

TUVALU 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tuvalu is a constitutional parliamentary democracy. Observers judged that parliamentary elections held September 9 were free and fair, with seven new members elected to the 16-member parliament. There are no formal political parties. Following the elections, parliament selected Kausea Natano as prime minister.

The national police service, under the Office of the Prime Minister, maintains internal security. The country has no military force. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

Significant human rights abuses included laws criminalizing sexual activities between men, although the law was not enforced.

The government took steps to investigate human rights abuses, and impunity was not a problem.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

The law prohibits traditional assemblies of local hereditary elders from imposing physical punishment.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were no significant reports regarding prison or detention center conditions that raised human rights concerns.

Physical Conditions: There were no major concerns in prisons and detention centers regarding physical conditions or inmate abuse.

Administration: The ombudsperson can act on behalf of prisoners and detainees and respond to prisoner complaints. The government did not investigate or monitor prison conditions and did not receive any complaints or allegations of inhuman conditions.

Independent Monitoring: The government permits visits by independent human rights observers, but there were no reported visits during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, and the government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law permits arrests without a warrant if a police officer witnesses the commission of an unlawful act or has “reasonable suspicion” an offense is about to be committed. Police estimated the majority of arrests were without warrant. Police may hold a person arrested without a warrant for a maximum of 24 hours without a hearing before a magistrate. When a court issues an arrest warrant, the warrant states the maximum permissible detention time before the court must hold a hearing, which is normally one to two weeks. Authorities did not hold suspects incommunicado or under house arrest.

Authorities generally informed arrested persons promptly of the charges against them, although bureaucratic delays sometimes occurred because persons charged with serious offenses must await trial at a semiannual session of the High Court. There was a functioning system of bail. The people’s lawyer was available free of charge to arrested persons and for other legal advice. Persons living on the outer islands did not have rapid access to legal services because the people’s lawyer,

based on the main island of Funafuti, traveled infrequently to the outer islands. The country had only one attorney in private practice.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. The law provides for a presumption of innocence. Judges conduct trials and render verdicts. Defendants have the right to be promptly informed in detail of the charges against them; to free interpretation as necessary from the moment charged through all appeals; to consult with an attorney in a timely manner; to access to the people's lawyer; and to adequate time and resources to prepare a defense. They also have the right to be present at their trial, confront witnesses, present witnesses and evidence, and appeal any convictions. Defendants may not be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have a right to appeal a judge's decision. The law extends these rights to all defendants.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals and organizations may seek civil remedies for human rights violations through domestic courts.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, and the government generally respected this right. An effective judiciary and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for the press.

Press and Media, Including Online Media: Although there were no government restrictions, the government's Media Department controlled the country's sole radio station. There were no local private, independent media to express a variety of views.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Although the law provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, the government allowed island chiefs to place restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provides for freedom of peaceful assembly; however, the government allows island chiefs to place restrictions on assembly for public worship (see the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>).

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected it.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, but the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. There were no reported applications for asylum or refugee status during the year.

g. Stateless Persons

Not applicable.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The parliamentary election held on September 9 was generally considered free and fair, with seven new members elected to the 16-member parliament. Following the election, parliament selected Kausea Natano as prime minister.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were no formal political parties. Parliament tended to divide itself between an ad hoc faction with at least the minimum votes required to form a government and an informal opposition faction.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No law limits participation of women in the political process, and they did participate. Nonetheless, participation by women in government and politics was limited. The 16-member parliament included one woman, who was also a cabinet minister. Women held a subordinate societal position, largely due to traditional perceptions of women's role in society. There were no members of minorities in parliament or the cabinet.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for some forms of corruption by officials such as theft, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were no reports of government corruption during the year.

