

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In the foreground, several large commercial buildings have their roofs covered with solar panels. To the left, a mosque with a prominent white minaret and a golden dome is visible. The background is filled with a dense urban skyline, including the Petronas Twin Towers and other high-rise buildings under a clear blue sky.

# 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.

A coal-fired power station operates near the waterfront in Johor state, Malaysia. Photo by Igor Grochev/Shutterstock

Cover: Solar panels installed at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia campus in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photo by drshahrinmdayob/Shutterstock

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 Nadiyah 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.

## Methodology

### 1. Sampling

Ili Nadiyah Dzulfakar, our researcher in Malaysia, sampled 344 online news items over 18 months, from January 2019 to August 2020, across six commercial publications:

- The Star, the online version of **Malaysia's most-circulated broadsheet**.
- *New Straits Times* (NST), the online version of Malaysia's oldest newspaper still in print, owned by Media Prima.
- Malaysia Kini, the most popular online news portal in Malaysia.
- Free Malaysian Today (FMT), an independent online news portal and one of Malaysia's most-accessed news sites.
- The Edge, the online version of Malaysia's best-selling business and investment weekly.
- The *Malaysian Reserve* (TMR), a business news and information provider in print and online.

All six news media outlets are based in the capital Kuala Lumpur or the broader Selangor state. The mainstream outlets with print versions, namely the *Star* and *New Straits Times*, have **histories of being biased in favor of the government**. Both are **effectively owned by parties within the former ruling coalition**. Meanwhile Malaysia Kini, FMT, and the *Edge* are independent digital media outlets known for being fiercely antigovernment at times. Due to time limitations, only top-ranking English-language news sites in Malaysia were examined, and Malay or Mandarin sources were not included.

For each outlet chosen, the keywords used in the searches were “coal,” “renewable energy,” “solar,” “wind,” “hydroelectric,” “megadam,” “small hydro,” and “minihydro.” Wire stories from foreign agencies and non-Malaysian energy stories were excluded from the analysis.

### 2. Content Analysis

For the content analysis, Climate Tracker media researchers utilized a standardized **coding method** developed with the researchers' input. Using this method, they analyzed articles according to 22 parameters in five categories: Article Type, Thematic Focus, Broader Framing, Energy Literacy, and Sources Used.

### 3. Framing Analysis

Fifty-four articles out of 344 were chosen to represent the sampling diversity of the total news items to conduct more in-depth framing analysis, which involved asking questions about the articles' sources, source placement, and discursive strategies. Their framing analysis template can be found [here](#).

### 4. Interviews with Journalists

Between August 29, 2020, and September 19, 2020, 11 reporters and four editors were interviewed from five of the six outlets sampled for analysis (the *Edge*, the *Star*, TMR, FMT, and Malaysia Kini) as well as additional news outlets (Mongabay Indonesia, Malaysia SME, the .print version of the *New Straits Times*).



#### Ili Nadiyah Dzulfakar | @NadQuarantasei

Ili Nadiyah Dzulfakar is currently the coordinator of Klima Action Malaysia, a youth-led climate NGO in Malaysia. She has created local climate content in Bahasa, Malaysia, and content for wide-reaching advocacy, and has collaborated with both environmental journalists and science-based publications. Dzulfakar was born in Malaysia and lived in Germany for 12 years before pursuing an environmental science degree. She enjoys working with data (as much as she enjoys working with people).

## Introduction

Over the course of three months, I analyzed how Malaysia's six leading English-language news outlets reported on Malaysia's energy future from January 2019 to August 2020, focusing on their coverage of coal and renewable energy. The analysis included 344 sampled articles across six publications. Through this analysis, I hope to be able to give some insight into how the country's largest media outlets are framing the future of energy in Malaysia.

This reporting took place in a country **heavily reliant on fossil fuels** with a **commercial media industry biased in favor of various political parties**. Currently, **44 percent of the country's energy capacity comes from coal**, while 37 percent comes from oil and gas, and 19 percent comes from renewable energy, including hydropower. According to the International Energy Agency, coal's contribution in recent years **has replaced oil and gas** as the largest source of energy. In 2019, the government set an ambitious target of **20 percent nonhydro renewables by 2025**, though it is unclear how this target will be met given the modest annual growth rate since then and the recent power transition in the Malaysian politics.

My analysis has shown that coal is described both positively and negatively while solar is overwhelmingly framed in a positive light in all publications except FMT. This may surprise those who know the outlet for its largely progressive political reporting.

