

COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN THAILAND

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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 about the specific media narratives that shape the national debates on an energy transition in each country.

For stakeholders wishing to influence such narratives and increase the quality of energy reporting, lessons from the past are crucial for future success. This knowledge gap is what Climate Tracker and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security wished to fill with an analysis of energy-related media coverage in five countries across Southeast Asia. This report on Thailand is the third in a series of reports commissioned by the Stanley Center and produced by Climate Tracker that will be copublished as part of *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. For Thailand, a country with a **considerable off-shore gas supply**, coal has never played a large role in the overall energy mix, making up only 18 percent of the total power output as opposed to gas's 57 percent. With the upcoming power development plan, the balance will further tilt in favor of gas, which is framed by all news outlets examined as cleaner and more financially viable than coal—despite also being a fossil fuel with **significant environmental risks**. Our media research did not focus on gas coverage but only examined articles that mentioned gas in connection with coal; out of these, eight articles used the term “energy transition” to describe the replacement of one fossil fuel for another.

This figure, however, pales in comparison to the 209 articles—or one in two energy articles examined—that positively framed a transition toward renewables as necessary for the future of Thailand's economy and environment. Solar power in particular attracts

enthusiastic coverage, accounting for 60 percent of all renewable energy stories; solar panels are often framed as a **new technology that could bring in profit for individual Thai investors**. Biomass is another renewable energy prominently featured in nearly a fourth of all renewable stories, as the Thai government hopes to take advantage of its **formidable agricultural outputs** to generate power.

Despite the dominant positive coverage, renewable energy is not without its critics. Though articles that frame renewables negatively are present in all Southeast Asian media, in Thailand, it is remarkable that more than half of these stories pit local interests against national energy policies. Community opposition to the Energy for All scheme, under which the Thai government develops biomass plants in southern provinces, is particularly visible in 21 articles examined.

This trend must be analyzed in the context of Thailand's political divisions, which have pitted the more rural northern and southern regions against the establishment in central Bangkok for more than a century. Southern Thailand is a region with distinct **cultures and languages** and a history of insurgencies, some of which **toppled elected governments**; the country is on its **20th constitution**. It is natural, therefore, that this distrust in the government has bled into the coverage of energy projects in the rural south. Not only biomass projects but proposed coal plants were also framed using the community versus government angle, which contributed to the moratorium on coal development in the south in 2018.

To capture a somewhat comprehensive picture of energy coverage in Thai media, our three Thai researchers examined 501 articles across 15 news outlets, including mainstream commercial outlets and independent nonprofit ones. Bangkok-based commercial outlets such as *Khaosod*, *Thai Rath*, and *Krungthep Turakij* frame energy policies in terms of potential implications for businesses and urban consumers, quoting single sources such as government or business representatives. Independent news sites like the *Isaan Record*, *ThaiPublica*, and *Green News Agency* focus on the experiences of those working in energy projects or the surrounding

community. Thus, the various news outlets examined in this study represent a diverse snapshot of Thailand's media landscape, including how each outlet frames energy stories.

Key Takeaways

- Coal is not a popular topic in Thai media, being covered in only 37 articles—the fewest out of all Southeast Asian countries studied. Thirty of these overwhelmingly frame coal as detrimental to the environment and Thailand's energy security; 23 deploy the moral frame to portray coal as “dirty” and “harmful to people's health,” citing Thailand's haze problems of 2019 and 2020.
 - Only seven out of 37 coal-focused articles frame coal as a necessary addition to Thailand's energy mix. These articles are either **opinion pieces by government-affiliated columnists** or news articles that exclusively quote from the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and the oil and gas giant PTT Public Company.
 - Currently, hydropower still **contributes the most to Thailand's energy output among nonfossil fuel sources**, with 26 dams across the country. Interestingly, 55 percent of hydropower stories were about dams outside of Thailand that caused ecological damages in the country downstream of the Mekong River. Using the words “China Dam” and “Lao Dam,” all publications link hydropower projects in Laos and China to the record drought in the Mekong in 2019, presenting Thailand as a victim of other countries' hydropower development.
 - Mainstream news outlets frame nonhydro renewable energy projects, especially solar and biomass, as opportunities for more rural regions to develop economically and socially. These stories are aligned with government policies, which aim to increase renewables' share of total energy output in Thailand.
 - At 106 articles, solar energy attracts the most coverage of all energy forms. It is often framed as a new technology that is profitable to investors in both the city and rural provinces.
 - Additionally, Thai media are proud of the country's solar investment across Southeast Asia. Twenty-three articles from four mainstream outlets feature glowing reviews of Thailand's solar projects in other countries, particularly Vietnam. Articles emphasize how Dau Tieng plant, hailed as the **“largest solar project in Southeast Asia,”** is financed by a Thai company.
 - Biomass has been heavily reported on over the last two years, thanks to the government's Energy for All development scheme, which promotes community-based biomass projects in rural areas of Thailand. The coverage, however, more often focuses on debate surrounding government policy as opposed to the technology's pros and cons.
 - There is a significant difference between mainstream and independent outlets' coverage of all energy sources, though the difference is most salient when it comes to biomass.
- Mainstream outlets frame biomass as a sustainable solution to resolve poverty and air pollution in rural areas.
- Independent and regional outlets generally frame coal projects as a causes of conflict between local communities and energy investors—as well as the state—with tensions over who regulates and implements energy-related policies.
 - Such differences could be explained by differing reporting strategies; all mainstream outlets' journalists say they quote from national government and business representatives, while independent journalists seek out local experts and community leaders.
 - In terms of article category, more than half of energy stories are placed under the economy/business section—a consistent trend across all Southeast Asian countries studied. The typical approach to an energy story at a mainstream Thai outlet includes reporting on a new policy update, with one-sided comments from big business.
 - *Thai Rath*, Thailand's most-circulated newspaper, stands out for having a fifth of its energy stories written as op-eds—mostly in the society section. Its news executive editor, Orapin Yingyongpathana, attributes this to a “long-standing practice” among traditional Thai broadsheets to give space for columnists to pen analysis pieces about policy impacts on society.
 - Energy stories are rarely presented with an environmental frame in mainstream media. This may correlate with recent shutdowns of environmentally focused news desks across Thailand due to financial difficulties, according to four journalists who previously worked for such desks. One of them, Piyaporn Wongruang of Krungthep Turakij, formed independent sites to continue their environmental reporting.
 - Lack of funding and proper training may affect reporting quality on official and independent sites. Seven journalists, or half of those interviewed, admitted that energy issues are hard for them to grasp as it connects to several other issues ranging from the economy to the environment to business. Green News Agency's Nicha Wachpanich said she “doesn't have enough knowledge to navigate through all [the] different layers in order to make [energy] news well-rounded.”
 - Ten journalists said they have been directly or indirectly pressured by energy companies to tilt their reports in certain ways. A journalist who asked to remain anonymous said some energy companies place advertorials—advertisements that often look like objective news articles—and take the journalists on media trips so that “the journalists end up writing noncritical or one-sided reports about the project.”
 - COVID-19 lockdown resulted in a sharp decrease from an average of 19 energy stories a month to three in April. However, the number of stories quickly stabilized in May; referencing COVID-19 trade barriers, articles such as this **Thai Rath report** started framing an energy transition as necessary in the context of lessening Thailand's dependence on imported sources.

While this report does not offer specific recommendations for improving clean energy media narratives in Thailand, 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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