

Kiribati



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1979
Population:	101,000 (2012)
GDP p.c. growth:	0.9% p.a. 1990–2012
UN HDI 2012:	world ranking 121
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT plus 12–14hr
Currency:	Australian dollar

Geography

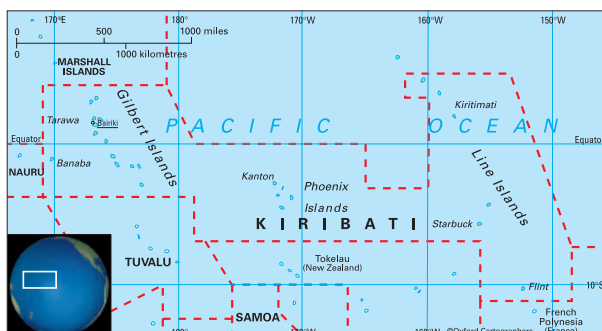
Area:	811 sq km
Coastline:	1,140 km
Capital:	Tarawa

Kiribati (pronounced 'Kirabas') spreads across the central Pacific, intersected by the equator and formerly the International Date Line, with most other Commonwealth Pacific island countries lying to its south. Its 33 islands are scattered across 5.2 million sq km of ocean. There are three groups of islands: 17 Gilbert Islands (including Banaba), eight Line Islands and eight Phoenix Islands. The north/south extent is 2,050 km. Kiritimati (formerly Christmas Island) is the world's biggest coral atoll (388 sq km). Kiritimati in the east is about 3,780 km from Banaba (formerly Ocean Island) in the west.

Time: GMT plus 12hr except for Kanton Island and Enderbury Islands (GMT plus 13hr – on the same day) and Kiritimati (GMT plus 14hr).

Area: Total land area 811 sq km.

Topography: Kiribati is composed of coral atolls on a submerged volcanic chain, nowhere rising higher than two metres above sea level, except for Banaba, a coral outcrop, which rises to 80 metres. Most islands have coastal lagoons. Some lagoons are large (up to 80 km long), and bounded to the east by narrow strips of land. There are no hills or streams. The UN's 1989 report on the 'greenhouse effect' listed Kiribati as an endangered country in the event of a rise in sea level during the 21st century.



In February 2005, massive seas breached sea walls, devastating some villages, destroying farmland and contaminating freshwater wells.

Climate: Varies from maritime equatorial (central islands) to tropical in the north and south. There is little temperature variation: from an average 29°C in the southern Gilberts to 27°C in the Line Islands, dropping by less than 1°C in the coolest months. Humidity is constant at 70–90 per cent. North-west trade winds blow between March and October. From November to April, there are occasional heavy rains, and strong to gale force winds, though Kiribati is outside the cyclone belt. Rainfall patterns vary considerably from year to year; drought is a constant danger.

In 1997, Kiritimati was devastated by El Niño, which, according to scientists studying the island, brought heavy rainfall, a half-metre rise in sea level and extensive flooding. Some 40 per cent of the coral was killed and the 14 million bird population, reputed to be the world's richest, deserted the island.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are limited natural freshwater resources, and heavy pollution of the south Tarawa lagoon, due to population growth around the lagoon and traditional practices such as lagoon latrines and open-pit dumping.

Vegetation: Poor soil (composed of coral sand and rock fragments) limits vegetation-types and agricultural potential. Coconuts cover most islands, except Banaba and some islands in the Phoenix and Line groups. Forest covers 15 per cent of the land area and there was no significant loss of forest cover during 1990–2011.

Wildlife: Many varieties of sea birds visit the islands, including terns, shearwaters and skuas.

Main towns: The main centre and capital is Tarawa, comprising Bairiki (Tarawa South, pop. 47,900 in 2010), Bonriki (Tarawa South, 4,000) and Buariki (Tarawa North, 3,300). Government offices are in Tarawa South at Betio, Bairiki and Bikenibeu. Other populated areas include Taburao (on the island of Abaiang, 4,300), Temaraia (on Nonouti, 3,000), Butaritari island (2,700) and Utiroa (on Tabiteuea, 2,500).

Did you know?

Former President Sir Ieremia Tabai was in 2010 appointed to the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group, which presented its recommendations for reform in the Commonwealth to Commonwealth leaders at CHOGM in Australia in October 2011.

The country comprises 33 islands scattered across 5.2 million sq km of the central Pacific Ocean, and has some 1,140 km of coastline.

Transport: There are some 670 km of all-weather roads in urban Tarawa and Kiritimati. Causeways and bridges link north and south Tarawa, plus several other islands. Bairiki and Bikenibeu in south Tarawa are connected by causeways. Betio, the port area 3 km west of Bairiki, is connected to Bairiki by a causeway. There are about 3,000 vehicles, nearly 75 per cent of them motor cycles.

