

# Seasonality in the Anthropocene: Politicisation of the Haze “Season” in Southeast Asia

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Countries in Maritime Southeast Asia have been [experiencing](#) transboundary haze almost annually since the early 1980s. Caused by a combination of unsustainable agroforestry practices, societies here now expect to experience a “haze season” between June and September every year. Among residents of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, a yellowish tint to the atmosphere or a smell of burning in the air during these months will often elicit statements like “the haze season is here/coming” by way of explanation. As an immediate response to the visible smog and unpleasant smell, members of the public tend to reduce outdoor activities, put on masks, and increase usage of air purifiers and air conditions to minimise their exposure to the pollution.

Discussions surrounding the haze in the region are inherently political. Hence, the “haze season” needs to be problematised from a political angle. How is the haze season as a social construct being deployed by various political actors for political purposes? One way of answering this question is through discourse analysis – understanding “who says what and for what purpose”. Discourse analysis, specifically the analysis of “storylines”, has been useful in understanding environmental policymaking and framing conflicts over environmental issues.

## **Social Construction of the Haze as a Season**

The haze season can be understood as a new “season of the Anthropocene”, as the interaction between natural rhythms of dry and wet seasons as well as the oscillation between El Niño, normal, and La Niña years interact with human activities to “construct” a new, and in this case, hazardous “season”. Pristine tropical peat swamp forests are naturally flooded and hence fire-resistant. However, human activities, including deforestation, peatland drainage and burning for agricultural purposes, render disturbed peatlands prone to repeated fires. Such anthropogenic constructions of nature are not unheard of in this part of the world: other seasons of the Anthropocene can include the [rubbish season](#) in Bali, the [smog season](#) in India, and the [burning season](#) in Thailand.



Figure 1: Peatlands burning, with smoke (haze) plumes visible. Image copyright of D

Secondly, societies experiencing air pollution (haze) with increasing regularity have “constructed” the existence of a haze season as a way to make sense of these recurring episodes. While the observation of *when* haze happens is scientific (i.e., measured by pollution monitors), the decision to make such observations and the meaning society gives to these observations are inherently politicised. Therefore, the haze season is not a “fact” of nature organised around atmospheric changes, but instead, one that has emerged “artefactually” – a term that has been used by [Demeritt](#) (2001). Society’s

practical engagement with haze on a regular (or rhythmic) basis configures it in a way that is recognisable – as a “season”. Hence, the matter-of-fact existence of what Indonesian, Malaysian, and Singaporean societies recognise as the haze season is an artefact of certain social practices and conventions.

This construct has been carried over into the media space. A quote from a Letter to the Editor in the Malaysian newspaper *New Straits Times* goes, “*it’s become such a normal part of our lives that children growing up today might not believe that there was a time that we didn’t have to breathe smoke particles at least once a year... so now we have a rainy season, a hot season, a durian season, and a haze season*” (Yap, 2006). Reggie Lee, a popular Malaysian cartoonist, introduced a variation of the concept during the 2015 haze, depicting the “four seasons in Malaysia” as consisting of a monsoon season, a dengue season (a possible social construction of nature itself), a haze season, and a durian season (see Figure 2).

Language is not a neutral messenger. [Hajer](#) (1995), in his seminal work on *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, argues that language “can create new meanings and new identities” – it “may alter cognitive patterns and create new cognitions and new positionings”. Indeed, findings from a related project by the some authors of this blog (Liu and Smith), show that discourse related to the “haze season” (or *musim asap/jerebu* in the local language) in Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean newspapers differ markedly from discourse related to just “haze”. This implies that, at least from the journalistic point of view, there is a tendency to think differently about the problem depending if it is presented as a seasonal issue or not.

## Storylines and Articulations

Hajer further introduces storylines as “a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena”. Various scholars have used the concept of storylines to categorise discursive narratives over a particular issue, for example, [Elsasser and Dunlap](#) (2013) for climate change denialism and [Thomalla et al.](#) (2018) for disaster recovery. Based on preliminary research and anecdotal evidence, we expect three haze season storylines to emerge: “it keeps coming back”, “it will go away”, and “it is normal”.

The “it keeps coming back” storyline closely matches the understanding of seasons in terms of “rhythms” of the life cycle. Such rhythms do not necessarily relate to atmospheric changes but instead can be purely cultural or social, like a tourist or holiday season. Understanding the haze as a season in this way can increase a society’s preparedness to better weather future episodes, as the collective memory of seasons past can inform society on how they should respond to the next haze season.

This storyline, however, can also speak to the failure of environmental policy and implementation among government actors. In other words, if environmental policies were better designed and implemented, the haze would not recur so often to the extent that a haze season can be socially constructed. My work on [patronage politics](#) shows how mutually beneficial relationships between political and corporate elites in the regional palm oil sector have created a culture of impunity among corporate actors implicated in haze-producing fires. These networks extend across borders as Malaysian and Singaporean agribusiness companies operating in Indonesia benefit from patronage relationships in both home and host countries. This, among other drivers, has contributed to the persistence of transboundary haze in the region, despite being recognised as a priority issue at the ASEAN level since the mid-1980s (see the [Roadmap for a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020](#)”).

