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The paradoxical (post-)politics of scale: exploring authoritarian state environmental policymaking in Brunei

Andrew P. Kythreotis  a,b,c

ABSTRACT

This article argues how the politics of scale is paradoxically used by the Bruneian state in environmental policymaking to legitimate its internal authoritarian regime. The literatures on post-politics, green authoritarianism and green as ‘spectacle’ are used in conjunction with personal observation findings on forestry protection and climate change policymaking processes, and triangulation with global environmental performance indices, to explore this paradox. The Bruneian state must justify a strong environmental policy implementation rhetoric, whilst simultaneously having to maintain its domestic authoritarian functioning that relies on fossil fuel extraction and exportation. It does this by engaging in a ‘consensual’ neoliberal post-politics that uses supra-national and international environmental policy frameworks and settings that are liberal democratic and polycentric in nature, through a ‘post-politics of scale’. This article contributes to the wider territory, politics and governance literature by illustrating how internal enviro-political tensions are remedied, inculcated across, and discursively influenced by, wider geographical spaces and politics beyond individual states, regardless of their political regime type.


KEYWORDS

environmental policy and politics; authoritarian and anti-democratic regimes; post-politics and green authoritarianism; mono- and polycentric governance; politics of scale; socio-spatial; neoliberalism; Brunei

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1. INTRODUCTION

Using the post-political as a principal underpinning theoretical framework, this article highlights how the Bruneian state internally legitimises and prioritises specific environmental issues to meet its own authoritarian, but neoliberal, ends by paradoxically using supra-national and international networks that are liberal democratic in nature. Arguably, authoritarian regimes have one specific commonality which is ‘a rejection of neoliberal hegemony and the articulation of genuine alternatives’ (McCarthy, 2019, p. 302). This suggests that a key tenet of authoritarian

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regimes is to reject neoliberalism (defined in the purest sense as free market capitalism). Furthermore, neoliberalism shapes the nature and processes of environmental policymaking in states (Coffey & Marston, 2013; Corson, 2010).

This raises the question of whether it is even possible for authoritarian regimes to effectively implement strong environmental policy for collective global environmental issues, whilst simultaneously being able to maintain their authoritarianism through monocentric state policy apparatus. The significant tension between authoritarian and democratic climate change governance in Southeast Asia has been recently highlighted (e.g., Marquardt et al., 2021a). Brunei offers an interesting case study of being an authoritarian state that selectively pursues neoliberal policies through fossil fuel extraction and exportation, despite being very different from other Asian counterparts (e.g., China and Middle Eastern countries) in how they project and draw from such neoliberal principles. Whilst China and the Middle East externally portray an overtly grandiose neoliberalism, Brunei is more understated. Despite this, fossil fuel exploitation has been described as the ultimate proxy and driver for neoliberalism to go unchecked (Kumar, 2022; Smith-Nonini, 2016; Tienhaara & Walker, 2021). For Brunei, its dependence on fossil fuels is no different to Western democratic states whose political economies are also underpinned by extractive neoliberalism. This journal has also published how the origins of neoliberalism lay in the rich philosophical traditions of liberal democracy (Galès, 2016; Peck, 2013). Kamat (2014, p. 67, quoting from Brown, 2003) problematises this notion further, arguing how ‘the distinctiveness of neoliberalism lies in the way democratic principles of freedom, rights and equality are merged so thoroughly with a market rationality that an emancipatory politics appears hopeless and unjustified’. Therefore, given Brunei’s authoritarian polity, how the Bruneian state manages its internal environmental policy processes are intrinsically linked to its pursuit of fossil fuel extraction and exportation and how it projects itself in external democratic polycentric governance networks.

The ‘post-political’ is a useful way to begin to theoretically contextualise the neoliberal (il)logics of environmental policymaking (Bryant, 2016; Featherstone, 2015; Kythreotis, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2010a; Swyngedouw & Ernstson, 2018; Weisser & Müller-Mahn, 2016). The central tenet of the post-political argues how contemporary democratic society has undergone a foreclosure of democratic politics whereby a technocratic and managerial consensus has delimited alternative politics from taking shape, organised fundamentally through the principles of the economic free market and the liberal state in order to maintain those very characteristics (for more complete explanations, see Mouffe, 2009; Rancière, 1999; and Žižek, 2009). Additionally, Kamat (2014) has argued how the post-political does not solely apply to Western democratic countries, it is globally pervasive, operating through ‘global policy formulation to local community interventions ... to form a post-ideological global impact on [economic] growth and democracy’ (p. 69). This article critically engages with how the authoritarian, post-political and relational geographies of a unique, understudied nation like Brunei influences their domestic environmental policymaking, when much of the literature assumes that tenets of liberal democracy and neoliberalism, for example, polycentricity are essential preconditions for more effective environmental policymaking (Baber & Bartlett, 2020; Cole, 2015; Ostrom, 2010; Pickering et al., 2020). Unpacking these enviro-political tensions in Brunei reveals how their process of domestic environmental policymaking are remedied, inculcated across and discursively influenced by wider geographical spaces and politics beyond individual states, regardless of political regime type.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 theoretically and experimentally explores fusing the literatures on the post-political, green authoritarianism and green as ‘spectacle’ in Brunei as a geographical foil to the recent burgeoning of the post-political *in toto* as an all-encompassing explanation to Western state neoliberal responses to environmental policymaking. Section 3 gives a brief description of the geography and socio-economic demography

of Brunei and how this is contextually important in creating the conditions for a 'post-politics of scale' to legitimate authoritarian state environmental policymaking. Section 4 empirically supports the post-politics of scale through an examination of environmental performance of Brunei through certain global indicators, triangulated with the author's personal observational experiences engaging with environmental policy and governance stakeholders involved in forestry protection (the Heart of Borneo (HoB) initiative of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, 2019)) and climate policymaking (the implementation of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement (United Nations, 2015) throughout 2018. The conclusion critically reflects on the findings and the more recent 'whole of nation' approach to environmental policymaking in Brunei. This article therefore provides new empirical and theoretical insights on the debate of the role of territory, politics and governance in authoritarian states.

