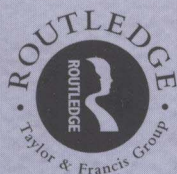


# **The Politics of Human Rights in Southeast Asia**

Philip J. Eldridge

Politics in Asia Series



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Philip J. Eldridge



London and New York

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The divide between the West and Southeast Asia seems to be nowhere more apparent than in debates about human rights. Within these diverse geographical, political and cultural climates, human rights seem to have become relative, and the quest for absolutes seems unattainable.

In this new book Philip Eldridge seeks to question this stalemate. He argues that full participation in United Nations' human rights treaties by both western and Southeast Asian countries could be the common ground that bridges the gap. Eldridge uses topical case studies and primary research from Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia, to compare the effectiveness of United Nations' human rights directives on local democracies.

This study presents insightful research into a hotly debated topic. As such it will be a thought-provoking resource for students of human rights, politics and international relations.

**Philip J. Eldridge** is Honorary Research Associate at the School of Government, University of Tasmania.

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

Southeast Asia has experienced a period of sustained upheaval since research for this project began in 1995. Assumptions underlying the work and the empirical foundations on which they are based have experienced corresponding turbulence. The human and political as well as economic impact of the regional crisis, beginning in 1997, has been profound. A major regime change in Indonesia and the emergence of East Timor as an independent state have been among the more dramatic developments. Currently, the resignation or impeachment of President Wahid appear highly probable. Intensifying struggles for democratic reform in Malaysia, major constitutional change in Thailand and enlargement of ASEAN membership may prove of equally long term significance to regional human rights development.

This account explores diffuse interactions between democracy, human rights and economic development in Southeast Asian regional and domestic politics, with parallel accounts of ASEAN states' strategies in balancing national sovereignty priorities and pressures to conform with international human rights law, as articulated in United Nations covenants and conventions. The original country focus on Indonesia and Malaysia is reflected in specialised chapters. Together with Singapore, these countries were the most articulate advocates of relativist cum Asian values approaches in regional human rights debates before 1997. These themes have retained their salience, although changing forms since the economic crisis. Subsequently, the work has been expanded to include, though unevenly, all ten ASEAN countries.

Australia combines western history and Asian geography, and is of necessity closely engaged with the region. Comparison of Australia's bilateral relations with ASEAN states indicates a pragmatic approach to integrating human rights policies with regional diplomacy and considerations of national sovereignty, security and economic interest. Accounts of internal debates draw out often overlooked tensions between western-style democracy and universal human rights. As Southeast Asian countries democratise, and therefore societies as well as governments interact more closely, human rights are becoming increasingly part of such engagement. In the short term at least, democratisation in Indonesia and East Timor's secession, coinciding with populist re-directions in Australia's regional policy, have worsened relations at both societal and elite levels.

Networks of scholars have been researching notions of dialogue, interdependence and inclusiveness of human rights for many years. But false polarisation between civil and political as against economic, social and cultural rights, together with inflexible understandings of national sovereignty, still frustrate their efforts. This study supports the universalist rather than relativist side of the human rights debate, but takes pains to argue that means for accommodating the region's diffuse cultural traditions are provided within the existing framework of international human rights law.

While universal values are unlikely to be agreed in an absolute sense, UN human rights instruments can be seen as representing the highest level of normative consensus achieved at any given stage by the international community, recognising that this is a continuing process. Most importantly, they provide an operational framework of *a priori* moral equality and mutual accountability.

Sharp differences between Southeast Asian governments and non-government organisations (NGOs), in the context of a global and regional UN-sponsored consultation in 1993, focused attention on the UN context at an early stage of this research. An international conference at La Trobe University, Melbourne, in July 1995, coordinated by Professor Joseph Camilleri, to celebrate the United Nations fiftieth birthday, provided further encouragement in this direction. I also acknowledge earlier exposure to 'humane governance' themes at the Centre for Developing Societies and Lokayan, Delhi, thanking especially Rajni Kothari, D. L. Sheth, Smitu Kothari and Harsh Sethi.

The study's time frame centres on the 1990's, with excursions into earlier history as appropriate. The manuscript has been finalised in late May 2001. Inevitably, problems have been encountered during the final stages in keeping abreast of diffuse, continuously breaking developments in several countries bearing on the work's main themes. The reader's understanding is, therefore, requested for some uneven depth and coverage plus sometimes uncertain use of tenses. However, key themes and arguments, as stated in the Introduction and Conclusion have remained consistent.

