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The Return of the Haze: An Analysis of Singapore Government's Behavior Before and After the 2013 Haze Attack

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Abstract

This paper compares and analyses Singapore government's commitments towards the past haze phenomenon with the haze attack on 2013. In the past, Singapore seemed to be quite willing to tolerate hazy skies and choking smog caused by the haze; but the haze in June 2013 oversees significant change in Singapore's behavior from being half-hearted to fully commit in resolving the haze issue. There are many approaches to argue the change in government position, but this article argues that the main reason behind the change in Singapore's behavior is due to the persistent competition between various individuals and groups. This changing dynamics is well-captured by Liberalism school of thought. Though many scholars had looked into the haze issue in Southeast Asia, but only a limited number of studies have focused on states' behaviour. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge in the studies of Southeast Asia politics as well as to the haze issue, which is the

most pertinent issue in Southeast Asia region. This paper does not analyse how this incidence can induce social movement since haze is a periodical phenomenon. Moreover, the nature of this paper does not intend to include policy recommendation to the government because the theoretical framework employed focus more on explaining the interactions of different groups in the society and how it influences state's behavior.

Keywords: haze, Singapore, Liberalism, behavior, Southeast Asia

Introuduction

An almost annual visit of an 'Indonesian-born-child' to Southeast Asia countries, notably Malaysia and Singapore is no surprise for the people. Unlike previous brief visits, the presence of the 'child' in summer 2013 had left a deep mark on them, particularly on Singaporeans. Haze is the name of the child. In 1997, Southeast Asia was shrouded with thick smokes coming from forest burning in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Indonesian government was quick to put the blame on the harsh weather condition (dry season).

However, many have attributed the root cause of the forest fires to illegal clearing of the land using slash and burn technique (Varma 2003; Saiful 2008; Tan et al. 2009). This cost-effective land clearing was utilized not only by small landowners but was reportedly being used even by local firms and foreign giant corporations. Malaysian and Singaporean MNCs are among those who had set foot in Indonesia's logging and palm oil industries. Although those foreign firms have pledged to adhere to zero burning policy, there is however little incentives for them to walk their talk (Lee, 2013). In general, there are two reasons to explain the continuous use of fires for land clearing. The foremost explanation is the weak enforcement by local governments to punish those involved in illegal practice. Corruption practices are abundant in Indonesia, a common phenomenon to be found in developing country. It is therefore not a surprise for giant corporations to give bribe to local officers, politicians and other related authorities to close an eye while they set fires on land (Nguitraoool, 2011). Decentralisation system in Indonesia allows local government to take charge in planning and managing their

region without being scrutinized by Federal Government. This system enables corruption and bribery to prevail. However, the most important and major factor is because fire is the cheapest and fastest way to clear vast land (Varkkey, 2012). This method can reduce between USD 50 to USD 150 per hectare for land clearing. This method is therefore frequently used in accordance to the oil palm owners' interest – maximizing profits.

The occurrence of haze in 1997 has become the prime interest of many when its significant presence had brought great impact on economic, social and environment. The regional total loss in terms of economic, social and environment was expected to be USD 4.5 billion (Glover & Jessup, 2006).¹ The economic burden was shared between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in which Indonesia had shouldered 85 percent of the impact (Lee, 2013). A research commissioned by Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA) and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) had estimated the haze-related damage for Singapore at about USD 74.1 million in which tourism losses alone costs them USD 58.4 million (Glover & Jessup,

2006; Palanissamy, 2013). There are some haze-related losses beyond calculation. 1997 haze episode had been the worst in Singapore's recorded history where its PSI reading topped 226 (very unhealthy level) before the return of the haze in 2013. The number of outpatients doubled during the haze attack and many ailments have been made worse by the haze.