2. THE POST-POLITICAL, GREEN AUTHORITARIANISM AND 'GREEN AS SPECTACLE': THEORETICALLY ARTICULATING THE SCALAR TENSIONS BETWEEN NEOLIBERALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING IN BRUNEI

This article engages with the literatures on post-politics, green authoritarianism and green as 'spectacle' to explore the scalar politics of environmental policymaking in Brunei. The Bruneian state internally implements strong monocentric environmental policies in the areas of forestry protection and climate change that might appear more effective or beneficial for environmental policy outcomes, whilst paradoxically having to maintain economic (over)reliance on fossil fuel production which legitimise the neoliberal polycentric governance (il)logics of globalisation that have systemically caused environmental depletion in the first place. Brunei attempts to present itself to the world as a good environmental governance actor, which supports the idea that some key tenets of liberal democracy such as polycentrism in states, is not necessarily a prerequisite for successful environmental policymaking (Sonnenfeld & Taylor, 2018). In the very least, liberal democracy and the pursuit of neoliberal policies by states are actually a tool for a 'politics of unsustainability' (Blühdorn, 2019) when thinking about how states use the politics of scale to pursue (contradictory) economic and environmental goals as a means to maintain internal state functionality. As Jessop (2016) has quite rightly argued in this journal, socio-spatial relations are objects and means of government and governance in states.

The Brunei economic–environment tension is supported by geographical research on the relationship between extractive neoliberalism and ecological/climate crises (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Genschel & Seelkopf, 2015; Huber, 2018; Malin et al., 2022). Likewise there has been a rich scholarly tradition in environmental-cum-political geographical research that further conceptualises the broader geopolitical tensions between global state neoliberalism and environmental policymaking and politics, arguing for greater political and territorial interrogation of this (Huber, 2019; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). In this journal, Wachsmuth (2019) has rightly argued the importance of analysing post-fossil socio-spatial dimensions beyond their own spatial boundedness (city/urban), taking account of 'extra-territorial pre- and co-requisites' (p. 138). Thinking beyond the city is required to understand why fossil fuel extractivism continues unchecked (Pincetl, 2020). The approach to state environmental policymaking in Brunei (like all countries) is inextricably tied to all socio-spatial geographical dimensions, territories, places, scales and networks, etc. Particularly the way in which these socio-spatial dimensions are pervaded by a global-wide reliance on fossil fuel extraction that is continually justified and 'consensualised' through the post-political rationale.

The spatial relationality of environmental policy implementation in states are deeply linked to post-political writings that argue how there is now no place for an alternative politics of the

environment beyond technocratic and apolitical state management of the environment and its resources to continue global neoliberalism unchecked (Swyngedouw, 2010a, 2013). Modern liberal democracy is continually being reduced through this form of technocratic governance in which the politics of the environment are ‘settled’ through a (false) consensus, enabling those in power to prevent alternative environmental politics coming to the fore. This (re)perpetuates neoliberal economics through fossil fuel extraction as the principal paradigm of economic growth by states which also exacerbates anthropogenic climate change unchecked (Swyngedouw, 2013). There is dissensus rather than consensus (Rancière, 1999). To maintain this external appearance of being a good global environmental governance actor, the Bruneian state remains mostly receptive, or at least, tolerant, to certain neoliberal and democratic foreign conditions that paradoxically impinge upon the anti-democratic nature of its political system. This has been noted by Wells (2020) who argued how the Myanmar government integrated democratic principles into post-political forms of governance. For countries that are deemed authoritarian and undemocratic, like Brunei, this elucidates how internal environmental-cum-political state tensions are remedied, inculcated across, and discursively influenced by, wider geographical spaces beyond their authoritarian borders.

The post-political has been well used by environmental-political theorists to unpack the environment-economic tension within ‘liberal democratic’ regimes. Such explanations show how decision-making processes, on the face of it, in liberal Western democratic states that are governed by polycentric governance, delimit environmental possibilities by reducing such spaces to technocratic political vacuums that render them non-political or anti-democratic (Bracking, 2015; Kenis, 2018; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2013). Yet the post-political condition does not solely pervade the way a national state governs a particular issue in response to global economic pressures, subnational spaces and places (Haughton et al., 2016; Weisser & Müller-Mahn, 2016) are also subject to its depoliticising totalities giving the post-political has an inherent socio-spatial character beyond mere political meaning. As Swyngedouw (2011, n.p.) claims, ‘[T]he question is now about bringing environmental issues into the domain of politics as has been the case until now but rather about how to bring the political into the environment.’ Regardless of whether liberal democracies are dominated by ‘left’ or ‘right’ politics, state environmental policymaking has arguably been depoliticised as to ‘consensualise’ and justify free-market neoliberalism (Rancière, 1999; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014).

Matijasevich (2019) supports this, arguing how the post-political is more likely to find footing in liberal democracies than in authoritarian regimes like Thailand and Singapore. This is because liberal democratic regimes are freely polycentric which allow different ‘creative’ forms of neoliberal capitalism to flourish through free markets and global economic integration, thus legitimating neoliberal environmental politics more easily. But this is not necessarily the case. The techno-managerial component of post-politics can be seen in firmly established authoritarian regimes like Brunei, whose political system is fundamentally monocentric and authoritarian. Symons (2014) and Büscher (2010) argue how technical anti-politics, which is always associated with environmental projects, reduces politics to technical-economic decision-making that reinforces neoliberalism, as well as helping justify and legitimate both the positions of certain actors and policy precedents already present within the (environmental) policy process. Similarly, Paprocki (2015) has cited how more pressing environmental historical legacies like land tenure rights and associated local power dynamics in less democratic countries like Kenya (i.e., a hybrid regime) have been depoliticised in favour of an anti-political, technocratic international climate discourse around UNFCCC loss and damage. Such research highlights how it is important to understand whether the post-political condition is solely applicable to polycentric, liberal democratic states. Its usefulness as a socio-spatial analytical device to unpick the nuanced mechanisms of environmental policymaking can be applied to authoritarian regimes like Brunei too given its unequivocal social-spatial embeddedness and pervasiveness.