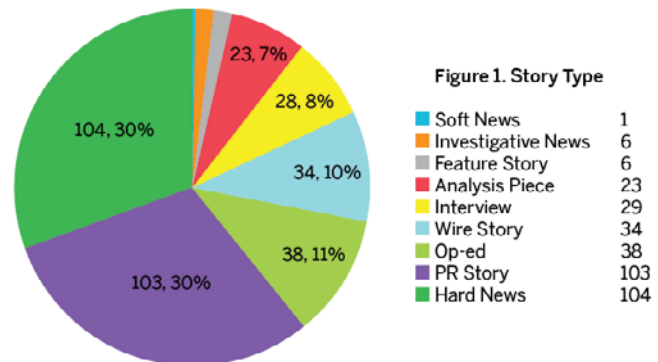
More than half of the energy articles included in my analysis (predominantly business news articles) used only one type of source. This source was most often a business representative. The lack of nuance in most energy stories highlights capacity issues in the Malaysian media industry and energy as a narrowly defined business story. The results of my analysis indicate that scientific reports and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are often being overlooked as sources for energy stories.

Despite solar energy being positively framed, actual installed capacity in Malaysia is still **low, at only 882MW, or around 6 percent of the total capacity**. Meanwhile, coal is still the dominant energy source, with **more plants coming up in the pipeline**. Solar and coal are often not directly compared but only discussed in isolation, leading to a lack of critical narrative about Malaysia's energy landscape and prospects for a clean energy future. In short, the reality of the current Malaysian energy mix is not accurately portrayed or scrutinized in media coverage.

## Discussion

### Quantitative Analysis: Story Types and Prevalence

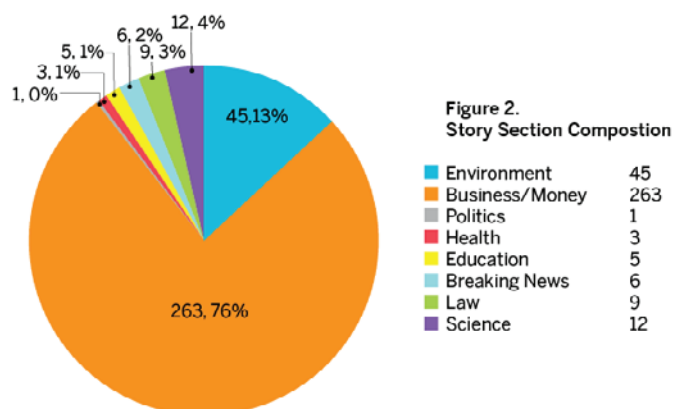
Promotional content common in energy reporting;  
PR stories made up 30 percent of sample



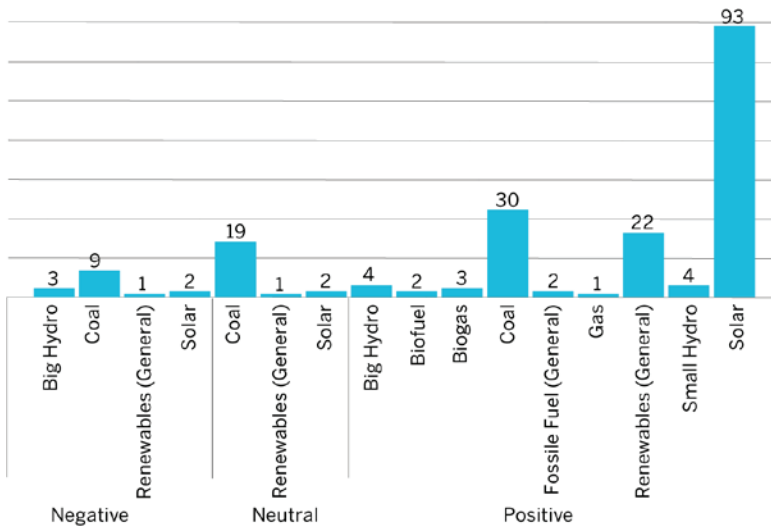
My analysis began with quantitative analysis categorizing 344 articles based on article type and the sections they were published in. Across all six news publications, I found that PR stories—or stories containing mostly promotional content—and hard news stories made up more than 60 percent of all the articles sampled, with 207 stories published during the period examined. Otherwise, the various article types were equally distributed across news outlets, though the business publication TMR stood out as the only publication with no opinion letters on energy.

My interview with editors and reporters shed some light on the large number of PR stories. Shannon Teoh, an editor from the *New Straits Times*, described the relationship between PR firms and news editors at mainstream news outlets: “The editor decides [what gets published], and in many cases, that is why most newsmakers or PR firms, they reach out directly to editors. ... So [the PR firms] want to get into editors’ minds and [make them] see it as an important story to assign.” Columnist Mangai Balasegaram from the *Star* described promotional stories as “essentially [writing] to support a business” since newsrooms rely on ad revenues.