The principal port is at Betio Islet, Tarawa. International airports are at Bonriki on Tarawa and at Kiritimati, and all inhabited islands have airports. Air Kiribati, the national airline, operates scheduled services to nearly all the country's outer islands, linking them with Tarawa.

Society

KEY FACTS 2012

Population per sq km:	124
Life expectancy:	69 years

Population: 101,000 (2012); the Phoenix Islands and central and southern Line Islands are mostly uninhabited; 44 per cent of people live in urban areas; growth 1.6 per cent p.a. 1990–2012; birth rate 23 per 1,000 people (41 in 1970); life expectancy 69 years (49 in 1970).

The government's resettlement programme, which began in 1989, aimed to transfer almost 5,000 people from the densely populated western atolls to the Line and Phoenix Islands. Five of the Phoenix Islands were designated for residential development in 1995, especially for people from the overcrowded island of South Tarawa.

The people are mostly of Micronesian origin (98.8 per cent in 2000 census). There are also Polynesian and European-descended minorities.

Language: I-Kiribati is the national language, English the official language though not generally used outside the capital.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Roman Catholics 55 per cent, Protestants 36 per cent, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists; 2005 census). There is a small Baha'i minority.

Health: Public spending on health was eight per cent of GDP in 2011. Infant mortality was 46 per 1,000 live births in 2012. Tuberculosis is a serious public health problem; there are regular outbreaks of dengue fever and occasional cases of leprosy and typhoid. Some 66 per cent of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 39 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2011).

Education: There are nine years of compulsory education starting at the age of six. Primary school comprises six years and secondary six, with two cycles each of three years. The school year starts in January.

Three organisations run by the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development offer vocational training: the Institute of Technology (established in 1970) in technical and administrative skills; the Fisheries Training Centre (1989) in maritime, fishing and language skills, for those who seek employment on Japanese fishing vessels; and the Marine Training Centre in merchant maritime skills. A training college for primary teachers and an extra-mural centre of the University of the South Pacific are located at Tarawa. Kiribati is a partner in the regional University of the South Pacific, which has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, and a campus in Tarawa, Kiribati, with some 3,000 students, enrolled for a wide range of courses using the university's distance-learning facilities.

Media: *Te Uekera* is a weekly newspaper mainly in I-Kiribati, but with main news items also in English. *Kiribati Newstar* is an independent weekly. The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches publish newsletters. Radio Kiribati provides a public service. There is no national television service.

Communications: Country code 686; internet domain '.ki'. Radio telephone is used to call the outer islands. Internet connection is available on some of the islands. The main post office is in Bairiki, with branches in Betio, Bikenibeu and the outer islands, including Kiritimati.

There are 89 main telephone lines, 159 mobile phone subscriptions and 107 internet users per 1,000 people (2012).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Women's Day (8 March), Health Day (18 April), Independence (usually several days around 12 July), Youth Day (7 August), Human Rights Day (11 December), Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The Independence celebrations continue for three days.

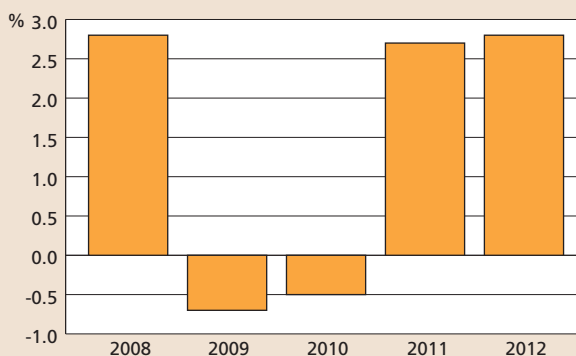
Religious festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday and Easter Monday.

Economy

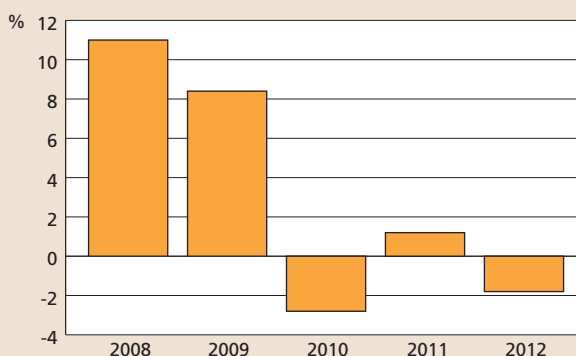
KEY FACTS 2012

GNI:	US\$254m
GNI p.c.:	US\$2,520
GDP growth:	1.4% p.a. 2008–12
Inflation:	3.1% p.a. 2008–12

