

Date: November 2022

AEC submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

New international development policy

Overview

Supporting democratic governance in our region should continue to be a key priority for Australia's international development policy. A strong electoral system is the foundation of democracy and is central to building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development. As Freedom House notes, 'there is more to democracy than free and fair elections, but there can be no democracy without them'.¹ Credible elections are the key mechanism for citizens to participate in the political process and hold governments to account. They support the peaceful transfer of power and confer legitimacy on governments. Failed or disputed elections can have negative consequences that range from political uncertainty to social unrest or violent conflict. This can create fertile ground for authoritarian influence, risking regional stability.

Recent studies suggest that democracy is under threat by various forces, with The Economist labelling 2021 a 'new low' for global democracy.² This is a key trend that will impact on Australia's regional engagement over the next five to ten years and should be considered in the design of the new international development policy. Australia must strategically invest in building democratic resilience to support a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is committed to defending democracy to promote regional stability in line with Australia's national interest.

Elections are highly complex and expensive logistical exercises. Most Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in our region operate in extremely challenging environments, often servicing a geographically dispersed and ethno-linguistically diverse population, while navigating capacity and resource constraints. Strong electoral systems go beyond election operations and delivery. EMBs must be independent and apolitical, and legislative frameworks must support effective electoral administration. Australia's electoral assistance program should focus on strengthening the institutional foundations of regional EMBs through a 'whole of election cycle approach', so that they are better placed to deliver elections.

The AEC is uniquely positioned to support this objective. Globally recognised as an exemplar EMB, the AEC holds high-quality technical knowledge and a track record for delivering trusted elections. With support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the AEC has worked in partnership with EMBs in our region for over thirty years, supporting them to deliver elections and building their technical capacity. In that time the AEC has built strong relationships with our counterparts. There are lessons that can be drawn from these experiences to inform Australia's future development efforts and harness Australia's strengths in electoral administration and democratic governance.

Challenges to democracy – a key trend for the international development policy

EMBs in the Indo-Pacific have the difficult task of administering elections with extensive logistical requirements on tight budgets. Some EMBs may also have to contend with highly charged political environments where there is the potential for violence. And although the region is committed to enhancing inclusion, women, youth, and people with a disability continue to face barriers to electoral participation. Despite these hurdles, elections are delivered, and many citizens remain engaged in the democratic process. The post-conflict nation of Timor-Leste has been described as one of the strongest democracies in the region.³ Due, in part, to donor support for reinvigorating elections. Recently, sound elections in Tonga and Nauru preceded a smooth transition of power.

EMBs in the region are dedicated to upholding democracy to support a peaceful and stable region. As outlined in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, Pacific countries will remain committed to democratic

¹ Freedom House, *Election Integrity*, accessed at: <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/election-integrity>

² The Economist, *A new low for global democracy*, 9 February 2022, accessed at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-low-for-global-democracy>;

³ 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>;

principles and values.⁴ Australia has an important role to play to support this shared priority by continuing to invest in international electoral assistance programs in the region. These emerging democracies must now also cope with new threats to democracy that are being seen around the world. Research shows that voter turnout is decreasing in several countries in the region.⁵ The information environment is growing increasingly fractured with the spread of mis- and dis-information affecting citizens' trust in democracy and elections. In the lead up to the 2022 Australian federal election, the AEC invested in a concerted campaign to counter false claims about the electoral process online before they spread. Given the resources required to combat these threats in a consolidated democracy like Australia, emerging democracies in our region will need additional support to deliver elections in this environment.

The stability of democracy in the region rests on strengthening its EMBs and their elections to ensure their continued independence. The AEC is adept at providing international electoral assistance, while working closely with DFAT and other Australian Public Service agencies to mitigate any potential risks. This is supported by the AEC's excellent international reputation as an impartial and apolitical agency and the strong long-standing relationships we have with our counterparts in the region.

Harnessing Australia's strengths in electoral administration

Australia's electoral system is internationally recognised as the 'gold standard'.⁶ The AEC delivers elections which are renowned for optimal operations and timely declaration of reliable results. Upholding the integrity of Australia's electoral system has become an increasingly complex task in the current global environment. The AEC must manage risks to electoral integrity and perceived or actual interference from multiple threats including cyber security attacks, physical security attacks, mis- and dis-information campaigns, and foreign interference. In the delivery of the 2022 Australian federal election, the AEC demonstrated its ability to anticipate and prepare for these challenges.

