Submission to the JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE – FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND AID SUBCOMMITTEE (JSCFDAT)

Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region

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International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization, including Australia, that supports sustainable democracy around the world. Comprised of, and governed by, its thirty-four Member States, including Australia as one its founding members, the Institute's mission is to support sustainable democratic change through the provision of comparative knowledge, assisting in democratic reform, and influencing policies and politics.

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Summary:

Australia should make democracy a policy priority in the region in response to backslides in the Asia-Pacific. With diverse factors, from military intervention in political processes to corruption, contributing to these erosions, pro-democratic actors, countervailing institutions and civil society need steadfast support as they seek to resist this negative trend – which risks impacting safety and security in our region.
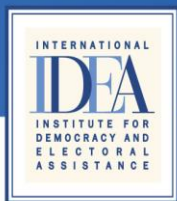
The linkages between effective accountable and transparent institutions, the rule of law and justice for all and sustainable development have been recognized in the Agenda 2030 and are considered of concern for all.

International IDEA is proposing Australia to:
- Strengthen the countervailing institutions required to tackle democratic backsliding, corruption and to protect integrity of elections
- To move from support of 'conducting' elections toward 'protecting elections' in the region
- Ensure a comprehensive approach to address digital threats to democracy, including regional initiatives to fight restriction of democratic rights online and combat disinformation,
- Support regions human rights and democracy defenders – as well as media and academia
- Recognise that functioning democratic institutions are critical in mitigating and adapting to consequences of the climate crisis in the region
- Include support to the indigenous peoples' rights in the region as integral part of Indigenous Foreign Policy
- Provide special attention and support to the Myanmar democracy movement

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Global state of democracy

Democracy is in decline around the world with the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism more than double the number of those moving towards or consolidating democracy. As per the International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices, the number of backsliding democracies has never been as high as in the last decade. In 2022, more than two-thirds of the world's population live in either a backsliding hybrid or authoritarian regime, indicating a significant rise in authoritarianism. Moreover, International IDEA's data indicate that 45 percent of non-democratic countries are experiencing a deepening of authoritarianism, and authoritarian leaders are using new and ever more brazen tactics.

Globally, democracy faces immense challenges from new and growing threats of disinformation, populist authoritarianism, and efforts to undermine – or simply deny – the legitimacy of electoral processes. Democracy is at risk of further erosions amid economic recession, rising food and fuel prices and growing inequality, thereby contributing to social tension. The unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both how authoritarian regimes undermine multilateralism and the role that all democrats in the international community, including Australia, have in countering these threats.

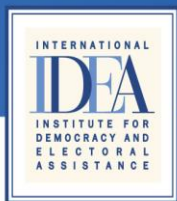## State of Democracy in Asia and the Pacific

Democracy in the Asia-Pacific region is receding, and authoritarianism is solidifying. Overall, nearly half of the people in the region live in an authoritarian regime (72 percent of those live in China). Of those living in a democratic regime, 84% live in a weak or backsliding democracy[1]. Although the most dramatic examples of breakdown have been in Myanmar and Afghanistan, longstanding stable democracies such as India, Philippines or Indonesia are experiencing widespread erosion among many of its indicators. Even high and mid performing democracies such as Japan or Taiwan are suffering democratic erosion. Democratic decay is negatively impacting the security environment in our region and is often exploited by populist leaders seeking to capitalise on grievances among their constituents. Yet, in parallel, vibrant pro-democracy movement have evidenced that democracy remains a core aspiration for millions in the region

Our 2021 data also showed severe declines on checks on government in India, the Philippines, Indonesia and in Sri Lanka. It is particularly worrying that India's consistently high scores on clean elections and free political parties have declined over the last three years. In Indonesia, the scores on absence of corruption, as well as freedom of religion have declined most over the past five years. In the Melanesian democracies, (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands) the scores on gender equality and absence of corruption remain low, while in Fiji the scores on social group equality are worryingly low.

Although erosion has taken place in all aspects of democracy, the impact on **Freedom of Expression and Media Integrity i**s striking especially among democracies. A total of 35 percent of democracies in the region have experienced erosion in at least one of them. Since 2018, at least 15 countries in the region – ranging from democracies such as Indonesia, hybrid regimes such as Singapore or authoritarian countries such as Viet Nam or Cambodia– have approved measures that restrict Freedom of Expression, particularly online, on the grounds of fighting disinformation and protecting the country against cyberattacks. These laws are being used to selectively remove content online, muzzle dissent and prosecute pro-democracy activities

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[1] Population data from the World Bank and Taiwan monthly official estimates.

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and activist. Social media platforms are also being forced to sometimes implement these repressive policies to appease government.