Thanks are due to the University of Tasmania Office for Research and Arts Faculty for research travel support, and to the School of Government (previously Department of Political Science) both before and after my retirement from full time academic employment in November 1997, when I was appointed as Honorary Research Associate, for collegial and infrastructure support, including excellent internet and document delivery facilities. Former Head of Department, James Cotton, provided continuing encouragement and insights during the early stages of research. Exchanges with David Jones (Government) and Simon Philpott (Asian Studies/Languages) are also appreciated.

Thanks are due to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for financing a Research Fellowship in Australia–Southeast Asia Relations for nine months at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, from August 1995 to May 1996. I revisited ISEAS for six weeks in January–February 1997 and briefly in May 1998. I visited Malaysia and Indonesia from ISEAS between September–December 1995 and February–March 1996, with follow-up

fieldwork from April to June 1998. Contact with developments has been maintained through the internet and through fieldwork and conferences in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney at regular intervals during the whole period of research.

At ISEAS, thanks are due to the former Director, Prof. Chan Heng Chee, Administration Secretary, Mrs. Y. Lee, Triena Ong and other Library and Administrative staff and academic colleagues, notably Tania Li, Caroline Gates, Peou Sorpong, John Funston, Diana Wong and Tin Maung Maung Than for providing a stimulating and supportive environment. At a critical stage, the late Michael Leifer, Professor of International Relations at London School of Economics, a regular visitor to ISEAS and Editor of Routledge's Politics in Asia Series, encouraged me in broadening the focus of my work, subsequently commenting on various drafts. Leo Suryadinata, Department of Politics, National University of Singapore, provided incisive commentary on regional, especially Indonesian politics. Exchanges with Hari Singh in that Department are also appreciated.

In Melbourne, I am indebted to the School of Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, La Trobe University, for a Study Fellowship in Governance which provided support in the later stages of my work. Exchange of ideas with Anthony Jarvis is appreciated, as is administrative assistance by School Secretary, Liz Byrne. Institutional and collegial support was also provided by the Asia Institute and Politics Department, Monash University. Thanks are due to Susan Blackburn and David Goldsworthy. Arief Budiman and Gerry van Klinken, variously encountered in Australia and Indonesia, provided background insights on many issues.

Community Aid Abroad and the Overseas Service Bureau provided salient points of contact with the NGO sector. The Human Rights office of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), particularly its Director Pat Walsh, as in previous work, provided a wealth of resources and insights. Alan Matheson in the international section of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) provided important information and insights, plus a network of regional contacts. These included the Asian regional office of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions based in Singapore and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) regional office in Bangkok. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), through its Director, Brian Noakes, provided parallel business insights and contacts, notably with the Indonesia–Australian Business Council in Jakarta.

In Sydney, I consulted with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), Australian Legal Resources, which acts as the funding arm of the International Commission of Jurists in Indonesia, and the Human Rights Council of Australia. Thanks are due to Kieran Fitzpatrick, Liz Biok and Andre Frankovits.

In periodic visits to Canberra, the Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, provided an institutional base and collegial support. Warm thanks are due to Harold Crouch for exchange on both Indonesia and Malaysia. Edward Aspinall assisted my understanding of developments in the



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Thanks are due to many desk and section officers in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Defence and Intelligence Organisation (DIO), Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID), and their counterparts in Australian embassies in Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok for providing high quality information and resources. Margaret Svieringa, Secretary to the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade also provided extensive information and insights. Among NGOs, assistance is acknowledged from Michael Curtoti (Australian Forum of Human Rights Organisations), Janet Hunt (Australian Council for Overseas Aid) and Patrick Kilby (Community Aid Abroad).

The Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), as my main academic base in Jakarta, provided a supportive, collegial environment. Its library provided an excellent press cuttings service. Particular thanks are due to Yusuf Wanandi and Hadi Soesastro. Thanks are also due to Ikrar Bhakti, Dewi Fortuna Anwar and Rifki Muna (Indonesian Institute of Sciences – LIPI) for wide-ranging exchanges.

At Gajah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Lukman Sutrisno (Rural Development Studies Centre) has been a continuing source of energy and ideas. The Social and Political Science Faculty hosted periodic visits. Thanks are due to Yahya Muhaimin, Afan Gafar and other Faculty members for lively exchange – also to visiting Australian lecturers Herbert Feith and Lance Castles. The Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies (linked to the Institute of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) offered an additional resource base.

