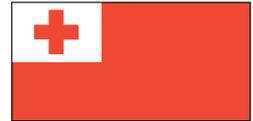


# Tonga



## KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1970
Population:	105,000 (2012)
GDP p.c. growth:	1.7% p.a. 1990–2012
UN HDI 2012:	world ranking 95
Official languages:	Tongan, English
Time:	GMT plus 13hr
Currency:	pa'anga or Tongan dollar (TOP; T\$)

## Geography

Area:	748 sq km
Coastline:	419 km
Capital:	Nuku'alofa

The Kingdom of Tonga, known as 'The Friendly Islands', lies in the central south-west Pacific, surrounded (clockwise from the west) by Fiji, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Samoa, Cook Islands and, to the south, New

Zealand. The islands, which straddle the international date line, lie to the east of the Tonga Trench, containing some of the deepest waters of the South Pacific. The main island sub-groups are Tongatapu, Vava'u and Ha'apai. The largest island is Tongatapu.

**Area:** 748 sq km; Tongatapu 256 sq km.

**Topography:** Of the 172 islands, only 36 are permanently inhabited. The islands to the east are of coral formation, the Lifuka and Nomuka groups with many small coral islands and reefs. The islands to the west are volcanic. There are active volcanoes on four of the islands, including Tofua Island whose crater is filled with hot water. Falcon, an active volcano under the sea, sends up lava and ash from time to time.

**Climate:** Hot and humid from January to March; cooler from April to December. Cyclones may occur November to April.

**Environment:** The most significant environmental issues are deforestation, damage to coral reefs by excessive coral and shell harvesting, and depletion of sea turtle populations by hunters.

**Vegetation:** Tongatapu island is flat and covered in small agricultural plantations with coconut trees and other crops. Eua island is hilly and partly forested. The Vava'u Islands are densely wooded. Coconut palms grow along the coastline and cover some of the coral islands. Forest covers 13 per cent of the total land area and there was no significant loss of forest cover during 1990–2011.

**Wildlife:** Tonga was the first South Pacific country to initiate a conservation programme, with a series of marine and forest reserves. The only land mammal indigenous to Tonga is the 'flying fox', actually a large fruit bat with a wingspan of up to one metre. It occurs in a large colony near the village of Kolovai on Tongatapu. Birds include the red-breasted musk parrot and the blue-crowned lory, said to be the most beautiful bird of the Pacific.

**Main towns:** Nuku'alofa (capital, pop. 24,300 in 2010), Mu'a (5,200), Haveloloto (3,500), Vaini (3,100) and Tofoa-Koloua (2,600) on Tongatapu; Neiafu (4,000) on Vava'u; Pangai (1,600) on Lifuka in the Ha'apai group of islands; and Ohonua (1,300) on Eua.

**Transport:** There are 680 km of roads, 27 per cent paved and the rest surfaced with compacted coral. The two main ports are at Nuku'alofa and Neiafu, and have shipping connections with Australia and Europe. Ferries run between the islands.



## Did you know?

Tonga is a monarchy.

Known as 'The Friendly Islands', it comprises 172 islands (36 inhabited; some coral and some volcanic, four with active volcanoes) and straddles the international date line.

Tongans enjoy life expectancy of some 73 years.

International airports are located at Fua'amotu (21 km south-east of Nuku'alofa) and at Lupepau'u on Vava'u.

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2012

Population per sq km:	140
Life expectancy:	73 years
Net primary enrolment:	96%

**Population:** 105,000 (2012); 24 per cent of people live in urban areas; growth 0.4 per cent p.a. 1990–2012; birth rate 26 per 1,000 people (37 in 1970); life expectancy 73 years (65 in 1970).

The vast majority of the people are of Polynesian descent. Tonga suffers from heavy emigration, mostly to New Zealand, Australia and the USA. There are 50,478 Tongans living in New Zealand, more than half of whom were born there (2006 New Zealand census).

**Language:** Tongan and English are official languages.

**Religion:** Mainly Christians (Wesleyans, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Church of Tonga, Free Church of Tonga).

**Health:** Public spending on health was four per cent of GDP in 2011. There are public hospitals on the islands of Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u, and dispensaries throughout the islands. Some 99 per cent of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 92 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2011). Over time, the Tongan diet has moved away from traditional root crops to imported foods. Infant mortality was 11 per 1,000 live births in 2012.