Drivers of democratic erosion in Asia and the Pacific

The erosion of democracy in Asia and the Pacific is a product of several factors, including the rise of exclusionary ethno-nationalist movements which are fuelled by a mix of real and politically manipulated social grievances. Erosion is also triggered by influence and the continued presence and influence of the military in political institutions, state capture, stalled democratic transitions and economic mismanagement that has led to unsustainable debts and, in extreme cases, financial collapse. Due to the vast diversity of political systems and historical conditions across the Asian continent and Oceania, these forces are not felt uniformly, and the roots of these stressors are both international and domestic.

In Melanesia, corruption is one of the biggest drivers of democratic decline. These countries have policies about reforms to combat corruption including legislation to establish anti-corruption commission and whistle-blowers protection policies but are struggling with implementation. In some instances, anti-corruption commissions have been used by the incumbent party to criminalise their opponents. This in turn causes the population to lose trust in formal institutions.

What can Australia do to support democracy in the region?

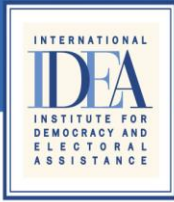**Strengthening the Countervailing Institutions**

There are certain key elements of democracy that are always systematically undermined during nearly every backsliding example, including in the Asia-Pacific region. Typically, those are: judicial independence, freedom of the press, and credible electoral processes. These are three of the most powerful checks on the power of governments. Protecting and strengthening these institutions and processes, along with effective parliament and independent institutions, such as anti-corruption commissions is critical.

The election management bodies (EMB) of the region are largely delivering well-managed elections. The challenges the regions' EMBs confront relate to their legal and functional independence, quality of electoral legal frameworks, and to new threats such as disinformation, foreign influence, and cybersecurity.

Moving Australia's support from 'conducting elections' toward 'protecting elections', and support of all electoral actors that have mandates and interest to protect electoral integrity, including electoral dispute mechanisms, is becoming increasingly critical for every democratic society.

Ensuring a comprehensive approach to combat digital threats to democracy

With the digitalization of society, threats to democracy are raising in different forms from it. These range from repression of online activities, invasive digital surveillance, internet shutdowns or the contamination of the information environment through active disinformation campaigns. Bilateral and multilateral engagement is often key for democratic development. In this respect, role of regional initiatives is increasingly recognized combating cross-border challenges such as disinformation on elections or the use of technology to advance antidemocratic agendas. Australia can draw on the remarkable work carried out

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by the **Australian Election Commission (AEC)** to continue leading regional capacity development for electoral excellence, including by supporting a regional anti-disinformation network and strategy. This should include specific attention to the threat of gender-based disinformation as well as the targeting of traditionally marginalized communities. Australia can also leverage its leadership to support regional and global efforts to protect freedom online, for instance through the work of the Freedom Online Coalition.

Supporting civil society: Regions' human rights and democracy defenders deserve and require more support.

Civil society organisations working on media freedoms, corruption, indigenous peoples' rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, on climate change or electoral reforms are under pressure in the region. Several countries have outlawed foreign funding directed toward civic action, making it complicated at best, and dangerous at worst, for those groups to operate.
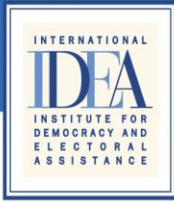
Overall, the region is trending backwards on Fundamental Rights, particularly Freedom of Expression. There are several countries in the region where democratic actors are forced underground, muted through legal threats, or working within well-defined limits – be it in Thailand or Cambodia. In Sri Lanka, four months of mass protests have been replaced by army-imposed order. Supporting activists and actors on the ground should go hand in hand with strengthening the multilateral mechanisms set up to protect them.

Civil society organisations often play an important role in service delivery and the provision of humanitarian assistance, particularly in the authoritarian settings. While important, these actions are not sufficient to advance democracy, freedoms, or strengthen the protection of minority rights. At worst, they may support the status quo other civic groups are seeking to change. Balance of approaches need to be thought through, in line with 'do no harm' principle.

In countries like Nepal, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Mongolia, with history of and space for civic action, the civil society organisations have been a source of resistance to democratic decline. The people have utilised many forms of advocacy, from social media, street protests, and petitions, to legal challenges. In Indonesia, it was the civil society that mobilised to resist any constitutional amendment to extend the presidential term. Support for civil society actors in these contexts should continue well beyond the democratic transition.

In countries like Fiji, with an authoritarian past that includes military coups, Australia should balance its support and focus not only on state institutions but also on civil society actors working on electoral and political reforms. In view of the upcoming parliamentary elections, domestic observation is still not permitted, despite the repeat calls by the Fijian civil society.

