



Samoa — Va-PoReg Country Report

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12/02/1899 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Germany]: Samoa became the final German colonial acquisition in the Pacific basin when it was received through the Tripartite Convention. This agreement was signed on 12/02/1899 and the ratifications were exchanged on 02/16/1900 in Washington. The German colonial period lasted for 14 years. Wilhelm Solf became the first governor.¹ According to LIED no legislative and multiparty elections were present. Universal suffrage was absent (LIED). Political liberties were absent according to LIED. LIED's data start to list Samoa only since 1902.

08/29/1914 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Germany, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: On this date, during the early stages of World War I, the New Zealand Expeditionary Force successfully landed on Upolu without facing any opposition. They took control from the German authorities in response to a request from Great Britain, who sought New Zealand's assistance in carrying out this significant and time-sensitive imperial duty.² No elections were held during this period (LIED). For that period, LIED identifies political liberties as absent.

12/17/1920 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: On this date, the League of Nations officially granted New Zealand a Class C Mandate over Samoa, which was formerly a German colony. This mandate was established through the Samoa Constitution Order of 1920, replacing the military occupation with a civil administration starting from 05/01/1920. Between 1920 and 1962, Samoa was administered by the Department of External Affairs, a government department which had been specially created to oversee New Zealand's Island Territories and Samoa.³ The Samoa Act of 1921, effective from 04/01/1922, solidified the governance structure. According to the Samoa Act, the New Zealand Governor-General appointed an administrator stationed in Apia to exercise executive power and report to the New Zealand Minister of External Affairs in Wellington. The administrator and a local legislative council held the authority to create laws, although ultimate decision-making power rested with Wellington.⁴ After 1945, the mandate's classification was altered to that of a United Trust Territory.⁵ According to LIED legislative and multiparty elections were held since 1924 but universal suffrage was absent. A Fono of Taimua was the former Lower House of the legislature. In 1939, the system of appointment was abolished but voting rights were only granted to the Matai.⁶ Political liberties were absent according to LIED.

11/15/1957 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]: On this day General elections were held for the new 48-member Legislative Assembly with 41 members elected by the Samoan people and five European members elected by universal suffrage from the inhabitants with a European status. In 1957's election the Samoan representatives were elected for the first time by the Samoan. However, the votes for the Samoan members were restricted to the Matai.⁷ LIED considers that multiparty legislative elections were present but universal suffrage remained absent until 1990. Political liberties were absent according to LIED.

01/01/1962 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [as International Mandate of New Zealand, (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Oligarchy: On this date, Samoa gained independence from New Zealand

and adopted the name „Western Samoa.“ Upon gaining independence, Western Samoa implemented the 1960 Constitution, which took effect and became the governing framework. This constitution draws inspiration from the British Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, while also incorporating elements of Samoan traditions and customs. The constitution framed Samoa as a parliamentary representative democracy that used a single member district plurality electoral system. However, only „Matai“ were entitled to vote or stand as candidates in elections in Samoa.⁸ This restriction is reflected in the percentage of the population that participates in elections. According to Vanhanen it ranges between 4.1 (1964) and 10.5 (1988) (Vanhanen 2019). In Samoa, the term „Matai“ refers to the heads of families and extended families, and they play a central role in Samoan society. The Matai system is a traditional system of governance and social organization in Samoa, where each family group, or ‘aiga, has its own Matai. The Matai are responsible for the welfare of their family group and play significant roles in village governance and decision-making processes. They are chosen based on their leadership skills, wisdom, and ability to serve and care for the family and the wider community. The selection process is usually based on consensus among family members, and a Matai can be either male or female. Due to this circumstance, Samoa is for example classified as oligarchy in other datasets (LIED). During the first ten years after independence the system resembled consensus politics. Most members of parliament were elected unopposed in their constituencies. In 1970 a period of ‘parliamentary factional politics’ started. For the first time more than one candidate contested the office of Prime Minister. Furthermore, political parties emerged. As parliamentarians increasingly vied for ministerial roles and influence, the competition for constituency seats became more intense. This trend reached its zenith with the establishment of political parties and heightened competition among candidates for parliamentary seats, ultimately culminating in the adoption of universal suffrage in 1990 (So’o 2001: 781). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 1962 LIED scores the elections with a constant competitiveness. Per FH, from 1972 to 1988, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. As per FH’s classification in 1989, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. However, political liberties were absent until 1970. Since 1971, the country guarantees political liberties (LIED). As the constitution was adopted, it was anticipated that future heads of state would be chosen from among the four matai paramount chiefs in line with customary protocol. This is not a constitutional requirement, so Samoa can be considered a parliamentary republic, rather than a constitutional monarchy.⁹ At the time of independence, two out of the four highest-ranking paramount chiefs, known as Tama a ‘Aiga, were appointed as joint heads of state, serving lifetime terms. Additionally, Fiamē Mata afa Faumuina Mulinu u II, another paramount chief, was elected to parliament and assumed the role of the country’s first Prime Minister. Following the passing of his colleague Tupua Tamasese Mea’ole in 1963, Malietoa Tanumafili II held the position of Head of State alone.¹⁰