The “it will go away” storyline can imply that the haze problem is only temporary, and one just has to wait it out. This interpretation can applaud a society’s resilient spirit (A quote from the Letter to the Editor mentioned above goes, “our resilient nature has helped us come to terms with the haze”), but it can also imply that decisive governmental action does not need to be taken as the issue will resolve itself with time – just like the passing of the four seasons in temperate geographies. Despite established ASEAN mechanisms for cooperation, collaborative mitigation efforts have often rubbed up against politically sensitive notions of non-interference and respect for another member state’s sovereignty. Because of this, Malaysian and Singaporean offers for firefighting and other forms of assistance are often [rejected](#) and can increase tensions further. Hence, this storyline may serve to absolve neighbouring governments from the need to act in such difficult circumstances.

The “it is normal” storyline speaks to traditional understandings of seasons as specific temporal blocks of the year organised around atmospheric changes – like winter, spring,

summer, and autumn in temperate countries or the wet (monsoon) and dry seasons in tropical geographies. Such seasons are taken as given, and society accepts them as they come, although the expectation of what these seasons look like from one year to the next is fluid: society understands that one summer may be hotter than another, and one monsoon may last longer than the next. Even though there is an increased understanding that the haze issue is anthropogenic, as the haze season becomes increasingly normalised (more severe one year and less so the other, but taken as a given), society may “forget” that haze is anthropogenic and hence avoidable. This storyline thus may also contribute to absolving governments of responsibility or pressure to act.

### **Different Actors, Different Politicisation Strategies?**

[Feindt and Oels](#) (2005) posit that “the articulation of an environmental problem shapes if and how the problem is dealt with”. Media content analysis work in the related project by Liu and Smith mentioned above found that the phrase “haze season” has been used in major Indonesian, Malaysian, and Singaporean newspapers since at least 2001. This fits into Foucault’s (1976 cited in Hajer 1995) description of the emergence of a new subject of discourse that creates a new discursive space within which the problem can be discussed, regardless of whether it has been introduced for unrelated purposes – in this case, possibly as a coping mechanism among society and the media. Our project thus considers to what extent the emergence of the articulation of the haze as a seasonal problem in recent decades has shaped how political actors interpret and respond to the issue.

Different actors may relate to such subjects of discourse differently: (1) unaware, (2) as a given, (3) strategically, or (4) oriented to consensus and mutual recognition (Feindt & Oels, 2005). If actors relate to discourse strategically, the right storyline can become an important form of agency: it can enable these actors by shaping their field of opportunities and policy options (Hajer 1995). At the same time, how different actors measure, make sense and take action towards haze are inherently political decisions that hinge on the conflicting interests of other actors. Similar workings are visible in other hotly contested sustainability realms, like sustainable finance (see [Strauß, 2021](#)). Scholars have also pointed out how politicians and government actors are often able to

strategically “use” discourse particularly well ([Fischer, 2003](#)), especially within the media, where politicians and government actors are often given more importance over other actors like scientists and civil society ([Calsamiglia, 2003](#); [Ekayani, 2016](#); [Miller & Riechert, 2000](#)). This may be especially so within countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, where there is limited press freedom (see [Forsyth, 2014](#)).

Anecdotal evidence indicates that government actors have strategically used the “it will go away” storyline within the media and beyond to regulate public emotions, manage expectations, and (re)assign responsibility for the haze. For example, [Yeo Bee Yin](#), former Malaysian Environment Minister, was quoted during the 2019 haze episode as saying that “the haze situation is estimated to improve once the monsoon wind direction changes at the end of September”. An [article](#) in the Straits Times Singapore during the 2014 haze referenced a Meteorology Service Singapore advisory when stating that the country “can expect more rain and less haze in the coming weeks with the south-west monsoon season transitioning into inter-monsoon conditions”. More infamously, former Indonesian Vice-President [Jusuf Kalla](#) was reported during the 2015 haze episode saying that neighbouring countries should stop complaining about haze and instead be grateful for the clean air they enjoy for the rest of the year. This article in the Straits Times Singapore contextualised his statement as “an echo of *seasons* past”.

## Conclusion

While the haze is very real, it is society’s articulation and construction of the issue as a “seasonal” one, which gives it substance. This project thus aims to contribute to the understanding of how anthropogenic environmental problems like the haze are socially constructed ([Demeritt, 2001](#)) and what this means for its potential solutions. Through document analysis of media articles and other materials in the public domain, we will explore these haze season storylines (and possibly find new ones), and theorise their importance in the politics and politicisation of haze and haze mitigation, to inform broader lessons for making sense of seasons in the Anthropocene.

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