



Brunei — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[officially known as Brunei Darussalam]

09/17/1888 Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom]: The Sultanate of Brunei was a powerful state in the early 16th century. This power vanished over time. On 09/17/1888 Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo became a British Protectorates by treaty. However, they retained significant authority over their internal governance (Horton 1986). Article I of the treaty provided that: „The State of Brunei shall continue to be governed and administered by the Sultan [...] and his successors as an independent State, under the protection of Great Britain” (Crawford 2006). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Political liberties were absent for this time (LIED).

01/01/1906 End Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]: From 1906 on Britain effectively established indirect rule in Brunei (Heath-Brown 2015). Administration in Brunei was established through the Anglo-Brunei Treaty of 1905-1906, by which consent was given to receive a British officer, titled Resident. The Resident’s advice was to be followed on all matters in Brunei, except those concerning the Muslim religion (Horton 1986: 353-354). Therefore, despite being categorized as a Protected State, Brunei did not possess true independence after 1906 (Crawford 2006). Therefore, the regime in this period is coded as an indirect rule colonial regime. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Additionally, political liberties remained absent according to LIED.

12/22/1941 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]: Japanese forces entered Brunei on this date, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Heath-Brown 2015: 238). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Political liberties were not present (LIED).

09/02/1945 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: The British Military Administration (BMA) took over the governance of Brunei in 1945 after Japan surrendered (Heath-Brown 2015: 238). Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin passed away from illness on 06/03/1950, after which Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III succeeded him.¹ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Therefore, we code this regime as a direct occupation regime. Besides, political liberties are still coded as absent by LIED.

09/29/1959 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by United Kingdom, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: Britain granted Brunei internal autonomy in 1959. On 09/29/1959 a new constitution was promulgated with the Sultan as Supreme Head of State. When the British transferred power in 1959, it was predominantly handed over to the sultan rather than the people (Heath-Brown 2015: 238, Horton 1986: 372-372).² However, a brief experiment with elected representation ended abruptly with the Brunei Revolt in

December 1962, when the victorious opposition party contested the Sultan's rule. The Sultan, supported by British forces, suppressed the uprising, declared a state of emergency (which remains in effect today), and suspended the Legislative Council and elections.³ On 10/04/1967, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien abdicated after a 17-year reign, primarily due to prolonged illness. He stepped down in favor of his eldest son, Crown Prince Hassanal Bolkiah.⁴ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. This period is to be coded as Protectorate because Britain retained responsibility for defense and foreign affairs (Horton 1986) and thus, Brunei was semi-autonomous. As classified by FH for 1972 to 1976, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free.

01/01/1984 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as independent country]: On 01/01/1984, the protectorate of the United Kingdom ended. Brunei operates as an autocratic monarchy, with executive power vested in the sultan. The current monarch, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, has held the throne since 1967 and has served as prime minister since Brunei gained independence. After 1984, he revised the constitution to consolidate his executive power, formally establishing himself as head of government and solidifying his position as an absolute monarch.⁵ At the national level, there are no elected representatives, and the freedoms of press and assembly are noticeably restricted.⁶ According to our observations, no multiparty legislative and executive elections were held since 1900, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Per FH, for this regime period, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. Since 1959, no political liberties were present following LIED. V-Dem does not list Brunei in its database.

Autocratic Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Grotz 2004)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sultans_of_Brunei

² https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Brunei_2006?lang=en

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brunei_revolt

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omar_Ali_Saifuddien_III

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassanal_Bolkiah

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/brunei/freedom-world/2022>

References

Crawford, James (2006): *The Creation of States in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grotz, Florian (2004): Brunei, in: Grotz, Florian, Nohlen, Dieter & Hartmann, Christof (Hrsg.), *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 47–52.

Horton, A. V. M. (1986): British Administration in Brunei 1906-1959, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 20, 353-374.