



The Asia Foundation

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE
ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE & TRADE**

INQUIRY INTO SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN OUR REGION

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THE CHALLENGE

Across the Indo-Pacific, the region's democratic landscapes are facing serious challenges that have significant implications for Australia. The trend towards more authoritarian governance, even in established democracies, is apparent in many countries, with indicators such as The Economist's Democracy Index¹ registering a significant decline. The deterioration of political rights and civil liberties is reflected in the diminishing space for free media and growing restrictions on civil society across the region. The COVID-19 pandemic gave many political elites the opportunity to further centralize power under the auspices of health security measures.

Much of the Indo-Pacific region is in what Professor Larry Diamond of Stanford University terms a 'democratic recession'—in which increasingly authoritarian tendencies are coupled with the silencing of popular dissent. The size, scale and significance of the region, in global terms, means it is of crucial importance for the future of democracy more broadly, making Australia's response to this situation urgent.

The retreat from democratic norms across the Indo-Pacific threatens prosperity and stability in the region. Increases in authoritarianism and the consolidation of majoritarian political systems can lead to increased inequality and deprivation, poor development outcomes, the marginalization of minorities, and in some instances to direct conflict. Women and gender diverse individuals are often the most affected by these trends, yet their experiences are still largely invisible. Countries experiencing internal instability have proven more likely to employ coercive policies and practices to quash dissent, such as through assimilation practices, policing, and armed intervention—which in turn increase the democratic deficit and further marginalise excluded communities.

Halting or reversing the democratic recession will require a concerted local effort by citizens, civil society, and governments, as well as the support of Australia and other partner governments. The Asia Foundation (TAF) is pleased to share the following insights and recommendations, which are informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise across the Indo-Pacific region, including significant partnership with Australia.²

[1] <https://www.economistgroup.com/group-news/economist-intelligence/democracy-index-2021-less-than-half-the-world-lives-in-a-democracy>

[2] The Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organization committed to improving lives across Asia and the Pacific. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our work across the region is focused on democratic governance, women's empowerment and gender equality, inclusive economic growth, environment and climate action, and regional and international relations. TAF's engagement with Australia is longstanding, including with the Australian Parliament, a strategic partnership agreement with DFAT, and relationships with other departments and national think tanks.

INSIGHTS

Any strategy for addressing the democratic recession in Asia needs to recognize that there are varieties of democracy. By avoiding an oversimplified division between ‘democratic’ and ‘autocratic’ states, it is possible to recognise the multiple levels on which democratic principles and practices are present and can be supported. Beyond procedural components such as elections, in all countries there are participatory and deliberative processes and agendas, movements that advocate for greater equity, as well as efforts to ensure greater accountability and transparency of government and access to justice for citizens. It is through a comprehensive understanding of the layered and multi-dimensional nature of governance systems, and their democratic elements (government and non-government), that Australia and other partners are best able to support efforts to turn the tide.

A multi-dimensional approach to the concept of democracy enables the identification of entry points for effective engagement and support. With the support of the Australian government, TAF takes this approach in a range of challenging contexts. Examples include leveraging local government interest in greater citizen engagement on basic services in Laos; greater collaboration between think tanks and the national government on policy-relevant research in Cambodia; or changes in national education policy in Thailand that encourage models of educational leadership grounded in democratic principles and behaviours.

‘Listening to the region’ means understanding how democracy is understood and valued differently. The announcement of a ‘First Nations Foreign Policy’ by the Australian Government is a good first step towards properly recognising the multiplicity of societies, cultures and histories across the Indo-Pacific. It is important to recognise that all versions of ‘democracy’ are to some degree socially and culturally specific, and that oversimplified notions of democracy are insufficient and fail to capture contextual complexity and nuance. For example, recent research by the Alliance for Democracies shows there is broad support for democratic principles among citizens across much of Asia.³ Similarly, public perception research by the Pew Center⁴ shows that the democratic concepts of elections, gender equity and freedom of speech are valued by citizens differently in different contexts.

