

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE (JSCFADT)

Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict

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Overview

Democracy is an essential component for the promotion of peace, and a resilient electoral system is fundamental to a functioning democracy. It underpins citizens' acceptance of electoral results, enables the peaceful transfer of power, and confers legitimacy on governments. Conversely, failed or disputed elections can erode trust in government and lead to instability, social unrest, or violent conflict.

Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are key institutions that ensure elections are free, fair, and credible. Elections are highly complex and expensive logistical exercises and most EMBs in the Indo-Pacific region operate in challenging electoral environments. In most cases, they service a geographically dispersed and ethno-linguistically diverse population, while also navigating resource constraints. Some EMBs may also have to contend with highly charged political environments where there is potential or actual violence.

The Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) international programs contribute to resilience in Indo-Pacific countries through supporting electoral integrity. Having a well-functioning EMB strengthens public trust in democracy. The AEC's electoral support aligns with Australia's International Development Policy and is delivered in collaboration with - and resourcing from - the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The AEC has experience in engaging with post-conflict societies where the renewal of democratic institutions has been an important part of preserving peace. The AEC works in partnership with EMBs in the Indo-Pacific region to contribute to stronger democracies which in turn aids the prevention of conflict.

Building resilience through democracy

Building democratic resilience is an important part of maintaining peace and stability in fragile states. This is especially important in the current international electoral environment which is facing increasing risk and complexity due to geostrategic shifts, technological acceleration¹, and the changed approach to international aid and development by the United States².

Australia's International Development Policy provides electoral support in the Indo-Pacific region through the policy focus of building effective, accountable states. The AEC partners with DFAT in this agenda. Section 7(1)(fa) of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 requires the AEC to provide international assistance in matters relating to elections and referendums when endorsed by the Foreign Minister. The AEC's electoral assistance programs are built on requests for assistance from partner EMBs and are fully funded by DFAT.

¹ World Economic Forum, 'Global Risks Report 2025', 15 January 2025, accessed at: https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2025.pdf p. 4.

² The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) reports that up to 97% of US-funded programs relating to democracy, governance and peacebuilding have been cancelled. This has required NGOs to close offices, cancel electoral support programs, and downsize staffing profiles, resulting in reduced electoral support. Annika Silva-Leander, Kourtney Pompi, and Cassandra Emmons, 'When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem Report', November 2025, accessed at: <https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/When-Aid-Fades-Impacts-and-Pathways-for-the-Global-Democracy-Ecosystem-Report.pdf> p. 9-10.

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The AEC has built partnerships with Indo-Pacific EMBs across multiple election cycles. The AEC's bilateral electoral assistance programs have included assisting with the establishment of independent electoral bodies in Timor Leste (2001); supporting an approach to electoral education in Nepal after conflict (2012); and providing targeted, long-standing support to our closest neighbour, Papua New Guinea (since 1998). The AEC's current electoral assistance programs include, but are not limited to, Papua New Guinea, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Fiji, all of which have experienced violent conflict or non-democratic regime change within the last three decades. The AEC support to these post-conflict democracies is focused on capability building and strengthening the long-term resilience of institutions. This approach is key to stabilising and rebuilding community and civic engagement and proper governance.

The AEC's program aligns closely with Australia's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Democracies that are functioning, stable and open, promote peace in the Indo-Pacific and allow for greater cooperation with Australia and its allies.

The electoral support Australia provides is important for addressing key elements of the resilience agenda. An EMB that lacks the capability to conduct a well-run election is a threat to the legitimacy of a state, and thereby its resilience to withstand crises. Research indicates that electoral support is more likely to contribute to building democracy than general development assistance because it targets key institutions and actors of democracy.³ The same study also found that having specific electoral support programs, rather than broad funding, was the most effective way of supporting democratic outcomes.

Effective electoral support

Elections are often referred to as the largest and most complex peacetime logistical exercise nation states undertake. The AEC is dedicated to working with partners to ensure that each election support program is unique and fit for purpose for each EMB. No two AEC programs are the same; this reflects the diversity in the Indo-Pacific and the AEC operating according to principles of locally-led development. There is growing interest from EMBs in the Indo-Pacific to increase their engagement with the AEC.

The 2017 *Making it Count* report recommends that electoral support should flexibly follow a whole of electoral cycle approach.⁴ The whole of cycle funding approach highlights that while elections may appear to be short, discreet exercises, short term support close to an election does not achieve lasting impact. Undertaking the proper planning and risk mitigation, undertaking considered cyclical electoral reform, and preparing for the delivery of large-scale events is an ongoing, time consuming and costly enterprise. Providing support throughout the electoral cycle increases the institutional capability of EMBs to perform these vital functions.

While the AEC's role in providing support to EMBs during their electoral periods can be important for reducing the risk of individual elections failing, the whole of cycle approach seeks to effect more enduring change. By building capability and increasing buy-in from governments, the AEC's support aims to reduce a country's reliance on international assistance to run elections long term. An example

³ Rachel M. Gisselquist, Miguel Niño-Zarazúa, and Melissa Samarin, 'Does aid support democracy? A systematic review of the literature', January 2021, accessed at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/229415/1/wp2021-014.pdf> p. 2.

⁴ Daniel Arghiros, Horacio Boneo, Simon Henderson, Sonia Palmieri, and Therese Pearce Laanela, 'Making it count: lessons from Australian electoral assistance 2006-16', December 2017, accessed at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/making-it-count-lessons-from-australian-electoral-assistance-2006-16.pdf> p. 72.

