

The politics of implementing tobacco control policy in Malaysia: An Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) approach

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of tobacco control efforts, Malaysia continues to face high smoking prevalence and sustained interference from the tobacco industry. This paper applies the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to examine the political dynamics underpinning tobacco control policymaking in Malaysia. It identifies and analyzes the competing coalitions — the pro-tobacco control coalition comprising the Ministry of Health, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and public health advocates; and the anti-tobacco control coalition including multinational tobacco companies, allied government ministries, and industry-aligned actors. Using historical and contemporary case studies, this research explores how belief systems, resource mobilization, and political strategies have shaped the trajectory of tobacco policy. The findings reveal persistent resistance from the tobacco industry through economic framing, political lobbying, regulatory capture, and strategic use of media and misinformation. While Malaysia's accession to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2005 marked a pivotal shift towards stronger regulatory measures — including pictorial warnings, tax hikes, and smoke-free laws — the anti-tobacco coalition continues to exert influence, often delaying or diluting policy implementation. Recent efforts, such as the MPOWER strategies and targeted enforcement, have yielded measurable public health benefits, notably a decline in smoking rates from 29.5% in 2000 to 22.5% in 2020. However, tobacco industry interference remains entrenched, especially through its involvement in policymaking institutions and framing of illicit trade narratives. This study underscores the importance of sustained coalition-building, institutional insulation from industry influence, and policy learning in achieving long-term tobacco control goals. It provides valuable insights into how political power dynamics and actor interactions determine the success or failure of public health interventions in Malaysia and similar contexts.

Keywords: Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Tobacco Industry Interference, Tobacco Control Policy, Coalition Politics, MPOWER Strategies