# Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Inquiry into supporting democracy in the region.

**Richard Robison & Garry Rodan**

The terms of reference for this inquiry ask how Australia can partner with the countries of the region to promote democracy and good governance. These terms assume that democracy normally involves liberal characteristics and is inherently linked with greater stability and cohesion of societies, free markets, and the wellbeing of the peoples of the region. They also infer a view of democracy promotion as a process of building institutions, notably involving the design and management of elections and democratic values through various training schemes.

Yet Australians must learn lessons from the widespread failure of the democracy promotion programmes undertaken by Western powers, including Australia, since Secretary of State James A. Baker formally announced these as a key part of US foreign policy in 1990.

We make two initial points about existing democracy promotion programmes. One is that building democracies is inherently a political process rather than one reliant on institutional fixes. It follows from this argument that there are, second, many different varieties of democracy, some of which can be fundamentally hostile to liberal ideas and values.

Democracies that have emerged in many late developing capitalist countries, including in Southeast Asia, have rarely reflected the liberal expectations of their Western patrons.

Nevertheless, 'democracy promotion' programmes continue to look at the problem of building democracies backwards, assuming that once the institutions of elections and representative parliaments are assembled and liberal ideas established in constitutions, everything else will fall into place.

The hard reality is that there are no institutional fixes that will enable Australian policymakers to engage in democracy promotion without becoming, directly or indirectly, part of the bitter struggles over power and wealth between different forces and interests within the region. [1]

The question for Australia's policymakers is not simply whether democracies can be promoted, but what sort of democracies? Are we serious about promoting democracies that provide citizens with greater scrutiny of how political power is exercised and which opens meaningful opportunities for political representation and reform?

Or is the goal of democracy promotion tempered by security and defence considerations that are at odds with this? In this vein, Prime Minister Tony Abbott made it clear in 2016 that 'moral posturing'

[1] Richard Robison, 'Australia and Southeast Asia: Australia Needs a New Plan,' *Melbourne Asia Review*, 14 September 2022.

(presumably taking a stand on issues of corruption, human rights, or social justice) should not threaten Australia's national security interests.[2]

This is a critical question for Australian policymakers given that more recent democracies in Southeast Asia, and many other regions, have been shaped and built by forces precisely as mechanisms to obstruct and prevent liberal ideas and protect entrenched interests against social and political reform. In other words, liberal democracies cannot simply be parachuted in where powerful reformist forces have not already emerged and who see democracy in liberal terms as a key to securing their interests. Western democracy promotion has failed because it has handed the task of democratisation to the wrong interests.

In the Philippines, electoral democracy was built by a vast propertied oligarchy specifically to preserve its ongoing rule and to channel social unrest into populist organisations. Weak parties and and political fragmentation were fostered to stymie reformism. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the West handed the responsibility for building democracy to predatory kleptocracies without popular support. In Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, and to a lesser extent in Indonesia and Malaysia, Western policymakers assumed naively that economic and political oligarchs backed by the military and security forces would be the midwives of liberal democracies and societies.

In effect, democracies in Southeast Asia have usually been vehicles that preserve established privilege. They do not interfere with arbitrary authority or the capture of public authority by private interests and which enable reformist challenges to be co-opted or bought out as well as being simply repressed.[3]

Where does this leave the democracy promotion agenda?

Clearly, Australia has little option except to deal with established governments when promoting Australia's national interests in the Asian region. And every regime contains elements open to reformist programs that may suit Australian interests. Australia has negotiated agreements in areas including trade and defence, money laundering, refugees and human trafficking and other global criminal activities, tax regimes, and environmental regulation.

The challenge for Australian policymakers is to calculate whether such agreements will be subverted or hijacked by more powerful interests within the regimes and whether our friends and allies in these projects are themselves at the heart of the problems. This risk analysis requires detailed knowledge not often possessed by policymakers although there is a vast reservoir of such knowledge outside the policy world.

It is true that Australia has neither the economic nor the strategic power to shape events in the region in a direct way. Nevertheless, a central principle should be – 'do no harm'. This applies especially to collaboration with military and police in the region.

[2] Tony Abbott, 'I was Right on National Security' *Quadrant, 26 March 2016.* Mikey Slazak, 'I was Right to put National Security before Moral Posturing,' *Guardian,* 27 March 2016.
[3] Garry Rodan, *Participation without Democracy: Containing Conflict in Southeast Asia.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2018.

The key example here is the decision by defence and security policymakers in Australia to provide support and training to military and police in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia with claims these programmes would introduce ideas and practices of good governance and respect for human rights. The problem was that these institutions have never been military forces in the Western idea. They might be more accurately conceived as internal security institutions deeply embedded in domestic political struggles and often involved in commercial business practices.

