



Following the decisions taken by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 31 July 2009, Fiji was suspended from membership of the Commonwealth on 1 September 2009.

## KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1970 (rejoined in 1997 after ten-year lapse)
Population:	849,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	1.4% p.a. 1990–2008
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 86
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT plus 12
Currency:	Fiji dollar (F\$)

## Geography

Area:	18,333 sq km
Coastline:	1,130km
Capital:	Suva

The Republic of the Fiji lies 1,850km north of Auckland, New Zealand, and 2,800km north-east of Sydney, Australia. It consists of about 300 islands (100 inhabited) and 540 islets, spread over 3 million sq km. It is surrounded by the island groups of (clockwise from north) Tuvalu, Wallis and Futuna, Tonga, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. The largest islands are Viti Levu ('Great Fiji'), Vanua Levu, Taveuni and Kadavu.

**Area:** Total land area is 18,333 sq km: Viti Levu 10,429 sq km; Vanua Levu 5,556 sq km.

**Main towns:** Suva (capital, pop. 194,400 in 2009, comprising Nasinu 88,000 and Lami 20,500), Lautoka (54,400), Nausori (52,500), Nadi (45,500) and Ba (16,000) on Viti Levu; and Labasa (28,100) on Vanua Levu.

**Topography:** Much of Fiji is volcanic in origin, with the larger islands featuring heavily populated coastal plains and uninhabited mountainous interiors. Many of the smaller islands have coral reefs. The highest point is Mt Tomanivi on Viti Levu (1,323m). The main rivers are the Sigatoka, Rewa and Ba on Viti Levu and the Dreketi on Vanua Levu; their deltas contain most of the country's arable land.

**Climate:** The climate is tropical and oceanic. South-east trade winds prevail; day temperatures range from 20 to 29°C and humidity is high. The rainy season is November to March throughout the country, though there is rain during June–September. On average, the country is affected by a hurricane every other year, for example Cyclone Ami in January 2003.

**Environment:** The most significant environmental issues are deforestation and soil erosion.

## did you know?

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum has its Pacific regional projects office in Suva, where it works to promote and strengthen democratic local government and encourage the exchange of good practice in the Pacific region.

The country is an archipelago of about 300 islands (100 inhabited) and 540 islets, spread over 3 million sq km, and has some 1,130km of coastline.

**Vegetation:** The distribution of the rainfall is the determining factor in the country's vegetation. Dense forests and coastal mangrove swamps are found in the east and grasslands, with coconut palms on the coasts, in the west. Forest covers some 55% of the land area. Indigenous sandalwood resources were exhausted in the 19th century.

**Wildlife:** Fiji is home to six species of bat, including four fruit bats (flying-foxes), and the Polynesian rat. All other mammals have been introduced, mainly during the 19th and 20th centuries. There are more than 100 species of birds and several snakes and lizards, including the recently discovered crested iguana. Fiji's waters contain turtles, sharks, eels and prawns.

**Transport:** 3,440km of roads, 49% paved. The network is vulnerable to flooding and hurricane damage. A coastal road encircles Viti Levu, linked by smaller roads to the villages of the interior.

Lautoka, in the north-west of Viti Levu, is the main port; others are Suva, Levuka and Savusavu. Ferry services operate between the larger islands.

The main international airport is in western Viti Levu, at Nadi. Nausori, near Suva, is the hub for inter-island flights, and receives some international services. Most islands have airports or landing strips.

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 46  
Life expectancy: 69 years  
Net primary enrolment: 89%

**Population:** 849,000 (2009); 51% lives in urban areas; growth 0.7% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 21 per 1,000 people (34 in 1970); life expectancy 69 years (60 in 1970).

More than 50% of the people are ethnic Fijians, who are of mixed Melanesian–Polynesian origin, and most of the rest are of Indian origin. There are small populations of Europeans, Banabans, Tuvaluans and Chinese.

**Language:** The official language is English, but Fijian, of which there are more than 300 dialects, is widely spoken. A single dialect, Bauan, is used in the media. Hindi is the main language of the Indian population, although it is now distinct from that spoken in mainland India. English, Fijian and Hindi are all taught in schools and most of the population is at least bilingual.

**Religion:** Christians 65% (Methodists 35%, Roman Catholics 9%, Assembly of God 6%, Seventh Day Adventists 4%), Hindus 28%, Muslims 6%, small number of Sikhs (2007 census).

