



Kiribati — Va-PoReg Country Report

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08/02/1875 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: In the framework of the Pacific Islanders Protection Act from 08/02/1875¹, the British declared a protectorate, according to our coding a colonial regime, over the region that later was known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (but not specifically over these islands). Nauru and the future Gilbert and Ellice Islands were placed in the British sphere of influence. A British protectorate was established first on the Marshall Islands and Nauru and later in 1892 was declared for the sixteen islands of the Gilbert Islands and Ellice Islands as well. The Ellice and Gilbert Islands were administrated together by a British governor from Fiji and then received their own resident commissioner.² Although technically separate protectorates, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were treated as a single entity for administrative convenience. The British authorities adopted a continental type of protectorate, asserting authority that amounted to full sovereignty within its protectorates, later known as ‘colonial protectorate’. With the arrival of William Telfer Campbell as second resident commissioner in 1896, indirect rule was effectively abandoned and replaced by an authoritarian, paternalistic, and direct rule. Although customary authorities such as unimane and Kaubure continued to exist at the local level, they operated primarily as subordinated administrative intermediaries rather than as autonomous governing institutions. Hence, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were governed like a colony, even before this arrangement was formalized in 1916 (Munro and Firth, 2003). According to LIED no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period. Political liberties were absent according to LIED. On 01/12/1916, the islands became a Crown colony.³ This formal annexation consolidated an already existing regime structure of direct colonial rule rather than constituting a regime-critical institutional break. During the year 1916, the Union Islands (Tokelau) were also annexed to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony. On 03/18/1937, Great Britain annexed the uninhabited Phoenix Islands (except Howland and Baker Islands) to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony.⁴ These territorial extensions did not alter the fundamental mode of governance and are therefore treated as occurring within the same episode of direct colonial rule. Based on our own assessment of the colonial governance structure, neither multiparty executive nor legislative elections existed during this period, and political liberties were structurally absent under direct colonial rule. This assessment is consistent with LIED, which likewise records no multiparty elections and the absence of political liberties for this period.

12/10/1941 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]: On the day of their attack on Pearl Harbor (USA) Imperial Japanese forces occupied the Gilbert Islands.⁵ Based on our assessment, this event constituted a regime-critical rupture in which governing authority was transferred from British colonial institutions to the Imperial Japanese military. Rule over the territory was exercised directly by military command structures, without any civilian or representative intermediary institutions. Political authority was enforced through occupation administration and coercive control rather than institutionalized legal or electoral mechanisms. Representative political institutions were suspended, no executive or legislative elections were conducted, and political liberties were structurally excluded. Legitimation during this period derived exclusively from military occupation and wartime authority. During this period no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held (LIED). In this time political liberties were coded as absent per LIED.

