

**Submission to the inquiry of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade on matters related to supporting democracy in our region**

I write to the Committee with a proposal for enhancing Australian efforts to ‘partner with countries in our region to promote democracy and the international rules-based order’. This submission is made on behalf of the Department of Political and Social Change of the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, firstly to ensure that the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is aware of a significant body of work that we conducted in precisely this area between 2018 and 2021. After describing the now-concluded project, we then propose a set of similar—yet broader and more sustained—endeavours extending into future years.

Our submission thus begins with brief background on our recent body of work. With the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, scholars at ANU undertook a project called ‘Supporting the Rules-Based Order in Southeast Asia’, or SEARBO for short. The project was motivated by the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, which had called for Australia to support an ‘increasingly prosperous, outwardly-focused, stable and resilient Southeast Asia’. In that White Paper, the primary goal was of course to sustain a rules-based order at the *regional* level. Thinking more broadly, however, we also wanted to emphasize the importance of encouraging *domestic* arrangements in the countries of the region that would be conducive to fostering such an order. In seeking to counter strong illiberal headwinds in much of the region, the idea was to give greater Australian attention to the goals of nurturing more inclusive democratic structures in Southeast Asia as well as upholding human rights and the rule of law.

The project was based in the ANU’s Department of Political and Social Change for two major reasons. First, we house Australia’s largest concentration of academic expertise on Southeast Asian politics (indeed, there is no larger concentration of academic expertise on Southeast Asian politics anywhere in the world outside of the region itself). Second, since the department’s founding back in 1978 it has developed very extensive relationships throughout Southeast Asia—with academics, think tanks, polling firms, political parties, civil society organisations, leading journalists, and national and local government officials. We regularly partner with Southeast Asian academics in our work, and commonly share the same normative values in support of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The best way to highlight the broad extent of SEARBO’s research and advocacy activities is to refer the Joint Standing Committee to our website:

<https://psc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/searbo-supporting-rules-based-order-southeast-asia>. There you will see an overview of the project as it evolved from Phase One in 2018-2019 to Phase Two in 2020-2021 (including, in the latter phase, a major reorientation of activities to address the specific new challenges by COVID-19). The website further provides a survey across the specific issues covered in the two phases of the project alongside a list of our very extensive publications and other outputs, most of which were clearly oriented to policy-oriented audiences. It further documents the wide range of Southeast Asian partners with whom we collaborated (most prominently individuals

from universities, polling firms and think tanks), supplemented with Southeast Asia academic expertise located at a range of other Australian universities as well as elsewhere in the world (particularly North America).

Thinking prospectively, we would like to propose an on-going initiative that could be called a 'Network for Democratic Governance' and focus—entirely in line with the goals of this Parliamentary Inquiry—on how Australia can forge effective partnerships in Southeast Asia able to advance both democracy and the international rules-based order. The historical foundations of such an effort can be traced to what was formerly the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), supported by the Australian Government and based for many years at the Australian National University. CDI engaged in the training of parliamentarians and party officials as well as the promotion of women's political participation (with a particular geographic focus on Indonesia and Melanesia). Unlike CDI, however, our proposed initiative would be oriented less to training and more to forging common paths with partners throughout Southeast Asia.

It would do so by sponsoring activities, which might include, but not be limited to:

- joint research programs concerning key challenges to democratic governance and sources of democratic resilience in the region, involving collaboration with Southeast Asian universities, think tanks, civil society organisations, and government agencies;
- a publication and advocacy program on such issues, producing both scholarly and, especially, readily accessible and punchy think pieces and other resources, published online in both English and Southeast Asian languages;
- hosting public events such as conferences, workshops and symposiums on key issues of democratic resilience and challenges to it in Southeast Asia; and
- facilitating networking among Australian and Southeast Asian policy-makers, members of civil society organisations, academics, business and counterparts.

Grounding such an effort in the Australian university sector would be a way to ensure that it maintains academic credibility and independence, and would facilitate broad networking among a wide range of Southeast Asian partners.

The overarching purpose of this partnership would be to foster analysis, knowledge sharing and networking that would help Southeast Asian counterparts to build more inclusive democratic structures that reflect the broad religious, ethnic and other diversity of Southeast Asian societies, while at the same time encouraging efforts to nurture greater substantive political representation of women. The focus on democratic inclusivity would of course be complemented with major attention to upholding human rights and the rule of law.

Some of this work would logically build on efforts already undertaken in SEARBO, but it would also involve close consultation with stakeholder groups in Australia and the region to develop an agenda of research and advocacy activities that can be undertaken

over the next five to ten years. If we in Australia are indeed keen to 'partner with our neighbours in promoting our shared democratic values and protecting democratic institutions', to quote from this inquiry's terms of reference, we need to recognise that this is a long-term effort requiring deep connections and networks with those in the region who also want to advance these goals. In sum, Australia has a critical role to play in countering the many illiberal trends and forces that threaten these democratic values and institutions in our region. We applaud the focus of the Parliamentary Inquiry and would be honoured to play a role in advancing its goals.