Further, organisations working across the spectrum of media, academia and freedom of expression require steadfast support. Here, Australia will find an opportunity to strengthen non-governmental bonds among democracy defenders and foster cross-regional collaboration on issues concerning the fate of democracy in our region.

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Climate crisis and democracy in the region

In Asia and the Pacific, the climate change already has an effect on democratic governance through its effect on food security, water scarcity, relocations, and migration, among others. International IDEA emphasises that functioning democratic institutions are critical in both mitigating and adapting to the consequences of the climate crisis.

While many of the Pacific Island countries have plans and policies in place for adapting to climate change, and access to significant sources of international finance, including from Australia, the limited capacity of bureaucratic systems and state fragility means that implementation remains difficult in most of these countries.

Climate change may, however, result in generative forces with the potential to help address democratic deficits. For example, adaptation will require forms of sub-national state-building to help communities prepare disaster responses. Similarly, climate change anxiety is driving new forms of political participation, as young people engage with global climate movements.

These recommendations[2] seek to harness democracy while providing support in the name of dealing with climate crisis: democracy:
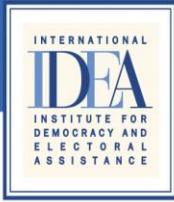
- *Identify and implement ways to establish a democratic planning state:* The climate crisis calls for a stronger state in the form of a planning state and democratic responses should be situated within that context.
- *Place Indigenous perspectives at centre of democratic politics:* This is imperative in terms of voice, justice, and learning (especially in relation to a solidarity ethos).
- *Ensure that international funding for climate action is based on effective democratic mechanisms:* Such funding is essential for many countries and should not come at the cost of undermining their democratic institutions.
- *Invigorate multilateralism by learning from those most climate vulnerable:* Through their concerted action in international forums, climate-vulnerable communities such as in Bhutan, Pacific Islands and the Torres Strait Islands in Australia set an example for the rest of the world.

Indigenous foreign policy

Australia's Indigenous foreign policy, in line with the reconciliation process with our own First Nations persons, is still taking shape. Any international development policy must centre the perspectives of Indigenous peoples in countries including the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar and in the Pacific. A focus on targeted support of Indigenous groups is crucial in ensuring traditionally silenced voices are heard. Indigenous foreign policy implies Australia adopting an approach of co-governing aspects of its foreign policy with the representative of Australia's first nations which is to be encouraged

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[2] Forthcoming International IDEA publication: Climate Crisis and Democracy: Lessons from Asia and the Pacific

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Myanmar: Special attention and effort is required

To date, Australia's approach to Myanmar has differed somewhat from measures taken by other Western democracies. Australia may wish to undertake a comprehensive political risk assessment of its ongoing engagements with the junta-controlled institutions, such as police cooperation.

All social indicators measuring wellbeing have collapsed in Myanmar since the military coup d'état on 1 February 2021. Thousands have been killed, arrested, and jailed. Democracy and human rights activists, and elected leaders were forced to flee the country. The wholly negative impacts of the coup are felt throughout the South and Southeast Asian region, and beyond. International IDEA has been calling for international community, including Australia, to recognize and engage with the legitimate democratic stakeholders of Myanmar, including the elected parliament, the National Unity Government, and other democratic actors, including the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Democratic breakdown in Myanmar demonstrates how Australia should prioritize the restoration of peace and democracy, and good governance in fragile and failed states in the region as the outcomes have spill-over effects on others.

As an ASEAN Dialogue partner, Australia should lend its diplomatic support to the ASEAN countries working to bolster ASEAN' commitment to rule of law and human rights, reject the military's planned 2023 'elections', and ramp up concrete measures in support of legitimate democratic actors, including the NUG and the Civil Disobedience Movement.

International IDEA as a strategic partner for democracy support

International IDEA is well placed to support resilience of the democratic institutions in dealing with the current and future challenges in the region, in collaboration with other Australian institutions, such as the AEC and ANU and others. International IDEA is producing data and qualitative analysis of state of democracy at global, regional, subregional, and country level- which can be utilised by policy makers. . *The Global State of Democracy Indices*, the soon to be launched *Democracy Tracker*, and the *Global State of Democracy Reports* are providing evidence-based tools, and alerting stakeholders to both vulnerabilities as well as opportunities for growth and innovation.

In addition to state institutions, such as Parliaments and Election Management Bodies, International IDEA is also supporting the civil society, academia, and democracy activists by providing safe spaces, skill development and comparative knowledge. IDEA's new areas of focus are impact of digitalisation on democracy, and the nexus of climate crisis and democracy.

International IDEA has a unique convening power as its membership include, in addition to Australia, several countries from the Asia and the Pacific region, committed to discussing the common challenges and sharing their good practices in benefit of others.
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