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Tonga: Background and Issues for Congress

Overview

The Kingdom of Tonga is one of the United States' oldest diplomatic partners in the Pacific Islands region. U.S. policymakers, including some Members of Congress, have identified U.S. national security interests in the Pacific, and have sought to bolster diplomacy; increase U.S. assistance in areas such as climate change, sustainable fisheries, and economic development; and counter growing economic, political, and security engagement by the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China).

With approximately 100,000 inhabitants, Tonga is the last remaining monarchy in Polynesia and the only Pacific Island Country (PIC) never to have been colonized by European powers. Tonga signed a protectorate agreement with the British Empire in 1900, and became independent in 1970. In the defense sector, Tonga is one of three PICs, along with Fiji and Papua New Guinea, to have a standing military.

Politics, Society, and Economy

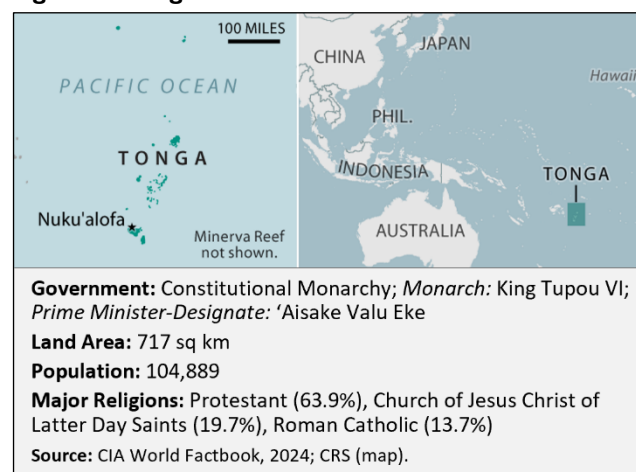
Tonga is a constitutional monarchy with a unicameral Legislative Assembly. Before 2010, most of the 26 members of parliament were appointed by the monarch or held designated noble seats. The Legislative Assembly adopted reforms to broaden the number of popularly elected parliamentarians from 9 to 17, with 9 seats reserved for nobles selected by their peers. The prime minister, who is selected by the Legislative Assembly, is responsible for most government functions. The monarchy retains substantial powers, including the authority to dismiss parliament, appoint and supervise the judiciary, and approve changes to the constitution. The current monarch, King Tupou VI, acceded to the throne in 2012. The next general election for parliament is expected to be held in November 2025.

The World Bank considers Tonga a lower-middle income country; its primary economic sectors include agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, all of which are vulnerable to climate-related events. About 40% of Tonga's total land area is used for agriculture, and the sector employs one-third of the labor force. Tonga is one of the world's most aid-dependent countries, ranking 7th of 134 countries measured. Top donors include Australia and Japan, as well as multilateral donors such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the Asia Development Bank. The Tongan economy relies heavily on small-sum remittances from the Tongan diaspora; in 2022, remittances comprised more than 45% of Tonga's total GDP. The Tongan government is facing a substantial debt service burden through 2028 on account of repayment deadlines to China, which owns two-thirds of Tonga's \$195 million debt, one of the highest debt burdens in the world. Currently, Tonga's

annual repayments to China are near 4% of the GDP, placing burdens on Tonga's public services and threatening to derail climate priorities.

Tonga's standing military force, His Majesty's Armed Forces (HMAF), has land and naval components. The monarch commands the HMAF, but under the constitution cannot "make war without the consent of the Legislative Assembly." The HMAF is small, with 590 personnel including support staff, and is primarily focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; search and rescue; countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU); and delivery of supplies to Tonga's outer islands.

Figure 1. Tonga at a Glance



U.S.-Tonga Relations

The State Department describes U.S.-Tonga relations as "broad and deep, based on shared values and close cooperation" In 2023, the United States established an embassy in Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. In August 2024, the U.S. Embassy opened a Consular window pilot program to support visa services. The U.S. ambassador to Fiji is also accredited to Tonga (as well as Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu). The State Department supports Tonga with law enforcement programming and plans for food security investments, in cooperation with Congress and in coordination with Australia and New Zealand.

