

IN FOCUS:

SEADS FEATURE



Governing Bots? AI & the Public Sector in Southeast Asia

By Stefan Bächtold

For better or worse, AI has firmly arrived in Southeast Asian government bureaucracies. But who controls AI technologies is a thorny question to answer – and one that should keep governments on their toes, find two events organised by the Governing Technologies program at SEADS.

After its rapid proliferation throughout everyday life, artificial intelligence (AI) is now capturing the imagination of policy makers, bureaucrats, and tech developers for deploying AI in the public sector. But, what exactly happens when AI is deployed in the public sector to do the governing?

In January, SEADS organised two events to explore these questions. For the first event, we collaborated with Sheffield University and Nottingham University Malaysia to bring researchers from Asia, Europe, and Australia together to discuss AI and sovereignty in Southeast Asia.

‘Sovereignty’ is a word that comes up regularly in the conversations around AI in the public sector. But AI applications are often developed by international big tech companies, and rely on extensive international transmission, computing and storage infrastructure.

Typically, none of those are under the sovereign control of the Southeast Asian states that use them. So, what does sovereignty mean in the geopolitical conflicts of a highly interconnected and interdependent world, where datafication, AI, smart government, data centres, and deep-sea cables are becoming central arteries of control?

Participants were Preeti Raghunath, Eric Orlowski, Clarissa Ai Ling Lee, Arran Ridley, Dyah Pitaloka, Gerard Goggin, Brett Neilson, Haiqing Yu, Andreas Deppeler, Júlia García Puig, Sina Hardaker, Cheryl Ruth Soriano, Emma Baulch and Stefan Bächtold.

For Southeast Asian governments, using AI in their public sectors comes with complicated questions. Neither of them is an AI superpower that could realistically aspire to fully develop governing AI systems on their own. Instead, they have to carefully balance different strategies based on their bargaining power: Buy and integrate into existing global tech stacks? Develop (some of) the technology for themselves? And how to make sure that the deployment of AI does not negatively affect large parts of their populations, either as omitted 'ghost workers' keeping global infrastructures alive, or as vulnerable populations exposed to the experimentations with new technologies in the name of an 'AI future'?

For the second event, SEADS collaborated with the School of Business and the School of Engineering to gather stakeholders from government ministries, civil society, and tech industry to discuss their hopes and fears for AI in the public sector. While the vision to become an AI nation gives a general direction, it is far from clear what this would look like in the everyday of public service.

What we observed is that currently, ministries are in a phase of experimenting and testing out different AI-based solutions to improve their efficiency or deal with case load. But, is a chatbot directing citizens to legal advice and services accessible to everyone? Or, does a digital airport tower make mistakes in guiding planes around the runway? Are these technologies actually making public service more efficient?



Our dialogues show that AI in the public sector comes with a lot of question marks, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Although complicated, governments need to be able to answer these questions. We think it is in this moment where a set of diverse voices needs to be heard in the design, implementation, and evaluation of these technologies in public service.

Otherwise, Governments are at risk of losing not only their sovereignty – but also their legitimacy in the eyes of their people.

● Key Takeaways

- AI can improve efficiency in public services, but it also raises serious concerns about surveillance, exclusion, and inequality.
- Southeast Asian governments rely on foreign tech infrastructure, making it difficult to maintain full control over data, systems, and decision-making power.
- Without input from diverse stakeholders (civil society, public, experts), AI deployment risks undermining trust, fairness, and government legitimacy.

Researching Conflict in Real Time: Participatory Action Research Across Thai-Cambodian Digital and Armed Conflict

Amid rising tensions and the recent 2025 armed conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, this event brings together cross-border researchers to reflect on how digital spaces shape and intensify conflict.

Featuring 22 members of a participatory action research team, the session will explore insights from their new book, share experiences of sustaining dialogue across divides, and examine how research itself can act as a form of peace-building.

Held in Malaysia as a neutral space, the event invites participants to rethink the role of research, not just in studying conflict, but in actively engaging with it.



Date: 4th May 2026

Time: 4pm to 6pm

**Venue: Library Exhibition Space,
Monash University Malaysia**

Event is free via registration.

[Register for the event here!](#)

● Session Leaders



Raymond Hyma

Monash University,
Australia / University
of Warwick, UK



Phasiree Thanasin

Chiang Mai University,
Thailand



Suyheang Kry

Women Peace Makers,
Cambodia



Stefan Bächtold

SEADS

Tech Stacks and Stakes – Sovereignty vs Dependency

As governments become increasingly reliant on global tech infrastructures, questions of sovereignty and dependency are more urgent than ever. Tech Stacks and Stakes: Sovereignty vs Dependency brings together policymakers, researchers, and industry leaders to examine how states can navigate governance in an era dominated by big tech and AI.

The event, jointly hosted by Monash University and Yayasan Malaysiakini, will explore the growing influence of external technologies on national systems, the challenges of regulating powerful tech actors, and the implications of emerging digital trade agreements.

Through keynote sessions and a panel featuring voices from academia, civil society, and industry, the discussion will unpack what sovereignty means in today's interconnected digital landscape, and what is at stake for governments and societies moving forward.

You're Invited! SEADS Future Event



Date: 7th May 2026

Time: 9am to 1.30pm

Venue: Auditorium 1

Event is free via registration.

[Register for the event here!](#)

● Keynote Speakers



YB Gobind Singh
Minister of Digital



Haiqing Yu
RMIT

Panelists ●



Premesh Chandran
Malaysia Media Council



Farlina Said
ISIS Malaysia



Stefan Bächtold
SEADS



Moderator:
Emma Baulch
SEADS



Natalie Loi
UNBOUND



Haiqing Yu
RMIT

Get in Touch with Us!

Interested in collaborating with SEADS?

We welcome partnerships across events, research, and workshops. Whether you're from government, academia, civil society, or the tech industry, we're always looking to work with diverse partners to explore the social and political impacts of digital technologies.

SEADS is located at:

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