**Education:** There are nine years of compulsory education starting at the age of six. Primary school comprises six years and secondary six, with cycles of four and two years. More than 95 per cent of

primary students attend state schools, while about 90 per cent of secondary students attend church schools. Some 90 per cent of pupils complete primary school (2005). The school year starts in February.

Tonga is a partner in the regional University of the South Pacific, which has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, and a campus at 'Atele, about 7 km from Nuku'alofa, where some 1,400 students are enrolled each semester for preliminary, foundation and degree courses, using the university's distance-learning facilities. Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 99 per cent (2006).

**Media:** Newspapers include *Tonga Chronicle* (state-owned weekly), and *Times of Tonga* (published in New Zealand). *Matangi Tonga* is an online news service.

Tonga Broadcasting Commission provides public radio and TV services; there are several private radio stations and a cable TV channel.

There are 59 personal computers per 1,000 people (2005).

**Communications:** Country code 676; internet domain '.to'. Mobile phone coverage is limited to Nuku'alofa. There are several internet cafés in Nuku'alofa and Neiafu. The main post office is in Nuku'alofa, with branches on Ha'apai and Vava'u.

There are 286 main telephone lines, 534 mobile phone subscriptions and 349 internet users per 1,000 people (2012).

**Public holidays:** New Year's Day, ANZAC Day (25 April), Emancipation Day (4 June), Crown Prince's Birthday (12 July), King's Birthday (1 August), Constitution Day (4 November), Tupou I Day (4 December), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday and Easter Monday.

## History



Tonga was inhabited 3,000 years ago. The country is a very old Polynesian monarchy – its royal family goes back more than 1,000 years – with an old and well-developed social and political system. Occasional Europeans visited it from early in the 1600s: it was sighted by the Dutch navigator Abel Tasman in 1643 and later visited by the British explorer Captain James Cook. The first larger-scale arrival was in 1826, when Wesleyan missionaries landed and began a highly successful conversion campaign. Civil wars raged between Christian and non-Christian factions until Taufa'ahau Tupou, ruler of the island of Ha'apai and a Christian convert, gained control of and united the islands, becoming, in 1845, King George Tupou I (1845–93) and adopting the country's first constitution.

Tonga was never a British colony. In 1900, the King agreed a treaty of friendship with Britain, which gave Britain control of foreign affairs, and kept Tonga free from other predatory powers. The treaty was frequently revised until May 1970, when Tonga became fully independent.

King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV succeeded his mother, Queen Salote Tupou III, on her death in 1965.

From 1990 a pro-democracy movement gathered strength, challenging Tonga's political system which endeavoured to combine its 1,000 year-old feudal system with democracy. Elections did not result in any changes in the executive and only a

small number of members of the Legislative Assembly were elected. The country did not, in consequence, have a developed party political system.

Tonga's first-ever political party, the People's Party, was formed in 1994 out of the pro-democracy movement. In the 1996 elections four of the nine people's seats were won by pro-democracy candidates and leading democracy campaigner 'Akilisi Pohiva had a convincing majority in his constituency.

In January 1999 the People's Party held a four-day convention on constitutional change and, with the new name of Human Rights and Democracy Movement (HRDM), it went into the elections of March 1999 with the hope of raising its numbers in the assembly from the six seats they then controlled. In the event they won only five of the nine people's seats.

In April 1999 former Prime Minister (1965–91) and brother of King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, Prince Fatafehi Tu'ipelehake, died. In January 2000, the King appointed his younger son, Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka-Ata, to replace Baron Vaea as Prime Minister.

In October 2001, the country was rocked by financial scandal resulting in the resignation of two ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister. More than US\$20 million – the proceeds of the sale of Tongan citizenship in the 1980s – had been placed in June 1999 with a company in the USA that had apparently disappeared.