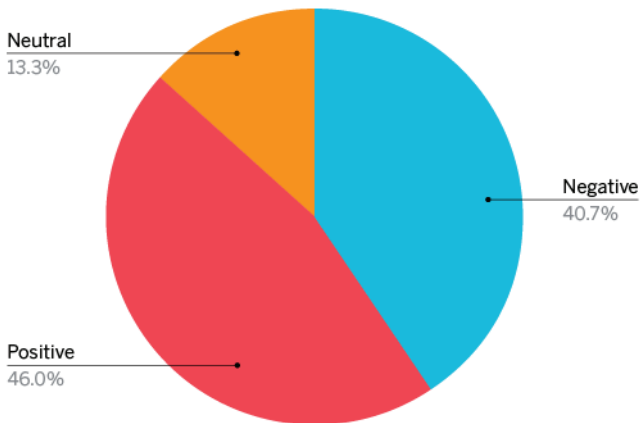
Business/Money section dominated; three-fourths of articles had economic frame



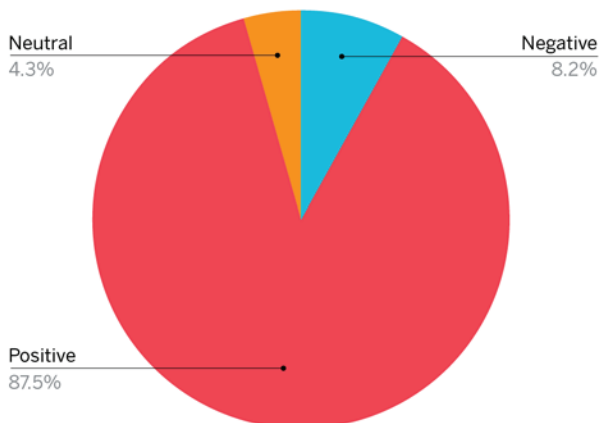
**Figure 3. Framing in Business/Finance Stories**



**Figure 4. Coal articles breakdown by coverage attitude**



**Figure 5. Renewable articles breakdown by coverage attitude**



Business interests in energy reporting were not only reflected by the number of PR stories but the sectioning of all articles as well. Energy stories were published across eight sections: breaking news, business/money, education, environment, health, law, politics, and science. However, more than three-quarters of stories sampled (76.5 percent), or 263 articles, were published in the business/money sections. Although the environment category was not a main section on the home page for any news outlet (except for TMR's "Green Growth" section), it was the second-most-popular story tag and article focus at 45 articles (13 percent of the total sample).

The *Star*, which published the most energy articles (152) also published the most stories with an environmental focus (19). However, FMT was the only publication that had more energy articles with an environment focus (15) than a business focus (10). Malaysia Kini, meanwhile, did not have any energy articles in the environment section. This was an interesting contrast, given that FMT and Malaysia Kini are both online-only independent outlets.

None of the journalists interviewed were surprised by my finding that most energy reporting was placed in the business section. However, not all were satisfied with the status quo. A journalist at the newspaper *Malaysian SME* said this practice should change in the future. "When we see business news, there are no environmental impacts" mentioned, he said. "Energy stories would be deemed as normal news so that it will also allow for much broader reporting." Similarly, editor Shanon Teoh, bureau chief for NST, said, "I think there should be a better balance [when it] comes to reporting of energy issues, away from just the dollars and cents." However, Teoh was "not optimistic that's going to happen."

Not all energy types were equally favored by the business section, however. To adequately answer the question of how Malaysia's leading outlets are framing the future of energy, I further broke down articles by dominant attitude displayed, either "positive," "negative," or "neutral." Though journalists may present diverse viewpoints in their writing, an article I categorized as "positive" ended by promoting the growth of a particular energy source, while an article categorized as "negative" was more concerned with the risks associated with such growth. A "neutral" article presented hard facts without any clear viewpoint.

As shown in figure 3, in the sample of articles published as business stories, solar articles dominated the positive frame at 93 articles, followed by coal at

30 articles, or less than a third of that number. The total of the positively framed business articles about renewable energy (128) outnumbered the coal articles four to one. In both the neutral and negative sections, on the other hand, coal articles dominated at 19 and nine articles respectively; however, just comparing between coal business articles, the positive frames slightly outnumbered negative and neutral frames (30 to 28). Therefore, one might conclude there were more articles about renewable energy in the business section and most of them framed the energy source positively; there were fewer articles about coal, and they were more divided in their framing.

