



Australia

Assessment: Good

Trend: ⇔

Capital: Canberra

Type of Government: Democratic,
Federal-State system recognizing the
British monarch as sovereign

Head of Government: Prime Minister

John Howard (since 11 March 1996)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Alexander
Downer

Population: 19,357,594

Human Development Index Ranking: 5

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia has a **good** overall record of support for democracy abroad. It has shown a commitment to providing electoral assistance, to supporting local democracy promotion through bilateral aid, and to strongly criticizing and sanctioning many of those regimes engaged in the most serious infractions of democracy. This is consistent with Australia's status as one of the world's oldest democracies, and as a nation that takes pride in being a consistent advocate for democracy and the rule of law within the international system.

Australia takes an expansive and holistic approach to democratization. Democracy promotion is considered to require not only a commitment to free and fair elections, but also an effective and dependable legal system, an independent judiciary, honest and transparent government, respect for human rights, and strong civilian control over the military.

In promoting these goals, Australia has typically preferred, in very general terms, to work through bilateral relationships within the Asia-Pacific region, and to work through multilateral fora, especially the Commonwealth and the UN, everywhere else in the world. When pursuing democratization through bilateral relationships, Australia has frequently (although not universally) employed a soft-touch policy of "constructive engagement," rather than a more vigorous and belligerent approach such as the use of sanctions.

As with the foreign policies of many countries, however, there is a strong dose of expediency in Australia's use of constructive engagement to promote democracy within the Asia-Pacific. While it may be a legitimate approach to democratization, Australia has, nonetheless, been far more willing to take a tougher stand with countries outside the Asia-Pacific, or with countries having little or no economic or security bearing on Australia.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Australia structures its foreign relations around three major foreign policy priorities: the promotion of its economic and commercial interests through a stable multilateral trading system; the promotion of a safe and peaceful international community; and the projection of its fundamental values throughout the world, including first and foremost, a respect for democracy and the rule of law. Australia's commitment to democracy promotion abroad is deeply shared and supported by all major political parties in Australia. The Australian media and the Australian public have also played important roles in demanding that Australian governments construct and articulate foreign policy goals with democracy promotion firmly in mind.

Australia's democracy promotion efforts have tended to focus on the Asia-Pacific region. This reflects Australia's geopolitical circumstances and its national security and trade interests. In the early 1990s, under the leadership of Prime Minister Keating, Australia sought to distance itself from American policy in the Asia-Pacific and looked to carve out a "uniquely Australian" position within the region. This move was



seen by many to enhance Australia's ability to exercise political and economic influence in Asia. In recent years, however, there has been a subtle refocusing of Australian foreign policy priorities away from the Asia-Pacific and toward the U.S. This move has been characterized by Prime Minister Howard as a shift from an *Asia-only* policy to an *Asia-first* policy. Nonetheless, Australia is now commonly perceived within the region as looking to play "deputy sheriff" to the Americans. As a result, some have questioned whether Australia presently exercises the same degree of backdoor influence in the region as it did in the mid 1990s.

Australia's emphasis on strong and resolute bilateral relationships within the Asia-Pacific region is said to result in part from the view that democracy promotion --with its inevitable generation of friction and difficulty-- can be best managed through such relationships. This approach is frequently referred to in Australian policy circles as "constructive engagement," and it has been frequently and strongly criticized by some NGOs and human rights groups. Australia's policy of constructive engagement reflects both an expedient view of its economic and security interests, together with a genuine conviction, borne of experience, that bilateral engagement represents the best chance for Australia to promote democratic reform. Outside of the Asia-Pacific region, however, Australia nearly always prefers to utilize multilateral fora such as the Commonwealth and the UN to promote democratization.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

The Australian government has repeatedly moved quickly and forthrightly to condemn the assumption of power, or the threat thereof, through military means especially in the Asia-Pacific region, or when involving a member state of the Commonwealth. However, the manner with which Australia has backed up its rhetoric with sanctions has depended, in large part, on an assessment of whether Australian economic or political interests are likely to be damaged. There are three pertinent examples: Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Pakistan.

