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The Politics of Nauru

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Island Nation: Geography and Demographics of Nauru
- **Chapter 2** Historical Foundations: From Micronesian Settlement to Independence
- **Chapter 3** Establishing the Constitution: Origins and Structure
- **Chapter 4** The Executive Branch: Role of the President and Cabinet
- **Chapter 5** The Parliamentary System Explained
- **Chapter 6** Elections and Electoral Systems in Nauru
- **Chapter 7** Political Parties and Independent Candidates
- **Chapter 8** The Legislative Process: Making Laws in Nauru
- **Chapter 9** The Judiciary: Structure, Role, and Challenges
- **Chapter 10** Administrative Divisions and Districts
- **Chapter 11** The Evolution of Local Government
- **Chapter 12** Political Culture: Family Ties and Alliances
- **Chapter 13** Political Instability: No-Confidence Motions and Changes of President
- **Chapter 14** International Relations: Australia and Other Partners
- **Chapter 15** The Economy and Its Political Impact
- **Chapter 16** The Regional Processing Centre and Its Implications
- **Chapter 17** Human Rights and Freedom of the Press
- **Chapter 18** Citizenship, Voting Rights, and the Dowdall System
- **Chapter 19** Women and Politics in Nauru
- **Chapter 20** Youth Engagement and Political Participation
- **Chapter 21** Law Enforcement and Public Service
- **Chapter 22** Key Political Figures and Leadership Styles
- **Chapter 23** Controversies and Political Crises
- **Chapter 24** Future Challenges: Environmental, Economic, and Political
- **Chapter 25** The Road Ahead: Upcoming Elections and Political Reform

Introduction

Nauru, the smallest island nation in the Pacific Ocean, offers a fascinating case study in modern governance, distinct from most other countries in the region and the world at large. Despite its small size—just 21 square kilometers—and relatively low population, its political system is notable for its unique blend of Westminster-influenced parliamentary procedures, local customs, and persistent innovation in the face of internal and external pressures. This book, "The Politics of Nauru: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Nauru," provides a comprehensive exploration of the country's governmental structures, constitutional foundations, political culture, and recent developments that have shaped the island's governance.

Since gaining independence in 1968, Nauru has charted a complex path, marked by frequent leadership changes and adaptations to the challenges posed by economic dependence, environmental vulnerability, and shifting international relationships. Its Constitution enshrines the fundamental rights of citizens and sets out the framework for the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. However, the reality of Nauruan politics often reflects a delicate balance between constitutional ideals and pragmatic responses to the demands of governance in a small, close-knit society.

One of the most distinctive features of Nauru's political system is the near-total absence of formal political parties. Instead, candidates typically stand as independents, with alliances and divisions within Parliament often formed along the lines of family networks, personal loyalties, and strategic in-the-moment pragmatism. This has contributed to dynamic, sometimes unstable, political conditions, with frequent changes in government leadership and ongoing debates about potential systemic reforms, such as the direct election of the president.

Internationally, Nauru occupies a unique position. Its economic fortunes are closely tied to activities such as phosphate mining and, more recently, the operation of the Australian-funded regional processing center for asylum seekers. These relationships have not only shaped domestic policy and the nation's economy but have also influenced Nauru's standing in global and regional forums. Issues such as human rights, freedom of the press, and the management of asylum seekers have attracted international attention and scrutiny, further intertwining Nauru's political narrative with global discourses.

This guide invites readers to delve into the full breadth of Nauruan politics: from constitutional basics and the day-to-day functioning of the government to deep-seated cultural influences, pressing social issues, and critical external relationships. Through

careful analysis of government structure, election processes, and the often fluid alliances that dominate the nation's Parliament, this book aims to offer a thorough understanding of how Nauru is governed and the challenges it faces in the years ahead.