The Office of the Attorney General, police force, ombudsperson, auditor general, Public Service Commission, and the Central Procurement Unit were responsible for the government's anticorruption efforts.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires income and asset disclosure by "leaders," a term covering public servants and politicians. Enforcement of the code was weak.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

No nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focused entirely on human rights, although no known barriers exist to the establishment of human rights groups. Some NGOs that included human rights in their agenda, such as the Tuvalu National Council of Women, operated under the auspices of the Tuvalu Association of NGOs, composed primarily of faith-based organizations. Organizations involved in human rights issues generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Nonetheless, the lack of local print and electronic media limited opportunities to publicize such information locally. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to local organizations' views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Ombudsman includes a national human rights institution, to promote and protect human rights in the country.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is punishable by a minimum sentence of five years' imprisonment, but spousal rape is not included in the legal definition of this offense. The law recognizes domestic violence as a criminal offense. Under the law domestic violence offenses are punishable by a maximum five years' imprisonment or a maximum fine of Australian dollars (AUD) 1,000 (\$680), or both. Under the assault provisions of the penal code, the maximum penalty for common assault is six months' imprisonment, and for assault with actual bodily harm, five years.

Police have a Domestic Violence Unit, employ a "no-drop" evidence-based prosecution policy in cases of violence against women, and operate a 24-hour emergency telephone line for victims of domestic violence. The law recognizes the existence of domestic violence and gives police explicit powers to intervene in violent circumstances, including the power to enter private property and order a person who has committed an act of domestic violence to vacate property, whether or not that individual has rights to that property, if another person at risk of further violence occupies it. The Women's Crisis Center provided counseling services, but there were no shelters for abused women. Cases of rape and domestic violence often went unreported due to lack of awareness of women's rights and traditional and cultural pressures on victims, although the Attorney General's Office and police conducted nationwide awareness campaigns.

Sexual Harassment: The law does not specifically prohibit sexual harassment but prohibits indecent behavior, including lewd touching. The *Tuvalu Study on People with Disability* report, released by the government in 2018, found that women with disabilities were subject to abuse and harassment, including sexual abuse.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: Aspects of the law contribute to an unequal status for women, for example in land inheritance and child custody rights. No law prevents employment discrimination based on gender or requires equal pay for equal work, and such discrimination occurred. Nonetheless, women increasingly held positions in the health and education sectors and headed a number of NGOs.

Children

Birth Registration: A child derives citizenship at birth, whether born in the country or abroad, if either parent is a citizen. The law requires registration of births within 10 days, a practice generally observed.

Education: Education is compulsory until age 15. No law specifically mandates free basic education, but government policy generally provides free basic education for all.

Child Abuse: The government does not collect or publish data on child abuse, and there were no reports of child abuse during the year. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicated child abuse occurred. The law prohibits corporal punishment.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys is 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The age of consent for sexual relations is 15. Sexual relations with a girl younger than 13 carries a maximum punishment of life imprisonment. Sexual relations with a girl older than 12 but younger than 15 carries a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment; however, no law prohibits the use, procurement, or offering of boys from age 15 through 17 for sex. The victim's consent is irrelevant under both these provisions; however, in the latter case, reasonable belief the victim was 15 or older is a permissible defense. No provision of law pertains specifically to child pornography, although the penal code prohibits obscene publications in general. Although child trafficking is prohibited, the law prescribes a harsher punishment for the trafficking of adults than of children.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There was no known Jewish community, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

There were no confirmed reports during the year that Tuvalu was a source, destination, or transit country for victims of human trafficking.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities. Government services to address the specific needs of persons with disabilities were very limited. There were no mandated building accessibility provisions for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities had limited access to information and communications, including participation in civic life.

A 2018 government report found that abuse and discrimination against persons with disabilities was prevalent, and women with disabilities were particularly vulnerable to abuse. There were no reports of investigations or punishment by the government for violence and abuses against persons with disabilities, but societal norms may limit the reporting of such incidents particularly against women and girls with disabilities.