## Economy

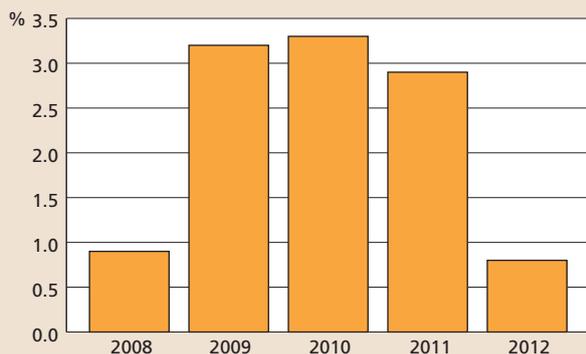
### KEY FACTS 2012

GNI:	US\$442m
GNI p.c.:	US\$4,220
GDP growth:	2.2% p.a. 2008–12
Inflation:	4.5% p.a. 2008–12

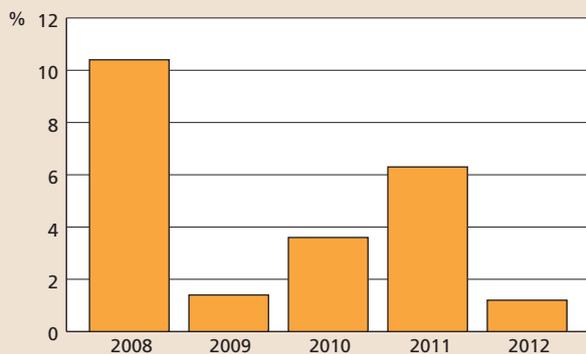
The economy is dominated by subsistence agriculture, and economic performance is heavily dependent on weather conditions and world commodity prices. However, the formal money economy has been growing as farmers have moved towards production of cash crops, some of which are exported, for example squash, which from the early 1990s was exported to Japan.

This very success, though, illustrates the vulnerability of small agricultural economies such as Tonga. In the early 1990s farmers rapidly switched to the new crop. By 1994, there was over-production, a collapse in local prices and unsold stocks. Drought in 1995 led to further falls in exports. Squash and, increasingly, fish products are, nonetheless, the most important exports, and squash remains more profitable than traditional crops such as copra and bananas.

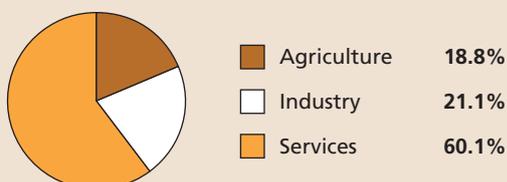
#### Real Growth in GDP



#### Inflation



#### GDP by Sector (2012)



The main source of foreign currency is the remittances of Tongans living abroad, followed by tourism. The government has recognised the need for economic reforms to expand the private sector and diversify the economy and has worked to gain public – and especially civil service – acceptance of the need.

From the late 1990s the economy continued to grow steadily (2.2 per cent p.a., 1997–2006), but slowed from the mid-2000s, facing the challenges of high debt, low private investment and the world economic downturn of 2008–09, when remittances fell and tourism was subdued. Growth of about three per cent p.a. resumed in 2009–11, moderating to 0.8 per cent in 2012 and an estimated one per cent in 2013.

## Constitution

Status:	National monarchy
Legislature:	Parliament of Tonga
Independence:	4 June 1970

Until 2010 the constitution was essentially King George Tupou I's constitution granted in 1875, under which executive power resided with the monarch.

Under the 2010 constitution, Tonga is a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral Legislative Assembly consisting of 26 elected members, nine of whom are elected by and from among the country's 33 hereditary nobles, and 17 on the basis of universal adult suffrage (women received the vote in 1960) in a general election which must take place at intervals of no longer than four years. Up to two cabinet ministers who are not already elected Assembly members become *ex officio* members.

The Prime Minister is chosen by the Legislative Assembly and appointed by the monarch. The Prime Minister selects his cabinet who are then appointed by the monarch. The Prime Minister may nominate up to four ministers from outside the Assembly and on appointment they become members of the Assembly.

All land belongs to the Crown. Large estates have been allotted to nobles. By law, every male Tongan at age 16 is entitled to a small piece of agricultural land and a small town plot. In practice, there is not enough land and the majority of men have not been allocated any land, and latterly there have been objections to the exclusion of women. Consequently, reform of the land tenure system has been under discussion.

