

KIRIBATI

History & culture

Kiribati. Officially the **Republic of Kiribati** (pronounced *Kiri-bas*) is an island nation located in the central tropical Pacific Ocean. It is composed of 33 atolls, dispersed over 3.5 million square kilometres, straddling the equator, and bordering the International Date Line at its easternmost point.

The word *Kiribati* is the local spelling of the word *Gilbert* and the original name of this British colony was the Gilbert Islands. The indigenous format of the name was adopted when independence was gained in 1979.

Ethnically, the Kiribati people are Micronesians. Kiribati has been inhabited by people speaking the same Oceanic language since sometime between 3000 BC and AD 1300. Invaders from Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji later introduced Polynesian and Melanesian cultural aspects, respectively.

Tarawa Atoll and others of the Gilbert group were occupied by Japan during World War II. In November 1943 Tarawa was the site of one of the bloodiest battles in US Marine Corps history. Some of the islands of Kiribati, especially in the remote Line Islands, were formerly used by the United States and United Kingdom for nuclear weapons testing including hydrogen bombs in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The Gilbert and Ellice Islands gained self-rule in 1971, and were separated in 1975 and granted internal self-government by Britain. In 1978 the Ellice Islands became the independent nation of Tuvalu. The Gilbert Islands became independent as Kiribati on 12 July 1979.

Christianity is the major religion, having been introduced by missionaries in the 19th century. The population is predominantly Roman Catholic, although a substantial portion of the population is Protestant

The people of Kiribati mostly live in villages with populations between 50 and 3,000 on the outer islands. Most houses are made of materials obtained from coconut and pandanus trees. Frequent droughts hinder reliable large-scale agriculture, so the islanders rely on the sea for livelihood and subsistence. Most are outrigger sailors and fisher-people. Copra plantations serve as a second source of employment. In recent

years, large numbers of citizens have moved to the more urban island capital of Tarawa for educational and employment opportunities.

Kiribati is considered one of the least developed countries in the world. Apart from Copra and fish it has few natural resources. However, the country has several sources of external income, including fishing licence fees, investment income, remittances from seamen working merchant vessels around the world, as well as remittances from agricultural seasonal workers in New Zealand and Australia.

Kiribati has a rich culture expressed in dance and song. The uniqueness of Kiribati dance when compared with other forms of Pacific island dance is its emphasis on the outstretched arms of the dancer and the sudden birdlike movement of the head. The Frigate bird on the Kiribati flag refers to this bird-like style of Kiribati dancing. Most dances are in the standing or sitting position with movement limited and staggered. Traditional songs are often love-themed, but there are also competitive, religious, children's, patriotic, war and wedding songs^[37]

Anote Tong has been president of Kiribati since 2003. In 2008 Tong announced that the country had reached "the point of no return"; he added: "To plan for the day when you no longer have a country is indeed painful but I think we have to do that."

Kiribati has close relations with its Pacific neighbours, Japan, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand, which provide the majority of the country's foreign aid.