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**A big year for polls and uncertainty**

The Canberra Times

8 January 2004

This year will be a bumper year for elections in East Asia, with eight countries holding national elections. This flood of elections is the result of a 20-year wave of democratisation that has yet to subside. While this liberalising wave contributes to regional stability in the long run, it has created a more fluid and turbulent foreign policy environment for Australia. Four elections pose the greatest uncertainty for Australia's regional policy interests. The elections in Taiwan and South Korea promise to aggravate the region's two hottest "flashpoints" and challenge Australia's carefully crafted policy positions. The Taiwanese and Korean presidents are offering referenda on their rule underpinning these regimes' democratic transitions. Unfortunately, these referenda threaten to raise regional political tensions that Australia must navigate.

The Indonesian and Philippine elections may have significant impacts on state-military relations in these "front-line" states in the War on Terror and on their domestic insurgencies. Indonesia's April 5 parliamentary elections and its first direct presidential elections on July 5 and September 20 (if a run-off is required) may even turn Australian foreign policy into a key election issue, complicating Australia's touchiest bilateral relationship. The recent public rebuttals of Australia's support for America's missile defence shield by Indonesia's Foreign Minister may be a warning shot of many more to come. While the State Department is well-used to having US foreign policy become populist fodder in elections around the world, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is not. The parliamentary and presidential elections in Indonesia will be good measuring sticks for the rise of Islamist politics in South-east Asia. In Indonesia, observers predict that Megawati Sukarnoputri will win Indonesia's presidential election, while her PDI-P party may link up with the main coalition of Islamic parties in the earlier parliamentary elections to ensure a majority. While a Megawati win would help guarantee continuity in the bilateral relationship, any teaming up with Islamic parties would mean that the President would have to take a stronger tone against Australia's support for the US and potentially a softer line on more extreme Islamist groups. With Prime Minister Howard focussing on strong ties with Washington as one of his major achievements for our own vote next year, divergent electioneering in Indonesia and Australia will likely strain mending relations at the highest and most public levels. General Wiranto is a leading candidate to become Golkar's, Indonesia's largest party, presidential candidate while Megawati has worked hard during her first term to establish strong ties with the military (TNI). With military operations intensifying in separatist Aceh and Irian Jaya/West Papua, TNI is well-placed to regain some of the political weight it has lost since the fall of Suharto and the pending loss of its 38 reserved seats in parliament in the coming elections. A stronger crackdown in Irian Jaya/West Papua holds the greatest potential disruption for Australia. West Papuan independence leaders are publicly calling for Australia to support their call for independence after the East Timor precedent. While Canberra has steadfastly refused to support independence, any escalation in this conflict will increase these calls for support and Indonesian skepticism. In the worst-case scenario, the Indonesian military would pursue West Papuan independence forces sheltering in Papua New Guinea. Increasing tensions between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea would certainly draw Australia in, especially given our new, more assertive role in PNG. In the Philippines, President Macapagal-Arroyo came to power in 2001 on the back of a "constitutional" military coup and has strongly supported the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Mindanao campaigns. Trailing in early polls to movie star Fernando Poe jr, Macapagal-Arroyo will likely maintain her tough populist line on the Muslim Moro insurgency in Mindanao. The run-up to the May election will entice the Abu Sayyaf or AFP elements to reignite the conflict to gain maximum exposure and electoral impact. However, if Poe jr wins, as expected, his extraordinary personal popularity in Mindanao and independence from the military may help temper the conflict. Taiwan's March 20 presidential election is already the most destabilising, and may severely test Australia's burgeoning relationship with China. Taiwan's President Chen Shuibian of the

Democratic People's Party is running for re-election against the odds and has adopted a very risky pro-independence/ethnic empowerment platform. Despite public rebukes from Washington, Taiwan's security guarantor, and threats of war from China's military brass, President Chen has persisted in his calls for a referendum on China's threatening military posture towards Taiwan. Chen is calling for the referendum to be held the same day as the presidential election, maximising its electoral impact and Beijing's ire. Australia's "One China" policy would be put under extreme pressure if Beijing responded militarily to a referendum in Taiwan. Could Australia maintain the pragmatic policy status quo recognising Taiwan as part of China against the democratically expressed wishes of 23 million people? Strong foreign pressure against such a referendum may play into Chen's hands by emphasising Taiwan's present inability to decide its own future. With over 85 per cent of its population being ethnic Taiwanese, too much criticism of Chen's populism is ill-advised. Like Taiwan's Chen Shuibian, South Korea's President Roh Moo-hyun is fighting for political survival. Roh's continuation of the "Sunshine Policy" of careful engagement with North Korea is likely to suffer another major setback in April's parliamentary elections. Roh has already lost his parliamentary majority after his party dumped him and now can only confidently call rely on the nascent Uri party that controls a small minority of seats. In retaliation, Roh has called for a referendum on his 10-month rule. If Roh loses the proposed referendum or the conservative main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) does well in April, South Korea may revert to the GNP's stronger line against North Korea. Roh's eroding position has already complicated the tense situation on the peninsula and bolstered conservative voices in Seoul and Washington backing a much harder line on North Korea. Any moves by Seoul in this direction will spur Pyongyang's intransigence and test the fragile, developing consensus between Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo. Australia has supported this softer, engagement-oriented line on Korea by re-establishing diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. South Korea's young and rambunctious democracy threatens to challenge Australia's present Korea policy and heighten regional security fears. If a more hawkish line on North Korea prevails, Australia may be forced to change tack. East Asia's year of elections and their uncertain outcomes is proof positive of the strength of the region's commitment to democracy. However, these elections will cast some of our most important regional policy pillars and relations into new and uncertain electoral waters.

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