



Tonga — Va-PoReg Country Report

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

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

12/04/1845 Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]: The first king of Tonga, George Tupou I, reigned from 12/04/1845 until his death on 02/18/1893. He was succeeded by George Tupou II.¹ On 11/04/1875 a constitution was established, creating a modern framework for government.² Starting with a declaration of rights, it affirmed the supremacy of law. The constitution established a Legislative Assembly, a Cabinet and defined the role of the king. Additionally, an aristocracy of 20 nobles was created to replace the traditional chieftainship. The established legislature was unicameral and included hereditary, nominated, and elected members. Elections were held every five years, and parliament was required to meet at least once every two years. Government functions were carried out by Privy Council, which consisted of four ministers, one of whom was the king (Campbell 2004: 810). The Tonga Islands became a British protectorate on 11/14/1899 by the Anglo-German Agreement (also known as Treaty of Amity) (Turner 2014). The Treaty was signed by the King and the British representative in Tonga. It transferred authority over the islands' financial and foreign affairs to the British Consul, who acted as the representative of Britain (Ratuva 2019, Lansford 2021: 1670). The Agent was instructed not to meddle in internal matters unless the welfare of British subjects or foreigners was at stake, although he could offer counsel if requested by the King and his government. These agreements were ended by mutual consent in 1970 (Crawford 2006). Tonga was not what was understood as colonial protectorate, however, since in 1958 and 1968 certain levels of authority in internal and external matters were attained by Tonga, therefore it is coded as a protectorate. Revised agreements with the United Kingdom in 1958 and 1968 granted Tonga complete internal self-governance alongside restricted authority over its external affairs (Lansford 2021: 1670). Under the guardianship of Britain, Tonga safeguarded its sovereignty, retaining its monarchical government as the sole Pacific nation. The Tongan monarchy upholds an unbroken lineage of hereditary rulers from a single family.³ In 1915, due to the inefficiency of a large parliament, the government implemented a significant amendment. The number of representatives for both the nobles and the people was reduced to seven each, and all Privy Councilors, except for the King, were included as members of the assembly. From then on, elections were scheduled every three years, with the parliament meeting annually (Campbell 2004: 810-811). In this regime period, Tonga represents a borderline case between a constitutional monarchy and an autocratic monarchy. The lack of data from datasets such as V-Dem further complicate the distinction. However, due to the fact the legislature could not formally initiate bills in this period, one of the many signs that power was concentrated in the hands of the king and his appointed ministers, we interpret Tonga as an autocratic monarchy here. In 1951, general elections were held and the right to vote was extended to women aged 21 and older, though this change did not come into effect until 1960 (Campbell 2004: 814). However, still only half of the legislature was directly elected, while the other half was appointed by nobles.⁴ Political liberties were absent according to LIED. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period.

06/04/1970 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as independent country]: Tonga attained full independence within the Commonwealth as a ruling monarchy on 06/04/1970 and was the only country that had its own monarch, rather than having the United Kingdom's monarch, along with Malaysia, Lesotho, and Eswatini. While exposed to colonial pressures, Tonga has always governed itself, which makes it unique in the Pacific.⁵

At this stage, the elections have no influence on the composition of the government, as the king appoints the prime minister and the cabinet outside parliament and the term of office is not fixed (Campbell 2004: 812).

