



Cook Islands — Va-PoReg Country Report

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01/01/1890 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: The Cook Islands derive their name from Captain James Cook, who explored the islands in 1773 and 1777. However, the first European to reach the islands was the Spanish navigator Alvaro de Mendaña in 1595. The Cook Islands became a British protectorate in 1888, primarily due to concerns among British residents that France might attempt to occupy the islands, as it had done in Tahiti.¹ Local ariki councils retained nominal authority, but Britain assumed control over external relations and ultimate sovereignty. This arrangement corresponds to an indirect rule colonial regime, with limited autonomy for indigenous institutions under British suzerainty. On the 10/8&9/1900, seven documents of cession concerning Rarotonga and other islands were signed by their chiefs and residents. Simultaneously, a British proclamation acknowledged the cessions, officially declaring these islands as integral parts of Her Britannic Majesty's. Despite the inhabitants considering themselves British subjects, the Crown's title was uncertain, leading to the formal annexation of the island through a Proclamation dated 10/09/1900.² In 1901, following encouragement from New Zealand, the leaders of the largest islands submitted a formal request for annexation. On 06/11/1901, through an Order in Council under the United Kingdom's Colonial Boundaries Act of 1895, the islands were incorporated into the Colony of New Zealand. This boundary adjustment took effect on 06/11/1901, establishing a formal relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand that has persisted since that time.³ Following the incorporation of the Cook Islands into New Zealand, the Federal Parliament of the Cooks was abolished, and the islands were governed by a Resident Commissioner, who was subject to the New Zealand government.⁴ The new administration under the Resident Commissioner rendered the local ariki council impotent and established a system of great personal power, representing a clear consolidation of autocratic rule.⁵ On 09/26/1907, New Zealand was granted nominal independence shifting into a dominion status (Yates 2014). In October 1946, the Cook Islands Legislative Council was established through the Cooks Islands Amendment Act 1946. This council had limited legislative powers and held a mostly advisory position.⁶ Upon the implementation of the British Nationality and New Zealand Citizenship Act 1948 on 01/01/1949, Cook Islanders who held British subject status were automatically conferred New Zealand citizenship. The islands retained⁷ On 10/25/1957, under the Cook Islands Amendment Act 1957, the Legislative Council was reorganized into the Legislative Assembly.⁸

10/13/1958 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: On this date, general elections for the newly reorganized Cooks Islands Legislative Council under universal suffrage. Of the 27 council members, 15 were elected directly, including 14 from the general constituencies and one from a European voter constituency. Another 7 members were elected by Island Councils and the last 5 seats went to the Resident Commissioner, who also acted as the President of the Assembly, the Administration Secretary, the Treasurer, and two members appointed by the Resident Commissioner.⁹

08/04/1965 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of New Zealand, Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under New Zealand, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, the Cook Islands obtained self-government in a free association with New Zealand under the Cook Islands Constitution Act, establishing parliamentary institutions and regular elections.¹⁰ The United Nations endorsed this political

transition.¹¹ Political competition was dominated by Albert Henry's Cook Islands Party, which maintained hegemonic control through manipulation of voter rolls, misuse of state resources, and intimidation. While elections were formally held and opposition parties were not banned, the degree of manipulation systematically undermined their democratic quality. This corresponds to an electoral hybrid regime: elections took place, but they were not free and fair enough to guarantee genuine alternation in power. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. FH, LIED and V-Dem do not list the Cook Islands.

07/07/1978 End Electoral Hybrid Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Democracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: On 07/07/1978, the Democratic Party under Thomas Davis came to power after the defeat of the Cook Islands Party, following revelations of electoral malpractice. This transition marked the end of hegemonic one-party dominance and the emergence of competitive multi-party politics. Subsequent elections allowed for genuine alternation in power, but the political system remained limited in terms of institutional checks and balances, capacity, and independence from New Zealand in key policy areas such as defense and foreign affairs. These structural deficiencies justify coding the regime as an electoral democracy in comparative perspective rather than as a fully consolidated liberal democracy. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. FH, LIED and V-Dem do not list the Cook Islands.

(Monarchical) Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

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

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Cook_Islands#British_protectorate

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Cook_Islands#British_protectorate

⁴ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/cook-islands-achieves-self-government>

⁵ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2g23/gudgeon-walter-edward>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_the_Cook_Islands#History

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cook_Islands#History

⁸ <https://parliament.gov.ck/about/>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958_Cook_Islands_general_election;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Cook_Islands#Recent_history

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cook_Islands#History

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Cook_Islands#Recent_history

References

- Yates, Lawrence A. (2014): Operation Power Pack, in: Roorda, Eric P., Derby, Lauren H. & Gonzalez, Raymundo (Hrsg.), *The Dominican Republic Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. New York: Duke University Press, 355-361.