11/23/1943 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: After Japanese withdrawal from the Islands, colonial administration was re-established. Governing authority reverted to British colonial institutions, specifically the Governor and the colonial administrative apparatus, which exercised executive and legislative power on behalf of the metropolitan state. Indigenous actors were not incorporated into sovereign decision-making bodies and did not control core state functions. Political authority was legitimized through colonial legal frameworks and imperial administrative mandate rather than through domestic electoral participation. The Tokelau Act of 1948 transferred sovereignty over Tokelau to New Zealand, while the five islands of the Central and Southern Line Islands were added to the colony in 1972. These territorial adjustments were implemented through metropolitan legal acts and did not alter the institutional structure or the legitimation pattern of colonial rule. The Tokelau Act of 1948 transferred sovereignty over Tokelau to New Zealand while the five islands of the Central and Southern Line Islands were added to the colony in 1972.⁶ According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held until 1963, from 1964 onward only multiparty legislative elections were held. Political liberties were absent (LIED). On 11/15/1967 universal suffrage was introduced for the election of the House of Representatives.⁷ According to LIED universal suffrage was introduced in 1964.⁸ Even though, this assembly was only a partially elected body, it allowed for the first time a limited number of indigenous representatives to participate in legislative processes, while full control remained with the British colonial administration. Progress continued in 1971 when the House of Representatives was expanded and granted more power. During this period, political parties began to form, signaling the early stages of a multiparty system, although the system was not yet fully oriented toward a comprehensive multiparty framework. While the majority of the colonial period from 1943 to 1979 was characterized by strong British administrative control and limited political freedoms, the late 1960s marked the beginning of electoral processes and limited self-governance in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. From the mid-1960s onward, incremental institutional reforms introduced elected components into the colonial governance structure. Elected legislative bodies and, subsequently, universal suffrage enabled a limited number of indigenous representatives to participate in legislative deliberation. However, these bodies operated within a framework in which executive authority remained vested in the British Governor and the colonial administration. Elected institutions lacked autonomous control over executive power, security, and core policy domains. Electoral participation thus functioned as a supplementary mechanism of limited domestic legitimation, without displacing the prevailing colonial-administrative basis of authority. Progress continued in 1971 when the House of Representatives was expanded and granted additional powers. During this phase, political parties began to emerge and electoral competition increased, yet political contestation remained institutionally constrained and did not constitute a fully competitive multiparty regime. Overall, the period from 1943 to 1979 is best characterized as sustained direct colonial rule, in which governing authority resided with British colonial institutions and was legitimized primarily through imperial legal-administrative authority. The gradual introduction of electoral practices and restricted self-governance in the late 1960s and early 1970s modified the institutional environment but did not fundamentally transform either the locus of authority or the dominant legitimation pattern prior to independence.

04/04/1974 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, general elections took place, constituting a newly formed House of Assembly.⁹ Based on our assessment, this reform constituted a regime-critical transition from direct to indirect colonial rule, as colonial governance began to be systematically mediated through elected indigenous institutions with substantive legislative and executive functions. The reorganization of the House of Assembly created a permanent legislature with a clear majority of elected members and formal legislative competences, and introduced a Chief Minister and a Council of Ministers selected from the elected Assembly, thereby embedding indigenous political actors within the core institutions of governance.¹⁰ While ultimate sovereignty and formal override powers remained with the British Governor, effective internal governance and policy coordination were no longer exercised exclusively through

colonial administrative structures. A reorganization of the House of Assembly strengthened the position of elected representatives and paved the way for a more comprehensive democratic system. Social unrest and ethnic differences in 1974 within the colony led the Polynesians of the Ellice Islands to opt for separation from the Gilbert Islands (later Kiribati). On 10/01/1975, the Ellice Islands became the separate British colony of Tuvalu, but the separation was completed on 01/01/1976. This territorial reorganization did not constitute a regime-critical break for the remaining Gilbert Islands, as the institutional framework of indirect rule, centred on the House of Assembly and the ministerial executive, remained in place and continued to structure colonial governance. Based on our assessment, electoral competition during this period was confined to the legislative arena, while executive authority remained subject to colonial oversight and political liberties continued to be structurally constrained. According to LIED only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period, and LIED still identifies political liberties as absent. These features are consistent with an indirect colonial regime in which governance is mediated through elected indigenous institutions but ultimate authority and the dominant legitimation pattern remain external (colonial) rather than electoral. From 1975 onward, indirect colonial rule persisted and gradually deepened. Ministerial government, introduced through constitutional change, expanded the role of the Chief Minister and the Council of Ministers in internal administration and policy coordination, while legislative authority remained vested in the elected House of Assembly. Elections for the post of Chief Minister were held in the Gilbert Islands on 03/17/1978. Despite the existence of elected executive and legislative institutions, governing authority remained embedded within a colonial framework, as a British-appointed Governor retained ultimate administrative and constitutional oversight until independence. According to LIED, from 1976 onward multiparty executive and legislative elections were held, while political liberties were coded as absent until 1977. Taken together, these developments represent a consolidation of indirect colonial rule rather than a transition to a sovereign democratic regime, as effective sovereignty and final executive authority had not yet been transferred to indigenous institutions. According to LIED from 1976 on multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. Moreover, political liberties were coded as absent until 1977 according to LIED. According to LIED, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held from 1976 onward, while political liberties were coded as absent until 1977. This divergence reflects differences in conceptual focus: whereas LIED records the presence of electoral events, our classification prioritizes the locus of effective authority and sovereignty in determining regime type.

