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Lessons from Spain for Sabah's energy future



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Lessons from Spain for Sabah's energy future

THE recent massive blackout that plunged almost the entire Spain and Portugal into darkness has sent shockwaves not just across Europe but around the world.

This event has prompted urgent discus-sions about the realities and risks behind a rapid energy transition towards net-zero emissions especially by the year 2050. So as nations race to meet their climate commitments by that year, the experience in Spain serves as a powerful reminder of how complex, fragile and interdependent modern

energy systems truly are. For Sabah, Malaysia, a region that has long struggled with electricity supply con-straints despite being a carbon-negative state, the developments in Europe provide valuable lessons that deserve close attention.

On April 28, 2025, Spain and Portugal experienced one of the most serious power outages in European history. The blackout, lasting several hours, caused major disru tions across transport, industry and daily

While a definitive technical explanation is still pending, many energy experts point to the growing challenge of managing a power system that now relies heavily on intermittent renewable sources like wind and solar, which together made up 56pc of Spain's power mix as of 2024.

The push to rapidly phase out tradi-tional baseload energy sources, such as coal and nuclear, without parallel investments in grid upgrades and storage solutions, has left

the grid exposed to vulnerabilities that, once triggered, can ripple widely. In fact, it was reported that perhaps one problem that contributed to the outage was that there was not enough backstop stable power, such as gas and nuclear, to handle the sudden fall of power generation, an

the sudden fall of power generation, an industry source said. This brings the conversation closer to home. Sabah holds a unique position in Malaysia's energy and environmental land scape. Thanks to our extensive tropical forests and the non-existent coal genera-tion, Sabah acts as a significant carbon sink.

In fact, Sabah's carbon-negative status has been an anchor in Malaysia's overall car-bon reporting, helping the country present a more favourable emissions profile on

a more favourable emissions profile on international platforms. Some might say, Sabah's deliberate avoidance of coal-fired power generation has played no small part in maintaining this low-carbon standing. However, this environmental sacrifice has also come with a price. The state has also price and the state has a long faced with a price. The state has long faced chronic electricity shortages. Frequent blackouts, voltage fluctuations, and unmet industrial power demands have hampered conomic progress and quality of life for Sabahans.

The irony is clear. While Sabah's clean environmental record indirectly benefits the entire nation, the state itself bears the brunt of an insufficient and fragile energy system. And as demands for power continue to grow, both from rising population and expanding industries, Sabah must prepare for this.

The events in Spain and Portugal are par-



ticularly instructive now as Sabah plans its energy future. The first clear takeaway is the importance of investing in a strong, modernized grid infrastructure. Just as Spain's blackout exposed the consequences of an overstretched system, Sabah cannot afford

to continue relying on an outdated grid to carry it into an era of higher demand and

to carry it into an era of higher demand and renewable integration. There is of course the potential offered by the Asean Grid in which Asean countries have signed their respective Memorandum of understanding (MOU) at the Energy Transition Conference in Bali late in 2023. Under the MOU, we in Sabah Electricity have signed an MOU with Indonesia PLN regarding the connectivity of the Kaliman-tan Indonesia grid to the Sabah Malaysia grid presumably through Simangaris in Kal-abakan, Tawau. The Asean Grid will do won-der for Asean countries to buy and sell der for Asean countries to buy and sell power generation across borders.

Secondly, energy diversification is critical. Sabah's caution with fossil fuels may be viewed admirably, but an overdependence on a narrow mix of hydro and small-scale renewables creates risks. A logical, balanced energy mix including solar, wind, and cleaner-burning natural gas as transitional fuels could offer greater energy security without undoing the state's low-carbon achievements.

Storage technologies also cannot be ignored. Batteries like the Battery Energy Storage System (BRMESS) in Lahad Datu and other forms of energy storage would help smooth out the variability inherent in renewable energy, improving reliability and reducing outages

Furthermore, Sabah can look into stronger energy interconnections. Spain's limited links with neighbouring countries numera miks with neighbouring countries worsened the impact of their blackout. Sabah too operates somewhat in isolation from Peninsular Malaysia's larger, more diverse energy grid. Regional collabora-tions, whether within Malaysia or poten-tially with parts of Borneo could open new pathways for resource sharing and grid balancing balancing.

Finally, the role of policy cannot be understated. Clear, forward-thinking energy policies that encourage investment in infrastructure, storage, and diversifica-tion are critical to ensuring that Sabah's energy future is both secure and sustainable

The blackout in Spain and Portugal is a reminder that good intentions on climate policy must be accompanied by careful, technically sound energy planning. For Sabah, which already stands as a national environmental asset, the lessons are doubly relevant.

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