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 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 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.⁷ The PIANZEA Network was established in 1997 and has proven to be a highly effective collaboration of electoral administrators working across the Pacific. It supports EMBs in the Pacific to come together and share information and provide mutual assistance in support of elections. Through

⁴ <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022.pdf>

⁵ OECD iLibrary, *Voting*, accessed at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/0d2b0485-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/0d2b0485-en>;

⁶ Miller, Michael E.; Vinall, Frances, *The Twitter account defending Australian democracy*, 14 May 2022, accessed at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/14/australia-electoral-commission/>

⁷ 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).

the PIANZEA Network, the AEC deploys its expertise to help develop local capacity to deliver quality electoral services. The program has been exclusively Australian Government-funded for over 20 years, bolstering the relationship between Australia and Pacific countries. The PIANZEA 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 these networks play to ‘ensure that global standards are implemented while regional and local sensitivities are appreciated’.⁸

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

The Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) program is a key pillar of the AEC’s international engagement. BRIDGE is an enduring international success story, and the effective delivery of the program has assisted many emerging democracies to cope with the complexities of elections. The program is, to this day, the most comprehensive, and widely delivered, global professional development course in election administration. BRIDGE programs aim to enhance the professional skills and confidence of staff in EMBs and provide an essential educational tool for stakeholders. The AEC is one of the founding partners of BRIDGE and has played a leading role in the partnership since its initial development in late 2000. To administer the BRIDGE program the AEC partners with 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 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 donors to take the burden of coordination off regional 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. Working collaboratively with other development partners is an important aspect of delivering effective electoral assistance programs.

Looking forward: recommendations for international electoral assistance

Australia is well placed to support stability, democracy, and good governance in the Indo-Pacific. DFAT has played an important role in strengthening governance in the region with a long-term focus on this sector. The design of the new international development policy is an opportunity to reinforce efforts to support strong electoral systems and democracy in our region. To successfully address this, Australia’s development program will need to take a multi-pronged, whole-of-society approach where electoral assistance is positioned within the broader good governance agenda. The wider legislative, financial, and political environment in each country must be considered in efforts to build capacity and strengthen EMBs as institutions. These factors determine EMBs’ ability to carry out their roles effectively. Strong diplomatic relationships need to be fostered to encourage governments to support their EMBs. Australian support for good governance should also focus on building demand for better quality elections and support for democracy among citizens. Civil society organisations are important partners in this work.

⁸ 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, accessed at: https://eba.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021_05-Webb.pdf p. 126.

Australia should take a ‘whole of election cycle’ approach to electoral assistance. Support should be provided consistently, 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. This approach will also allow development partners to focus on building institutional capacity with partner EMBs. This is difficult to achieve if development partners are only engaged ahead of a specific electoral event when the focus is on dealing with the immediate operational needs.

Civic education is a critical element in promoting inclusive elections and can contribute to countering disinformation. A strong civic education program is essential to help citizens understand their rights and responsibilities. These education programs should also be used to assist electors to identify the characteristics of a strong democracy and a good election. This is best achieved through sustained, high-quality, and fit-for-purpose awareness activities supported by a comprehensive communications plan. Civic education helps to counteract disinformation surrounding elections and democracy, which is becoming an increasing issue for democracy world-wide. The AEC has an excellent reputation in developing and implementing civic education campaigns through its education, communication, and engagement functions, as seen in the recent Australian federal election.

The AEC plays a significant leadership role in the region for the provision of effective electoral assistance and for promoting and supporting shared democratic values. We stand ready to scale-up this support to our friends and neighbours, in partnership with DFAT and subject to the provision of appropriate resourcing. The AEC’s best practice operations and long-standing relationships in the Indo-Pacific position us as a trusted partner of choice for fellow EMBs. As Australia’s EMB, the AEC understands the challenges faced by our counterpart EMBs and can provide them with valuable peer-to-peer support. DFAT’s 2017 evaluation of Australian electoral assistance outlined the important ‘relationship value-add’ that the AEC provides for Australia, adding that the AEC is an ‘asset to Australia’s bilateral relationship with countries in the region’.⁹ Given the global trend of democratic decline, this is a critical time for Australia to consider increasing its electoral assistance program.

⁹ 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.