My interview data might help explain this trend. All journalists and editors interviewed agreed that solar was seen as a good investment and in line with the narrative by government, business, and NGOs that all support clean energy growth. Two journalists indicated this might be linked to real-time revenue potential. In 2019, Malaysia was **the third-largest solar cell producer worldwide**, behind China and Taiwan.

The trends seen in business stories are also evident in the entire sample. For coal, slightly more articles use the positive frame than the negative frame (46 percent to 40.7 percent), with the rest (13.3 percent) being neutral articles tracking the rise and fall of global coal prices. For renewable energy, meanwhile, positive frames clearly dominate, making up 87.5 percent of the sample.

With these figures in mind, I conducted a deep dive into 54 articles from all news outlets to analyze the specific frames used when discussing coal and renewable energy, whether from a positive, negative, or neutral perspective. The results of this framing analysis are below.

## Qualitative Analysis: Common Energy Story Frames

### News outlets framed coal as beneficial for local economy, pushed for “green coal”

As positive frames were shown to be slightly more common among coal articles across the entire sample, I began my framing analysis by taking a deep dive into the positive coal frames used. Five news outlets examined—FMT, the *Edge*, TMR, the *Star* and NST—contributed articles that positively described coal as “cheap,” “stable,” and “reliable”; Malaysia Kini was the only one that did not publish any positive frames. As shown in the quantitative analysis (figure 3), 30 articles in the business section framed coal positively; out of these, eight were chosen for a deeper framing analysis.

My framing analysis shows that the notion that coal is good for the economy was pushed by groups with interest in the coal industry—namely banks and big energy players like electricity providers TNB and Malakoff, the two largest in Malaysia. An article consisting of mostly promotional content by the *Star* called “**Thriving on Power**,” for example, framed coal as benefiting local economies, using sources like local government and community

leaders from the town of Seri Manjung. The authors of the article argued, in no subtle terms, that the presence of coal plants leads to social mobility as well as infrastructure and tourism revenue for the community.

Articles framing coal as beneficial often referenced technology, particularly ultra-supercritical (USC) power plants, which can supposedly make coal “clean.” Three outlets examined—FMT, the *Star*, and NST—covered the new generation of USC power plants of **Jimah East**, Tanjung bin Energy, and **Jana Manjung** using words such as “green,” “clean,” and “efficient.” These articles did not mention the fact that despite generating less air pollution, USC coal is essentially still a carbon emitter contributing to climate change.

An editor from a now-defunct news outlet in Malaysia emphasized that these types of story frames are mostly told from the businesses’ point of view, which also happen to be the most prioritized point of view in Malaysian media. “Maybe it’s the launch of a new power plant...maybe it’s about why we should turn to coal right now because it’s cheaper, and coal-fired power plants are more energy efficient. I mean, those are the articles that [the mainstream media outlets] are most likely to run,” he said.

### Coal framed as dirty and regressive for a developing country

My framing analysis showed, however, that not all articles presented such a rosy outlook for coal, USC or not. Of the 17 coal stories chosen for framing analysis, seven framed coal negatively by citing its environmental and social impacts as well as the phaseout of coal happening in developed countries. The four most in-depth analyses of these seven were published by the *Star*.

Despite Malaysia’s current reliance on coal, this fossil fuel was increasingly framed as dirty and regressive for the country’s long-term development. The *Star* published an article by long-time columnist Mangai Balasegaram headlined “**Human Writes: Why Is Malaysia Still Stuck on Coal for Energy?**,” which quoted industry experts and NGO Carbon Tracker in framing coal as dirty and unsustainable for Malaysia as a nation. The article primarily used the environmental and climate-change frames to justify why Malaysia should not be “stuck” on coal. In an interview, Balasegaram said she’s passionate about climate change and is part of the Clean Energy Wire, a network of journalists covering climate and clean energy issues, and wishes this angle would be broached more in coal reporting.

The *Star* also published articles that pointed to coal’s negative impacts in specific localities. The article “**Melaka Warns Stern Action against Polluters**” focused on the environmental, social, and economic risks posed by coal transportation in the regional capital of Melaka because of coal-dust dumping by sea vessels. The chief minister of Melaka, a local government official, warned that this activity is commonplace as there are no mechanisms to monitor and act against polluters. Thus, coal pollution is framed as an environmental hazard that affects the economy and health of the local community.





The gas turbine Tanjung Kling Power Station, one of the oldest power stations in Malaysia in Tanjung Kling, Melaka state. Photo by Chongkian, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)



Meanwhile, an editorial from the *Star* headlined “**Balancing Energy Cost and Sustainability**” heavily criticized coal as regressive for economic growth due to the unsustainable government subsidies needed to cover losses from global coal price fluctuations. The analysis argued that in the long run, coal subsidies will lead to cuts in development spending, causing indirect social impacts.