To anticipate the findings detailed in section 4, the socio-spatial anti-politics of environmental policymaking in Brunei were observed by the author in terms of forestry protection policy through the HoB initiative, and the climate policy process by which Brunei's UNFCCC NDCs were made. Domestic climate policymaking in Brunei was seen by government officials as an economic project legitimated by wider territorial international policy discourses grounded in techno-managerial responses to mitigating climate emissions (e.g., UNFCCC, Paris Agreement). The HoB initiative also drew on supra-national policy discourses by courting external collaboration in developing forestry protection across the Borneo region through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Both climate and forestry protection policy processes also evacuated certain actors from the policy processes, particularly non-governmental actors giving environmental politics an intra-territorial dimension. Such environmental projects certainly assist the Bruneian state in maintaining a supra-national image of an important Southeast Asian regional actor in collective environmental policymaking. Yet intriguingly, the internal monocentric polity of Brunei does hold certain advantages for them *appearing* to be more able to tackle global environmental crises related to climate change and forestry protection, above and beyond multiscale policy legitimation. This suggests that relying on post-political explanations to *solely* explain the totalising antinomies of neoliberalism as influencing environmental policy outcomes in states (McCarthy, 2013) is more nuanced than many post-political commentators (e.g., Kythreotis, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2010b, 2011, 2013) have previously suggested.

But any discussion of environmental post-politics in Brunei must also consider ideas of how environmental policy is implemented in authoritarian states beyond the form of post-political techno-managerial discourse. This is where the literature on green authoritarianism and green as 'spectacle' (or symbolic environmentalism) can be theoretically explored and fused with the post-political condition to illustrate the paradoxical, nuanced politico-spatial nature of environmental policymaking in Brunei. Authoritarian states like China and Qatar have created major fossil-fuel driven environmental projects that conform to a particular grandeur way of nations responding to the global ecological crisis (Koch, 2014; Ren, 2012). For example, the idea of the 'eco-city' does project an ill-perceived policy panacea to the global ecological crisis, whilst simultaneously conforming to the neoliberal growth paradigm, regardless of state political regime type. However, such grand projects are inherently post-political too because they are not built upon an openly contestable environmental politics. Rather, they are fundamentally about saving carbon as a commodity, and such infrastructure is physically built on strict managerial and technocratic principles that have their provenance in wider neoliberal globalisation and global climate regime discourses (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019).

McCarthy (2019) has problematised the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism further, as more complex, positing the reason why such states have come to power was to reverse 'major elements of neoliberal globalization, yet still they are often continuing to pursue and deepen neoliberal policies in many areas' (p. 303). Brunei falls into this line of reasoning in the way it pursues and draws from neoliberalism, via a politics of scale, which is more understated and strategically selective. This is contra the grandiose projects of anti-democratic, rapidly developing economies like China and the Middle Eastern oil states, which reek of the neoliberal paradigm of overt consumption whilst Brunei does not usually (or intentionally) symbolically parade grand environmental projects to an international audience like China and Qatar (the recent 2022 FIFA World Cup is a prime example) have. Its 'audience' are first and foremost its own domestic citizens and political power is not ostensibly wielded, or even thought about in predominantly supra-national or global ways as such; politics are internalised to the Sultanate and its national philosophy, 'Melayu Islam Beraja' (MIB) (see section 3). This is certainly very different to the geopolitical image that China projects globally. Koch (2018, p. 135) astutely describes Brunei as a 'representational economy' which 'are those practices involved in representing and interpreting space and the material world, including urban landscapes.' Whilst the urban

landscape in Brunei's capital city, Bandar Seri Begawan, is dominated by many spectacular buildings laced with gold and finely trimmed well-watered grounds, its iconic buildings are decentred and do not dominate a particular area within the city, and so the urban landscape is not intended for global tourist consumption. Rather, as Koch (2018, pp. 140ff.) suggests, such urban representation presents an image of the Sultan as a benevolent ruler who cares about his people. This enables the politics of the country to continue, predominantly unchallenged by its citizens. In this sense, Brunei is different to other neighbouring Southeast Asian authoritarian regimes like Thailand, which has periodically struggled with community and non-governmental actors confronting the state on environmental issues like forestry protection (Forsyth, 2019).

Yet despite Brunei's reluctance to open itself up fully to the global stage in the way that other authoritarian regimes have, its monocentric polity is inevitably exposed to the pervading powers of global 'zombie neoliberalism' (this pejorative term refers to how neoliberalism has died but keeps stumbling on) (Peck, 2012). As a member of the Commonwealth and ASEAN, Brunei craves perception as a country that does not renege on important contemporary societal issues that require active involvement in liberal democratic collective geopolitics like environmental stewardship, outside of its borders. This may seemingly give the Bruneian regime some external legitimisation, despite it being viewed as authoritarian by the world 'looking in'. So paradoxically, even though it shuns the geopolitical limelight, involvement in a degree of supra-national and international collectivism remains vital for Brunei to maintain its internal political system. Therefore, Brunei internally justifies certain political approaches to policy problems that can often be contradictory in nature, namely reinforcing uneven state accumulation practices at the expense of social, environmental and/or political justice (McCarthy, 2019). These governance (il)logics suggest that reconciling environmental with economic growth can only be a success if liberal democracy allows a diversity of state and non-state stakeholders to engage with formal state policymaking mechanisms. Key literature tends to support the notion that successful environmental policymaking has to take place in polycentric systems to create more effective environmental policy (e.g., Cole, 2015; Ostrom, 2010). Yet Brunei presents its environmental policymaking processes as if a polycentric and democratic polity may not necessarily be a prerequisite for successful environmental policymaking (Sonnenfeld & Taylor, 2018), even though the environmental policymaking outcomes often appear to be weak through external measures. Brunei exhibits an economic-environment tension through its environmental policymaking practices that chimes with the central managerial and technocratic tenets of the post-political. But it also illustrates certain competencies in the processes of environmental policymaking that actually expose the weaknesses of the democratic condition in making the state more eco-conscious (Blühdorn, 2019). This is empirically illustrated through the observational experiences of the author engaging with forestry protection and climate policymaking stakeholders. Interestingly, these observations also reveal a more nuanced layer of multiscalar neoliberal conditions that impinge upon the anti-democratic nature of Brunei's internal political system. These conditions show how Brunei's internal enviro-political state tensions are remedied, inculcated across, and discursively influenced by, wider geographical spaces beyond its borders. For understanding global environmental politics more widely, this has politico-spatial implications in the way social and political theorists apply post-political arguments to environmental policymaking in authoritarian state regimes. The next section introduces Brunei as a unique case study to explore these multiscalar political and environmental nuances.

