P14 / Understanding Climate Obstruction in Southeast Asia

Topic : ENVIRONMENT, SDGs, ENERGY

Chair : Christian Downie (Australian National University)

Second Chair : Dieter Plehwe (Berlin Social Science Center)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Southeast Asia is critical to efforts to combat climate change. Yet most countries in the region, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, have rising populations, rising emissions, and rising energy demand, not to mention a continued reliance on coal. In this context climate change action remains a pressing challenge in the region, but efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions continue to confront political failure. One reason for poor policy outcomes is because of the limited understanding of the oppositional groups determined to protect the fossil fuel dependent status quo. While there is a growing body of literature across political science, sociology, public policy, and legal studies, among other fields, on climate obstruction in North America and Europe, much less is known about climate obstruction in other regions of the world.

This panel aims to explore climate obstruction in Southeast Asia. Climate obstruction refers to intentional actions and efforts to slow or block policies on climate change that are commensurate with the current scientific consensus of what is necessary to avoid dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The shape and form of such efforts vary depending on whether it occurs in electoral democracies or autocracies, pluralist or corporatist interest group systems, economies dominated by extractive industries or service industries, among other factors. This panel seeks to encourage empirical and theoretical research papers on the actors, political activities, and institutions that shape climate obstruction in Southeast Asia. Questions might include:

· What actors are obstructing climate action, such as government agencies, state-owned enterprises, corporations, industry trade associations, and think tanks?

· What types of resources do these actors have at their disposal, including financial resources?

· What strategies and tactics are these actors using, such as lobbying, political donations, coalition building, public relations, or legal challenges?

· How do political, economic and social institutions shape climate obstruction in the region?

· And how are other actors, including social movements, seeking to counter climate obstruction?

CALL FOR PAPERS

We welcome papers that draw on a variety of theoretical and methodological traditions to answer these questions. This could include single country studies or comparative studies, papers focused on specific actors or coalitions, or on specific strategies and tactics. We are especially interested in papers that interrogate those organizations that act as enablers for government agencies and emissions intensive industries, such as trade associations, think tanks, public relations firms, and legal and lobbying firms. We also welcome papers on Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

Panel will be in person to encourage participation - hybrid possible.

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Session 1

Friday, July 4th 08:00 to 10:00 (SME-F4)

Climate-related policy narratives of neo-liberal think thanks in East and Southeast Asia

Piyapong Boossabong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

This paper examines climate-related policy narratives promoted by neo-liberal think tanks in East and Southeast Asia, based on publicly accessible materials. It focuses on think tanks in Singapore, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, given their strong international connections.

The key members of these think tanks primarily come from academia, followed by those working in government bodies. Other significant affiliations include the communication, media, research, and consulting sectors. Some members also have backgrounds in banking, finance, consumer goods and services, legal services, insurance, and the energy and extractive industries. A common theme among these think tanks is their advocacy for energy-intensive industries.

Their common climate-related policy narrative is promoting activities linked to the fossil fuels-high emissions industry under free market discourse. These think tanks challenge a far-left system and immediate change agenda, especially just and democratic orientation. They promote climate-unfriendly resource utilization with ‘cleaner’ and ‘more efficient-reliable’ discourses. Some think tanks promote market-driven tech-innovative solutions to climate issues. Another narrative is promoting environmental protection under market environmentalism-green market solutions discourse. In addition, some of them challenge state-led climate policy interventions for their economic impacts and suggest importing from neighbours rather than investing in their own country.

The paper concludes that most of these think tanks integrate into the political landscape of techno-authoritarian regimes, working closely with ministries, national government bodies, and state enterprises. They are politicized through affiliations with politicians, particularly those from right-wing parties and ruling elites. As a result, political acumen is a defining characteristic of these think tanks.

Transitioning Carbon Club’s Energy Sector: Reconciling Interests in Coal-rich Archipelago

Cahyani Widi Larasakti (University of Melbourne)

This article raises an important question about the stigmatisation of resource-rich countries as climate laggards due to their slow participation in multilateral schemes. Despite this perception, they are actively working on greening their energy sector through bilateral alliances. How can we make sense of this seemingly contradictory behaviour? Instead of maintaining coal mining industries, including coal-fired power plants, Indonesia, as one of the biggest coal exporters, is taking a strategic approach to balance the need for decarbonisation and its traditional reliance on coal. Instead of looking solely at which actors and institutions obstruct the transition to renewable energy, this article is interested in looking at how the government reconciles complex competing interests from various actors whose interests are positively and negatively affected.

This article contends that reconciling the competing interests of key actors in the Indonesian energy sector shapes Indonesia's energy transition policy. Despite the traditional dominance of the coal mining industry in energy policy-making, the government balances their dominance with policy instruments that are shaped by national imperative interests for energy security, energy sovereignty, and energy transition down-streaming.

This study examines Indonesia’s energy transition policy, including a Net-zero emission target by 2060, power sector decarbonisation, the domestic market obligation for coal, the local content requirement for renewable energy development, and bilateral partnership for the energy transition. The argument is

developed using primary and secondary data collected through interviews and discourse analysis of the government's official documents, constitutions, and mass media through an international political economy lens. The findings of this study have the potential to significantly contribute to the literature on energy transition in developing countries, a field that has yet to explore the experience of traditional fossil-dependent countries. This study's findings could potentially reshape international political economists' perspectives on the energy transition in resource-rich countries, underscoring the significance of this study.

