporter at Malaysian SME Media Group said, "I think it is much better if energy stories are categorized as general news, not necessarily business, because when we see business news, there are no environmental impacts [mentioned]." In our sample, 67 percent of articles in the business/money category did not mention the economic impact of energy issues.
- Regarding common obstacles to better energy reporting, three reporters out of 11 interviewed agreed they had trouble accessing reliable sources for interviews. All journalists interviewed except one acknowledged that their sources for energy articles are limited and that this has led to recurring, one-sided viewpoints, usually from business/banks/industry and government.

While this report does not offer specific recommendations for improving clean energy media narratives in Malaysia, the research can be used to inform the development of effective interventions and actions.

Research for this report was carried out under the guidance of Climate Tracker, a network of 12,000+ young climate journalists around the globe. Research methods included sampling, content analysis, framing analysis, and interviews with reporters and editors, and the time frame examined was January 2019 to August 2020.

This report is part of a regional media analysis commissioned by the Stanley Center for Peace and Security and produced by Climate Tracker.



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