Located about 1,500 miles north of New Zealand in the central South Pacific, Samoa is a Polynesian archipelago of nine volcanic islands, of which four—Apolima, Manono, Sava'ai, and Upolu—are inhabited. Samoa is known as the "Cradle of Polynesia" because Sava'ai is believed to be the legendary Hawaiki, the Polynesian homeland. The nation was called Western Samoa until a 1997 legislative vote. The country's climate is tropical (warm and humid) with a rainy season from December to April. Samoa's rocky volcanic islands are ringed by coral reefs and shallow lagoons except where the shoreline features cliffs created by lava flows. Samoa contains rain forests in the mountains and vegetable plantations near the beaches. On September 29, 2009, Samoa and the nearby islands of American Samoa and Tonga were struck by a devastating tsunami that followed a huge 8.3-magnitude Pacific Ocean earthquake. The disaster had an inital death toll of about 100 people in Samoa. Ethnic Samoans—the largest group of Polynesians after New Zealand's Maori—make up 93% of the population, which stands at about 187,000 people. Samoa is also home to some Euronesians (of European and Polynesian descent) and a few Europeans. Most Samoans practice Christianity. The official languages are Samoan, a Polynesian tongue, and English. The *fa'a Samoa*, or Samoan way of life, stresses devotion to the community; individuals belong to an extended family group headed by a *matai,* or chief. The capital is Apia, on the island of Upolu, which is home to most of the population**.**

**Government and Politics**

Samoa (then Western Samoa) became the first independent Polynesian nation in 1962, governed by a constitutional monarchy under Malietoa Tanumafili II, who reigned as head of state from 1963 until his death in May 2007. The Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), the country's first organized political party, has been Samoa's ruling party since 1988. Universal adult suffrage was introduced in 1991. In 2001 elections, the HRPP won another majority in the 49-seat Legislative Assembly (known as the *Fono*), and the party's Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi was chosen as prime minister. Samoa has retained strong ties with New Zealand, which ruled Samoa from 1914 to 1962 and where many Samoans live and  receive secondary education. In 2002, New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark apologized to Samoa for New Zealand's brutal treatment of Samoans in colonial times more than 70 years before. In 2003, widespread demonstrations were held in Samoa and in New Zealand demanding the repeal of the Citizenship Western Samoa Act of 1982, which curtailed the Samoan people's automatic right to New Zealand citizenship. Then, in 2004, a parliamentary committee rejected a 100,000-signature petition seeking to repeal the law. Also in 2004, Samoa abolished capital punishment, which it had practiced for more than 50 years. In 2006, Samoa's government announced its plan to open a consulate in Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa (which lies just to the east of Samoa), the purpose of which was to provide assistance with immigration issues for Samoan citizens and also to encourage American Samoans to visit Samoa. In February, Samoa announced that it had established diplomatic relations with the Southeast Asian sultanate of Brunei. Then, in September, a strong earthquake near Samoa's coast triggered a small tsunami. Ceremonial head of state Malietoa Tanumafili II died in May 2007. He was the last Samoan head of state allowed to serve until the end of his life. In June 2007, Samoa's Legislative Assembly chose his successor, Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi, who served a five-year term. He was reelected, unopposed, in July 2012.

**Economy**

Agriculture employs most of Samoa's population. The main exports are taro, coconut cream, cocoa, and copra (coconut meat). Attempts to diversify the economy have led to some growth in light manufacturing, mostly funded by Japanese investors. Tourism is also a growing industry. Despite these strengths, many Samoans are underemployed and many have emigrated, sending their earnings back to their families. Samoa's recent economic growth has resulted mostly from increased construction activity, including private-sector hotel development and the building of sports facilities for the South Pacific Games, which Samoa hosted during August and September 2007. Samoa's main trading partners are Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Hong Kong.

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