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of this approach is Fiji. Following the 2006 military coup, Fiji partnered with a range of organisations providing electoral support as they undertook a gradual process of rebuilding democratic institutions. Since 2006, the role of Deputy Supervisor of Elections was held by representatives from Australia and New Zealand in an advisory capacity. In November 2025, a Fijian national commenced in that role. This signifies a significant step toward strengthened institutional capability and a reduced reliance on international electoral support.

PIANZEA Network: regional electoral management cooperation

The AEC is secretariat for the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators' (PIANZEA) Network. PIANZEA is a collaboration between electoral administrators in the Pacific who come together to share information and provide mutual assistance in support of elections. The PIANZEA Network has been Australian Government supported for over 20 years, bolstering the relationship between Australia and Pacific Island countries. A 2021 report on effective electoral assistance showcased PIANZEA as an exemplary regional network, noting the key role regional electoral networks play to 'ensure that global standards are implemented while regional and local sensitivities are appreciated'.⁵

The AEC values its relationships with other development partners and appreciates the complementary nature of their support in the broader electoral landscape. We actively seek out opportunities to work with other development partners to maximise partner strengths and limit program duplication. The AEC works closely with a range of partners, including the New Zealand Electoral Commission, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the United Nations Development Programme.

BRIDGE Program: training capable electoral administrators

The AEC has also contributed to the international election landscape through its central role in the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) partnerships program. BRIDGE is a modular professional development program that enhances the professional skills and confidence of staff in EMBs and stakeholders in the electoral process. BRIDGE is the most comprehensive capability development tool for elections of its kind. Since 2001, over 2,500 BRIDGE workshops have been conducted across more than 116 countries and for over 21,393 participants.

BRIDGE plays a key role as one of the AEC's primary capability building resources. Its focus on training serves to build understanding and professional capability in its participants. It prepares public administrators for the challenge of running elections and promotes international best practice to EMBs. Its practical nature also helps create processes to guide the effective planning and delivery of elections. BRIDGE works to create a shared understanding of democracy, its processes, and fundamental principles, which aids to protect against emerging threats to state stability. This is particularly important in the context of conflict-affected states, as gaps in a population's electoral literacy and understanding can be exploited by malign actors through concerted disinformation campaigns.

Technical support provision

The AEC identifies and uses its own expertise from across the organisation in its electoral support programs. Some of the activities we deliver include supporting EMBs to formalise electoral processes and procedures, and providing technical advisers to support reform agendas. Other activities we deliver include election time support through technical advisers and material support, conducting knowledge exchange programs, and support for secondment programs between Indo-Pacific EMBs.

⁵ Therese Pearce Laanela, Sead Alihodžić, Antonio Spinelli and Peter Wolf, 'Supporting Elections Effectively: Principles and Practice of Electoral Assistance', May 2021, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden, accessed at: https://eba.se/app/uploads/2021/11/2021_05-Webb.pdf p. 126.

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The AEC has also conducted security analyses to produce heat maps to enable EMBs to identify polling places that may experience unrest and plan accordingly.

The impact of electoral assistance on maintaining peace and preventing conflict

The AEC has a long history of supporting post-conflict societies to maintain peace through its electoral support. The AEC has worked with Timor-Leste since the establishment of the United Nations Mission in East Timor ahead of the 1999 referendum. Following this, in 2000 the AEC supported Timor-Leste's efforts to establish an independent electoral body. Timor-Leste has since been described as one of the strongest democracies in the Indo-Pacific.⁶

The impact of development partners providing bilateral support to democratic strengthening can be seen in Solomon Islands. 'The Tensions' in Solomon Islands ran from 1998 to 2003, a period marked by civil unrest which divided the country into conflict along ethnic, economic and political lines. This instability weakened governance and public institutions, including the electoral system. The AEC has worked with the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) since 2001, including supporting the delivery of national elections between 2010 and 2024. The 2024 elections were a potential source of tension due to the increased scrutiny placed on the SIEC to successfully deliver national and provincial elections concurrently as the first Joint Elections. AEC support included coordinating development partner assistance alongside the SIEC, training support, facilitating the supply of key election materials, and assisting the SIEC in undertaking a security analysis to identify which polling places in the country were most likely to experience unrest on election day. This heat map was in turn provided to security partners so that preventative measures could be put in place. Assistance like this contributes to the reduction in the likelihood of violence and conflict through detailed planning and risk mitigation.

Experts have highlighted the SIEC's capability to meet increased election management demands.⁷ The success of the 2024 Joint Elections underscores the progress made by the SIEC to become a more resilient professional EMB.

Conclusion

By supporting Indo-Pacific EMBs to deliver elections with integrity, Australia promotes peace and democratic principles in the region.

The impact of Australia's contribution to electoral support is evident in the strides made by Indo-Pacific EMBs to deliver credible elections, including in post-conflict societies such as Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands. While electoral assistance alone cannot prevent conflict, it is an important part of ensuring that governments are accountable and legitimate in the eyes of the public.

⁶ Joshua Kurlantzick, 'Why has East Timor built the strongest democracy in Southeast Asia?', 4 October 2021, accessed at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-has-east-timor-built-strongest-democracy-southeast-asia>

⁷ Colin Wiltshire, Anna Kwai, Lincy Pendeverana, Leonora Rotomane Houma, John Fasi, Vhairi Gegana Devi, James Batley, Stephanie Russo, Thiago Oppermann, and Kerryn Baker, '2024 Solomon Islands Elections', December 2024, accessed at: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/entities/publication/39caa2cb-eb56-401b-bea9-74b198628a14> p. 1.