Articles that used the economic frame to portray coal negatively sometimes cited hydro megadams and gas as more profitable alternatives, such as **this one** from FMT, which broke news about the state government in Sabahan refusing to allow coal mining in the region. Quoting the state minister, the article framed coal as a poor choice because the local government of Sabah was looking toward gas and hydroelectric dams in Ulu Padas as cheap energy sources, with intentions to increase Sabah’s revenue by raising oil royalties from Petronas. This article predominantly used economic framing to justify why coal is not a good option for the state of Sabahan.

### Coal projects framed in context of government corruption

In terms of stories about specific coal projects, four articles focused on **TADMAX**, one of the most expensive power plant projects by the property giant of the same name, framing the deal as corrupt and against the public interest. In all four articles, the project’s approval was criticized for not echoing the new energy reform plans rolled out by the new PH government. The *Star* story “**Power Plant Projects Back in the Limelight**” heavily criticized the PH government, using unnamed sources or insiders in the energy industry, indirectly quoting Professor Jomo, Malaysia’s prominent economist, with direct mention of Malaysia’s renewable energy policy target.

An interesting trend observed was that columnists and opinion letters were less restricted in criticizing coal policy in general and controversial projects like TADMAX in particular. In my quantitative analysis, I found that 18 of 46 articles that framed coal negatively—nearly 40 percent—were opinion pieces. Examples of this were a column headlined “**Human Writes: Polluting Our Breathing Air with Our Constant Need for Power**” by the *Star*’s Mangai Balasegaram; an opinion letter headlined “**Giving Tadmax RM3.5 Billion Power Project Is Atrocious**” by Malaysia Kini’s P. Gunasegaram; and an opinion letter headlined “**No Need for More Energy Than We Can Use**” from Dr. Kua Kia Soon in FMT. This showed that even though TADMAX is a highly controversial issue, Malaysia Kini, FMT, and the *Star* covered it by drawing in opinions from veteran energy columnists and experts.

An editor from a now-defunct news outlet in Malaysia suggested the high percentage of op-ed pieces covering these more controversial topics could be due to their being printed alongside a disclaimer—“This is the writer’s own point of view”—which emboldens outlets to publish them.

In brief, an examination of coal article frames showed that Malaysian media were divided on how to envision coal’s role in the country’s energy future. On the one hand, coal is still a large part

of the current energy mix, and half of the articles sampled cited benefits like economic growth, local development, and improving coal technology as reasons why it still has a role to play in the near future. On the other hand, half of the articles presented a negative outlook for coal, framing it as environmentally and socially destructive as well as economically regressive. Project-specific reporting also pointed out how deals struck between coal developers and the government, such as the one related to TADMAX’s power plant, can lack transparency.

### Renewable energy framed as part of energy reform policies to “diversify the fuel mix”

Moving onto renewable energy frames, in Malaysia’s leading outlets, many articles framed renewables in the context of energy reform policies, especially those instituted in early 2019. When the PH coalition took power in 2018, the newly formed Energy, Environment, Technology and Climate Change Ministry (MESTECC) aimed for energy reform through liberalization measures that would supposedly create a more competitive market. Through these measures, the ministry framed renewables as necessary for diversifying the country’s fuel mix. In our framing analysis, we reviewed 15 stories covering this policy shift.

Unsurprisingly, articles about energy reform policies relied heavily on quotes from government representatives, particularly MESTECC Minister Yeo Bee Yin. This was the case in nine of the 15 articles. In an article about energy reforms, **the Edge** quoted Minister Yin as saying, “We are heavily reliant on fossil fuel. We’ll always be susceptible to global fuel prices. ... We are talking about at least more than half of your electricity bill [being dependent] on something that you cannot control.” With this, the article quoted her call for an increase in renewables capacity to “diversify the country’s fuel mix for electricity production.” **The Star** ran a similar story, which highlighted new renewable development policies among the 80 energy reform initiatives rolled out by MESTECC.

The second-most-quoted sources for these articles were business representatives, who voiced support for the ministry’s energy reform policies in six articles. One of these stories, “**Power Sector to Gain from Govt Plan to Expand Use of Renewable Sources**,” was a PR article written by the Public Investment Bank Berhad, uncritically promoting the argument that new renewable policies would benefit Malaysia’s growing power sector. Through this and a series of other articles, government and business representatives were portrayed as united in their support for energy reform policies, specifically those promoting renewable energy growth and energy security. The normalization of renewables development and energy diversification then became a common theme to a range of structural changes within the Malaysian energy industry in the last year.