3. A BACKGROUND TO BRUNEI: A UNIQUE CASE STUDY IN STATE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING?

To understand why Brunei is a unique case study in state environmental policymaking it is important to forelay its social, economic, and religious background to reveal its interesting

multiscalar policymaking dynamics. Brunei, known as the 'Abode of Peace', is a small Islamic sovereign Sultanate state located on the north coast of Borneo in Southeast Asia with an area less than 6000 km² and a population of under 500,000. It is surrounded by the Malaysian state of Sarawak, although separated into two parts by the Sarawak district of Limbang. Gaining independence from the UK in 1984, the country has been in a state of political emergency and martial law since 1962. Under the full executive authority of His Majesty the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah (who is also the Prime Minister, Finance Minister, and Defense Minister – hereafter, 'the Sultan'), Brunei has been a member of the Commonwealth and ASEAN since 1984, suggesting, on the face of it, a willing active involvement in the wider geopolitical community. The discovery of oil and natural gas in Brunei's territories have resulted in extensive economic development, making Brunei one of the richest nations in the world, with Brunei ranking fourth in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (one place behind its close neighbour, Singapore) (World Bank, 2017a). Its income is highly dependent on exporting its oil and gas reserves (fuels), which in 2017 totalled nearly 90% of all exports (World Bank, 2017b). Estimates of contribution to GDP are 60.3% compared with the second nation on that list, Kuwait which is 46.5% (Sheffield, 2015). These statistics starkly illustrate Brunei's dependence on its fossil fuel reserves. With the country having 0% public debt of the national GDP, its citizens also enjoy large state subsidies. However, these subsidies can arguably be interpreted as an active attempt by the Sultan to maintain sovereign power and control, and to prevent citizens from creating civil unrest. Notwithstanding this, and from personal observation, it is clear Bruneian citizens do revere the Sultan (and his family). He has arguably created a more stable economic and social infrastructure in the country during his reign, with robust education and health systems on par with many advanced Western welfare state systems. The state also supports many of its citizens, who are employed as government workers (Heritage.org, 2019). As such, Brunei also ranks 39th on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2018), much higher than many of its Southeast Asian counterparts.

Therefore, the economic and social demographics of Brunei suggest it is a highly developed country like many Western nations whose wealth has been built upon fossil fuel extraction. Yet its internal authoritarian political nature seems inconducive to the global tenets of neoliberalism that extol the virtues of liberal democracy, namely the right to open domestic markets to foreign competitors. How does the Bruneian state manage such tensions in its environmental policymaking given Brunei needs to court external foreign markets to sell its fossil fuels? Brunei does 'strategically select' and court external economies to support its economy, with China and close allies Singapore (whose currency is paired with the Bruneian dollar), being obvious external collaborators and investors (Sin, 2018; Xinhua, 2021). Yet the pervasiveness of neoliberalism – defined in the fullest sense of international markets and competition having free reign to directly influence the political economy of a country – is also limited by an authoritarian state political system which can, when necessary, selectively act as a counter to, or solicitor of, external market forces. Whilst the Bruneian state is somewhat protected from certain forms of foreign political economy exposure because of the nature of its internal political system, this also limits citizen exposure from internationalised market forces. Despite this, there is, ironically, still evidence of international Western consumption in quotidian commercial spaces like the fast-food chains Burger King, Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken, which are ever-present in all Bruneian malls. The paradoxical illusion of Brunei rejecting many political and cultural tenets of Western origin is soberly brought to the fore through the state maintaining its economic development through fossil fuel reliance and consumption which is, arguably the ultimate proxy for global neoliberalism (Huber, 2009). Yet it is also Brunei's sensitive social and religious conditions that directly influence its policymaking conditions. Climate policymaking and action in Southeast Asia are highly dependent on the unique socio-political contexts of the country in question (Marquardt et al., 2021b).

The process of environmental policymaking in Brunei must be understood in the context of the social and political conditions created through its national philosophy, ‘Melayu Islam Beraja’ (MIB), adopted by the Sultan since independence in 1984. MIB is ‘a blend of Malay language, culture, and Malay customs, the teaching of Islamic laws and values and the monarchy system which must be esteemed and practiced by all’ (Government of Brunei Darussalam, 2006). Even students at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) cannot pass their undergraduate degree without completing the ‘MIB module’. UBD is not autonomous from the Bruneian state (the Sultan is Chancellor) and all academics are classed as civil servants. Hence, secularism is publicly frowned upon in Brunei, with the Islamic faith heavily influencing all quotidian spaces of society. This has been consolidated through the adoption of the first phase of Shariah Law in 2014, and in April 2019 a second, stricter phase which applies to Muslims and even non-Muslims (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). The politics of Brunei is an extremely sensitive subject intra-state, because of MIB’s influential and intertwining role in social, cultural, religious, political and economic conditioning, even though there is limited space for passive political dissent and criticism of particular issues within the state (but not directly aimed at Islam or the Sultanate) (Müller, 2015).

Despite its social conditioning through MIB, Brunei is an anachronistic state with many social, economic and religious contradictions, yet it enjoys relative political stability (Croissant & Lorenz, 2018), even though Western political science discourse would describe it as a monocentrically authoritarian regime. These contradictions spillover into the under-researched environmental policymaking domain, making Brunei an interesting and unique case study for critical social scientists. This is the focus of the next section.