[3] <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-copenhagen-democracy-summit/dpi-2021/>

[4] <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>

The implication of this diversity is that the traditional prescriptive approach that has characterised much of the ‘democracy promotion’ efforts of the U.S. and Europe since the end of the Cold War—which has focused first and foremost on electoral systems and political party development, underpinned by liberal Individualism—should be avoided. A singular focus on the formal institutions and procedures fails to acknowledge, and therefore respond to, evolving concentrations of power that are maintained as much through informal means as secured through formal mechanisms. To its credit, Australia has historically taken a more nuanced approach, demonstrating a willingness to be open minded as it seeks to identify shared democratic values to build upon. This is key to being a valued neighbour and effective partner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognize civic spaces as crucial: Australia would do well to elevate the depth of knowledge of the region’s many civic spaces that DFAT’s vast networks of non-government organisations afford. The strengthening of civic space—both through the institutions that enable it and the diversity of actors that operate and engage within it—should be understood as an end in itself across all areas of Australia’s bilateral engagement, spanning regional and bilateral trade negotiations, regular diplomatic engagements, and development cooperation. Australia’s ability to promote and even broker policy dialogue can elevate key advocacy agendas and provides political capital to a variety of non-government actors working on them. Opportunities to work in this way are manifold and untapped.

2. Prioritise addressing contextually specific problems which a critical mass of stakeholders are keen to address: TAF has found that even the most difficult contexts hold entry points for supporting better development outcomes—often at subnational if not national levels—in ways that also progress values of participation, deliberation, and equity, and that encourage consensus and enable more democratic decision-making. Partnerships with civil society, religious and minority leaders, women and youth groups, and the media can in varying contexts play an important role in supporting democratic institutions and practices.

3. Strengthen the 'neighbourhood effect': In contexts where democratic backsliding has already occurred, Australia should draw on all forms of statecraft in both bilateral and multilateral settings in pursuing a deliberate strategy of engagement to influence governments to reconsider authoritarian tactics. This can occur through the facilitation of more regional networks (both governmental and non-governmental), more ambitious engagement by Australia in multilateral forums, and support to the foreign policy capacities of neighbouring countries to heighten their influence in regional dialogue.

4. Get behind local leaders and priorities: Australia's own experience of development cooperation in several countries attests to the importance and benefits of supporting local leaders and local ownership of ODA investments. That involves investing in and listening to locally-engaged staff at posts and ensuring that diplomatic and development interventions are underpinned by a strong understanding of the local political economy. By understanding local manifestations of democratic values and connecting with those positioned to realise them, Australia can use its political and financial capital to strengthen contextually-grounded policy reforms.

5. Support marginalised groups: Where democratic backsliding and increased authoritarianism are present, it is important that Australia supports marginalised communities to be active participants in governance and decision-making. Programmes and approaches that prioritise security interests over democratic norms and human rights can aggravate drivers of local conflict, resulting in greater instability. Support for women peacebuilders and civil society leaders is vital for working towards more-inclusive societies, in line with Australia's commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

6. Facilitate broad coalitions among governments, regional organisations and civil society to effectively regulate online spaces: Disinformation and hate speech spread through social media and other online channels undermine democratic institutions and lead to real-world violence. State and non-state actors have used online tools to fuel disharmony between social groups for political gain, while also pursuing policies that aim to stifle legitimate public debate. Australia can share relevant experience with managing online extremism and hate speech and should encourage collective action across the Indo-Pacific to create effective regulations to limit the harmful elements of the internet while sustaining democratic engagement.

7. Continue to make strategic investments in building state capacity in democracies at risk of backsliding: A capable state is essential not only to economic growth and prosperity but also to mitigate the risks of ‘democratic backsliding’. Recent empirical research suggests that when presently democratic states have strong administrative capacity the risk of democratic breakdown is lower. Australia’s strong track record of investing in state capacity, through support for public financial management, public sector reform, and public service delivery, should continue to be prioritised in countries that self-identify as democratic and where democratic institutions are still being consolidated.

8. Strengthen local governance: Given levels of economic development in the region, persistent high levels of poverty and the additional economic strains imposed by the COVID pandemic, local governments are commonly strapped for cash and resources. Given their proximity to local communities, they are also much more likely to welcome the service delivery function that many civil society organizations provide across the Indo-Pacific. At a local level, there are often more opportunities for government and non-government collaboration, deliberative dialogue, and citizen engagement. Australia has invested in many local governance programs over decades and should build upon these successful examples going forward.
