



Marshall Islands — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Marshall Islands, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

10/22/1885 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Germany]: Initially, the Marshall Islands were claimed by Spain, but no Spanish armed forces had been stationed there. Hence, German rule was installed on 10/22/1885 and declared as protectorate in 1886. While the Marshallese version did not differentiate between the ranks of the five chiefs of the Marshall Islands, the German text acknowledged Kabua as the King of the Marshall Islands. Effectively, the Marshallese Iroji chiefs continued to rule under indirect German colonial administration.¹ Hence, the regime is a borderline case between a ruling monarchy and a colony. 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 according to LIED.

09/30/1914 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Germany, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Autocratic Monarchy]: At the onset of World War I, the Marshall Islands came under the control of Japan. On 09/30/1914 they captured the administrative center of the Islands, Jaluit, after they occupied Enewetak the day before (Lansford 2021: 1051).² Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED identifies political liberties as absent.

12/17/1920 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Autocratic Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of Japan, Autocratic Monarchy]: On this date, the Council of the League of Nations sanctioned the South Seas Mandate, granting Japan control over all former German colonies in the Pacific Ocean situated north of the Equator.³ According to LIED no legislative and multiparty elections were present and universal suffrage remained absent. LIED identifies political liberties as absent for this timeframe.

01/31/1944 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USA, Electoral Democracy]: The Marshall Islands were occupied by the US in World War II and became part of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific in 1947. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED still identifies the state of political liberties as absent.

07/18/1947 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USA, Electoral Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of USA, Electoral Democracy]: Following the war, the USA carried out almost 70 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, which resulted in significant legal claims due to radioactive contamination and the forced relocation of islanders. Multiparty executive and legislative elections as well as universal suffrage were not given (LIED). For that period LIED identifies political liberties as absent. On 07/01/1950, the bicameral Marshall Islands Congress was established with the House of Iroji and the House of Assembly. In 1958 the Congress became a unicameral legislature.

01/19/1965 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of USA, Electoral Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of USA, Electoral Democracy]: On 01/19/1965, the Marshall Islands elected members to the Congress of Micronesia.⁴ The Marshall Islands elected four representatives to the House and two senators to the senate. Elections were held every two years, with House members serving two-year terms, and Senators serving four-year terms, leading to only one Senator being elected in each election.⁵ In 1966, Marshallese political leaders announced their intent to create a constitution

for the Marshall Islands, but it took another decade until a Constitutional Convention was organized in 11/1976. The 48-member convention consisted of two members of the House, one Senator, multiple chiefs of Marshall Islands districts and 33 elected members, who were tasked with drafting a constitution. On 08/08/1977 the convention was opened, with Ruben Zackhras being elected as president.⁶ Based on our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Universal suffrage was introduced (LIED). Since 1950, LIED identifies political liberties as present.

04/10/1979 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of USA, Electoral Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy [as International Mandate of USA, Liberal Democracy]: On this date elections for the legislature were held on the Marshall Islands.⁷ In 1979 universal suffrage had been introduced.⁸ Amata Kabua, a descendent of the iroji chiefs was elected president and remained in office (with reelections every four years) for more than thirty years. It was not until his death in 1996 that nominations for the presidency were not closed immediately after his nomination.⁹ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies the elections as competitive during this time. Moreover, political liberties were present, despite the classification as an electoral autocracy (LIED). In 1979, the constitution came into effect (Lansford 2021: 1051). On 03/12/1982 the Republic of the Marshall Islands signed the Compact of Free Association with the United States. On 10/21/1986, the Compact of Free Association entered into force after ratification by RMI and USA. Under the Compact, the RMI gained full sovereignty, except for defense matters which remained a US responsibility for at least 15 years. The RMI was also obliged to consult with the USA on major foreign policy issues (Lansford 2021: 1051).

12/22/1990 Continuation Electoral Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under USA, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, the trusteeship under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 683 was terminated, effectively ending the International Mandate of USA on Marshall Islands. Although the constitution was in place, the government was primarily influenced by the Iroij. It was not until 1999, when accusations of political corruption arose, that the aristocratic rule was overturned.

11/22/1999 End Electoral Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under USA, Liberal Democracy]/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date parliamentary elections took place on the Marshall Islands. Since there were no political parties, all candidates for the 33 seats ran as independent candidates.¹⁰ The opposition won and Imata Kabua was replaced by the commoner Kessai Note as a result of this change in leadership.¹¹ The Marshall Islands are a mixed parliamentary-presidential representative democracy with a unicameral system. The president serves as head of state and head of government.¹² Democratic elections are implemented in the constitution and regular, competitive elections are held. Civil liberties are generally guaranteed, but problems regarding corruption, gender-based discrimination and human trafficking persist.¹³ In addition to that political liberties are still constantly present according to LIED. On 11/20/2023 general elections were held. In the Nitijeļā, incumbent candidates suffered defeats in 13 out of the 33 seats, resulting in the loss of Speaker Kedi, Vice Speaker Peterson Jibas, and government ministers John Silk and Casten Nemra.¹⁴ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Furthermore, according to LIED, constant electoral competitiveness is scored since the country's democratic transition. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country is scored from 2 to 4 as free, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. V-Dem does not list the Marshall Islands in its data.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Stöver 2001)

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Islands
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Marshall_Islands
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Marshall_Islands
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislature_of_the_Marshall_Islands;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust_Territory_of_the_Pacific_Islands;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965_Trust_Territory_of_the_Pacific_Islands_parliamentary_election
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_the_Trust_Territory_of_the_Pacific_Islands
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1976_Marshallese_Constitutional_Convention_election
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1979_Marshallese_general_election
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage
- ⁹ <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/pacific/MH/marshall-islands-legislative-needs-assessment-undp>
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999_Marshallese_general_election
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Islands#History
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_of_the_Marshall_Islands#:~:text=Governance%20occurs%20in%20a%20framework,is%20exercised%20by%20the%20government.
- ¹³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/marshall-islands/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Marshallese_general_election

References

- Lansford, Tom (2021): Political Handbook of the World 2020-2021. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press.
- Stöver, Philip (2001): Marshall Islands, in: Grotz, Florian, Nohlen, Dieter & Hartmann, Christof (Hrsg.), Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 687–696.