4. FORESTRY PROTECTION AND CLIMATE POLICYMAKING: ARTICULATING THE ECONOMIC–ENVIRONMENT TENSION IN THE POLITICO-SPATIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF BRUNEI

The economic–environment tension is starkly revealed through Brunei being an authoritarian state whose ties with a neoliberal hegemony are obvious given its continued reliance on fossil fuel extraction. As expected, Brunei performs mediocly on many global indices for how countries address their environmental challenges. In the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) compiled by Yale University, Brunei ranks 71st overall out of 180 nations for environmental performance, 89th out of 180 for biodiversity and habitat and 79th out of 180 for climate policy (Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy, 2022). These results are not too bad when you compare against Brunei’s greenhouse gas (GHG) per capita, where it ranks 172nd out of 180. Given these results, examining more closely the processes of environmental policymaking through biodiversity and climate change makes for an interesting comparison.

The author had the opportunity to observe and experience the governance machinations of state environmental policymaking through an invitational advisory role in the Prime Minister’s Office in relation to Brunei’s implementation of NDCs for the UNFCCC Paris Agreement.¹ The author also had some contact with government officials at public events showcasing the Temburong rainforest, and in particular its place in the HoB, a multi-state policy initiative between Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to sustainably manage (rather than conserve) Borneo’s rainforest. This article shows through personal examination of the governance of climate change and forestry protection, how the Bruneian state internally prioritises certain environmental issues over others. It also demonstrates how the state excludes (and includes) certain groups over consultation and decisions to maintain an external image of good environmental governance, despite its paradoxical and anachronistic internal and external political geographies.

Through helping frame and advising on Brunei’s first NDCs and informal discussion and personal observation of forestry protection policies related to HoB with government officials, the author was able to ascertain specific information on the broader governance processes of

environmental policymaking. Such processes could not be ascertained through other qualitative (e.g., interviews) and quantitative methods (e.g., questionnaires). Whilst undertaking covert participant observation can be interpreted as an unethical research practice, if a researcher was to instead interview or send questionnaires to those Bruneian government officials involved in environmental policy implementation, a specific pre-determined government position would have been adopted by the respondents from the onset, that only reported the positive aspects of Bruneian environmental policy, due to the stringent censorship rules in place within Brunei for academic research. Therefore, participant observation – the personal experiences and observations of the author – was the only viable research method to ascertain more ‘objective’ knowledge on the practicalities and nuances of governance processes related to environmental policymaking, even though there are scholarly arguments that a researcher can never be objective and subjective simultaneously whilst conducting participant observation (Ratner, 2002). However, for social science research, covert participant observation has been deemed extremely valuable and only possible for understanding particular sensitive issues (Roulet et al., 2017). While the author is cognisant that supplementing personal experience and observation with other methodological tools like in-depth interviews would ordinarily improve objectivity and validity of the research findings, due to the political ‘closed’ system in Brunei, more covert forms of participant observation were deemed essential in being able to ascertain greater objectivity in reflexively interpreting the machinations of Bruneian state environmental policymaking (for a precedent, see Goode, 1996). Fakhri and Purwaningrum (n.d.) have also argued that this is sometimes necessary when conducting observational research in certain political and socio-cultural contexts, drawing from Erikson’s (1967) idea of ‘disguised observation’. The author decided that disguised observation and personal experience were essential, as asking for research permits from the state would only result in censorship of any research findings that would potentially cast Brunei’s policymaking practices in a bad light, pre-empting what Koch (2013, p. 394) calls ‘state-scripted speech’ on environmental policy. Furthermore, the researcher was a national from another country which made it easier to conduct research more safely and objectively without the fear of state reprisals, as in comparison to a local researcher conducting the research (Janenova, 2019). For a more extensive geographical debate on conducting research in closed authoritarian systems see the special issue, ‘Field Methods in ‘Closed Contexts’: Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places’ in *Area* (2013).

Regarding climate policymaking processes firsthand in Brunei, the author accepted an invitation to sit on an advisory panel for Brunei’s NDCs for the UNFCCC Paris Agreement. Acceptance of this invitation was not however based upon initially having the pre-meditated intention to critique Bruneian climate policymaking. It was a genuine acceptance of an invitation to advise objectively, given the author’s previous experience in environmental policy scholarship. There was no initial intention of acting covertly to gain knowledge in a clandestine way, but as the realpolitik of climate policymaking in Brunei became more clearer to the author through subsequent meetings and emails with government officials, it was decided to explore the policymaking process further as a critical environmental political geographer, and not allude to any government officials that there was an intention to publish any academic work on environmental politics in Brunei. The author then attended certain public events related to other environmental issues, and these were typically centred around forestry protection and biodiversity, given Brunei’s unique geographical location in equatorial rainforest. These events provided an opportunity to informally learn about other aspects of environmental policymaking beyond the invited climate role. The circumstances of data gathering then, were moreover organic and experiential, rather than intentionally covert, which fortuitously, eliminated any pre-determined personal subjectivities surrounding the processes and outcomes of environmental policymaking in Brunei.

4.1. Forestry protection policymaking

The first example of environmental policymaking in Brunei revolves around the HoB initiative, which aimed ‘to conserve the biodiversity of the HoB for the benefit of the people who rely upon it through a network of protected areas, sustainable management of forests and other sustainable land uses’ (WWF, 2019). Through personal observation and informal conversations with official attendees at public events held in malls around Brunei, the author ascertained three important interrelated findings/themes in relation to forestry protection policy in Brunei and how authoritarian regimes give the impression of good environmental governance. First, the Bruneian state takes the HoB initiative very seriously. Second, to consolidate forestry policy the Bruneian state actively positions tourism policy around the HoB initiative. Third, the interlinking of forestry policy and tourism policy highlights a broader observation of the way that certain environmental policies like forestry protection may require governance through both anti-democratic and liberal democratic processes. Hence, the post-democratic nature of forestry protection policymaking in Brunei relies (paradoxically) on monocratically governed state autocracy, whilst simultaneously relying on liberal democratic spaces outside of its own territories through participatory collaborations with Malaysia and Indonesia, and neoliberalised eco-tourism to ensure the image of a good environmental state. Regionally, Brunei does rank slightly higher (89th) than Malaysia (106th), Indonesia (107th) and Thailand (108th) in terms of biodiversity out of 180 nations (Yale Centre for Environmental Policy and Law, 2022).

