

# Tonga



## KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1970
Population:	104,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	2.9% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 85
Official languages:	Tongan, English
Time:	GMT plus 13hr
Currency:	pa'anga or Tongan dollar (TOP; T\$)

## Geography

Area:	748 sq km
Coastline:	419km
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.

**Main towns:** Nuku'alofa (capital, pop. 24,200 in 2009), Mu'a (5,100) and Haveloloto (3,500) 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.

**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

## 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 more than 70 years.

Tongans receive substantial levels of their income from overseas. Tonga has one of the highest levels of remittances per capita in the world and certainly the highest among the small Pacific island states.

wooded. Coconut palms grow along the coastline and cover some of the coral islands. Forest covers about 5% of the total land area.

**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 1 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.

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

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

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 139  
Life expectancy: 72 years  
Net primary enrolment: 99%

**Population:** 104,000 (2009); 23% lives in urban areas; growth 0.7% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 27 per 1,000 people (37 in 1970); life expectancy 72 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).

**Media:** Newspapers include *Tonga Chronicle* (state-owned), and *Times of Tonga* and *Talaki* (both published in New Zealand). *Matangi Tonga* is a news magazine.

Tonga Broadcasting Commission operates two public radio stations and two TV channels; there are several private radio stations and TV channels.

There are 59 personal computers (2005) and 81 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

**Education:** There are nine years of compulsory education starting at age five. More than 95% of primary students attend state schools, while about 90% of secondary students attend church schools. 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 7km from Nuku'alofa, where some 1,400 students are enrolled per semester for preliminary, foundation and degree courses, using the university's distance-learning facilities. Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 99% (2008).

**Health:** There are public hospitals on the islands of Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u, and dispensaries throughout the islands. The

entire population uses an improved drinking water source and 96% of people have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2009). Over time, the Tongan diet has moved away from traditional root crops to imported foods. Infant mortality was 17 per 1,000 live births in 2009.

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

There are 298 main telephone lines and 510 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

**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.

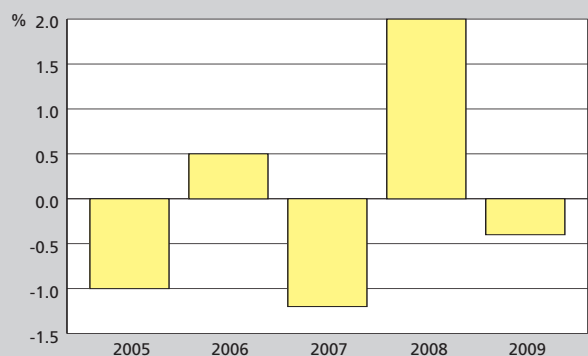
## Economy

### KEY FACTS 2009

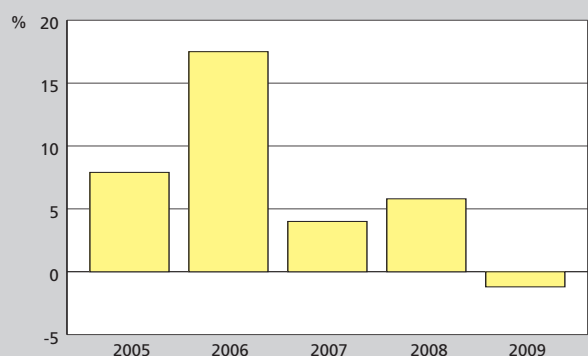
GNI: US\$339m  
GNI p.c.: US\$3,260  
GDP growth: 0.0% p.a. 2005–09  
Inflation: 6.6% p.a. 2005–09

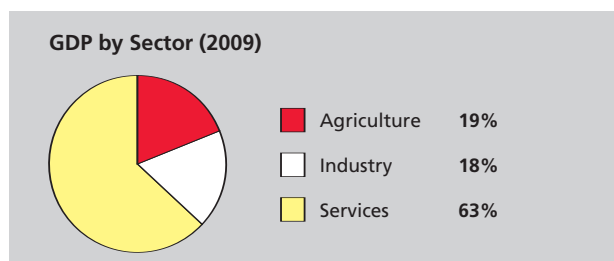
**Overview:** The economy is dominated by subsistence agriculture, and economic performance is heavily dependent on weather

Real Growth in GDP



Inflation





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, a relatively recent introduction, which has been a great success as an export 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.

