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Submission to the Joint Stand Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT)

Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region

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Overview

A strong and trusted electoral system is critical for a functioning democracy: it supports citizens' acceptance of electoral results, the peaceful transfer of power, and confers legitimacy on governments. Failed or disputed elections can have negative consequences that range from political uncertainty to social unrest or violent conflict. This in turn can create fertile ground for authoritarian influence.

Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are the key institutions responsible for running free, fair, and credible elections. Elections are highly complex and expensive logistical exercises and most EMBs in our region operate in extremely challenging electoral environments. In most cases, they will service a geographically dispersed and ethno-linguistically diverse population, while also navigating capacity and resource constraints. Some EMBs may also have to contend with highly charged political environments where there is the potential for violence. Despite these hurdles, elections are delivered, and citizens remain engaged in the democratic process.

For over three decades the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT), has worked in partnership with EMBs in our region, supporting them to deliver elections and building their technical capacity. The AEC's comparative advantage as a development partner lies in its globally recognised standing as an exemplar EMB with unrivalled technical knowledge and experience of high integrity election delivery.

Regional democracy

Recent studies suggest that globally democracy is under threat by various forces, with The Economist labelling 2021 a 'new low' for global democracy.¹ Despite this trend, democracy has largely shown resilience in the Pacific region. The post-conflict nation of Timor-Leste has been described as one of the strongest democracies in the region.² Due, in part, to reinvigorating elections which has boosted participation in the democratic process. Recently very sound elections in Tonga and Nauru preceded a smooth transition of power, pointing to the effectiveness of democratic systems in areas of the Pacific.

However, an important aspect to strong democratic practice is the participation of all eligible voters in the electoral process. While the region is committed to enhancing participation, women, youth, and people with disability continue to be underrepresented. Further, research shows that voter turnout is declining in several democracies in the region.³ Without participation of all groups in society, there can't be equal democratic representation, which can lead to disenfranchisement of large sectors of society. Meaningful inclusion requires overcoming a variety of social norms and structural inequities that can obstruct electoral participation. Ensuring that all eligible voters can participate in elections is a cornerstone of a strong democracy.

AEC's effort to defend democracy

The AEC delivers elections which are globally renowned for optimal operations and timely declaration of credible results. Upholding the integrity of Australia's electoral system has become an increasingly complex task in the current global environment. The 2022 Australian federal election provided some new and unprecedented challenges for the AEC which had the potential to undermine successful event delivery.

¹ The Economist, 'A new low for global democracy', 9 February 2022, access at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-low-for-global-democracy>;

² Kurlantzick, Joshua, '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>;

³ OECD iLibrary, 'Voting', accessed at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/0d2b0485-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/0d2b0485-en>;

Risks to electoral integrity and perceived or actual interference in electoral processes arise through multiple threats, including cyber security attacks, physical security attacks, disinformation and misinformation campaigns, and foreign interference. In democracies worldwide, disinformation has been identified as a major threat to democratic processes.

The AEC was able to adapt to provide a professional and impartial event, upholding electoral integrity, in an environment that posed multiple threats to the AEC's reputation. The AEC is committed to the continued defense of democracy both domestically and internationally. This is especially significant given the global decline in trust in democracy and Australia's continued role as an exemplar of democracy in a region characterised by increasing geo-strategic complexity.

These challenges for the AEC are exacerbated for EMBs in the Pacific who struggle for adequate funding and resources to be prepared for the rapidly changing environment in which elections are now delivered.

The AEC's international electoral assistance

The AEC is internationally recognised for providing effective electoral assistance to EMBs in the Indo-Pacific region, and for our contribution to the international knowledge and resource base on best practice electoral administration. Section 7(1)(fa) of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 directs the AEC to provide international assistance in matters relating to elections and referendums. With endorsement from the Foreign Minister, the AEC's electoral assistance programs are built on requests for assistance from partner EMBs and are fully funded by DFAT. The strong reputation of the AEC's international program would not be possible without the support of DFAT.

Since the AEC's first international program in 1989, the AEC has delivered a wide range of bilateral electoral assistance programs including: supporting the first universal franchise election in South Africa (1994); assisting with the establishment of an independent electoral commission in Timor Leste (2001); supporting Tonga to operationalise a new electoral system (2010); assisting with Nepal's first Electoral Education and Information Centre (2012); and providing targeted, long-standing support to our closest neighbour, Papua New Guinea (since 1998). Currently, the AEC has bilateral electoral assistance programs that are fully funded by DFAT with EMBs in Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga, and Sri Lanka.