Allen and Cochrane (2010, p. 1076) have argued how the post-political condition relies on ‘an assemblage of distributed authority in which power is continually negotiated and renegotiated’. Within liberal democratic states this ‘assemblage’ is usually managed by the state through local government agents that smooth a path of political and policy consensus through wider state apparatus support. However, the Bruneian context is slightly different because power is not usually up for negotiation through polycentric governance, and local government officials do not have the blessing of the Bruneian state to enact semi-autonomous policies that can achieve specific national policy objectives. Rather, the Sultan directs top-down policy orders to his ministers, that are cascaded downwards and must be accurately enforced. Hence, there is no leeway for state political officials to pragmatically enforce (environmental) policies as a ‘means to an end’ (like in most Western liberal democracies) unless they have direct authorisation from the Sultan. Government officials have little or no political agency because from observation and conversation with many of Brunei’s government workers, they are just administrative vessels that enforce policy *verbatim* from the Sultanate above. Such a top-down process could be deemed more beneficial for achieving a more rapid transition to more effectively aligned environmental policymaking.

Direct top-down enforcement is certainly exemplified in the way that HoB, forestry protection and tourism policy are strategically aligned together at the public events the author attended. From observation, only state-legitimised groups had stands at such events – state officials from tourism, HoB and forestry protection alongside state approved ‘non-state’ groups like Green Brunei and some established university society groups that had government ratification. Here we see a perfect example of post-political foreclosure of autonomous civil groups and politics in Brunei at seemingly public-facing events. This is contrary to other authoritarian Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and Myanmar, where civil society activity success was partly contingent upon the tactics, strategies and activities of environmental non-governmental organisations (Simpson & Smits, 2018). In Brunei, if the non-governmental organisation (NGO) does not get the blessing of the state, it has no place in the policy process. Rather, the state bestowed the illusion of NGO activity and therefore democratic governance, by strategically granting the NGO Green Brunei access to public events to protect non-governmental dissent. This compares with the micro-geographies of territorially positioning stands away from dissenting climate activists that diverged from the techno-managerial policy approach to climate mitigation at the 2015 Paris Conference of the Parties (Weisser & Müller-Mahn, 2016).

More interestingly, the Bruneian experience of forestry protection policy paradoxically shows how the state forecloses some liberal democratic values and promotes others. For example, on one hand, the liberal democratic value of polycentricity in the governance of environmental policy is foreclosed by not allowing greater civil society participation in forestry protection events – only Green Brunei was allowed at such events. This is reflected and reified through Brunei's strict authoritarian and monocentric political system that reduce statehood to the Bruneian national identity through the dominant MIB discourse. Hence, Western democratic ideas of localism, placemaking, political civil alterity and so on are made politically vacuous, even illegal, by the Bruneian state in all policymaking discourses, as nothing is more important than the maintenance of the Sultanate through state apparatus, although the politics that enables such executive control is highly nuanced. Hence, statehood in Brunei is not defined through traditional Western notions of institutional ensembles with multiple boundaries, nor limited institutional fixity and no substantive unity, with its political apparatus and institutions constantly evolving (see Jessop, 2007). Even though state sovereignty is sacrosanct in Brunei, the Bruneian state is, in essence, reduced to the institutional fixity of the Sultanate and the MIB discourse that underpins this. State officials and elements of state apparatus, let alone NGOs, cannot act strategically in their own right – they are monolithic vessels used to legitimate the Sultanate and MIB.

On the other hand, the state also promotes Brunei's forests through other liberal democratic values, namely the neoliberal discourse of state-driven environmental tourism, by telling the world their forests are open for eco-tourism through global tourist outlets like Lonely Planet (Foxe, 2018). Nothing could be greener as 'spectacle' than this, but only when you are situated within the Bruneian state looking inwards. This strategy echoes with the idea of 'eco-island traps' where certain island states get locked in to the 'unsustainability' of eco-tourism (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017). The nature of forestry protection policy in Brunei is therefore not a result of liberal democracy having free reign to influence state policy via polycentric multi-stakeholder governance. It is rather the Bruneian state strategically using some components of environmental neoliberalism alongside a withdrawal of civil society agency through its monocentric political system to promote forestry protection. This type of strategic state governmentality approach retains certain elements of the post-political and green authoritarianism – publicly positioning the HoB as a collaborative and consensus-driven supra-national environmental project between Borneo nations, internally evacuating critical civil agency from the Bruneian forestry protection narrative using MIB to justify this, and using the neoliberal discourse of state-driven ecotourism and green as 'spectacle' as central to its domestic forestry protection policy. This political strategy certainly works for Brunei's forestry protection policy narrative, given that in comparison to its Borneo counterparts, Malaysia and Indonesia, it has been more successful in protecting its rainforest (Bryan et al., 2013). Hence, the rhetoric around environmental policymaking serves to repoliticise forestry protection as a collaborative policy project, but also depoliticises efforts to address them collaboratively through evacuating equitable, alternative politics by using the monocentric political system and the MIB mantra as nuanced devices for policy legitimation (Saguin, 2018).

4.2. Climate change policymaking

The second example, climate policymaking, also draws from components of post-politics and green authoritarianism, particularly in terms of legitimising and evacuating certain actors from policy processes. To illustrate this, what follows is an examination of how the initial formulation of the NDC document for the UNFCCC Paris Agreement in 2018 firstly involved certain selected stakeholders, and secondly the use of certain prescribed and reductive knowledge that demonstrate a 'consensual' approach to climate policy formulation in Brunei that is inherently 'techno-managerial'. Following this is a critical discussion and questioning of what this green authoritarianism and post-political condition with regards to climate change policy may mean for Brunei in the future, given that the state now heavily relies on natural gas reserves for

maintaining its GDP. In this case, the author was more closely aligned to the machinations of the governance networks that had the potential to (albeit limitedly) influence climate policy as, in a sense, the author was part of the (post-political) process as an 'epistemic' actor (Haas, 1992), having an invitational advisory role in Brunei's NDC submission to the UNFCCC.