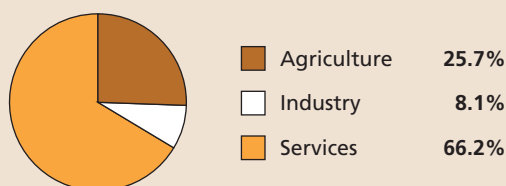
Real Growth in GDP



Inflation



GDP by Sector (2012)



Phosphate mining on Banaba by the British Phosphate Commission accounted for 80 per cent of exports and 50 per cent of government revenue until the mines were exhausted in 1979, the year of independence. The loss of the phosphate industry caused a huge drop in GDP; no other product or sector has yet been able to

make up the lost revenue. The best prospects for diversification of the economy lie in marine resources. The country's exclusive economic zone of some 3.55 million sq km is among the largest in the world in relation to its land area. After fishing licences, the next largest source of income is remittances from seamen employed on foreign – mainly German – ships.

A vital source of revenue is the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, built up from past phosphate taxation surpluses. It was worth A\$573 million by July 2010.

There were some years when the economy was buoyant in the 1990s, growing five per cent in 1998 and 9.5 per cent in 1999, with modest levels of inflation, but in the 2000s growth was generally slower, when sustainable development became a key objective. This low-lying country faces numerous development

History



The present inhabitants are descended mainly from Samoans who migrated to Kiribati at some time between the 11th and 14th centuries. Traces of later contact with other Pacific Islanders and a Chinese influence remain in the population and culture. Social structure was diverse, chiefs ruling in the northern islands and councils of elders having authority in the south.

The islands were sighted by 16th-century Spanish seamen, but settlement was not attempted, and Europeans did not arrive in any numbers until after 1765. Between the late 18th century and 1870 the waters of Kiribati were used by European sperm-whaling ships; deserters from the ships sometimes settled on the islands. Trade in coconut oil began about 1860, followed by trade in copra. By the second half of the 19th century about 9,000 Kiribati people were working overseas, thanks to energetic labour recruitment.

Christian missionaries first arrived in the northern Gilberts in 1857. In 1870 Samoan clergy, sponsored by the London Missionary Society, arrived at Arorae, Tamara, Onotoa and Beru. In 1888 Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in the Gilberts, which are today predominantly Roman Catholic.

In 1892 a British protectorate was proclaimed at Abemama by Captain Davis of HMS *Royalist* on behalf of Queen Victoria. The headquarters were established at Tarawa, district magistrates were assigned to the islands and a code of law was drawn up. Phosphate-rich Banaba (Ocean Island) was annexed by Britain in 1900. In 1915, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were annexed by a British order in council which came into effect on 12 January 1916.

The Japanese army occupied the Gilbert Islands (1942–43) until driven out by the US army in some of the Pacific War's fiercest fighting. In 1957 three hydrogen bombs were detonated in the vicinity of Kiritimati, as part of the UK's atmospheric testing programme.

In 1975 the Ellice Islands seceded to form the separate territory of Tuvalu. Internal self-government was given to the Gilbert Islands, renamed Kiribati, on 1 January 1977. At a conference in 1978 it was agreed that Kiribati, with other islands appended to the territory by the colonial authorities, should become fully independent as a republic. On Independence Day, 12 July 1979, Kiribati became the 41st member of the Commonwealth.

Ieremia Tabai became the first President of Kiribati in July 1979. He was re-elected in April 1982, but the following December his government was defeated in a vote of no confidence. Re-elected President in February 1983, he went on to win the election of May 1987. Prevented by the constitution from standing for a further term, he was succeeded after the 1991 general election by his former Vice-President, Teatao Teannaki.

There were no political parties before September 1985, and candidates continued to stand for election as independent individuals, though loosely structured parties – for example, Teatao Teannaki's National Progressive Party, Teburoro Tito's Maneaban Te Mauri, and Boutokaan Te Koaua – emerged thereafter.

In May 1994, President Teannaki's government lost a vote of no confidence. A general election held in July 1994 brought 18 new members into parliament. The majority of the 39 seats were won by an opposition grouping and in the presidential election that followed in September 1994 Teburoro Tito was elected from a list of four nominations.

In March 1998, among the main recommendations of the first review of the constitution since independence in 1979 was that foreign husbands of I-Kiribati women should have the same automatic rights to Kiribati citizenship as foreign wives of I-Kiribati men.

On 23 and 30 September 1998, elections were held for the House of Assembly. In the first round of voting the government won six seats, and the opposition eight seats. In the second round, the government won a further 14 seats (making 20 in all) and the opposition nine seats (17 in all); the remaining two seats were won by independents. In November 1998, President Tito was re-elected. He defeated opposition members Amberoti Nikora and Harry Tong.