01/01/1984 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Constitutional Monarchy: The formal codification of legislative initiative by Tonga's parliament in 1984 constitutes the first legally defined redistribution of political authority within the regime. Although the monarch retained full control over the executive, including the appointment of the prime minister and cabinet, and while no democratic elections were yet in place, the 1984 reform marked a clear institutional shift: for the first time, the Legislative Assembly was endowed with a constitutionally recognized right to initiate bills (Campbell 1992: 79). This development introduced a formal, if limited, legislative function that had previously been entirely absent or undefined. As such, the change represents a decisive step away from a purely autocratic monarchy, in which all political initiative resided exclusively with the crown. The date 01/01/1984 is used to mark this transition because it reflects the formal enactment of this new legislative competence. While not accompanied by broader democratization, the reform altered the structure of the regime by establishing a rudimentary separation of powers. Hence, beginning on this date, the regime is no longer classified as an autocratic monarchy but as a constitutional monarchy. In 1988 a court of appeal was established. Before that event, the privy council functioned both as the executive and the court of appeals. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held until 2000. Thereafter, only multiparty legislative elections were conducted during this period. No executive elections were held. Since 2011, multiparty executive and legislative elections have been held. The constitution does not clearly define who holds the greatest influence. Constitutional amendments in 1915 were made to increase the king's power relative to the nobles. The arrangement in the latter part of the twentieth century is more balanced, allowing personal abilities, and other intangibles to significantly affect power dynamics. These factors have certainly shifted power towards the monarch instead of the nobles (Campbell 2004: 811). On 11/25/2010 early general elections under a new electoral law were held. The early elections were announced by the new King George Tupou V in July 2008 shortly before being crowned on 08/01/2008 and were preceded by a program of constitutional reform. For the first time, a majority of the seats (17 out of 26) in the Tongan parliament were elected by universal suffrage, with the remaining nine seats being reserved for members of Tonga's nobility. This marked a major progression away from the 165-year rule of the monarchy towards a fully representative democracy. The Taimi Media Network described it as 'Tonga's first democratically elected Parliament'.⁶ The constitutional reforms of 2010 strengthened democratic change in the political regime. They included increasing the role of parliament and reducing the influence of the monarch.⁷ Despite these reforms and the introduction of partially competitive elections, Tonga is still classified by Va-PoReg as a constitutional monarchy with a ruling monarch. The king continues to serve as the effective executive leader, retaining core powers such as appointing and dismissing the prime minister, dissolving parliament, vetoing legislation, and appointing senior judges. These functions go beyond symbolic representation and establish the monarch as the central authority in the political system. Therefore, the regime remains a hereditary monarchy in which democratic procedures exist but executive power is not derived from electoral legitimacy. Former prime Minister Akilisi Pōhiva died in 2019 and was temporarily succeeded by finance minister Pōhiva Tu'ionetoa whose government survived a vote of no confidence in January 2021. In November 2021 general elections were held, following which parliament elected Siaosi Sovaleni as the new acting prime minister. While elections were held competently and effectively, criteria such as universal suffrage are not met, due to the continued reservation of nine parliamentary seats for nobility. Moreover, the King retains significant political powers including the right to veto legislation, dissolve parliament and appoint judicial officials.⁸ According to FH, a score of 6 to 7 for 1972 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. Per FH's scoring for the period 1973 to 1988, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. Per FH, for the years 1989-1992, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. According to FH, for the years 1993 to 2009, the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. As per FH's classification for 2005, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we

categorize as rather free. As classified by FH for 2010 and 2011, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. Per FH, for the rest of the assessed regime period, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. Political liberties were absent until 2017 and present from 2018 onward according to LIED. V-Dem does not provide data for Tonga.

Constitutional Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

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

² https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_2013

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

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1951_Tongan_general_election

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonga>; https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_2013?lang=en

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Tongan_general_election

⁷ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_2013

⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tonga/freedom-world/2022>

References

Campbell, I. C. (1992): The emergence of parliamentary politics in Tonga, in: *Pacific Studies* 15, 77-97.

Campbell, Ian C. (2004): Tonga, in: Grotz, Florian, Nohlen, Dieter & Hartmann, Christof (Hrsg.), *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 809–822.

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

Lansford, Tom (2021): *Political Handbook of the World 2020-2021*. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press.

Ratuva, Steven (2019): Thy Kingdom Burn: Hegemony, Resistance and Securitisation in Tonga, in: Ratuva, Steven (Hrsg.), *Contested Terrain: Reconceptualising Security in the Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press, 155-204.

Turner, Barry (2014): Tonga, in: Turner, Barry (Hrsg.), *The Statesman's Yearbook 2015: The Politics, Cultures and Economies of the World*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1214–1216.