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# The Politics of Kiribati

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## Introduction

The Republic of Kiribati stands as a unique and remarkable example of island-state governance in the Pacific. Composed of 33 atolls and one raised coral island dispersed across an expansive stretch of the central Pacific Ocean, Kiribati's geography alone sets it apart from many other nations of the world. Yet, it is not only the land and the sea that define the country, but also the complex tapestry of its political system, which reflects both a vibrant local tradition and pragmatic adaptations of parliamentary democracy.

This book, "The Politics of Kiribati: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Kiribati," is designed to provide readers with an accessible yet comprehensive exploration of Kiribati's distinctive approach to politics and governance. From the constitutional underpinnings established at the time of independence in 1979 to the ways in which traditional values and structures influence contemporary decision-making, Kiribati's story is one of adaptation, resilience, and dedication to the principles of democracy. The chapters that follow unpack the institutions, actors, issues, and challenges that shape the daily exercise of power within the country.

Central to understanding politics in Kiribati is an appreciation for its hybrid political framework. The blending of elements from British parliamentary traditions and American presidential practices is further complicated—and enriched—by the enduring role of island councils, traditional leaders, and customary law. Far from being a simple transplant of foreign models, the political system of Kiribati is a living arrangement that evolves continually to meet the aspirations and needs of its people, while staying rooted in indigenous values.

Over recent decades, Kiribati has faced a range of political challenges. These include threatened judicial independence, questions about government accountability, and debates over the influence of major powers such as China and Taiwan. Issues of gender equality, electoral fairness, corruption, and the ongoing bid for autonomy by the Banaban community have made their mark on the nation's political landscape. Most pressing of all, however, is the existential threat posed by rising sea levels and climate change, which require the nation's leaders to frame policy within the context of immense long-term uncertainty.

Despite these challenges, Kiribati has maintained a robust record of peaceful transfers of power, open elections, and vibrant political debate. The resilience and adaptability of its people are mirrored in the flexibility and creativity of their political institutions. With a keen eye on the present and a hopeful gaze toward the future, the study of Kiribati's politics provides not just insight into island governance, but lessons relevant

to democracy in small states everywhere.

This guide offers a thorough, chapter-by-chapter journey through the foundations, operation, and contemporary debates of Kiribati's political world. It is intended for anyone—from students and scholars to observers and citizens—who seeks to better understand the inner workings and wider context of this Pacific nation's political life. Through this book, readers are invited to engage with the questions, experiences, and aspirations that continue to define Kiribati's path as a sovereign democratic republic.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Islands and People of Kiribati

To truly grasp the political landscape of Kiribati, one must first understand the physical environment and the people who call these scattered islands home. Kiribati is not a single landmass but a nation woven from thirty-two coral atolls and one raised coral island, Banaba, spread across a truly immense area of the central Pacific Ocean. Imagine an area of ocean roughly the size of India, or even larger than Western Australia and South Australia combined, and within it, tiny specks of land totaling only about 811 square kilometers. This geographic reality profoundly shapes daily life and, consequently, the politics of the nation.

The islands themselves are generally very low-lying, with most land sitting no more than a few meters above sea level. Banaba, the raised coral island, is the outlier, reaching a dizzying 81 meters at its highest point – the nation's highest elevation. The atolls are typically ring-shaped coral reefs surrounding a lagoon, although some islands lack a central lagoon. These fragile landforms are vulnerable to the power of the ocean, a fact that looms large in the minds of the I-Kiribati people and their government.

The nation is broadly divided into three island groups: the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands, and the Line Islands. The Gilbert Islands are where the majority of the population resides, and this is also where the capital, South Tarawa, is located. The Phoenix Islands are largely uninhabited and are home to one of the world's largest marine protected areas, a vast expanse of ocean dedicated to conservation. The Line Islands, stretching far to the east, include Kiritimati, also known as Christmas Island, which boasts the largest land area of any coral atoll globally.

The sheer distances between these island groups are staggering. Traveling from the westernmost islands to the easternmost can involve traversing thousands of kilometers of ocean. This geographical dispersion presents significant challenges for communication, transportation, and administration, all of which have political implications. Maintaining a sense of national unity and providing government services across such a vast and disconnected territory is no small feat.

The people of Kiribati are primarily of Micronesian descent, and the vast majority speak Gilbertese, also known as I-Kiribati. English is also an official language and is widely used, particularly in government and business, and on Tarawa. The term "I-Kiribati" refers to the people of Kiribati, and it is important to use the capitalized 'I' out of respect.

As of the 2020 census, the population of Kiribati exceeded 119,000. However, this

population is not evenly distributed. More than half of the nation's people live on Tarawa, particularly South Tarawa. This concentration of people on a small land area leads to significant population density issues in South Tarawa, comparable to that of major cities like Tokyo or Hong Kong in some areas. This urban center is the administrative and economic heart of the country, attracting people from the outer islands seeking opportunities and services.

Life on the outer islands, in contrast to the bustling environment of South Tarawa, often remains more traditional and centered around subsistence activities. Fishing is a vital source of food and livelihood, and islanders also cultivate crops like breadfruit, papaya, and bananas where the environment allows. Traditional community meeting houses, known as *maneaba*, are central to village life, serving as places for gatherings, decision-making, and cultural events.

Kiribati society remains deeply rooted in tradition, with strong ties to family and ancestral land. Communal living and a culture of sharing are important aspects of life. Respect for elders and hospitality are highly valued. While Western influence is present, particularly in more urbanized areas, traditional customs and practices continue to play a significant role in daily life and cultural identity. Traditional dances, which often tell stories and imitate the movements of frigate birds, are a significant art form.

Christianity is a dominant religion in Kiribati, with a majority of the population identifying as Roman Catholic, and a substantial Kiribati Protestant (Congregational) population. The influence of Christianity is evident in community life, often intertwining with traditional beliefs and practices. Western-style churches are prominent features in villages.

Despite the beauty of the islands and the warmth of the people, daily life can be challenging. The low elevation of the islands makes them incredibly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion. These environmental challenges threaten land, agriculture, and access to fresh water, impacting the livelihoods and well-being of the I-Kiribati people. Access to safe drinking water is a particular concern.

Poor waste management is another significant environmental issue, particularly in densely populated areas like South Tarawa, posing risks to health and the environment. The remoteness of the islands also presents logistical hurdles for development and access to resources.

The economy of Kiribati is relatively weak and relies heavily on fisheries, particularly fishing licenses, and copra exports. Remittances from I-Kiribati working abroad and foreign aid are also important contributors to the economy. The depletion of phosphate mines on Banaba in 1980 had a significant economic impact.

The combination of geographical dispersion, environmental vulnerability, and economic realities creates a unique context for politics in Kiribati. Understanding these fundamental aspects of the islands and their people is essential before delving into the specifics of the political system and its functions. The challenges and opportunities presented by this environment shape the priorities and decisions of the government and the aspirations of the I-Kiribati people.

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