Haze returns in 2013

Countries shrouded by thick smokes are a common scene in Southeast Asia during dry season. It was spotted in 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2013 (Hamzah, 2013; Palanissamy, 2013). Singaporeans luxuriate in good air for almost a decade before experiencing serious haze pollution with the PSI reading exceeding 100 in October 2006 (unhealthy level). On top of that, in the month of October 2006 alone, losses were estimated to be at USD 50 million (Saiful, 2008). The haze in 2006 had prompted Singapore government to offer assistance package to Jambi, Indonesia. A master plan was developed through collaborative actions among Singapore, Indonesia's State Ministry of Environment (KLH) and Jambi local government in which Singapore pledged to assist Jambi to implement some selected Action Programme (APs) aimed at promoting sustainable land clearing practices. A sum of S\$1 million was poured in by Singapore for Jambi Master Plan (National Environment Agency, 2007/2008). This action was considered as one of the many practical and immediate measures taken by Singapore since the haze in 1997. However, Singapore-Jambi Initiative was intended only for two years and the program stalled after the deadline (Gill & Tan, 2013). According to Zubaidah (2013), reporter of *The Straits Times*, the equipment that the Singapore government had donated to monitor air and weather in Jambi is still highly reliable though it is no longer in use. Local officer had explained that the recording tape ran out and it is very expensive to replace. Since Singapore only commits for two years, the expenses to operate the equipment after the effective date must be borne fully by Indonesia, in which they are reluctant to make a commitment (Tacconi et al., 2007). Forest campaigners, Rudi Syaf had applauded Singapore's efforts but he further purported that Singapore-Jambi Initiative acted only as a mere reference (as cited in Zubaidah, 2013). The fact is, a long term commitment is deemed more effective than a short term ones.

In June 2013, the return of the haze had caused an alarming state. On 19 June 2013, the PSI reading for Singapore was recorded at 321, a level which was detrimental to human's health. The situation became hazardous when the PSI passes 300. The reading soared to as high as 401 on 21 June 2013, the worst in Singapore recorded history (Lee, 2013). The haze had stayed on pretty long and made worse by the wind blowing towards Singapore's direction. Pharmacies across the island were running low of N95 mask supply. Hospitals had been crowded with patients seeking treatments during haze. The number

of patients had skyrocketed in relations to respiratory illnesses (Lee, 2013). 9 million of N95 mask in store (daily disposal) to cater for 5 million of Singapore population had proven that Singapore government did not anticipate the haze returned to be so severe. Some opportunists had benefitted from this calamity by raising the price of masks and air-purifier. The 2013 haze had by far been the most damaging in Singapore history. Palanissamy (2013) had suggested Singapore economic losses at \$1 billion a week. Schools were closed and many were advised to stay indoor although the smog had even enveloped into homes. Local businesses and tourism were impacted the most in this haze crisis. The severe impact of the haze had aroused discontentment among the citizens and the dissatisfaction had been further enhanced by government's slow response in addressing and solving the haze issue. Singaporeans claimed that Inter-Haze Committee was established in haste when the PSI readings reached unhealthy levels and guidelines were only prepared following hazardous level in PSI. This was the very first time that haze phenomenon had caused civil unrest in Singapore. Public had demanded for a clearer national response in relations to the haze. Annoyed citizens had forced government to take immediate action to curb this issue. This pressurised Singapore government to ask Indonesian government to name companies that are involved in illegal burning regardless of ownership (Lee, 2013). This was also the very first time Singapore government had considered extending extra-territorial jurisdiction.² So, the question is: What is the reason behind the drastic behavior change of Singapore in the haze issue?

Persistent competitions between individuals and groups in the society

Liberalism is able to offer one plausible way of explaining the change in government's behavior. According to Liberalism, the international politics comprise of individuals and private groups, who are rational. Most of the time, actors avoid taking risk and always work towards organizing exchange and collective actions to promote differentiated interests. The greater social incentives induced these actors to cooperate and it is likely that they remained under such arrangements since they are very cautious of the cost and risk in pursuit of new gains.

However, in reality, there is no 'automatic' harmony of interests among individuals and groups. There are several factors that drive conflictual-societal demands, three of which Morascvik (1990) believes is important. They are 'divergent fundamental beliefs, conflict over scarce material goods, and inequalities in political power' (p. 517). In liberal view, state is not an actor but a 'representative institution' that is subjected to change by the competition between different social groups.

Therefore, state-society relations are believed to have significant influence on state behaviour in international politics. According to Moravcsik (1997:

513), ‘Societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences, that is, the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of government’. Drawing from this assumption about state-society relations, the changing behavior of Singapore government may well be explained by the persistent competition between individuals and groups in the society. Since state is a ‘representative institution’, it is by nature that the actions of the state will change through the conflictual demands of the different actors in the society.