The AEC also delivers the Australian Government's support for the Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Administrators (PIANZEA) Network.⁴ Established in 1997, the Network 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 exclusively Australian Government-funded for over 20 years, bolstering the relationship between Australia and Pacific Island countries. The Network is deeply valued by its members, respected across the Pacific, and is looked upon as a best practice model by other regions. 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

Through PIANZEA the AEC provides support for voter registration through the Generic Voter Registration System (GVRS). GVRS is an AEC-designed and hosted software application that provides users with a sustainable, technologically appropriate system to manage their electoral rolls. GVRS provides an alternative to commercial

⁴ Members of the PIANZEA Network include EMBs from the following countries: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Timor-Leste (associate member);

⁵ Pearce Laanela, Therese, Sead Alihodžić, Spinelli Antonio and Wolf Peter (2021), *Supporting Elections Effectively: Principles and Practice of Electoral Assistance*, EBA Report 2021:05, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden, access at: https://eba.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021_05-Webb.pdf p 126

products and ensures user countries have complete ownership of their voter registration data. It is currently used by Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Tokelau, Palau, and Bougainville.

The AEC has also made a significant contribution to the international election landscape through its commitment to BRIDGE (Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections) partnership. BRIDGE is a modular professional development program that enhances the professional skills and confidence of staff in electoral management bodies and stakeholders in the electoral process; it is the most comprehensive capacity development tool for elections of its kind. The AEC plays a central role as one of five BRIDGE Partner organisations who also include the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The AEC has been delivering BRIDGE programs in the region for over 20 years.

An important aspect to delivering electoral assistance programs is working collaboratively with other development partners. The AEC values its collaboration with other development partners and appreciates the complementary nature of their support for the broader electoral landscape in the region. We actively seek out opportunities to collaborate with other partners to take the burden of coordination off EMBs and to limit program duplication. The AEC hosts a development partner forum for trusted partners in the region, including DFAT; the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; the New Zealand Electoral Commission, International IDEA; IFES; UNEAD; and UNDP.

Looking forward: the AEC as a partner of choice for international electoral assistance

The Australian Government is well placed to support stability, democracy, and good governance in the Indo-Pacific region. The AEC has a significant leadership role in the region for the provision of effective electoral assistance and for promoting and supporting shared democratic values.

The AEC remains committed to providing international electoral assistance and we are willing and able to scale-up this support to the region in partnership with DFAT and subject to the provision of appropriate resourcing. Our best practice operations and long-standing relationships in the Indo-Pacific region position us as a trusted partner of choice for fellow EMBs. As Australia's EMB, the AEC is uniquely placed to understand the challenges faced by our partner EMBs, and to provide peer-to-peer support to our counterparts in the region. DFAT's 2017 evaluation of Australian electoral assistance outlined the important 'relationship value-add' that the AEC provides the Australian Government in the region, adding that the AEC is an 'asset to Australia's bilateral relationship with countries in the region'.⁶

For Australia's electoral assistance to be as effective as possible, it is recommended that the Australian Government take a 'whole of election cycle' approach to electoral assistance. This approach ensures that electoral assistance is provided throughout the full electoral cycle, and not only in the immediate period before an election, where assistance will be too late to meaningfully reinforce (rather than replace) local capacity. Electoral assistance should support the planning, implementation, lessons-learned, and change management phases of the electoral cycle, noting that elections require significant planning and engagement before, during, and after polling day.

The stability of democracy in the region rests on the continued independence and strengthening of its EMBs and their elections. In its dual character as an Australian Public Service and a professional EMB, the AEC is uniquely placed to provide electoral support that is bespoke and appropriate. By building trust, mutual respect

⁶ Arghiros, Daniel; Boneo, Horacio; Henderson, Simon; Palmieri, Sonia; Pearce Laanela, Therese, '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. 64.

and a shared vision, the AEC promotes peaceful and inclusive societies through sustainable development, adapting programs in response to changes in Australian Government priorities and partner countries' requirements. Any support to elections in the region must be considered as a broader package of support for democratic governance through Australia's development assistance program. The AEC stands ready to provide electoral assistance to our friends and neighbours and views this as a part of its broader remit to defending democracy and enhancing stability in the Pacific region.