In response to the overthrow of the democratically-elected Fijian government in May 2000, the Australian Government immediately expressed deep displeasure and recalled its Australian High Commissioner. It also terminated most non-humanitarian aid activities --representing a halving of Australia's aid activities in Fiji-- and

imposed bilateral sanctions, including the suspension of defense ties, in an effort to encourage Fiji to quickly return to constitutional rule and democracy. Australia played an important role in having Fiji suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth (as it had with Nigeria in 1995 and Pakistan in 1999) and was instrumental in drafting resolutions against Fiji at the UN. The Australian response was firm, and through its diplomatic efforts it placed Fiji on the path to holding internationally endorsed elections in 2001 (to which Australia gave significant financial and technical assistance).

The Australian government also issued a firm response to the abduction and forced-resignation of the Solomon Islands Prime Minister and the subsequent election of a new Prime Minister amid violence and intimidation. The government expressed its deep concern with the manner of the removal of the previous prime minister, but nonetheless agreed to work with the new prime minister in an effort to provide a framework for peace among the various militia groups and to further consolidate democracy in the country. Australia provided, and continues to provide, significant technical and administrative assistance to these efforts. The Australian response, while not as strong as with Fiji, appears to have been successfully conceived and executed.

The 1999 coup in Pakistan elicited a strong rhetorical response from the Australian government, which immediately urged General Musharaf to respect its constitution and the rule of law. The Australian government strongly supported the expulsion of Pakistan from the Councils of the Commonwealth, but did not impose further sanctions beyond those sanctions already imposed following Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998. Those sanctions had included suspension of all ties with Pakistan's military, including the withdrawal of Australian defense attaches from Islamabad. According to the Australian government, the unwillingness to impose additional sanctions reflected the view that such sanctions would hurt the Pakistani people rather than the coup leaders. However, it seems clear that Australia's economic and security interests with Pakistan were equally as important.¹

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Australia has typically responded robustly to suggestions of the manipulation of electoral processes and has also been forthcoming in its efforts



to provide technical and administrative assistance for countries to properly stage and monitor elections. The focus of Australia's activity in this respect has been within the Asia-Pacific region and also certain member states of the Commonwealth.

The Australian government was quick to condemn Zimbabwean President Mugabe's tactics of electoral intimidation and outright manipulation during the 2000 election campaign. The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, played an important role in having Zimbabwe suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth, both before and after the election. The Australian government has been criticized from many quarters for not imposing smart sanctions against President Mugabe. However, the government, despite having repeatedly argued for such sanctions in various Commonwealth fora, chose instead to adopt the official Commonwealth response, typically expected of member countries, rather than to proceed independently.

In the run-up to Cambodia's national elections in July 1998, the Australian government, which had played an important role in the establishment of Cambodian democracy, deployed Australian electoral observers for a period of weeks leading up to the elections. The observers reported widespread violence and intimidation in the lead-up to the poll, although they declared the polling process itself as "satisfactory." In the period of instability that followed, Australia opted to work to persuade the various political factions to resume dialogue and to participate in the inauguration of the National Assembly. While this course was not perhaps in the best interests of democracy, there is a good case that this was a necessary and appropriate step for national stability.

Australia's role in the promotion of East Timorese democracy is complex, but ultimately highly successful. In August 1999, prior to the independence ballot, the Australian government informed the Indonesian government that interference in the ballot would severely jeopardize bilateral relations between Australia and Indonesia. In an effort to monitor the ballot, Australia led, and largely funded, the first UN election-monitoring mission, UNAMET, and following the later outbreak of violence, Australia led the UN peacekeeping mission, INTERFET. Australia's efforts to protect the nascent East Timorese democracy were costly both in terms of resources and in terms of Australia's strategic and economic relationship with Indonesia. Since January 2001, the Australian Electoral Commission has been helping develop skills and

resources for managing electoral processes in East Timor.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Australia is an active and constructive participant in international democracy fora, and a strong voice for democracy in multilateral fora such as the UN and the Commonwealth. Australia also has an excellent ratification record on international protocols dealing with respect for democratic values, although Australia has justifiably come under fire for its recent treatment of asylum seekers and indigenous Australians.