The main source of foreign currency is the remittances of Tongans working 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% p.a., 1997–2006), but slowed from the mid-2000s, with no real growth over the rest of the decade. After the world economic downturn of 2008–09, when remittances fell and tourism was subdued, the economy was in recession, contracting in 2009 by 0.4% and in 2010 by about 1%.

**Trade:** Main exports are squash, fish products, vegetables and vanilla.

## Constitution

<b>Status:</b>	<b>National Monarchy</b>
<b>Legislature:</b>	<b>Legislative Assembly</b>
<b>Independence:</b>	<b>4 June 1970</b>

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 4 years.

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

<b>Last elections:</b>	<b>November 2010</b>
<b>Next elections:</b>	<b>2014</b>
<b>Head of state:</b>	<b>King George Tupou V (2006–)</b>
<b>Head of government:</b>	<b>Prime Minister Lord Siale'ataonga Tu'ivakano</b>

Since 1990 a pro-democracy movement has gathered strength, challenging Tonga's political system which endeavours to combine its 1,000 year-old feudal system with democracy. Under the present arrangements, elections do not result in any changes in the executive and only a small number of members of the Legislative Assembly are elected. The country does 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), they went into the elections of March 1999 with the hope of raising their numbers in the assembly from the six seats they by 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'iipelehake, 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.

Having gained seven of the nine people's seats in the parliamentary elections in March 2002, the HRDM issued new proposals for constitutional reforms to strengthen democracy and reduce the powers of the King. Though such moves had been unsuccessful in the past, the frailty of the octogenarian King 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, and the remaining two were 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%, 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, 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 Tu'ivakano, was elected prime minister by the Assembly, defeating Pohiva by 14 votes to 12.

## 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

**Local laws and conventions:** Visitors should note that Sunday is sacred in Tonga and it is unlawful to work or trade on this day; almost everything (except bakeries, a few restaurants and resorts) is closed. Drug taking is illegal and trafficking drugs attracts heavy penalties. Anyone appearing in public without a shirt will be fined.

Tonga is a conservative and religious society. Visitors should dress modestly; and beachwear should be for beach only. Shaking hands is the usual form of greeting.

English and French are the most common languages used in business circles. Contracts signed on a Sunday are void. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0830–1630.

**Immigration and customs:** Passports must be valid for six months, and visas are issued at the airport and are valid for one month. Visitors must also hold a return ticket and have sufficient funds for their stay.

The import of firearms, ammunition and pornography is prohibited, and the export of valuable artefacts and certain flora and fauna is restricted.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required by those arriving from an infected area.

**Travel within the country:** Traffic drives on the left. Visitors will need a local driving permit, which is obtained on presentation of a national driving licence and a small fee from the Police Traffic Department in Nuku'alofa. Car hire is only available in Nuku'alofa and Neiafu. Speed limits are low, but are strictly enforced.

There are regular ferry services between the islands, though timetables are subject to change, depending on the weather or demand.

Minibus services are available throughout Tongatapu. Taxis can be recognised by their 'T' licence plates. Visitors can also hire a chauffeur-driven car.

**Travel health:** Visitors should have comprehensive health insurance which includes air evacuation, as serious medical cases are flown to Australia or New Zealand.

Dengue fever is prevalent in Tonga, and visitors should ensure they take insect repellent and suitable clothing to protect against being bitten by dengue-carrying mosquitoes.



## 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.

Tap water is chlorinated and is safe to drink in the main towns, and bottled water is widely available. Elsewhere, sterilisation of drinking water is sometimes advisable.

**Money:** The local currency is the pa'anga. Foreign currency exchange is available at banks and major hotels. There is limited use of credit cards but ATMs are available in Nuku'alofa and Neiafu. Banking hours are Mon–Fri 0900–1600, Sat 0830–1130.

There were 51,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

## Further information

Official Website of the Tongan Government: [www.pmo.gov.to](http://www.pmo.gov.to)

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

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