As the following analysis will show, Singaporean government was willing to safeguard the interest of the oil palm owners in the past because they hold considerable amount of assets of the economy. However, the catastrophic impacts of the haze gravitate toward new demands from the actors in the society. These actors comprise of folks, local businessmen, non-governmental organizations, or any individuals or groups that had suffered during the 2013 haze returned, be it in terms of health or economy. Bearing most of the costs and risks from the haze, these groups exert pressures on the state to take actions that may contradict the interests of oil palm companies’ shareholders. Amounting new pressures and growing support for the opposition had compelled government to uphold the collective interests of these groups. As such, Liberalism argues that the dynamics of class relations within Singapore drives the change in Singapore government’s behavior.

Singapore’s behavioral change: Before and After 2013 Haze Attack

Ever since the first regional haze crisis in 1997, Singaporeans have been experiencing moderate effect of the haze coming from illegal forest burnings to make way for palm oil plantations and other cultivations. As usual when the haze hit the region, Singapore government will routinely ‘request’ Indonesian government to commit in combatting the haze by strengthening fire-fighting, upgrading their monitoring system and even sharing of information to curb the haze at early stages. There is no any clear national response from the Singaporean government except for verbal-annual-pledge to prevent smog from engulfing the region. Any explicit effort was only observable in the Singapore-Jambi Initiative (Gill & Tan, 2010). However, this programme was designed to last only for two years, far from being an effective and concrete plan pioneered by Singapore.

Singapore government’s lackadaisical attitude towards the haze issue can be explained by the influence of palm oil companies based in Singapore. Since these giant conglomerates have many investments in Singapore, they have considerably more social power as compared to the other groups in the society. This statement is further supported by Atlee (2008) in which he purported that, *“People with lots of money, muscle, status, intelligence, etc., can usually successfully influence other people. In most (but, significantly, not all) circumstances, they have more*

social power".

Wilmar International Ltd is one of the largest Singaporean Investment Holding Companies and the world's largest processor of palm oil. According to Reuters (7 August 2013), "*At the start of 2013, Wilmar had around 255,648 hectares of planted area, with about 73 percent in Indonesia, 23 percent in East Malaysia and 4 percent in Africa*". In addition, this giant corporation has over hundreds of subsidiaries across the world doing various businesses. On another note, Indonesian-owned palm oil companies, Asia Pacific Resources International (April) and Sinar Mas both have also established their headquarters in Singapore. These huge corporations listed in Singapore Stock Exchange have also expanded their investment to the field of construction building hotels, resorts and residential in Singapore and many parts of the world (Down to Earth, 2012)]

These huge conglomerates specifically three that are mentioned above were often being criticised by environmentalist. April and Sinar Mas land concessions in Riau are reportedly being homed to the majority of hotspots (BBC, 23 June 2013). This vital information had indicated that these companies or their subcontractors were consciously involved in open burning to clear land. Wilmar too does not have a good environmental record. Besides involving in illegal burning and deforestation, Wilmar also took communities' land without asking their consent and perform human abuses towards the local communities (Down to Earth, 2012). According to Newsweek's green rankings for 2012, Wilmar was ranked last out of 500 companies (Newsweek, 22 October 2012).

These large corporations have a great influence on the Singaporean economy as whole. Their influences are observable in the large amount of investments they hold in Singapore. Nonetheless, they also provided huge revenues to the government by paying taxes or by pouring in massive amount of foreign direct investment. According to Grain (2007), a non-profit international organization:

"Wilmar International holds around 435,000 hectares of oil-palm plantations and 25 refineries in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.. Through its alliance with ADM, it has a 300,000-tonne-per-year biodiesel refinery in Singapore... And when it comes to the important trade link in the biodiesel chain, Kuok owns Singapore-based Pacific Carriers – one of the largest shipping companies in South-east Asia"

In comparable, these big companies have more leverage than the other groups in the society. Thus, these large businesses often demanded government to carry out their preferences sometimes at the expense of the whole

community. This allegation is further affirmed by Moravcsik (1997: 518) in which he asserted that:

“No government rests on universal or unbiased political representation; every government represents some individuals and groups more fully than others. In an extreme hypothetical case, representation might empower a narrow bureaucratic class or even a single tyrannical individual, such as an ideal-typical Pol Pot or Josef Stalin”.