Exchanges with activists and associated intellectuals in human rights and related fields in Jakarta and Yogyakarta included Gustav Dupe (Indonesian People for a Humanitarian Community); Bonar Tigor Naipospos and Eko Dananjaya (Information Centre and Action Network for Democratic Reform); Achmad Taufik (Alliance of Independent Journalists); Dita Sari (Centre for Indonesian Labour Struggles); Abdul Hakim Nusantara, (Institute of Policy Research and Advocacy); Asmara Nababan and Maria Pakpahan (International Forum for Indonesian Development); Buyung Nasution, Mulya Lubis, Budi Santoso and Fauzi Abdullah (Indonesian Legal Aid Institute); Poncke Princen (Institute for the Defence of Human Rights); M. Billah (Community for Participatory Social Management); B. J. Marbun (National Human Rights Commission); Tati Krisnawati (Women's Solidarity); Dadang Juliantoro (Lappera); Adi Sasono (ICMI); Nurcholish Madjid (Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina); the late Fr. Romo Mangunwijaya (Kanisius Foundation); Mansour Fakhri (Institute for Social Transformation); Sabam Siagian (Jakarta Post Director and former Ambassador to Australia). I also enjoyed the privilege of an interview in December 1995 with Indonesia's current President, Abdurrahman Wahid, who was then Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama.

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In Bangkok, thanks are due to Prof. Suchit Bunbongkarn and other staff of the Department of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, for valuable exchange during my visit in January 1996. Also to Thongbai Thongpao, veteran human rights lawyer and activist, for wide-ranging information and insights.

Sincere apologies are offered to many who gave generously of their time and ideas, who may have been omitted involuntarily from these acknowledgements, due to the effluxion of time and information overload on an ageing scholar. Many others encountered in the course of travels, without contributing in a direct academic sense, added to the general enjoyment and conviviality gained from this research.

Finally, I thank my wife, Inna, for invaluable cross-cultural 'reality checks' besides much other support.

Responsibility for interpretation, errors and omissions remains my own.

Philip Eldridge  
Hobart, Australia  
25 May 2001

# Abbreviations

ABIM	Movement in Defence of Malaysian Islam (Angkatan Bela Islam Malaysia)
ABRI	Armed forces of the Republic of Indonesia (Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia)
ACCI	Australian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
ACFOA	Australian Council for Overseas Aid
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ADF	Australian Defence Forces
AFHRO	Australian Forum of Human Rights Organisations
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
AHRC	Asian Human Rights Commission
AJI	Independent Journalists' Alliance (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen) (Indonesia)
AMDA	Association of Medical Doctors of Asia
ANCP	AusAID-NGO Cooperation Program
ANZ	Australia and New Zealand
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APFNHRI	Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions
APHR-FT	Asia Pacific Human Rights (NGOs) Facilitating Team
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Moslem Mindanao
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ASIET	Action for Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (Australia)
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
AWAM	All Women's Action Society of Malaysia
BA	Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif) (Malaysia)
BAPPENAS	National Planning Board (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional) (Indonesia)
BDLP	Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (Thailand)
BN	National Front (Barisan Nasional) (Malaysia)
BSP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CAA	Community Aid Abroad
CAP	Consumers' Association of Penang
CAT	Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatments or Punishments

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CDA	Constitution Drafting Assembly (Thailand)
CDI	Centre for Democratic Institutions (Australia)
CE	Christian Era
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CENPEACE	Centre for Peace (Malaysia)
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CGI	(World Bank) Consortium Group for Indonesia
CNRT	National Resistance Council for Independent East Timor
COHCHR	Cambodian Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
CPC	(Malaysian) Criminal Procedure Code
CPF	(Singapore) Central Provident Fund
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CROC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD)
DAP	Democratic Action Party (Malaysia)
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
DIFF	Development Import Finance Facility (Australia)
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Australia)
DPR	House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat) (Indonesia)
EAEC	East Asian Economic Caucus
ECOSOC	(United Nations) Economic and Social Council
EPSM	Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia
FORERI	Forum for Reconciliation in Irian Jaya
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
FSBI	All-Indonesia Workers' Federation (Federasi Serikat Buruh Indonesia)
FUNCINPEC	National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
GAM	Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka)
GBHN	Guidelines of State Policy (Garis-Garis Besar Haluan Negara) (Indonesia)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
HAKAM	National Association for Human Rights (Persatuan Kebangsaan Hak Asasi Manusia) (Indonesia)
HDI	Human Development Index
HRCA	Human Rights Council of Australia
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Australia)
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICMI	Institute of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (Institut Cendekiawan Muslim Se-Indonesia)
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INDOC	Indonesian Documentation and Information Centre
INFID	International Forum for Indonesian Development
INGI	International Non-Government Group for Indonesia
INTERFET	International Force for East Timor
IRI	International Republican Institute (USA)
JIOG	Joint International Observers' Group (for Cambodian elections)