**Media:** Daily English-language newspapers are *Fiji Times* (founded 1869), *Fiji Sun* and *Daily Post* (1989). The publishers of *Fiji Times* also produce weekly Fijian and Hindi papers, while a fortnightly Fijian paper is available from Sun Publishers.

Radio is a major source of information for most people, particularly on the outer islands, and the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts in Fijian and Hindi. Fiji TV provides a national free-to-air channel and a pay-TV channel.

There are 60 personal computers (2005) and 135 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

**Education:** There are eight years of compulsory education starting at age six. Primary school comprises eight years and secondary three. Some 95% of pupils complete primary school (2007). The school year starts in January.

There are about 50 further education institutions, including four teacher-training colleges. The main campus of the regional University of the South Pacific (founded 1968), Fiji Institute of Technology and Fiji School of Medicine are all located in Suva. The female–male ratio for gross enrolment in tertiary education is 120:100 (2005). The main campus of the University of the South Pacific is at Suva and there are two further campuses in the country, at Labasa and Lautoka.

**Health:** There is a comprehensive system providing universal health and dental services for nominal fees. There are 25 hospitals. The country is free of malaria. Infant mortality was 15 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (71 in 1960).

**Communications:** Country code 679; internet domain '.fj'. Mobile phone coverage in the outer islands is patchy. There are internet cafes in Suva, Nadi, Lautoka and most resorts.

There are 161 main telephone lines and 754 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

**Public holidays:** New Year's Day, National Youth Day (Friday in March), Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day (late May), Queen's Official Birthday (Monday in June), Fiji Day (Monday around 10 October), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Prophet's Birthday, Good Friday, Easter Monday and Diwali (October/November).

## Economy

### KEY FACTS 2009

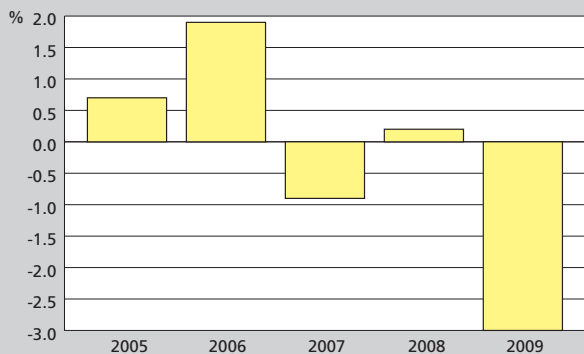
GNI: US\$3.3bn  
GNI p.c.: US\$3,840  
GDP growth: –0.2% p.a. 2005–09  
Inflation: 3.4% p.a. 2005–09

**Overview:** The Fijian economy is largely agricultural, and the main cash crop and export is sugar cane. Tourism is the largest foreign-exchange earner and clothing exports grew rapidly from the late 1980s. Other significant activities are gold-mining, fishing and timber production.

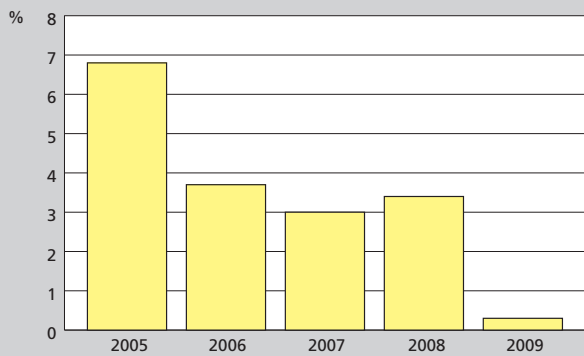
More than 80% of land is owned by ethnic Fijians, mainly by the local clans, or *mataqali*, and ownership by outsiders was prohibited from the late 19th century. Indo-Fijians were able to farm sugar cane under land lease arrangements. However, from the late 1990s, as leases came up for renewal, many landlords would only offer short leases at higher rents and many Indo-Fijian farmers have had to return the farms they have worked for many years to the owners.

Both sugar and tourism are vulnerable to the climate; hurricanes are relatively frequent and droughts can also cause problems, for example severe drought in 1997–98 was followed by cyclones and extensive flooding, and the islands were again devastated by

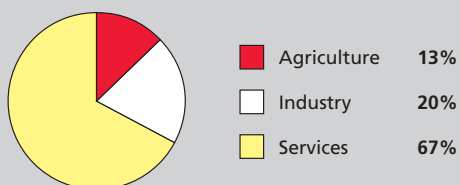
**Real Growth in GDP**



**Inflation**



**GDP by Sector (2009)**



Cyclone Ami in January 2003. Moreover tourists can be deterred by political instability.