07/12/1979 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Liberal Democracy [as independent country]: On this date the Gilbert Islands achieved independence as Kiribati through the Kiribati Independence Order 1979, becoming a republic and joining the Commonwealth.¹¹ The political landscape has stayed relatively stable since then, as the institutional structures have operated effectively and elections for both legislative and executive positions have been consistently held (Somoza 2004: 674). FH classifies Kiribati as free since 1980. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED recognizes elections as competitive since 1976. V-Dem does not list the country. Kiribati is recognized as a multiparty democracy that conducts regular elections and has undergone peaceful transfers of power between competing groups.¹² Its constitution guarantees freedom of expression, religion and speech. Per FH, for this regime period, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. According to LIED, political liberties are constantly achieved since 1979. Kiribati has a unicameral parliamentary system, in which regular elections are considered free and fair and are conducted under universal suffrage.¹³ The president of Kiribati was Taaneti Maamau from the Tobwaan Kiribati Party (TKP), who won his election in 2020 with 59.42%. In parliament, there was no clear majority, with the two main parties equally sharing the 44 seats up for election.¹⁴ The parliamentary elections in Kiribati, held on 08/14/2024 and 08/19/2024, were dominated by contentious issues, primarily President Taneti Maamau's pro-China foreign policy and accusations of democratic backsliding, including the dismantling of judicial independence. Maamau's TKP won a landslide victory, securing 33 of the 45 seats.

09/13/2024 End Liberal Democracy/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime: On this date, parliament convened and the ruling TKP used its supermajority from the August 2024 parliamentary elections to block the nomination of opposition party candidates for the presidential election. The TKP nominated incumbent president Maamau alongside three other TKP members described as „dummy candidates“: Bautaake Beia, Riteta Iorome, and Kaotitaake Kokoria, all first-time members of parliament. Opposition leader Tessie Lambourne denounced the move, declaring that „Kiribati is now a one-party state.”¹⁵ This institutional manipulation fundamentally transformed Kiribati’s regime character by eliminating competitive executive elections while parliamentary elections remained genuinely competitive. The exclusion of all opposition candidates from the presidential ballot through constitutional manipulation represents the crossing of the threshold to an electoral hybrid regime: opposition parties retain realistic paths to legislative representation (as demonstrated in the competitive August 2024 parliamentary elections where opposition won seats and government ministers lost seats), but face structural predetermination at the executive level with no realistic path to presidential power. This dual-level electoral system, competitive parliamentary elections combined with non-competitive executive selection, exemplifies electoral hybrid regimes where electoral legitimation retains partial function at one institutional level while being systematically undermined at another, and where liberal constraints become critically weakened through constitutional manipulation of nomination procedures. The subsequent presidential election on 10/25/2024 proceeded with only TKP candidates, with one „dummy candidate“ (Kaotitaake Kokoria) defecting from TKP shortly before the election to form a new alliance.

Electoral Hybrid Regime as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/imp_act_1881/pipa187538a39vc51346/

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands ; <https://www.rulers.org/ruljk.html#kiribati>

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_\(GEIC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_(GEIC))

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

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_\(GEIC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_(GEIC))

⁷ <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/KI/KI-LC01/elections/historical-data-on-women/>

⁸ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_\(GEIC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_(GEIC))

⁹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Assembly_\(Kiribati\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Assembly_(Kiribati))

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_\(GEIC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands#Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands_Colony_(GEIC))

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Ellice_Islands

¹² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kiribati/freedom-world/2022>

¹³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kiribati/freedom-world/2023> ;
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kiribati/>

¹⁴ <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3497/>

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Kiribati_presidential_election

References

Somoza, Alexander (2004): Kiribati, in: Grotz, Florian, Nohlen, Dieter & Hartmann, Christof (Hrsg.), Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 673–686.