As Nauru approaches another parliamentary election, and as debates about reform, development, and autonomy continue, a clear understanding of its political system is both timely and necessary. Whether you are a student of politics, a regional specialist, or simply curious about how governance operates in one of the world's smallest countries, this book provides a detailed roadmap to the people, processes, and forces that define the politics of Nauru.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Island Nation: Geography and Demographics of Nauru

Nauru, a mere speck in the vast Pacific Ocean, presents a study in contrasts. It is one of the world's smallest independent nations, yet its history and political evolution have been anything but insignificant. An oval-shaped island located just 53 kilometers (about 33 miles) south of the equator, Nauru's diminutive size of 21 square kilometers (8.1 square miles) makes it the third-smallest country globally, surpassed only by Vatican City and Monaco. Its nearest neighbor of any note is Banaba Island in Kiribati, some 300 kilometers (roughly 186 miles) to the east.

The island's topography is largely defined by a central plateau surrounded by a narrow coastal belt. This plateau, historically rich in phosphate deposits, rises to a highest point of about 71 meters (233 feet) above sea level at Command Ridge. The coastal strip, fertile in comparison to the mined-out interior, is where most of the population resides and where coconut palms and pandanus trees flourish. A fringing coral reef encircles the island, visible at low tide and punctuated by coral pinnacles. This reef, while a natural barrier, has also prevented the development of a deepwater seaport.

Freshwater is a precious commodity on Nauru. The island lacks rivers and streams. Water is primarily collected through roof catchment systems, supplemented by a desalination plant and water brought in as ballast on ships. There is also a brackish lagoon, the Buada Lagoon, and an underground lake in Moqua Cave, but these resources are limited and can be subject to pollution.

Nauru's climate is tropical, marked by consistent heat and high humidity throughout the year, a direct result of its equatorial location. The temperature generally ranges between 25°C and 35°C (77°F and 95°F). A monsoon season typically brings rain between November and February, but rainfall can be highly variable, influenced by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation, sometimes leading to significant droughts. While the island is not typically affected by tropical cyclones, it can experience strong winds and sea swells.

The island's natural resources, historically dominated by vast phosphate deposits formed from generations of seabird guano, were the engine of its economy for many years. These deposits were easily accessible through strip mining. However, intensive mining over a century has left a dramatic mark on the landscape, with approximately 80% of the island's land area rendered a barren terrain of exposed limestone pinnacles, largely unsuitable for habitation or agriculture. This extensive environmental degradation is a significant challenge for the nation. Beyond

phosphate, Nauru has marine resources within its Exclusive Economic Zone, providing potential for fisheries, particularly tuna.

The population of Nauru is relatively small, estimated to be around 12,000 people in recent years. The most recent census in October 2021 recorded 11,680 residents. Despite its small absolute number of inhabitants, Nauru is one of the most densely populated countries in Oceania. The population is predominantly Nauruan, though there are also smaller communities of other Pacific Islanders, Australians, and Chinese.

The demographic history of Nauru has seen fluctuations, including a notable repatriation of immigrant workers in 2006 following layoffs in the phosphate industry. The official languages are Nauruan and English, with Nauruan being the language spoken at home by the majority of ethnic Nauruans and English widely used in government and commerce. Christianity is the dominant religion, with a significant portion of the population adhering to the Nauru Congregational Church and a substantial Roman Catholic community.

Nauru faces unique demographic challenges, including a high prevalence of health issues such as type 2 diabetes, kidney disease, and heart disease, often linked to dietary factors. Life expectancy, while showing some recent improvement, has historically been lower compared to many other nations. The median age of the population is relatively young.

The settlement pattern on the island is primarily along the coastal belt, with a small inland village located near Buada Lagoon. The district of Denigomodu is the most populous, partly due to a housing settlement built for phosphate workers.

In terms of administrative divisions, Nauru is divided into 14 districts. These are further grouped into eight electoral constituencies for political representation. However, there is no formalized system of local government below the national level.

The geography and demographics of Nauru are not merely statistics; they are fundamental to understanding the nation's politics. The island's small size and concentrated population create a close-knit society where personal relationships and family ties can play a significant role in political dynamics, as will be explored in later chapters. The environmental impact of phosphate mining has profoundly shaped both the landscape and the economic realities, influencing political decisions and international relationships. The challenges posed by limited freshwater resources, vulnerability to climate change, and public health issues are ongoing concerns that necessitate governmental attention and often rely on external support. This unique physical and human landscape forms the backdrop against which the political system of Nauru operates.

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