Thus, economic growth has been uneven, with strong growth in years such as 1999 when the harvest is good and negative growth in years such as 2000 when the government was overthrown, some hotels were closed and tourist numbers fell sharply.

After 2000, however, there were four years of good growth (5.3% in 2004), before a decline in clothing exports (due to ending of US market quotas at end 2004) caused much slower growth of 0.7% in 2005. There was a recovery in 2006 when growth was 1.9%, but following the coup of December 2006 tourist numbers fell by 70% and the economy shrank by 0.9% in 2007, declining further in 2008–09, in the face of the global recession.

**Trade:** Main exports are clothing, sugar and molasses, fish products, gold, timber, coconut oil and bottled water.

## Constitution

**Status:** Republic  
**Legislature:** Parliament  
**Independence:** 10 October 1970

Fiji's constitution has always reflected the multiracial nature of its society. It provides for a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral parliament comprising an elected House of Representatives and appointed Senate. Some seats in the House of Representatives are reserved for ethnic Fijians, some for Indo-Fijians and some for other ethnic groups. Following the 1987 coups, Fiji became a republic, with a president appointed by the Great Council of Chiefs (Bose Levu Vakaturaga, a body comprising the heads of the ethnic Fijian clans), for a five-year term as head of state. The president appoints as prime minister the member of the House of Representatives who commands the support of the majority, normally the leader of the largest party or coalition. The prime minister then forms a government which has executive authority. Constitutional amendments require a 75% majority in both houses.

Under the 1997 constitution, the number of seats in the House of Representatives was increased to 71, 25 of which were opened to all ethnic groups (elected by universal suffrage), while the remainder were to be elected by separate communal electoral rolls in the following proportions: ethnic Fijians 23; Indo-Fijians 19; other ethnic groups three; and Rotuman Islanders one. The Senate has 32 members, 14 appointed by the Great Council of Chiefs, nine by the prime minister, eight by the leader of the opposition and one by the Council of Rotuma. The prime ministership, but not the presidency, was opened to all Fijians. In addition, the first-past-the-post electoral system was replaced by an alternative preference system and voting became mandatory. Parties taking more than 10% of the votes in a general election have the right to a number of cabinet posts in proportion to the numbers of votes received.

## Politics

**Last elections:** May 2006  
**Next elections:** date uncertain  
**Head of state:** President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau\*  
**Head of government:** Interim Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama\*

After a 10-year hiatus following a military coup and declaration of a Republic in 1987, Fiji resumed its membership of the Commonwealth in October 1997. Its new 1997 constitution came into force in July 1998.

The first general election under the 1997 constitution, held in May 1999, resulted in a surprise defeat for the ruling Fijian Political Party (SVT, with only eight of the 71 seats) and its new allies the National Federation Party (NFP, no seats) by a coalition led by the Fiji Labour Party (FLP, 37 seats) and including the Fijian Association Party (FAP, ten seats), the Party of National Unity (PANU, four seats) and the recently formed Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA, three seats). The turnout was high at these elections where voting was compulsory.

Following his victory, FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry became the first Indo-Fijian prime minister and, despite his party's overall majority in the House of Representatives, he formed a cabinet

representing all four of the coalition partners. His priorities were to defuse ethnic tensions and restore economic growth after the sharp contractions of 1997–99.

Soon after the elections, Rabuka resigned and was replaced as SVT leader by Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, who had been a minister in the Rabuka administration.

In May 2000, armed ethnic Fijians, led by George Speight, overthrew the government, occupying the parliament building and taking about 40 hostages – including the prime minister. There then ensued continuous negotiations between the army and the rebels until the deadlock was finally broken in July, when the hostages were released, a new civilian president and ‘emergency’

government were appointed and backed by the military. In June the country was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth pending the restoration of democracy. In July Speight and some of his supporters were arrested and charged with treason.

In October 2000, President Ratu Josefa Iloilo appointed a constitutional review commission to recommend a new constitutional arrangement for Fiji. In December 2000, Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon appointed Justice Pius N Langa, Deputy President of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, as his special envoy to help accelerate the restoration of democracy and promote national unity.



## History

Archaeological evidence suggests that Fiji has been inhabited, initially by Melanesian peoples, for more than 3,500 years. The first known contact with Europeans occurred in 1643, when the islands of Vanua Levu and Taveuni were explored by Abel Tasman. British explorers including Captains James Cook and William Bligh passed through in the late 18th century. By this time, the population was mixed, with Melanesians occupying the eastern areas and Polynesians the islands’ interiors, organised into a complex hierarchical society.