The first governance issue observed symptomatic of the post-political condition was the membership of the team who worked on the NDC submissions. There were representatives from different government Ministries and Departments including from the Ministry of Energy and Industry (MEI), who had designated responsibility for formulating the NDCs for submission to the UNFCCC; the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT) who managed the Forestry Department (and thus the HoB initiative); and the Department of Electrical Services (DES). There were also representatives from the electricity sector (although these companies are directly linked to, and governed by, the Bruneian state (Sultanate)) and from universities (Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Universiti Teknologi Brunei). Interestingly, in the initial meeting there were no representatives from civil society groups, even state-sanctioned ones like Green Brunei. Such (a lack of) representation demonstrates the nature of political processes in relation to the governance of formal Bruneian state policymaking processes.

The above governance model is certainly different to what one would expect to see in most liberal democratic states, where political leadership is a central factor in creating the conditions where market and civil actors have more freedom to participate in lobbying government to mobilise policy change (Pratchett, 2004). In Brunei, political leadership under the Sultanate becomes the most important factor in delimiting civil and market polycentrism. However, contrary to many established and ongoing political science arguments surrounding the importance and necessity of non-state governance in laying the foundation for 'good' environmental governance (e.g., Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2017; Bennett & Satterfield, 2018; Cashore, 2002), this maybe not such a bad thing in terms of policy pragmatism. For example, James Lovelock argued how urgent and wicked problems like climate change to be truly solved through political means might require liberal democracy being put 'on hold' (Hickman, 2010). This may mean streamlining governance processes from the networked governance complexities of multi-actor polycentrism that have previously been deemed beneficial for more effective climate policymaking (Cole, 2015; Ostrom, 2010). This makes sense to a certain degree given that various non-state actors have different and often conflicting vested interests and roles within environmental governance systems at both national (e.g., Fisher & Leifeld, 2019) and international (e.g., Abbott, 2012; Kythreotis, 2015) climate policy scales. There are many different 'publics' involved in environmental governance engagement, and their practices are also spatialised in terms of 'where practices take place, how they are scaled, their imagined geographies of influence and how they perform geographical and topological connections' (Eden, 2017, pp. 5–6). It can therefore be argued that non-state roles need to be disaggregated before even determining whether they legitimately contribute to good environmental governance. Additionally, it can be further argued that non-state actors have no legitimate reason to be directly involved in policy processes and it is rather the distinct role of the state to ensure good governance is enacted (whatever form this may take according to the state). Arguably, communities and civil society must accept the primordial institutional responsibility of the state because they are first and foremost national citizens of the state (Bernstein, 2011). On reflection, and from a pragmatic procedural perspective, the inclusion of a limited number of actors within the NDC governance process was certainly congruent with the expediency needed to help reduce Brunei's carbon emissions. In essence evacuating certain actors from the process through green authoritarianism can be highly effective in meeting a given policy output more quickly (Gilley, 2012), regardless of whether the actual process of policymaking is equitably participatory or not.

With this in mind, it is important to outlay the actual ways environmental knowledge was mobilised and used within the NDC policy process to determine increased carbon emission

reductions. Much literature has highlighted the role of climate science in policymaking, particularly the dominant role that physical sciences (vis-à-vis social sciences and humanities) have made in determining and legitimising certain climate (mitigation) policy responses within formal climate governance regimes centred around the state and international relations (e.g., Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019; Demeritt, 2001; Hulme, 2011; Hulme & Mahony, 2010; Jasanoff, 2010; Kythreotis, 2018). The draft UNFCCC submission for Brunei's NDCs certainly reflected a methodological approach based upon measurements and projections of CO₂ greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions underpinned by techno-managerialism: 'Energy supply and demand in 2035 were projected using a techno-economic model. Macroeconomic parameters used in the projections were based on the Wawasan 2035 (Brunei's overarching state plan for the next few decades) economic and diversification targets. Technical parameters were based on best available technologies and best practices' (Government of Brunei Darussalam, 2018, p. 2).

Global warming potential (GWP) based on Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) advice was ever-present in the draft 2018 NDC document, as was the role of market mechanisms to 'primarily achieve the intended emissions reductions under this NDC through domestic actions and financing' (Government of Brunei Darussalam, 2018, p. 2). These domestic actions included setting ambitious energy sector reduction targets and introducing nationwide energy efficiency schemes, carbon pricing, managing natural resources more sustainably, raising awareness and, somewhat ironically, public 'empowerment.' These are typical post-political approaches to climate (mitigation) policymaking that are ostensibly socio-economic and technical in nature and legitimated through the epistemological institutionalism of international science and policy frameworks of the IPCC and UNFCCC (Kolstad et al., 2014; UNFCCC, 2015). Such methods have hollowed-out more socially constructivist forms of knowledge to examine, understand, and tackle climate change (Hulme, 2010; Stehr & von Storch, 1995). This reduces climate knowledge discourse and therefore policy responses to climate change to 'technoscientific immutable mobiles' that depoliticise the Bruneian environmental policy system through what O'Lear (2016) calls 'latent, slow violence'. Such 'immutable mobiles' that project a post-political discourse based on reductive forms of carbon measurement were in evidence as important policy drivers that formed the basis for Brunei achieving their NDC, with high policy priority given to mitigation and energy efficiency targets, and carbon pricing (Government of Brunei Darussalam, 2018, p. 5). The HoB project is also mentioned in the draft document (p. 6) as a key mitigation policy to maintain carbon sinks, when as previously mentioned, this Borneo-wide forestry protection initiative is intertwined with Brunei's neoliberal trajectory of being an important international ecotourist destination. The irony of GHG emissions generated from international flights to Brunei's pristine rainforests is not lost here. Brunei's subsequent first official NDC submission in 2020 also reflected an overtly technocratic policy approach to mitigating carbon emissions, but interestingly mentioned the contribution of 'youth and NGOs' in the process (Government of Brunei, 2020, p. 5). However, when the author was advising this very draft NDC submission in 2018, there were no civil society/youth actors involved in the initial meeting.