Keywords: Energy Transition, Resource-Rich Countries, Competing Interests, International Political Economy

Coal Phase-Out, Climate Obstruction, and Local Governance: Examining the Political Economy of Energy Transition in Indonesia

Cinintya Audori Fathin (Universiti Malaya)

Ndaru Amalia (Asian Institute of Technology)

Vika Apriyani (Universitas Gadjah Mada)

This research explores how local governments in Indonesia can navigate their expanded roles and address challenges in implementing energy transition policies, particularly the phase-out of coal-fired power plants. While Indonesia has made regulatory advancements to support renewable energy, energy management remains highly centralized, historically limiting local governments' authority, resources, and capacity to play a significant role. A recent presidential regulation on renewable energy provides new opportunities for local engagement, yet entrenched interests and institutional constraints raise concerns about their ability to participate effectively. Climate obstruction—deliberate efforts to slow or block policies aligned with climate action—emerges as a key factor shaping local government involvement, as powerful actors in the fossil fuel industry, including state-owned enterprises and politically connected businesses, continue to dominate decision-making processes.

To address these issues, this study employs a qualitative case study approach, combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews with central government ministries, state-owned enterprises such as PLN (National Electricity Company), local governments from Java and Kalimantan, civil society organizations, NGOs, and researchers. Java, with its large electricity capacity but geographical distance from coal mining sites, and Kalimantan, with its coal-dependent economy but limited electricity access, offer contrasting contexts for analysis. Using the AOC (Actors, Objectives, Context) framework, the research examines the roles, objectives, and contextual factors influencing stakeholders. These findings are further analyzed through the stakeholder engagement framework for sustainability transitions by Gonzales-Porras et al. (2021) to uncover the relationships, collaborations, conflicts, and potential climate obstruction among actors.

Findings reveal that while local governments now possess formal authority to engage in renewable energy governance, their role remains constrained by institutional, financial, and operational barriers. Additionally, climate obstruction by entrenched fossil fuel interests further limits their capacity to drive policy implementation. Centralized policy design, political influence from the coal industry, and limited multi-level collaboration leave local governments underprepared to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the coal phase-out. Differences between Java and Kalimantan further highlight how political and economic structures shape regional energy transition dynamics.

This research underscores the need for stronger multi-level governance and more inclusive policymaking to reduce climate obstruction and empower local governments in energy transition efforts. By addressing these barriers, central and local governments can foster a more equitable transition. The study also provides insights for policymakers on how to integrate local governments more effectively into Indonesia's energy transition, ensuring they are not sidelined by entrenched interests that resist change.

Keywords: Energy transition governance, Stakeholder engagement, AOC framework

Multiple Case Study on Policy Networks in Low-Carbon Transitions

Gabriel Chen (LKY School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore)

Climate change caused by greenhouse gas ("GHG") emissions from human activities are a threat to our way of life, with the effects and consequences of global heating becoming increasingly extreme (Ripple et al., 2022). Governments have sought to address this through reducing GHG emissions and have focused on the decarbonizing the energy sector as it is the largest contributor to GHG emissions. Although

policymakers have designed and implemented various policy instruments and mixes to decarbonize electricity grids, latest estimates have shown that projected emissions from implemented policies will fall short of levels required to meet climate goals (Lee et al., 2023).This is despite efforts from the scientific community that has resulted in a large body of research on feasibility studies, technical analysis, and pathways for low-carbon transitions (Bolwig et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Comello et al., 2018; Yang & Chen, 2013). Within the context of low-carbon transitions, policy networks play a critical role in policy processes, which include policy formulation, policy design, and decision-making. However, despite the presence of multiple studies which examine the effects of policy networks on energy transitions, there is no consensus on what structural features of networks are most desirable or suitable in different situations and contexts to facilitate low-carbon transitions (Khan, 2013; Nochta & Skelcher, 2020). Additionally, although policy networks are dynamic and exhibit temporal changes which are caused by political processes, most studies have examined networks as a stable entity with fixed structural characteristics for a given point in time (Raab & Kenis, 2007). As such, existing literature on the mechanisms that actors use to influence policy network structure remains limited. Moreover, the lack of understanding on how policy networks affect policy designs poses a significant barrier in generating feasible policy recommendations.

Hence, towards addressing this research gap, this paper will identify, describe, and examine the structure, configurations, permutations, and characteristics of policy networks involved in low-carbon transitions in developing countries. Actors examined the policy network includes government decision makers, state-owned enterprises which exploit fossil fuel resources, industry associations, and politicians. It will also explore how political processes within policy networks affect policy processes as well as network structure, and further our understanding of how policy networks are linked to the complexities of energy transitions. Given that (1) the greatest energy transition challenge lies in emerging and developing economies in the Global South, (2) these countries face a higher exposure to transition risks, and (3) there is a lack of studies on developing economies, the cases that will be examined are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Eicke & Goldthau, 2021; Sovacool, 2010). Data from semi-structured interviews will be used for policy network analysis, towards developing a typology of policy networks for hypothesis generation.