The owners of these giant corporations repeatedly tried to call in the aid of authority to ward off public discontentment. Singapore government is willing to support activities by these companies, sometimes willing to incur the side effect of the activities done outside their border. This explains why government takes no clear and immediate action to tackle haze outbreak. Singaporean government had always helped to ‘cover up’ for these corporations by dispersing free masks or setting up temporary committees to look into the haze issue or to extend short term assistance to Indonesia to mitigate forest fires such as Jambi Programme. Singapore government also had constantly feed the public with information that the forest burning is a natural cause and there is no foul play by Singapore-based companies. Over time, other groups and individuals have come to accept the fact that the forest fires were due to dry season or it was fires started by small owners thus delinking connection with Singapore home-based palm oil companies. They have been ‘cheated’ into accepting the side effect of the activities done by Singapore palm oil companies outside their borders. Since the side effect was insignificant and largely negligible, other groups and individuals do not pressure much on the government to resolve the haze issue. As most societal actors are risk-averse, they usually accept existing arrangements (Moravcsik, 1997)

Initially when the haze hit the region in 2013 recording unhealthy levels of PSI, Singapore authorities merely called Indonesia to express concern and offered assistance to put out fires. They reoffered their assistance the next day in a letter addressed to Minister Kambuaya, Indonesia. However as the severity of the haze got worst, the effect was felt by almost every individual in Singapore. The PSI readings had reached record high and the smog was suffocating Singaporeans. The number of tourist fell significantly; local businesses were forced to close for good, many were advised to stay home. Public discontentment had risen. Apparently, the haze becomes a source of conflict between different groups. While the oil palm owners would like the government to safeguard their stake by downplaying the side-effect of their operation outside Singapore, the individuals and groups that suffered most from the side-effect began to push the government to hold someone accountable for the haze.

As such, many individuals and groups began to pressure government to take necessary action to curb the haze problems including punishing Singapore based companies that were found to be involved in starting the forest fires. The pressure casts on Singapore government would also include the growing support for opposition parties (BBC News, 6 May 2006). Faced with the new demands from these groups which may affect its legitimacy, Singapore government changed its course. These groups' preferences were translated into practical actions when Singapore pressed Indonesia to ratify the Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, which they did in 2014 (ASEAN Organisation, 2015). The firm stance adopted by Singapore had received assurance from Indonesian authorities to take in-depth investigation into this matter and penalize those involved (The Jakarta Post, 25 June 2013). On the Singaporean side, Law Minister is even looking at the possibility of introducing extra-territorial laws to punish Singapore linked companies that are involved in starting the fires (Palanissamy, 2013).

Conclusion

As was shown in the analysis, distribution of power is very asymmetrical in the society. The influence of the giant conglomerates were significantly more than the normal citizens in the country for they hold many investments of the country. As such, it was no surprise when the state behaves in accordance to the interests of these conglomerates. However, things began to change in the wake of haze in 2013. The change could be explained by Liberalism, which argue that rational actors prefer to remain under existing cooperation but would possibly seek new arrangements if the gains were much more worthwhile. It turned out the past haze phenomenon had negligible effect on the people and so it caused no major response from individuals and groups. However, as many suffered air-related illnesses and economic losses because of the haze on a greater magnitude than in the past, people began to push government to uphold the collective interests. It seemed that coupled with the growing support for opposition, the Singaporean government had to abandon the interest of the oil palm owners and began to proactively pushed for the interest of the masses. From the Singapore case study, it is evident that there exists the competition between individuals and groups in influencing state's preferences thus behavior. In this sense, the assumption by Liberals can well explain the shift in Singapore's stance towards the haze issue.

Notes

¹ The estimated regional losses vary between sources. Throughout this article, data used will lay predominantly on research report conducted by EEPSEA and WWF.

² Singapore had drafted the Transboundary Haze and Pollution Bill that intend to penalize the entity for causing haze pollution in Singapore. Successful enactment of the bill would mean that Singapore government can penalize the person or corporate for causing haze even if the activities are carried outside of Singapore.

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