11/12/1990 End Electoral Oligarchy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date a constitutional referendum took place. The voting system was changed by the Electoral Amendment Act which introduced universal suffrage. However, the right to stand for elections remained with matai title holders. Of the approximately 220.000 inhabitants of Samoa, only 25.000 are matai, of whom only 5% are women. Due to the deficits in the right to stand for elections, Samoa cannot be classified as a full democracy according to our criteria.¹¹ Western Samoa was renamed in State of Samoa on 07/04/1997. FH lists Samoa as partly free until 1988 and from then on as free. V-Dem does not list the country. On 06/16/2007 Tui Ātua Tupua Tamasese Efi was elected by the legislature to succeed Tanumafili after his death in May 2007. Tanumafili served a five-year term starting from June 2007.¹² In 2021, an extraordinary political crisis unfolded in Samoa following controversial election results in April. The opposition party seemed poised to overthrow the ruling party, marking the potential end of their three-decade-long reign. Fiamē Naomi Mataafa, the daughter of Fiamē Faumuina Mataafa, was on the verge of becoming Samoa’s first female prime minister. However, the ruling party contested that the composition of the newly elected legislature did not meet constitutional requirements, a claim dismissed by the judiciary. On 05/24, when the newly elected members arrived at the parliament

building to assume their seats, they were denied entry. Despite this, Mataafa took her oath of office outside the building. Meanwhile, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, who had been the prime minister since 1998, declared his intention to continue as a caretaker until the dispute was resolved. In late June, the Supreme Court ordered the convening of parliament within seven days. However, when the head of state attempted to postpone the proceedings, the Court of Appeal ruled in July that Mataafa's oath of office had been valid and legitimate.¹³ In the 2021 elections, the opposition party Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) overtook the longstanding HRPP. When HRPP lawmakers did not accept the election results, the incoming government declined to swear them in. The supreme court intervened to address the crisis, showcasing its capability and autonomy. Overall, civil liberties and political rights are upheld and honored.¹⁴ LIED affirms that political liberties are constantly achieved since 1991. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Besides, LIED classifies the elections as competitive since 1990. According to FH, from 1990 to 1997, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. As per FH's classification in 1998, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. Per FH, for the rest of this regime period, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. V-Dem does not list Samoa in its data.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

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

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samoa>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samoa>

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

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

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fono_of_Faipule

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1957_Western_Samoan_general_election

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Samoa; https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Samoa_2017?lang=en

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_le_Ao_o_le_Malo

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Samoa

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

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Samoa

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Samoa-island-nation-Pacific-Ocean/History#ref224603>

¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/samoa/freedom-world/2022>

References

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