The United States provides military assistance to the HMAF and includes Tongan forces in joint military exercises, including Pacific Partnership, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's largest annual multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mission. The Nevada National Guard has a State Partnership Program with the HMAF that entails joint trainings to build partner capacity and interoperability. Tonga and the United States have a

shiprider agreement that allows Tongan law enforcement officials to embark on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships in order to board and search vessels suspected of violating Tongan laws and to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in Tonga's territorial waters. Tonga is also a party to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty that provides U.S. fishers access to Tongan waters.

U.S. development assistance to Tonga is provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Pacific American Fund, Climate Ready project (2016- 2021), and Institutional Strengthening in Pacific Island Countries to Adapt to Climate Change program (2015-2021). Following a volcanic eruption in 2022, USAID provided \$2.6 million in humanitarian assistance, and partners with local organizations on disaster risk reduction. USAID programming also addresses health challenges, and democracy and governance.

The U.S. Peace Corps presence in Tonga dates to 1967 and focuses on education and the environment.

The Tongan diaspora in the United States is concentrated in Hawai'i, California, Utah, and Washington. Tongan communities in the United States are a significant source of remittances for Tongans. The United States has deported convicted felons of Tongan nationality back to Tonga after they served their terms in American prisons. The Tongan and other Pacific Islands governments have been critical of a lack of financial support to help re-integrate deportees into local society. Some analysts claim this challenge is fueling a growing drug problem in Tonga.

Tonga-China Relations

Tonga adheres to a "One China Policy" and maintains official diplomatic relations with China. In May 2022, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with King Tupou VI and former Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku in Tonga and signed several agreements, including on disaster management. The two sides also reportedly discussed Tonga's debt to China's Export-Import Bank.

About 40% of PRC aid has been in the form of loans to finance development projects. PRC development and infrastructure projects in Tonga include agricultural investments, wind farm development, and small public welfare projects like water tanks and fishing boats.

A delegation from the PRC Ministry of Public Security visited Tonga in April 2024, ahead of the Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM), and offered security support to Tonga, the PIFLM host, during the event (China is not a member of the PIF). Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku responded to Australian and U.S. government expressions of concern around PRC security engagements with the region by saying "there's no reason to be concerned." In a November 2024 meeting between Tonga's Police Commissioner and the PRC Ambassador to Tonga, the two parties discussed law enforcement cooperation and protecting Chinese nationals and businesses from damage or violence.

Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Addressing climate change is a priority for the Tongan government, as the country is vulnerable to natural disasters and environmental shifts. The effects of climate change on Tonga include temperature rise, shifts in rainfall patterns, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and extreme weather events. In a 2023 speech to the United Nations, former Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku called for the establishment of a climate-focused fund for the Pacific Islands. The World Bank is financing a Tonga Climate Resilience Project that includes an upgrade of the international airport and construction of a new parliament building.

In 2022, Tonga's Mt. Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai, an underwater volcano, erupted, releasing a destructive ash plume and triggering a powerful tsunami. The eruption, ashfall, and tsunami damaged buildings and infrastructure and disrupted agriculture, forestry, fishing, and tourism. USAID, the U.S. Geological Survey, and U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration responded with equipment and assistance in monitoring the volcano and improving forecast and warning models.

Per the 2024 PIFLM, Tonga is slated to be home to a new Pacific Resilience Facility, which is to finance climate-resilience initiatives in the region.

Considerations for Congress

U.S.-Tonga diplomatic relations have expanded under recent U.S. administrations as the United States takes a greater geostrategic interest in the Pacific. Congress may exercise oversight of U.S. foreign policy towards Tonga and shape pertinent funding priorities. Tonga and other PICs have noted U.S. efforts to re-engage the Pacific and appear to desire durable commitments in the form of programs and investments. Some Members of Congress have expressed support (e.g., S.Res. 611, 116th Congress) for Tonga's democratic progress and may continue to support such progress, including as a means of strengthening U.S.-regional interests. Additional considerations may include:

- The impact of U.S. programs in Tonga. In what additional areas, if any, could U.S. programming and funds support mutual interests?
- U.S. coordination with allies and partners of diplomatic, economic, strategic, and environmental efforts in Tonga and the broader Pacific. What cooperation mechanisms exist for U.S. regional engagement? How, if at all, can they be improved?
- The impact on bilateral relations of U.S. deportations of Tongan felons back to Tonga. What implications does this have for U.S. regional interests?
- Diplomatic services, if any, needed to support U.S.-Tongan relations beyond the opening of the embassy in Nuku'alofa and visa services.

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