Children with disabilities reportedly had lower school attendance rates at all levels than other children. Some students with disabilities attended public primary schools both in Funafuti and in the outer islands. Parents decide which school a child with disabilities attends after consultation with an adviser from the Fusi Alofa Association, a disabilities-focused NGO.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits sexual conduct between men, with penalties of seven to 15 years' imprisonment, but there were no reports the government enforced these provisions of the law. The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. There are no hate crime laws, nor are there criminal justice mechanisms to aid in the prosecution of bias-motivated crimes against members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex community. There were no reports of violence against persons based on sexual orientation or gender identity, but social stigma or intimidation may inhibit reporting of such discrimination or violence.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Persons with HIV/AIDS faced some societal and employment discrimination. The government and NGOs cooperated to inform the public regarding HIV/AIDS and to counter discrimination.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of private-sector workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law does not permit public-sector employees such as civil servants, teachers, and nurses to form and join unions. They may join professional associations that have the right to bargain collectively but not the right to strike. No law prohibits antiunion discrimination or requires reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

In general the government effectively enforced these laws. By law employers who violate laws on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are liable to a maximum fine of AUD 5,000 (\$3,390). These penalties were adequate to deter violations. The law also provides for voluntary conciliation, arbitration, and settlement procedures in cases of labor disputes. In general these procedures were not subject to lengthy delays or appeals.

Although there are provisions for collective bargaining and the right to strike, the few private-sector employers set their own wage scales. Both the private and public sectors generally used nonconfrontational deliberations to resolve labor disputes. There was only one registered trade union, the Tuvalu Overseas Seamen's Union. There were no reports of antiunion discrimination.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, and the government effectively enforced the law. Anyone who exacts, procures, or employs forced or compulsory labor is liable to up to 10 years' imprisonment. There were no reports of forced labor during the year.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the employment of children except in light work and of children younger than age 18 in hazardous work. The government has not specified the types of hazardous work prohibited for children; previous provisions only applied

to a male person younger than age 18 in the industrial, mining, and fishing sectors. The worst forms of child labor are prohibited, including the sale or trafficking of children; engagement in activities connected to armed conflict; prostitution; and use, procuring, or offering of a child for the production of pornography or pornographic performances or trafficking of illegal drugs.

The government did not have sufficient resources to monitor or enforce child labor laws and depended instead on communities to report offenses.

Anyone convicted of violating the law on the employment of children is liable to up to 10 years' imprisonment. Children rarely engaged in formal employment but did work in subsistence fishing. The government does not collect or publish data on child labor.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations do not prohibit discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national origin, age, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV or other communicable disease status, or social status, and these persons sometimes experienced discriminatory practices. There were no reports during the year of discrimination in employment and wages. In the wage economy, men held most higher-paying positions. Nonetheless, women increasingly held senior positions in government, particularly in the health and education sectors. Few women could access credit to start businesses. Local agents of foreign companies that hired local seafarers to work abroad also barred persons with HIV/AIDS from employment.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law provides for the government to set a minimum wage, but the Department of Labor had not done so.

The law sets the workday at eight hours, and the Department of Labor may specify the days and hours of work for workers in various industries. Although the law provides for premium pay and overtime work, there are no established premium overtime rates or maximum hours of work. The law provides for rudimentary health and safety standards and requires employers to provide adequate potable

water, basic sanitary facilities, and medical care. Workers can remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in such situations.

Enforcement of standards in all sectors, including the informal economy, was inconsistent. By law penalties for violations of laws related to acceptable conditions of work are liable to a maximum fine of AUD 5,000 (\$3,390). These penalties were adequate to deter violations. The Department of Labor is responsible for enforcing wage, hour, health, and safety regulations, but it did not have sufficient resources or inspectors to formally and regularly conduct workplace inspections; inspectors did follow-up when the Labor Department received complaints.

Approximately 75 percent of the working-age population lacked permanent, formal employment and worked in the informal and subsistence economy. There was no system for reporting and publishing workplace injuries or deaths.