The first American ships arrived in the 19th century, bringing adventurers attracted by the resources of sandalwood (which were exhausted within ten years) and subsequently traders and Christian missionaries. Later, Europeans began establishing cotton plantations but came into conflict with the Fijians over land, political power and the use of imported labour. The increasing availability of guns caused inter-tribal conflicts to escalate but by the mid-19th century, a single clan dominated, led first by Nauvilou and subsequently by his son Cakobau, and based on the small island of Bau to the south-east of Viti Levu. The Bauan dialect of Fijian consequently became the predominant Fijian language, and an important factor in unifying the clans. Cakobau converted to Methodist Christianity in 1854; in 1874, following British concerns over the interests of the settlers, Cakobau agreed that Fiji should become a Crown colony. In 1881, Rotuma Island in northern Fiji, inhabited by Polynesian people, was added to the territory.

The first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, collaborated with the local chiefs to protect the traditional ways of life. He forbade the sale of land to non-Fijians, levied taxes in kind and retained the existing political structures. He also encouraged the growth of the sugar industry, and its use of Indian labour. From the 1920s, Indians began to call for more commercial and political influence and, by 1943, despite the restrictions on land ownership, they were in the majority.

The country progressed towards independence through the 1960s, largely in response to international and British pressure, while internally there were divisions over the appropriate forms of government able to provide democracy while protecting the rights of the ethnic Fijians. The resulting constitution offered universal suffrage, with guarantees for Fijian land rights, and the Fijian chiefs, through their dominance of the Senate, had in effect a

veto on constitutional change. Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970.

Until 1987, the government was formed by the Alliance Party led by Ratu (Chief) Sir Kamisese Mara which followed policies of moderate multiracialism. The largest Indo-Fijian party, the National Federation Party (NFP), formed the main opposition for most of the period and calls from Indo-Fijians for greater political and property rights increased.

Elections in April 1987 resulted in victory for a coalition consisting of the NFP and the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), led by Dr Timoci Bavadra and supported by both ethnic Fijian and Indo-Fijian trades unions. Bavadra, an ethnic Fijian, became prime minister, but there were Indo-Fijian majorities in both the House of Representatives and the cabinet. In May 1987 the government was overthrown in a coup led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, who called for the ethnic Fijian dominance of all future governments.

The May 1987 coup was followed by a period of racial unrest, during which the Great Council of Chiefs attempted to introduce constitutional reforms. Mediated by the governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, negotiations between Mara and Bavadra resulted in the formation of an interim government of unity.

However, Rabuka led a second coup in September 1987 and in October he declared Fiji a republic. Having become a republic, it was then required to reapply for membership of the Commonwealth and, at their summit in Vancouver in October 1987, Commonwealth Heads of Government decided to allow its membership to lapse, primarily on the grounds that Fiji had adopted a form of government at variance with the democratically expressed wish of the people and so with Commonwealth principles. In December 1987 Rabuka appointed a new civilian government with Mara as prime minister and Ganilau as president.

Between 1988 and 1990, a new constitution was drawn up and approved by the Great Council of Chiefs, but the National Federation Party–Fiji Labour Party coalition announced it would boycott any elections held under its provisions. The constitution was also the subject of international criticism, especially from the Commonwealth led by India, Australia and New Zealand.

A general election was held under the new constitution from 25 August to 5 September 2001 when 26 political parties participated (ten more than in 1999). In a poll that was judged by international including Commonwealth observers to reflect the will of the people, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) took 32 seats, pushing FLP (27 seats) into second place, followed by Matanitu Vanua (six). SDL leader and head of the interim government Laisenia Qarase was sworn in as prime minister. Following the country's return to democratic government, the suspension from Commonwealth councils was lifted in December 2001.

A row soon erupted, however, when Qarase failed to appoint any FLP members to his cabinet or the Senate. An impasse continued, with Qarase only prepared to appoint ministers he felt he could work with, and Chaudhry insisting on his constitutional rights. In February 2002 the High Court ruled Qarase had failed to comply with the constitution when he appointed his cabinet and in July 2003 the Supreme Court upheld this judgment. But the impasse endured, with the two parties unable to agree on a list of cabinet appointments, the key issues being the number of FLP members (14 or 17) and whether Chaudhry himself should be included.

The May 2006 general election was won by SDL with 36 seats, while FLP took 31 seats and the United People's Party (UPP) two. Commonwealth observers present reported that the result reflected the wishes of the people. Qarase continued as prime minister and, in accordance with the constitution, appointed a cabinet in which nine posts were filled by FLP. FLP leader Chaudhry declined a position for himself.