## Politics

Last elections:	25 November 2010
Next elections:	25 November 2014
Head of state:	King Tupou VI (2012–)
Head of government:	Prime Minister Lord Siale'ataonga Tu'ivakano
Women MPs:	4%

In the March 2002 elections the pro-democracy Human Rights and Democracy Movement (HRDM) increased its representation in parliament to seven of the nine people's seats and issued new proposals for constitutional reforms to strengthen democracy and reduce the powers of the King. The King reappointed Prime Minister Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka-Ata. Though such moves had been unsuccessful in the past, the frailty of the octogenarian King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV and uncertainty over the succession now gave

them greater urgency. However, in October 2003, changes to the constitution gave greater power to the King, and increased state control over the media.

In the March 2005 election, the HRDM again won seven of the nine people's parliamentary seats, the remaining two taken by independents. In the same month two commoner and two noble representatives were appointed to cabinet.

In February 2006, Prime Minister Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka-Ata resigned and Dr Feleti Vaka'uta Sevele became acting Prime Minister, the first popularly elected member of the Legislative Assembly to be appointed to the post. He was then confirmed as Prime Minister in March 2006.

In September 2006 King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV (1965–2006) died after a long illness and was succeeded as head of state by his eldest son who was sworn in as King George Tupou V. In November 2006, when it seemed that parliament would go into recess before enacting democratic reforms, pro-democracy demonstrations turned into riots and looting, at least six people died and many buildings in Nuku'alofa were destroyed. At the Prime Minister's invitation, 150 Australian and New Zealand troops and police came to Tonga to restore order, the King promised that by 2008 the majority of government posts would be filled by elected representatives rather than nobles and King's appointees, and parliament passed the reforms.

In the elections of April 2008, with a turnout reportedly less than 50 per cent, HRDM and its ally, People's Democratic Party, together won six of the nine contested seats and independents took three.

In July 2008 the Constitutional and Electoral Commission was established, with the immediate task of making proposals for a more democratic system of government. In the same month the King's spokesperson announced that by 2010 the King would surrender his role in government to the Prime Minister and that most Assembly members would be elected. In November 2009 the final report of the Constitutional and Electoral Commission was delivered to the Legislative Assembly; the new constitution was approved by the Assembly in April 2010 and enacted in September 2010.

In the country's first democratic elections, held on 25 November 2010, when turnout was 91 per cent, the Friendly Islands Democratic Party, led by 'Akilisi Pohiva, won 12 of the 17 popularly elected seats, but remained short of a majority in the 26-seat Legislative Assembly. The remaining seats were taken by five independent people's representatives and nine nobles. The Assembly members initiated negotiations with a view to forming a new government. On 21 December 2010 a noble, Lord Siale'ataonga Tu'ivakano, was elected Prime Minister by the Assembly, defeating Pohiva by 14 votes to 12.

On 18 March 2012 King George Tupou V (2006–12) died and was succeeded as head of state by his brother, former Prime Minister (2000–06) and High Commissioner to Australia (2008–12) Crown Prince Tupouto'a Lavaka, who was sworn in as King Tupou VI.

## International relations

Tonga is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

## Traveller information

**Immigration and customs:** Passports must be valid for at least six months from the date of departure. Visas are required by most Commonwealth nationals.

**Travel within the country:** Traffic drives on the left. Visitors wishing to drive will need a driving permit, which can be purchased on presentation of a foreign driving licence at the Police Traffic Department in Nuku'alofa.

Ferry services operate between the islands. Minibuses run throughout Tongatapu. Taxis and chauffeur-driven cars are also available.

**Travel health:** Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include dengue fever, hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

There were 46,000 tourist arrivals in 2011.

## Further information

Tonga Government: [www.tongaportal.gov.to](http://www.tongaportal.gov.to)

Tonga Electoral Commission: [www.tongaelections.com](http://www.tongaelections.com)

Parliament of Tonga: [www.parliament.gov.to](http://www.parliament.gov.to)

Department of Statistics: [www.spc.int/prism/country/to/stats](http://www.spc.int/prism/country/to/stats)

National Reserve Bank of Tonga: [www.reservebank.to](http://www.reservebank.to)

Tonga Visitors Bureau: [www.thekingdomoftonga.com](http://www.thekingdomoftonga.com)

Commonwealth Secretariat: [www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org)

Commonwealth of Nations:

[www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Tonga](http://www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Tonga)

## Media

Tonga Broadcasting Commission: [www.tonga-broadcasting.net](http://www.tonga-broadcasting.net)

Matangi Tonga: [www.matangitonga.to](http://www.matangitonga.to)

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