JSCFADT	Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (Australia)
KBL	New Society Movement (Philippines)
KIPP	Independent Committee to Monitor Elections (Komite Independen Pemantau Pemilu) (Indonesia)
KISDI	Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the Islamic World (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam)
KLSE	Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange
KNP	Khmer Nation Party (Cambodia)
Komnas HAM	National Human Rights Commission (Komite Nasional untuk Hak Asasi Manusia) (Indonesia)
LEMHAMNAS	National Defence Institute (Lembaga Hankam Nasional) (Indonesia)
LP3ES	Social and Economic Research, Education and Information Institute (Lembaga Penelitian Pendidikan, Penerangan Ekonomi Dan Sosial) (Indonesia)
MAF	Malaysian Action Front
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines)
MIUK	Indonesian People for a Humanitarian Community (Masyarakat Indonesia Untuk Kemanusiaan – MIUK)
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front (Philippines)
MPR	People's Deliberative Council (Majelis Pemusyawaratan Rakyat) (Indonesia)
NAMFREL	National Movement for Free Elections (Philippines)
NCW	National Council of Women (Malaysia)
NDP	New Development Policy (Malaysia)
NEP	New Economic Policy (Malaysia)
NGO	Non-government organisation
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NLD	National League for Democracy (Burma/Myanmar)
NPA	New People's Army (Philippines)
NTT	East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur) (Indonesia)
NU	Association of Religious Scholars (Nahdlatul Ulama) (Indonesia)
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers (Malaysia)
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the (United Nations) High Commissioner for Human Rights
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Countries
OPM	Free Papua Organisation (Organisasi Papua Merdeka)
PAN	National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional) (Indonesia)
PAP	People's Action Party (Singapore)
PAS	Islamic Party (Malaysia)
PARMUSI	Indonesian Islamic Party (Partai Muslim Indonesia)
PBS	United Sabah Party (Partai Bersatu Sabah ) (Malaysia)
PDI	Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia)
PDI-P	Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan)
PDR	Centre for People's Democracy (Pusat Demokrasi Rakyat) (Indonesia)
PGI	Indonesian Communion of Churches (Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja Indonesia)

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PIJAR	Information Centre and Action Network for Democratic Reform (Pusat Informasi dan Jaringan Aksi untuk Reformasi) (Indonesia)
PKB	National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa) (Indonesia)
PKI	Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia)
PKK	Family Welfare Association (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga) (Indonesia)
PNG	Papua-New Guinea
PPBI	Centre for Indonesian Labour Struggles (Pusat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia)
PPP	Development Unity Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) (Indonesia)
PRD	People's Democratic Party (Partai Rakyat Demokrasi) (Indonesia)
PRM	Malaysian People's Party (Partai Rakyat Malaysia)
PSI	Indonesian Socialist Party (Partai Sosialis Indonesia)
PUDI	Indonesian United Democratic Party (Partai Uni Demokrasi Indonesia)
PWI	Indonesian Journalists' Association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia)
RAM	Reform of the Armed Forces Movement (Philippines)
RDA	Racial Discrimination Act (Australia)
RTD	United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development
SAHRDC	South Asia Human Rights Documentation Center
SAL	Structural Adjustment Loan
SAM	Friends of the Earth (Sahabat Alam) (Malaysia)
SBSI	Indonesian Labour Welfare Association (Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia)
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Committee (Burma/Myanmar)
SP	Women's Solidarity (Solidaritas Perempuan) (Indonesia)
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council (Burma/Myanmar)
SPRIM	Indonesian Peoples' Solidarity Struggle with the Maubere People (Solidaritas Perjuangan Rakyat Indonesia dengan Maubere)
SPSI	All Indonesian Workers' Union (Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia)
SUARAM	Voice of Malaysia (Suara Malaysia)
SUHAKAM	Human Right Commission of Malaysia (Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia)
TNI	Indonesian National Army (Tentara Nasional Indonesia)
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Indonesia)
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
UMNO	United Malays' National Organisation (Malaysia)
UN	United Nations
UNAMET	United Nations Mission for East Timor
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNCHR	United Nations Commission for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNTAET	United Nations Temporary Administration in East Timor
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Administration of Cambodia
USA	United States of America
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association (Burma/Myanmar)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VDPA	Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action
WTO	World Trade Organisation
YLBHI	Foundation of Indonesian Legal Aid Institutions (Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia)
YPMD	Institute for Rural Development (Yayasan Pengembangan Masyarakat Desa) (Indonesia)