It should have been no surprise these military allies became the engines of coups that overthrew elected governments in these countries and made possible the control of populations through state sponsored and extra-legal violence. Helping to bail out an inept Philippine military under threat from a rag tag Islamist insurgency, for example, may have done little more than prop up a system of oligarchic politics that has always been at the heart of that country's long history of unrest and injustice.

The risks in other areas of collaboration are not so clear. For example, it is difficult to know what we might expect from the agreement recently signed by Foreign Affairs Minister, Penny Wong, and the Thai government on human trafficking when powerful elements within the Thai government and its bureaucracy are deeply implicated in these activities.[4] The same principles apply to attempts to conclude agreement on the environment or wildlife protection, or to pursue anti-corruption agreements when powerful political figures and officials are themselves part of rent seeking and environmental destruction. Australian support for Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Commission (KPK) was eventually abandoned in the face of ongoing assaults on that agency from within Indonesia's parliaments and its police force.

Australians should not assume too much about its policymakers' influence over governments in the region or the interests that support them. Nothing illustrates this more than Australia's failure to convince Indonesia's government to bring a halt to the unregulated and predatory commercial fishing in Australian waters, so destructive to fisheries and wildlife.

A critical question is whether Australia can effectively focus its collaboration and assistance on reformist groups? These might include, for example, farmers' associations resisting land grabbing by elites, workers' unions attempting industrial workplace reform, organisations seeking to arrest illegal logging and deforestation, professional and business organisations aligned with anti-corruption movements, or human rights movements seeking to hold the police or military to account for assorted power abuses.

Such assistance will undoubtedly irritate governments and some powerful business interests in the region. Another problem is that building up reformist-oriented collective organisations and groups to a point where they can wield significant influence is an uncertain project and certainly will not produce instant results. It will, at the very least, require deft diplomacy, sustained effort, and patience.

[4] Michael Sainsbury, 'Australia Can't be Naive About Human Trafficking in Asia,' *Crikey*, 3 November 2022.

Should we give up? No. Promoting increased organisational space for political contestation is even more urgent given the growing influence of anti-democratic forces and ideas within civil societies in Southeast Asia.[5]

To an important extent, Australia faces the same problems US has faced in its dealing with countries like Saudi Arabia. Do the benefits of collaborating with illiberal and authoritarian regimes outweigh the eventual costs? While Western policymakers have argued that authoritarian regimes can bring stability and put a lid on insurgent forces and 'extremist' ideologies, they have mainly produced continuing social unrest and political upheaval where the only idea of a political settlement has involved endless ramping up of rule by repression. We see, for example, the regimes of Central America established by the US to enable access by private corporate interests and to contain reformist politics are now the conduits for rivers of drugs and refugees into the US.

We have reached a stage where, as neoconservative commentator, Max Boot, has argued, the West can no longer, 'secure our interests at the cost of other people's freedoms and through the appeasement of repressive governments.'[6] These include governments in many purportedly democratic regimes.

Australian policymakers now face an important watershed that challenges the prospects for a 'do no harm' principle as an essential foundation for any serious democracy promotion strategy, especially in Southeast Asia. In the current geopolitical climate and the rise of China, marked by increasing rhetoric about a struggle between democratic and authoritarian models, there is a danger of retreating to the mistakes of the Cold War period.

During that period, as we have argued above, Western powers, including Australia, backed authoritarian leaders simply based on being anti-communist and because they were the best options for deregulating and privatising the entrenched protectionist economies and giving access to Western corporate interests. This resulted in the dismantling of promising democratic organisations and forces in civil society that have struggled to recover, not to mention an explosion of oligarchic power in those cases where market agendas were most forcefully established.

Ultimately, we argue that effective engagement and democracy promotion means a shift in the locus of ideas and practices within the policy elites in Canberra. The idea of the late 1980s and the 1990s that all problems were market problems has given way to an agenda that sees all problems as security problems. This equally limits any real progress on democracy promotion. There needs to be a greater urgency in addressing democracy as a problem rooted in questions of social cohesion and power distribution.

***Richard Robison is an Honorary Professorial Fellow at Melbourne University and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Garry Rodan is Honorary Professor of Political Science and International Studies at University of Queensland and is also a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Both have written extensively on politics in Southeast Asia.***

[5] See Garry Rodan, *Civil Society in Southeast Asia: Power Struggles and Political Regimes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
[6] See Max Boot, 'The Myth of Authoritarian Stability' *Commentary,* 29 July 2013.