Banaba

Phosphate mining has made Banaba almost uninhabitable. The inhabitants were moved to the Fijian island of Rabi in the mid-1940s; in 1970 they became citizens of Fiji, but kept the ownership of land on Banaba. In 1981, after ten years of discussion and litigation over phosphate royalties and environmental damage caused by open-cast mining, they accepted A\$14.58 million compensation from the British Government. The Banabans have special rights of residence and representation in Kiribati.

challenges, not least that 32 of 33 islands rise no higher than two metres above sea level. The economy was in recession in 2009–10, when many countries were caught in the world economic downturn; but recovered in 2010 and showed steady growth of two to three per cent p.a. in 2011–14.

Constitution

Status:	Republic with executive President
Legislature:	Maneaba ni Maungatabu
Independence:	12 July 1979

Under the independence constitution of 1979, Kiribati became a sovereign and democratic republic with a unicameral legislature, the Maneaba ni Maungatabu. The President (*Beretitenti*, pronounced 'Beresistence') is both head of state and head of government, and is elected nationally, from nominations (from among its own members) made by the Maneaba ni Maungatabu. The cabinet consists of the President, the Vice-President (*Kauoman-ni-Maungatabu*), the Attorney-General (who is the government's principal legal adviser) and up to eight other ministers. These ministers are appointed by the President from the members of the Maneaba ni Maungatabu.

The legislature has 44 members elected for four years by universal adult suffrage, plus one *ex officio* member (the Attorney-General) and one nominated member from the Banaban community in Rabi, Fiji, who have a right to enter and live on Banaba, and have their own Banaba Island Council.

Individual rights and freedoms are guaranteed under the constitution. In the event of dissolution of the legislature on a vote of no confidence, the constitution provides for an interim council of state, composed of the Chief Justice, the Speaker and the chairman of the Public Service Commission.

Politics

Last elections:	21 and 28 October 2011 (legislative), 13 January 2012 (presidential)
Next elections:	2015/2016 (legislative and presidential)
Head of state:	President Anote Tong
Head of government:	the President
Ruling party:	Boutokaan Te Koaua
Women MPs:	9%

In the 2002 parliamentary elections, held on 29 November and 6 December, 17 Boutokaan Te Koaua (BTK) candidates were successful while President Teburoro Tito's Maneaban Te Mauri (MTM) won only seven seats, and 16 seats were taken by independents. Teburoro Tito then narrowly won the presidential poll in February 2003, defeating his principal rival, Taberannang Timeon, by some 550 votes.

Less than a month into his third (and necessarily final) term, President Tito lost a no-confidence vote and fresh elections were called. In the parliamentary elections in May 2003, MTM took 24 of the 40 elected seats and the BTK 16, the independents having joined parties. However, in the close presidential poll, in July 2003, Anote Tong of the BTK defeated the MTM's candidate, his younger brother Harry Tong, and formed a new government.

Parliamentary elections were held on 22 and 30 August 2007. Independent candidates won in 19 of the 44 seats available in the two-round contest, the legislature having been expanded from 40 to 44 elective seats in June 2007. BTK was the leading political party taking 18 seats, and MTM seven.

In the October 2007 presidential elections, Anote Tong – with 15,500 votes and 64 per cent of votes – was well ahead of his principal opponent, Nabuti Mwemwenikarawa.

Following the election of a new parliament in October/November 2011 – when President Tong's BTK won 15 seats, the Karikirakean Tei-Kiribati (KTK) ten, and the Maurin Kiribati Party (MKP) three; and 30 of the 44 members were re-elected – the new legislature nominated three candidates to contest the presidential elections.

The presidential elections, held in January 2012, were won by the incumbent, Anote Tong of the BTK (42 per cent), defeating Tetaua Taitai of the KTK (35 per cent) and opposition leader Rimeta Beniamina of the MKP (23 per cent).

International relations

Kiribati is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum and United Nations.

Traveller information

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid at least until the date of departure. Visas are required by most Commonwealth nationals. Prohibited imports include animal products, plants and plant products.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left. Car hire is available on Tarawa and Christmas Island only, and an international driving permit is required.

Scheduled services fly to the other islands from Tarawa. There are several passenger ferries between the smaller islands. Minibuses operate on main islands, taxis only on Tarawa.

Travel health: Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B and typhoid.

There were 5,000 tourist arrivals in 2012.

Further information

Maneaba ni Maungatabu: www.parliament.gov.ki

Kiribati National Statistics Office:
www.spc.int/prism/country/ki/Stats

Kiribati National Tourism Office: www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

Commonwealth of Nations:
www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Kiribati

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