The above illustrates how the NDC process in Brunei is rooted in global climate post-political discourse that enables the state to exercise green authoritarianism in its environmental policymaking. The process evacuates governance actors but is also discursively influenced by international policy settings that extol (neo)liberal democratic knowledge(s). As stated earlier, Brunei heavily relies on its fossil fuels, particularly its natural gas reserves to maintain its GDP and therefore its extremely attractive social welfare conditions. Hence, the fossil fuel political economy and the environmental policy process in Brunei is directly linked to social conditioning through the Sultan being able to appease his subjects, preventing potential civil unrest. This helps maintain his domestic power base and the ways in which policy discourse is continually internally legitimised. Thus, repoliticising climate change through such policy

actions becomes an ‘end in itself’ which internally risks undermining itself in the future (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014).

Similarly, it may be pertinent to argue that the post-political condition and green authoritarianism are important, maybe necessary, in maintaining the Sultan’s power within Brunei. The first reason is because adopting a dominant and consensual scientific and policy international discourse on the environment – a central tenet of the post-political condition – enables the Bruneian state to ‘deflect’ international attention from other political and cultural indiscretions.² The second reason is the fact that these post-political strategies have created the domestic climate policy conditions to enable the Bruneian state to continually extract fossil fuels unchallenged by civil society actors. This is in large part because, contrary to intended international political and policy interventions around climate change that are framed as being equitable and polycentric, the current formalised international regime and all its associated policy practices continue to be ineffective in tackling climate change (Vogler, 2016). Therefore, these examples show how environmental policymaking in authoritarian states like Brunei are not impervious to the multi-scalar powers of (neo)liberal democracy. Such powers are so densely intertwined to the state’s internal political conditions, that separating ‘environmental good’ from neoliberal economic development is an inevitable impossibility – they are rather paradoxically mutually reinforcing.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has highlighted how Brunei uses a post-political scalar discourse to portray itself as a responsible actor in supra-national and international environmental governance systems. It is ‘one of us’, part of the ASEAN, HoB, IPCC and UNFCCC geopolitical collectives. However, the ‘realpolitik’ of its internal political system suggests something more geographically nuanced. It depoliticises environmental policymaking through the anti-political and authoritarian way it internally makes non-state actors ‘one of them’ – disenfranchised, evacuated through the latent, slow violence of its monocentric political system. Yet it is this very system that is externally legitimated by the post-political, technocratic tools of the UNFCCC, IPCC and HoB that are supposedly designed to enable the liberal democratisation of science and policymaking. Domestically, such depoliticisation remains unchallenged because of a strong welfare system, underpinned by the philosophy of MIB and the subsidising Bruneian dollars of fossil fuels. This enables the Bruneian state to ‘enact’ green authoritarianism, delimiting internal civil dissent, whilst giving the external illusion of enacting (supra-national and international) polycentric traits of collective governance in its environmental policymaking.

Since 2018, when the author was immersed in the politics of environment in Brunei, recent literature written by a Bruneian academic has attempted to showcase Brunei’s transition from a whole-of-government approach to a whole-of-nation approach in how climate change is being managed (Pacudan, 2021). Whilst reporting of this more open governance transition is welcomed, one must be sceptical of the exact nature of this transition in terms of civil society engagement and polycentricity, given the preceding arguments in this article of how only certain civil groups that fitted in with the MIB philosophy are co-opted into state-led environmental governance circles (e.g., Green Brunei). From personal experience and observation there were other civil and citizen voices that had been sidelined and disenfranchised from environmental policy processes, of which I cannot mention in this article for fear of reprisals. Published academic evidence of this is difficult to ascertain, given the closed, authoritarian nature of Brunei’s internal regime (Curley, 2012; Weiss, 2018). However, Bruneian government officials did welcome other ‘experts’ in the field to contribute towards climate policy (hence, the authors invitation), although most invitees were from the private sector, as this could stimulate the growth of public–private partnerships and accessing private sector financing (Pacudan, 2021, p. 35). At the meetings the author attended, no civil society group attended. This certainly suggests that the multi-

stakeholder governance approach adopted during 2018 remained wholly economic and technocratic rather than deliberative, given the vacuousness of civil voices – and the dominance of private sector voices – in framing Brunei’s draft NDC.

This newly asserted ‘whole-of-nation’ environmental governance approach could just be another way for the Bruneian state to justify its political existence through the guise of good deliberative environmental governance outside of its borders, despite independent global environmental performance indices illustrating the contrary.

Finally, there is a need to think more broadly in the context of the wider environmental–geographical–cum–theoretical implications of fusing ideas of the post–political, green authoritarianism and green as ‘spectacle’ to help make greater sense of authoritarian state environmental policymaking beyond its borders. This article has shown how it is possible to disaggregate authoritarian policymaking from the Western (liberal) democratic tradition as a means of explaining how external and intra–territorial neoliberal logics can discursively influence and support state environmental policymaking through a politics of scale. By forensically revealing the hidden paradoxical nuances of environmental policymaking and governance in understudied authoritarian nations like Brunei, this article offers new theoretical insights into alleviating critique of the post–political condition as ‘potentially analytically, flat, totalizing, and inadequate as “globalization” and the like’ (McCarthy, 2013, p. 19). It is possible to jettison a foundational definition of post–politics as a one–dimensional way to theorise the anti–democratic nature of neoliberalism to justify the dominant form of Western environmental policymaking. The neoliberal traits of post–political conditioning also enable authoritarian states like Brunei to concurrently repoliticise and depoliticise environmental policymaking via a post(politics) of scale to meet their own internal political ends, and to continue fossil fuel extractivism unabated, much like Western nations.

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NOTES

1. The principal government ministry. The Bruneian government is hierarchically tiered, with ‘ministry’ status being the most important, whilst ‘departments’ are deemed less important in status.
2. However, the recent clandestine shift to phase two of Sharia Law by the Bruneian state has not gone unnoticed by the international community (Tan, 2019).

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