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A wind-shift waiting to happen: the haze problem in Southeast Asia

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As Singapore gears up for its glittering [F1 carnival](#) on 22 September and prepares to welcome thousands of fans for what's billed as the 'ultimate night race' of the motor racing calendar, the organizers will be hoping that environmental pollution, colloquially known as the haze, won't return to spoil the party.

In mid-June this year the Pollutant Standard Index (PSI) which measures air quality on a scale from good (0-50) to hazardous (300+) touched 401 in Singapore as the republic was [blanketed in the smog](#) driven from myriad hot spots on the island of Sumatra and the Riau Archipelago. It didn't help the cause of intra-regional harmony to hear senior Indonesian minister Agung Laksono dismiss the vociferous criticism of the Singaporeans about the return of the haze by declaring that the island republic "...shouldn't be like children, in such a tizzy."[\[i\]](#)

This seemed a little harsh to say the least, but it underlined the fact that Indonesians are very sensitive to criticism from outsiders. It considers itself justifiably to be the regional powerhouse and as [Derwin Pereira](#) (an LSE alumnus) asserts: "The more criticism there is of its irresponsibility, the more it is intransigent, adamant and defiant. It stands on political ceremony and insists on diplomatic protocol even as forest fires on its soil cast a pall on its relations with its neighbours."[\[ii\]](#)

Unfortunately, the haze experienced in June 2013 wasn't an isolated incident but merely the latest manifestation of an ongoing problem with transnational pollution that has been cropping up periodically within the region since Indonesia first began to develop its oil palm plantation industry for the global market back in the 1960s. In the three decades to 1997 the oil palm sub-sector rose from roughly 106,000 hectares to 2.5 million hectares bringing substantial foreign exchange and employment benefits to the country in its wake. Today, the Indonesians and the neighbouring Malaysians enjoy a dominant market share of global palm oil production.[\[iii\]](#) Along with this broad revenue stream, the Indonesians have been very willing to supply an increasing global demand for pulp and paper and all of its attendant ancillary industries, which have expanded by nearly [700% since the late 1980s](#).

To make matters worse a ludicrously flawed initiative was set in motion by the Soeharto government in the mid-1990s to create a vast rice project on 1 million hectares of tropical peatland and swamps in Kalimantan without determining in advance whether it was suitable for rice cultivation. It wasn't. Carbon-rich, peat is hugely combustible and when it catches fire, as it did in 1997-98 and in 2002, it becomes extremely difficult to extinguish. It's estimated that as much as 60-90% of smoke haze pollution in Southeast Asia is attributable to burning peat bogs.[\[iv\]](#)

Not surprisingly, this unchecked deforestation and environmental degradation has come at a massive environmental cost. In 1982-83, a dry [El Niño](#) year, 3.2 million hectares of land went up in flames in East Kalimantan in what became known as the 'Great Fire of Borneo' and the billowing smoke swept across national boundaries in the region with total impunity.[\[v\]](#) Thereafter more often than not whenever the [El Niño Seasonal Oscillation](#) occurred (1986-87; 1991-92; 1994-95), the haze would make a poisonous return to Indonesia and the region at large. These earlier manifestations of the haze problem – grim though they had been – proved to be only a dress rehearsal for the real thing.

In 1997-98 in what was the strongest *El Niño* event ever recorded, 6.5 million hectares of forest was lost to fire in Kalimantan and 1.7 million in Sumatra.[\[vi\]](#) Across the Southeast Asian region as a whole, visibility was massively reduced, flights were cancelled, schools and offices were closed and masks of one form or another became an essential article of clothing for those who had the luxury of affording them. 70 million people were affected, nineteen deaths were directly attributed to the existence of the haze and over 40,000 were hospitalized for a range of asthmatic and upper respiratory tract infections. Smog of a kind never seen before paralysed the East Malaysian state of Sarawak and its capital Kuching. In October 1997, the pollution level

reached an unprecedented figure of 849.^[vii] According to the Asian Development Bank, the fires of 1997-98 cost the Indonesian republic alone between US\$8.9-9.7 billion.^[viii]

Clearly, something needed to be done to prevent this kind of man-made catastrophe from reoccurring, but finding the appropriate means of doing so has proved difficult. One of the problems lies in the fact that the most populous island of Java and its administrative capital of Jakarta remain virtually unaffected by the haze, so there isn't a powerful domestic lobby group within the republic that demands change and needs to be appeased.

Nonetheless, after years of virtuous, slow-moving and non-binding negotiations, the [ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution](#) was finally signed in November 2002 and came into existence in 2003, a few months after the latest episode of the haze.^[ix] A worthy initiative at the outset, the ASEAN Agreement has still to be ratified by Indonesia a decade later. An attempt was made in 2008, but failed to gain parliamentary approval. In short, the efforts to tackle the haze problem has been a depressingly familiar story of rampant corruption in which rich and powerful business magnates have been able to manipulate weak, decentralized authorities who haven't the means to thwart them.

Will things change in the short to medium term? According to a recent statement by Balthasar Kambuaya, the Indonesian environment minister, Indonesia [hoped to ratify the treaty by the end of the year or early in 2014.](#)^[x] But even if Kambuaya's word is his bond, the jury is still out on whether Indonesia's ratification will lead to a rapid improvement in tackling the haze problem. After all, 2014 is a presidential election year in which the Indonesians will choose a successor to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. None of the candidates will need to be reminded of Indonesia's exalted place within the region and none will want to be portrayed as weak, fumbling individuals in thrall to the political leaders of the less powerful states of ASEAN. But as things stand, Southeast Asia continues to remain a hostage to environmental misfortune. All it will take is for nature to intervene with a scorching hot spell of dry weather allied to an unfavourable shift in the wind direction and the Singapore night race may not become the belle of the F1 ball any longer.

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^[i] *The Straits Times*, 20 June 2013

^[ii] Derwin Pereira, "Indonesia's mindset on haze casts pall on ties," *The Straits Times*, 22 June 2013

^[iii] Paruedee Nguitrageol, *Environmental Cooperation in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's regime for transboundary haze pollution* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011), p.106.

^[iv] Nguitrageol, *Environmental Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, pp.102-03.

^[v] *Ibid.*, p.57.

^[vi] Seth Jones, "ASEAN and Transboundary haze": 432.

^[vii] James Cotton, "The 'haze' over Southeast Asia: Challenging the ASEAN mode of regional engagement," *Pacific Affairs*, vol.72, no.3 (Fall 1999): 331-51.

^[viii] *Asian Development Bank, Final Report: Planning for Fire Prevention and Drought Management Project in Indonesia* (Manila, ADB, 1999), pp.xviii-xix.

^[ix] Seth Jones, "ASEAN and Transboundary haze": 436-46.

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