Tonga comprises an archipelago of 169 islands located in the South Pacific northeast of New Zealand. Tonga's volcanic islands (once known as the Friendly Islands) are divided into three main groups: Vava'u, Ha'apai, and Tongatapu. The climate is mild and tropical, with temperatures rarely dipping below 60°F or rising above 80°F. The closer a Tongan island is to the equator, the higher its humidity. The easterly islands are flatter and the westerly islands more mountainous. On September 29, 2009, Tonga and the nearby islands of Samoa and American Samoa were struck by a devastating tsunami that followed a huge 8.3-magnitude Pacific Ocean earthquake. The disaster had an inital death toll of almost 10 people in Tonga. Tonga's population of more than 100,000, which mostly consists of Polynesians and a small European minority, is spread out over only about 36 islands. The official language is Tongan, a Polynesian tongue, though English is also spoken. About 30,000 Tongans are Christians of the Free Wesleyan faith, though the country is also home to Roman Catholics and Anglicans. The capital is Nuku'alofa, on the island of Tongatapu.

**Government and Politics**  Fearing German designs on the region, during the early 20th century Tonga became a British Protected State under a treaty that was revised in 1958 and 1967 to give the islands more freedom. Queen Salote Tupou III reigned from 1918 to her death in 1965, when her son acceded to the throne as King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV. In 1970, the kingdom gained independence within the British Commonwealth of Nations. In 1992, an opposition group was formed to press for democratic reforms. The country's biggest scandal erupted in 2001 when it was revealed that an employee of the Bank of America, Jessie Bogdonoff, was allowed not only to manage the Tonga Trust Fund (for which he was paid and was also named court jester—as he requested), but also to invest millions of the fund's dollars in a shady Nevada asset management firm, which quickly disappeared. The Tongan monarchy publicly apologized to its people for the huge loss in October 2001. In 2002, prodemocracy crusader Akilisi Pohiva was arrested after accusing the king of possessing "personal funds" worth more than $350 million in off-shore accounts, charges that were supported by the New Zealand government. Then, in March 2002 parliamentary elections, Pohiva's prodemocracy party won seven of nine popularly elected seats. In March 2005, elected members of the Legislative Assembly joined the Tongan Cabinet for the first time—Cabinet members had previously been chosen by the royal family. After several months of protests demanding that the royal family allow more democracy, Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata resigned as premier on February 13, 2006 and was replaced as acting prime minister by prodemocracy legislator Fred Sevele—the first elected official to lead the government in Tonga's history.

The nation was saddened on September 10, 2006 by the death of the 88-year-old King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV. One day after the king's death, his eldest son, Crown Prince Tupouto'a, chose the name Siaosi George Tupou V, and was sworn in as Tonga's new monarch. The passing of Taufa'ahau Tupou IV and legislative inaction sparked rioting in November amid increased calls for a more democratic government. The new king promised democratic reforms during a speech at a ceremony marking the closing of Tonga's Legislative Assembly for the year, though two years later he was criticized for his elaborate, multimillion-dollar coronation. However, the king gave the prodemocracy movement his full support, and Tonga's parliamentary elections of November 2010 were the first in the country's history in which Tongans could vote directly for members of parliament. The watershed election was also the first in which the prime minister—Lord Tu'ivakano—was elected by parliament and not chosen by the king. George's transformative but brief reign came to a tragic end on March 18, 2012, when he died at the age of 63 after a long illness. His younger brother and crown prince, taking the royal name of Tupou VI, thus became king of Tonga.

**Economy**  Tonga's economy is based on agriculture—coconuts, cassava, passion fruit, bananas, and vanilla beans are just some of its commercial products, and natural resources include fish and fertile soil. Tourism is a major source of hard currency earnings. In August 2004, Chinese trade officials visited Tonga, and in November of that year Tonga's king returned from a trip to China and announced that the Chinese government had approved a $20 million aid package for economic development in Tonga. Athough the two countries signed a bilateral trade agreement in January 2005, many Chinese had to be evacuated from the country when they became a target of rioters in November 2006. Tonga became the 150th member of the World Trade Organization in December 2005. Tonga's largest export partners are Japan and the United States. Most of its imports come from Fiji and New Zealand. Major economic issues now facing the government are high unemployment among the nation's young people, increasing inflation, and rising civil service expenditures.

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