### Renewable energy framed as beneficial for national and local economy

Beyond the framework of government policy, renewable energy is most commonly framed as an economic opportunity that will expand with technological innovation. Solar energy in particular is framed in terms of present and future potential as a money-saving mechanism for individuals, businesses, and the government. This view is championed by big industry players, government officials, banks, and NGOs. In line with this framing, the *Edge* published an article by Arjuna Chandran Shankar that urged Malaysian firms to transition to climate-friendly sectors and pioneer green business practices more sensitive to environmental risks. The *Star* also sought to **frame technological development as the backbone of a renewable energy** future in Sarawak.

Local community concerns were also highlighted as beneficiaries. FMT ran an article about how two local councils in the city of Penang have ventured into solar farming to “harness renewable energy” and hopefully reduce electricity bills. **An article by the *Star*** described how solar was used to light up a gurdwara—a place of worship for Sikhs—in Penang. The onset of COVID-19 brought another way of approaching the economic article frame. While many publications reported on delays, such as the *Star*’s “**Rural Electrification Target Delayed Due To Movement Control Order,**” they also framed renewable energy as fulfilling important energy needs in the post-COVID-19 future. Here, solar was again seen as a key sector that will reactivate Malaysia’s economic recovery post-COVID-19; two articles from **the *Star*** and **TMR** framed rooftop technology as an important economic driver that will meet Malaysia’s electricity demand, which is expected to rise again soon.

#### **Renewable energy often framed as necessary to cut emissions and fight climate change**

While close to 75 percent of renewable stories included in this study were published in their respective news outlet’s business section, some publications also framed renewable energy as a way to fight climate change. Articles from NST and TMR in particular, even those in the business sections, framed renewable energy as part of the larger climate perspective, using phrases such as “carbon emissions reduction” and “green option for businesses.”

In one **NST article**, MESTECC’s Yin and TNB’s chief retail officer, Megat Jalaluddin Megat Hassan, were quoted while discussing their commitment to Malaysia’s first renewable energy subsidy program, myGreen+. The ministry committed to offsetting its carbon footprint by financing renewables development through myGreen+. Another article by NST quoted the private sector using similar language; Mydin Holdings, **the first retail chain to install solar panels for its malls**, framed its decision in terms of “help towards carbon footprints reduction.”

In TMR’s “**2019: A Bright Year for Sepang Solar Power Plant,**” electricity provider TNB again amplified its stand on climate change with the Large Solar Scaled Sepang project, the largest solar panel installation in Peninsula Malaysia. The amount of carbon emissions offset by the plant—76,000 tonnes—was mentioned as a noteworthy achievement, with a TNB representative saying “it

is akin to an equivalent fuel displacement of about 36,000 cars off the Malaysian roads.”

Two junior business journalists from TMR said during interviews that they understood the need to link energy to climate change. One even mentioned climate change as a reason for wanting to write about energy “to save the earth. I mean clean energy for world sustainability.”

This sentiment was echoed by journalist Mohd Faiz from SME Media Group and editor Shannon Teoh from NST. As mentioned earlier, Mangai Balasegaram, who is part of the Clean Energy Wire network, explicitly said her interest in covering energy stories came “purely from a climate change” lens.

Despite such awareness, these journalists said they are not always able to use the climate change angle for energy stories when they wish to. Article framing can be constrained by news outlets’ priorities for maintaining their readership base, which may prevent journalists from using the climate angle—deemed less “click-baity”—more often.

#### **Renewables sometimes framed as risky investment**

Although an overwhelming majority of nonhydro renewable energy stories framed these technologies positively (figure 3), three articles from the *Star*—either opinion pieces or features extensively quoting from one point of view—raised concerns about investment risks, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession. In these articles, Malaysia’s status as a developing country was frequently used to argue for lower renewable development targets, with the assumption that renewables are expensive to transition to.

An unattributed opinion article from the *Star*, for example, pushed for the extreme view that renewable energy/solar growth is “misguided” and “a luxury” for a developing country like Malaysia. “The reality is renewable energy is not a replacement for the conventional power plants,” the article said, further painting renewable energy as an unreliable energy source compared to fossil fuels, which were framed as reliable and cheap. Similarly, M. Shanmugam, a former managing editor at the *Edge* and now a columnist at the *Star*, wrote **an opinion piece criticizing Malaysia’s solar bidding program** as unsustainable for the longer term. The language used also subtly inferred that the Malaysian government’s renewable energy program was designed to please the international community rather than its own citizens. “The government’s efforts to push for more [renewable energy] is good and in accordance with what the developed countries would like to see happen,” Shanmugam wrote. “The spate of [large scale solar] power plants will not reduce the need to continue building gas and coal-fired power plants. The duplication in having multiple sources of electricity-generating plants is a cost to the country.”