Australia thinks of itself, with some justification, as a country whose comparative advantage in diplomacy is having innovative ideas and the willingness to put them into practice. Thus, Australia has taken significant pride in its successful leadership of international efforts to establish democracy in Cambodia in the early-mid 1990s, and in East Timor. In monetary terms, Australia's commitment to Cambodian democratization was approximately A\$250 million (US\$150 million) over four years, while Australia's total commitment to East Timor will be roughly A\$1.7 billion (US\$1 billion) (A\$1.4 billion representing Australia's contribution to the peacekeeping effort). However, one area in which Australia has not improved is the amount of foreign assistance it provides to democracy promotion through its development aid. At present, around A\$355 million (US\$210 million), or 20 percent of Australia's aid budget, goes to so-called "governance aid" every year, placing it only slightly above the OECD median. This is a significantly lower amount than under the Labor Government of the mid-1990s.

In the late 1990s, the Australian Government established the Center for Democratic Institutions (CDI) at the Australian National University (ANU). The CDI is an NGO that receives most of its funding from the government. Its mandate is to think through and implement forms of democratic assistance, while working closely with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). In particular, the CDI is charged with providing practical training and technical assistance with regard to electoral and parliamentary procedures, as well as the rule of law. In this sense, through the creation of the CDI, the Australian Government is seeking to leverage the benefits and expertise of the NGO community for the



purposes of government policy-making. This is an important development, and has already delivered positive new ideas for Vietnam and Burma.

POLICY TOWARD ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Australian policy toward authoritarian regimes tends to favor diplomatic and economic engagement rather than diplomatic isolation and sanctions often advocated by the United States.² This approach, however, owes as much to the economic and security necessities of the region as it does to a belief that playing Australian 'good cop' to the American 'bad cop' will affect positive democratic reform. In particular, Australia has been concerned to show Asian nations that it is not just another hectoring Western country, but one that understands the "Asian way" of doing diplomacy.

The most notable example of the policy of constructive engagement is Burma. In the early 1990s, the Australian government declined to impose economic sanctions against Burma following the decision of the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to discard the outcome of the election for a Constituent Assembly.³ The Australian Government did, however, strongly protest the actions of the Burmese government and conveyed its displeasure to the military government via the normal bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels.⁴ It also suspended its development aid program and the supply of defense related goods. At the same time, it sought to constructively engage

with the SLORC in an attempt to accelerate the process of reform. It did this by utilizing the "benchmarks approach" in relation to Burma, which linked greater bilateral contact with moves toward greater regard for democracy and the rule of law.⁵ While this policy was attacked by Aung San Suu Kyi and various NGOs as simply serving to extend the dictatorship's grip on power, Australian policymakers have defended it, claiming it has helped to facilitate the release of Suu Kyi and other signs of economic and political liberalization.⁶

Australia has adopted a similar diplomatic approach to China. In economic and security terms, China is a major concern for Australia. If China chose to hurt Australia, it could do so very badly. Thus, Australia's own national interests preclude it from taking an especially hard line with China with regard to democratic reform and the rule of law issues.

Instead, Australia, through its bilateral relationship with China, has established an annual human rights dialogue, which provides the Australian Government with an opportunity to discuss with the Chinese government the full range of Australian concerns. While this dialogue has facilitated some important exchange of technical assistance aimed at promoting civil society and legal reform, it is in substance little more than a charade.

¹ In September 2001, following the terrorist attacks on the United States, Australia resumed its defense links with Pakistan.

² Outside of the Asia-Pacific region, however, Australia's approach to entrenched dictatorships is much tougher (e.g. Iraq, Zimbabwe). In many of these instances, Australia has played a leading role within international fora in seeking to bring about reform.

³ The policy of the Keating government was to neither encourage nor discourage trade with or investment in Burma.

⁴ Australian governments have consistently co-sponsored resolutions on Burma in the UN Commission on Human Rights and at the UN General Assembly.

⁵ In 1997 the U.S. introduced sanctions on new trade and investment by U.S. companies in Burma and called on other nations to do likewise. The Australian government refused to support this call.

⁶ Australia (though the CDI) has conducted nine workshops since 2000, which are said to have been successful in raising awareness of democratic reform and human rights. Australia has also consistently and strongly called for greater dialogue between the SLORC and Aung San Suu Kyi, and welcomed the confidence-building processes between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Suu Kyi since October 2000, which resulted in the unconditional release of Suu Kyi from de facto house arrest.