In December 2006 the army took control of government dismissing the prime minister and president; and head of the army Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama assumed the presidency. This coup was immediately condemned by the international community and at a meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) on 8 December Fiji's military regime was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth pending restoration of democracy and the rule of law in the country. In January 2007 Bainimarama reinstated the president and became interim prime minister.

Fiji's Court of Appeal ruled in April 2009 that the military coup, which ousted the elected government in 2006, and the interim government that followed it were illegal. The ruling requested that the president appoint an interim prime minister and call a general election. In response, President Iloilo announced that he had abrogated the constitution and dismissed all the judges. He appointed himself as head of government and subsequently reinstated Bainimarama as prime minister.

In July 2009 Bainimarama announced the retirement of Iloilo from the presidency; Vice-President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau assumed the role of acting president and in November 2009 was confirmed as president.

Following Fiji's suspension from the councils of the Commonwealth in December 2006, sustained efforts were made by the Commonwealth to engage the interim government to promote a return to constitutional democracy and to encourage a national dialogue aimed at tackling the underlying issues that led to military coups. On 1 September 2009, having failed to satisfy CMAG that it

was committed to a timetable for restoring democracy, Fiji was fully suspended from the Commonwealth. In announcing this, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma said that the Commonwealth remained open to engaging with the interim government towards the restoration of constitutional democracy.

At their biennial meeting in Perth, Australia, in October 2011, Commonwealth Heads of Government urged the interim government of Fiji to restore democracy without further delay, to respect human rights and to uphold the rule of law, and reaffirmed that the Commonwealth should continue to remain engaged with Fiji and support efforts towards that end.

*\* Following the decisions taken by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 31 July 2009, Fiji was fully suspended from membership of the Commonwealth on 1 September 2009.*

## International relations

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

Fiji was suspended from participation in the Pacific Islands Forum in May 2009, pending the country's return to constitutional democracy through free and fair elections.

## Traveller information

**Local laws and conventions:** Fiji has a strict drugs policy and possession of marijuana carries a mandatory prison sentence.

Since the military coup of December 2006 visitors have been advised to exercise extra caution.

When visiting villages there is a tradition that guests should purchase a bundle of unpounded *yaquona* (kava) and wait until greeted before entering into the presence of the chief, to whom they should offer the gift. Visitors need to dress respectfully and women must cover their shoulders.

For business meetings, lightweight suits are customary. Businesswomen should dress modestly and cover their shoulders. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0830–1700.

**Immigration and customs:** Visa requirements are essential for some nationals and should be checked before entering the country. Business travellers are only allowed to stay for 14 days. All passports must be valid for six months on arrival. There is an airport departure tax.

A yellow fever certificate is required from those who have travelled from an infected area.

No meat or dairy products may be brought into Fiji from Europe because of foot and mouth disease, and the import of vegetables and seeds requires a special permit.

**Travel within the country:** Driving is on the left. The minimum age for car hire is 21 and seatbelts must be worn in the front seats. A valid national or international driving permit is required and third party insurance is compulsory. The national speed limit is 80kph. Livestock may wander freely on to the roads. Driving from Suva to Nadi takes approximately three hours.

Buses are efficient and cheap, and there are frequent services around the islands.

Taxis and minibuses bearing a yellow registration plate comply with Land Transport Authority regulations. The cost of a taxi ride should always be checked before starting out on a journey.

Air Fiji and Pacific Sun operate air shuttle services around the islands. Ferries run by Patterson Brothers, Beachcomber and Consort Shipping serve the larger islands.

**Travel health:** Health care in Fiji meets most of the World Health Organization goals and is generally good, although full medical insurance is advised. There is a private hospital in Suva.

Typhoid, leptospirosis and dengue fever can occur in Fiji, and visitors must ensure they take insect repellent and suitable clothing to avoid mosquito bites. Vaccinations for Hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid are recommended but up-to-date inoculation requirements should be checked well before departure.

Tap water is safe to drink in the main towns and resorts but visitors must ensure that it has been boiled or sterilised when visiting rural areas.

**Money:** Currency exchange is available at the airport and in most hotels as well as in banks on Viti Levu. Most hotels and restaurants accept credit cards but not all ATMs accept all cards. Resorts accept cards but there are limited facilities for obtaining cash. Those travelling to the islands should take sufficient cash with them. Banking hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1700.

There were 539,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

## Further information

Fiji Government Online Portal: [www.fiji.gov.fj](http://www.fiji.gov.fj)

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

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