An article by **the *Edge***, meanwhile, framed energy transition as a long and expensive process. The managing director





A worker installs panels at a solar farm on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photo by Ahmad Zikri/Shutterstock



of Malaysia's Sovereign Wealth Fund was quoted as saying developing countries like Malaysia need to "balance climate concerns with improving living standards," pitting the two interests against each other. In light of COVID-19, the director further described a **transition from coal to renewable energy as "expensive" and a "risky investment"** that many are not willing to pursue at the moment.

To conclude, media outlets in Malaysia overwhelmingly framed new renewable energy technologies—particularly solar power—as headlining energy reforms, bringing economic development, and slashing carbon emissions to fight climate change. However, a few articles painted solar as a risky investment that could never wholly replace fossil fuels in providing baseload power.

#### **Small-scale hydro framed as commercially viable and environmentally friendly**

Aside from solar power, small-scale hydro (SSH), for which **Malaysia has much unexploited potential**, also generated considerable media coverage from two publications, **the Star** and **TMR**. A clear assumption in all articles is that SSH counts as renewable, environmentally friendly energy and can contribute toward lowering Malaysia's carbon emissions. All but one of the seven articles that framed SSH in a positive light exclusively quoted business representatives responding to doubts about SSH's financial viability, framing it as an investment that is becoming more profitable with technological advances.

For example, TMR ran an article headlined "**Tenom Small Hydropower Plants Show RE Projects Bankable**," which from just the headline highlighted that SSH was commercially viable. The article quoted from three sources—a utility-rating agency, a financial institution, and an SSH developer—who all spoke about profitable SSH projects in Tenom, Sabah state. On the other hand, an article headlined "**Tapping into Hydro Power Potential**" in the **Star** focused on SSH discovery and technological advances, also in the state of Sabah, where experts deemed there was "high renewable development potential." Both articles framed SSH development within the broader framework of renewable energy growth in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, "**Banking on Renewable Energy**" from the **Star** stood out as a rare article that directly compared small and large hydropower in favor of the former. A one-sided promotional piece, the article quoted extensively from the CEO of Pancore Power, which has run five SSH projects across the Malaysian states of Perak and Pahang. "Unlike large scale hydroelectric plants, small hydro has little to almost no impact on the environment," the writer emphasized, though no third-party expert or NGO source was cited to back up this claim from the power developer.

#### **News outlets divided on whether megadams count as renewable energy**

While the framing of small-scale hydro was largely positive, articles were more split on large-scale hydro and megadams, which are usually excluded from the concept of "renewable energy." From my content analysis, I had found that two-thirds of hydropower articles (16) framed it negatively while one-third (eight) highlighted its merits. Fourteen stories were exclusively focused on **the Ulu Papar dam**, a controversial project that faced villagers, NGOs, academics, and dam engineers' opposition from its inception.

Framing analysis showed that on one hand, megadams were framed as key in solving rural energy poverty in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. An FMT article on Ulu Papar quoted the chief minister of Sabah and the water agency director as favoring megadams because "**the Sabahan people and economy will benefit from the project**." The *Malaysian Reserve*, meanwhile, quoted megadam developer Sarawak Energy saying it is "**frustrated**" with the federal government's decision to not include megadams as renewable energy. He reiterated that megadams are beneficial for the local economy and said they could play a role in boosting the renewable energy target 2.5 percent higher by 2030 than the government had planned.

On the other hand, megadams drew coverage that focused on the community-versus-government conflict angle, as locals disagreed with the government's belief that such dams would benefit them economically or environmentally. FMT and Malaysia Kini, the two independent news sources, ran 14 articles quoting from community leaders, science experts, and NGOs who framed megadams in terms of the risks they posed for Sabah.

FMT's article "**Sabah Groups Call for Study on Impact of Papar Dam**" quoted one community leader who was the article's primary source and paraphrased statements from NGOs and academics. The article highlighted how the dam had overwhelmingly negative impacts from scientific and community points of view, especially to the indigenous groups who had depended on the land slated for the dam. Malaysia kini, meanwhile, published **an opinion letter from human rights activist Dr. Kua Kia Soong** that had a similar frame. Soong further characterized the megadam's impacts on indigenous culture as "ethnocide" and called for the government to advocate for halting the dam for moral reasons.