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# Introduction

Political conflict surrounding human rights in Southeast Asia has intensified since the end of the Cold War, especially since the recent regional economic crisis. Conceptions of human rights are inevitably controversial, as they reach to the heart of a society's cultural and political identity. This book explores key themes influencing policy and discourse in a contextualised study linking international, regional and domestic politics across the ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries plus Australia. States' responses to international human rights law expressed via United Nations (UN) human rights instruments provide a primary frame of reference.

Key themes relate to the universality or relativity of human rights, tensions between national sovereignty and international human rights law, and comparing approaches to integrating human rights, democracy and economic development. Complexities of democratic transition in Southeast Asia and the political fallout from the regional economic crisis also feature strongly. The impact of religious ideas on human rights is taken up in selected country contexts.

Both the concept and application of universal human rights have been extensively challenged in Southeast Asia. Some governments see them as potentially threatening their national sovereignty, unity and stability, and emphasis on civil and political aspects of human rights in international discourse as tending to downgrade the priority they accord to economic development. Their concerns were articulated in the early 1990s through 'Asian values' and 'Asian democracy' paradigms. These deny universality and assert the relative nature of human rights, based on countries' unique culture, institutions and history. Such ideas have in turn been challenged by civil society groups, as legitimising authoritarian rule. Most groups nevertheless reject exclusion of social and economic rights in western neo-liberal formulations.

The politics of human rights in Southeast Asia entail a complex balance between diffuse domestic and external pressures. Post-colonial ASEAN governments, though historically resistant to universalist discourse based on international human rights law, have been increasingly obliged since the end of the Cold War to incorporate human rights into their objectives, policy frameworks and conceptions of national interest. Resulting inconsistencies are drawn out in the narrative. Civil society groups, though often championing human rights, are also



## 2 Introduction

inconsistent in their enthusiasm and emphasis, depending on their particular agendas.

UN human rights regimes, integral to any study of human rights, serve to strengthen understanding of key debates in this field. For example, ASEAN states' stress on economic development relative to democratic freedom will be shown as imitating but distorting UN assertions of 'indivisibility' between major streams of rights. However, there is no intention to impose UN regimes as a blanket explanatory framework. These are carefully located in their respective contexts, with comparable weight given to individual states' society and politics, perceptions of national and regional interests.

Despite many convolutions and points of resistance, there appears to be a gradual trend towards participating in UN human rights regimes by ASEAN states. This is reflected in piecemeal institutionalisation of international human rights law, as part of more general global convergence towards common codes of practice. UN regimes offer potentially the most effective multilateral, inclusive and legitimate framework for dialogue and dispute resolution in this highly contentious area. Norms of mutual accountability and peer review can also reduce affronts to sovereignty from uninvited bilateral criticisms. On the other hand, the growing legitimacy of UN human rights instruments, while encouraging formal adherence, may lead to new patterns of evasion in practice. Some governments also seek to weaken UN regimes by demanding consensus processes giving them effective veto powers.

Australia's role is treated somewhat differently compared with ASEAN countries, in that the focus is more on regional policy and interactions than domestic human rights practice – though this is included. Australia's proximity, and geo-cultural uniqueness as an economically developed and historically western-oriented country, offer a potentially valuable contrasting mirror to the conduct of human rights politics in Southeast Asia. Engagement is effectively compelled by Australia's growing, though uneven economic and strategic integration into the region. While Australia's stance is often the object of strong criticism, there has also been cooperation and even convergence with ASEAN states on human rights issues. Australia also illustrates difficulties experienced by fully-fledged liberal democratic states in conforming with UN regimes, and is not averse to invoking similar sovereignty concerns as Southeast Asian countries.

Realist international relations theory has historically assumed that a world order based on universal values can only be imposed by some form of world government possessing legal authority and force. This currently appears a far distant and not widely endorsed prospect. However, there is no reason why normal processes of cooperation, competition, and conflict in domestic and international political arenas should not co-exist within an overall framework of international human rights law, continually re-negotiated and adjusted to changing needs and circumstances. Conceptions of universal rights will thereby be rendered less abstract and unattainable. Though by no means infallible 'tablets of stone', UN human rights instruments represent the highest measure of normative and practical consensus achieved by the international community at any given time.