



# POLICY BRIEF

## Holding the line *Weathering populism in Southeast Asia*

June 2018

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YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

## **Holding the line: weathering populism in Southeast Asia**

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**Image: Philippine flags near the Cultural Center of the Philippines; Ken Wilson Lee, Flickr, Creative Commons**

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## Executive Summary

Australia should observe the changing political landscape in Southeast Asia with patient caution. Although the rise of populism to Australia's north - particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia - has attracted concern from within Government and wider foreign policy circles, it does not as yet justify radical change to Australia's current policy and engagement in the region. The desire for action as a response to only a handful of data points is misguided. Populism has emerged in waves throughout history and has proved to be neither a stable nor an enduring phenomenon.

Policymakers should practice forbearance, striving to preserve positive diplomatic relations with populist leaders in South-East Asia and maintaining the regional status quo, rather than working to undermine populist movements perceived as threatening to state stability. This recommendation is given for the following three reasons. First, populism, particularly authoritarian populism, has not transformed Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape to any meaningful extent. Second, there could be unforeseen costs to promoting anti-populist 'conventional' political movements. Interfering, or being seen to interfere, in the domestic politics of the region could amplify populist narratives of exploitative Western influence. Finally, interference risks overextending Australia's resources and political capital, whilst caution and observation leaves all future options open.

Observing the changing political winds in Southeast Asia is a low-cost and low-risk strategy necessary for navigating the region's still nascent populist movement.

## Background

The emergence of populist movements in Australia's region understandably attracts significant attention given their historical propensity to destabilise Western democracies. Most recently, the outcomes of the 2014 Indonesian and 2016 Philippine presidential elections demonstrate that powerful populist impulses are growing to Australia's north. These almost simultaneous successes in South-East Asia's two most populous states suggest that the populist surge spreading across the region is not an isolated phenomenon, and therefore seem to constitute a greater threat than past populist movements seen in [Thailand](#) and [Malaysia](#).

In Indonesia, an undeniably populist candidate - Prabowo Subianto, leader of the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) - gained approximately [47% of the vote in the 2014 presidential election](#). His platform [de-emphasised representative democracy and elevated the idea of a strong centralised leader](#). While Prabowo did not win the presidency, the close result indicates that populists in Indonesia are a formidable mainstream force, with the ability to mobilise significant public support. Moreover, the victor, Joko Widodo, demonstrates populist characteristics and rhetoric, as an 'outsider' who [mixed a technocratic agenda with populist flair](#).

The populist 'breakthrough' in the region came when the Philippines, a United States (US) treaty ally and second most populous country in the region, [elected an avowed populist in 2016](#). President Rodrigo Duterte has [radically altered the trajectory of the Philippines](#). He has publicly [denounced the Philippine Congress and Judiciary](#). He has flirted with withdrawing from Western-led multilateral forums. He has also publicly distanced himself from the US and the West, and has sought to [improve ties with China and Russia](#). Duterte is an important development, though his rule in the Philippines is still relatively new.

Thus, although this movement is still in its infancy, and the influence of populists in Southeast Asia is currently considered to be a peripheral one, the potential for a regional 'populist wave' makes it a phenomenon worth observing closely.

## The Challenge

Populists in Southeast Asia can, and have, advocated for policies that are hostile to Australian interests and the liberal-democratic order. Australia has more than \$100 billion in [trade](#) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Disruption to the current mutually beneficial business environment, political system, attitudes or commitments to treaty obligations would be severely damaging to Australia's strategic interests. Furthermore, relations with these Southeast Asian states have significant international and national security implications. Thus, Australia has a strong imperative for ensuring the stability of, and adherence to, the rules-based order.

While sharing many characteristics with Western populist movements, unique elements of Southeast Asian populism constitute a particular threat to Australia's interests and the liberal international order. Southeast Asian populists are [anti-establishment, anti-elite, nationalistic, xenophobic, and provincialist](#), but also have a more complex relationship with [authoritarianism and tend to advocate autarky](#). Further, their anti-establishmentarianism can manifest into an [antipathy towards the United States and the West, along with the Liberal Democratic order](#). These features trend towards illiberal governance.

The challenge of Asian populists is even more complex when considering their diversity. Asian populist movements can be dominant, as in the Philippines; powerful, as in Indonesia and Malaysia; dormant, as in Thailand; or weak to non-existent, in countries like Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam. It is difficult to predict if a more established political movement will adopt a populist style, as has [been seen increasingly with Joko Widodo](#). Southeast Asian populism presents a real threat to Australian interests, but it is difficult to trace and understand.

## Recommendations

The Australian Government must tread carefully. A policy of observation and patience is the most appropriate response to these developments. The advantages of strategic observation are multifaceted and provide a clear path forward.

The perception that the West interferes with domestic governance, extracts others' natural resources and acts with impropriety in Southeast Asia helps to fuel populist sentiment. Using any tool of statecraft to weaken these movements could therefore backfire dramatically. Inaction takes into account our limited influence and counters the populist narrative of the West's manipulative, interventionist, neo-colonialist agenda.

Until a true threat emerges region-wide, cautious scrutiny is the most appropriate course of action:

### *1. Wait for Populism to Exhaust Itself*

Populism in this region may be an unstable and fleeting political movement. Across the world it has risen and fallen, and while there is no guarantee that Southeast Asian populism will follow suit, peaceful decline remains a real and plausible possible outcome. As populists are anti-establishment by definition, taking the reins of state often causes serious tension within their movements and equally often leads to moderation or implosion. Therefore, allowing regional populism to fizzle out of its own accord may indeed be the best solution.

### *2. Gather Data and Make Contingency Plans*

A two-pronged approach is most prudent: build on Australia's existing relationships in the region whilst carefully monitoring the emergence or increase of anti-Western populism. Such monitoring would require minimal reallocation of resources and human intelligence. For optimum readiness, Australia must ensure its analysts and policy-makers are actively observing these trends, and must share intelligence with its key allies, chiefly the US. Then, if developments in Indonesia and the Philippines do give reason for concern, Australia must be in a position to mitigate risks.

## Conclusion

Southeast Asia's populists are scattered and have yet to redefine the region's political landscape. However, they have become a serious political force in some of the region's most powerful states. This shift is not at present dangerous to Australia and Australia's interests, but anti-western, anti-American, authoritarian and autarkic tendencies amongst Southeast Asian populists could destabilise the region and the liberal-democratic order in the future.

The path forward should therefore be one of caution and patience. It is crucial that Australia wait to see if the populist wave is brewing or has already crested before any further actions are taken. Diligent observance and data gathering as per normal is the wisest approach. It will leave Australia with the maximum amount of policy levers available if populists continue to rise in the region and threaten Australia's interests.