An editor from FMT said his publication framed megadam stories in terms of conflict because "community-political conflict attracts people's attention." Community leaders/members were primary sources in eight stories, or half of FMT's coverage on megadams. "In regards to the [dam stories] in Sabah, why it is a hot topic is also because it is somewhat linked to politics" and conflict, the editor said. He also spoke about making a conscious effort to focus on impact reporting, rather than just sensationalizing conflict. "At the end of the day, the story of a dam, for example—it could have severe repercussions to the state, it could destroy an ecosystem, or it could cause flooding. [We should] angle it in terms of how it will impact readers and this is why you should care about it."





The Tenom Pangi hydroelectric power plant in Tenom, Sabah state, Malaysia. Photo by Uwe Aranas/Shutterstock



To sum up my analysis of hydropower framing: as a more traditional source, large-scale hydropower is usually not included in renewable energy discourse, except for small hydropower projects that use new, environmentally friendlier technology. The media are split on large hydropower, on the one hand framing it as beneficial for the local economy and on the other hand decrying its impact on local environment and indigenous culture.

### Qualitative Analysis: Challenges to Reporting

Reflecting on the framing analysis trends found, I asked journalists about the main challenges they faced in their reporting or factors that led them to frame an issue a certain way.

Some journalists found that sources are usually inaccessible. Three journalists from the *Edge*, the *Star*, and TMR all spoke about a lack of stakeholders or sources to interview beyond private parties. These sourcing limitations led to journalists getting information from recurring, one-sided resources—usually business/bank/industry/government—as seen in the content and

framing analysis. All journalists interviewed acknowledged that they depended on recurring sources for their energy articles.

Furthermore, getting data or publishing certain information is challenging. A journalist from the *Edge* and an editor from NST agreed that aside from some publicly available data, if companies were publicly listed, some information was “protected by the Official Secret Act” and not allowed to be made public. A journalist from TMR suggested that “access to information—something like the Freedom of Information Act in the United States” would greatly improve his reporting.

### Conclusion

My analysis of coal and renewable energy reporting in Malaysia revealed that Malaysian media outlets were divided on how big a role coal should play in the country’s energy future, with 46 percent of articles framing the fossil fuel positively and 40.7 percent framing it negatively. The positively framed articles depicted coal



A big solar farm in Kudat, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo. Photo by Augustine Bin Jumat/Shutterstock





as an indispensable part of Malaysia's economy and cited new technology that will supposedly make coal "clean." More than 80 percent of them relied exclusively on business and government perspectives. Meanwhile, articles most critical of coal cited a wide variety of sources that spoke to the energy form's environmental and social damages.

On the other hand, all major media outlets in Malaysia were overwhelmingly optimistic about renewable energy's growth, framing it in the context of new energy policies passed by the PH government coalition in 2019 after it came into power. Quoting Energy, Environment, Technology and Climate Change Minister Yeo Bee Yin, articles framed renewables as necessary for Malaysia to "diversify the fuel mix," given the context of fluctuating fossil prices seen during the COVID pandemic. Beyond the government policy frame, renewable energy was most commonly regarded in the media as a business opportunity. Solar energy in particular was framed in terms of present and future potential as a money-saving mechanism for individuals, businesses, and the government, and an industry on the rise. A few articles approached renewable energy from a community perspective. FMT ran an

article about how local councils in Penang ventured into solar farming to "harness renewable energy" and hopefully reduce electricity bills. Other than solar, however, small hydropower was increasingly accepted and reported on as an environmentally friendly alternative to energy generation. Three-fourths of articles about larger hydro projects framed them negatively in terms of their environmental, ecological, and cultural damage to local communities.

At the end, all media outlets sampled faced some similar challenges in their energy reporting, including lack of source diversity and knowledge base among journalists about the issues at hand. Nuanced differences did exist, however, between Malaysia's various media outlets' energy reporting. The previously government-owned *Star* and *NST* published more critical opinion articles about coal and renewable energy compared to the rest of the news outlets sampled. Meanwhile, the newer outlets such as *FMT*, *Malaysia Kini*, *TMR*, and the *Edge* allowed more room for journalists to pursue "niche" topics. *FMT* stood out as being the online news outlet where articles with an environmental impact focus outnumbered articles with an economic impact focus.

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Research for this report was carried out under the guidance of Climate Tracker, a network of 12,000+ young climate journalists around the globe. 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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## About Climate Tracker

Climate Tracker is the largest youth-based climate journalism project in the world. We train and competitively empower young people around the world to influence their national debates about climate change, and publish their ideas in national media. We send the most impressive young people to international conferences where they can have a direct influence on decision makers and get a hands-on experience in shaping national and international policy. [ClimateTracker.org](https://ClimateTracker.org).