

# Still alive: Samoa's half century

Andreas Holtz

**Abstract:** In 2012 Samoa celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence. The then independent state is classified as an insular microstate. Its isolated location far away from the major markets, its limited economy, and its general vulnerability were considered to be the worst possible prospects for gaining independence. Despite these poor starting conditions Samoa is now considered as Oceania's model state. The main reason for this positive development is Samoa's political stability as a modern state. This stability results mainly from a successful incorporation of traditional regulatory mechanisms into the modern state of Samoa.

**Keywords:** Samoa, Independence, Vulnerability, Political and Economical System

[Submitted: 11 November 2012, Acceptance of the revised reviewed manuscript: 18 November 2012]

In 2012 Samoa celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence. On January 1, 1962, Samoa became Oceania's first independent state from New Zealand. The original name Western Samoa was changed to Samoa in 1997 to emphasize that there is only one Samoan nation despite there being two Samoan political units. At the time of independence, no more than 110,000 people (1) populated the nine (Western) Samoan islands which cover a land area of only 2,831 km<sup>2</sup>. The new independent state is classified as an insular microstate. Its isolated location far away from the major markets, its limited economy, and its general vulnerability were considered to be the worst possible prospects for gaining independence. The question arose as to whether a state with Samoa's structural determinants could be considered sustainably viable. The following text tries to reflect Samoa's shift from a divided dot in the ocean to becoming Oceania's model state.



Pacific Geographies Cartography: © C. Carstens 2012

All photos © Andreas Holtz



Samoa's Parliament building in Apia, Western Samoa

## Small States and Power: A Contradiction?

Based on Max Weber's classical characteristics (see Weber 1980: 822), a state consists of a state territory, its people and "is an entity that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence" (Dubreuil 2010: 189). As Ghani et al. (2005: 6-9) point out, ten basic state functions are fundamental to a modern state: a) a legitimate monopoly on the means of violence, b) administrative control, c) management of public finances, d) investment in human capital, e) delineation of citizenship rights and duties, f) provision of infrastructure services, g) formation of a market, h) management of assets, i) capability to maintain international relations, j) rule of law. These ten functions can be summarised in four core values, which are security, rule of law, democracy and welfare. These ones again are fundamental to good governance in all states including small states.

Within these core values, security is considered to be the most important one. The capacity of a state to guarantee security depends on its capabilities of power. "Power" in this sense does not only mean material or hard power, but also soft power as this kind of power is used to convince (see Noya 2005: 3). It is the power of attraction. Again, the power of attraction depends on how a state is acknowledged by its own citizens. If there is no domestic backing, the attraction of a state is negative. In this sense the only source of power is coercion, i.e. hard power. The term backing reflects the importance of state-related identity framed by well-functioning nation-building.

Backing also means that power without legitimation is fundamentally not possible. In this sense a government must be acknowledged. Such an acknowledgement by the people as the natural sovereign, which means the transformation from natural sovereignty to the sovereignty of a state, depends on a special cultural framework of shared norms and values. Within this framework, the state and its people create a coherent and homogeneous unit. This kind of legitimised homogeneity is a source of attraction and, with it, a source of power. Furthermore it is also a more or less perfect framework for sustainable political stability. Power and small states are not to be considered as a contradiction in terms.



Tourism is important for Samoa's economy

## Society, Power and Stability

In Samoa's case, homogeneity is present. Beyond this, Samoa's customs and traditions of a traditionally stratified society created a state-like organisation, and this also extends back to pre-European times. From a western point of view, so-called pre-modern regulatory mechanisms were transformed into the modern state of Samoa. The state as an institution is merely another relatively new kind of organisation. The state and its political and social relations are acknowledged by the people. In contrast to the Melanesian states, the Samoan state and Samoan state-building are not seen as artificial but natural (see McLeod 2008: 8). Solid evidence for the closed connection between the Samoans and their state is reflected in relatively high voter turnouts of almost 90% as was seen during the last elections in 2011 (2). Against the background of cultural homogeneity, it is not surprising that Samoa's party system is not differentiated. Only two parties and several independents fight for votes. This firm party system sums up Samoan state-building which in combination with the ubiquitous and stabilising Christian church is geared towards stability (see Fraenkel 2010: 2). Clearly, social and political stability are a precondition for Samoa's success even as a limited insular microstate.

Stability is also reflected in its functionality as a modern state. Following the World Bank's annual ratings of governance indicators, Samoa's assessment is relatively good when compared to other Pacific states (see figure 1; best assessment +2.5, worst assessment -2.5).

## Samoa's Economy

Stability also means the presence of a solid framework for economic development. Despite Samoa's geographical isolation, which is a handicap for most insular microstates, the country is trying hard to leave the group of agricultural subsistence economies. Besides fishery and a growing tourism industry, Samoa's economy is determined by the automotive supplier industry. As Samoa's biggest private employer, Yazaki Eds Samoa provides jobs for more than 900 Samoans, of whom 60% are women (Pacific Trade and Investment Commission 2009). The company produces automotive components for Toyota Australia.

However, the fact that Samoa's economic performance is much better than in other Pacific island states should not conceal Samoa's pronounced vulnerability. For example, Yazaki constitutes the most important social and financial contributor to the future prosperity of the country. This therefore represents a very high degree of dependence. Yazaki produces almost 90% of Samoa's export goods with a corresponding proportion of turnover. The tsunami and earthquake crises in Japan had a direct impact on the Samoan economy: "The disaster in Japan has dramatically reduced the demand for wire harnessing from Toyota Australia which Yazaki Samoa Eds supplies" (Islands Business 2011). Besides its economical vulnerability, Samoa also suffers from ecological vulnerability (see UNCTAD 2006). During the last Tsunami in 2009 some 143 people were killed and 25% of Samoa's extremely important tourism infrastructure





The church is still an influential factor in Samoa

was damaged or even destroyed (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2012). In 1990 and 1991, two cyclones displaced over 10,000 Samoans. Three years later the serious plant disease Taro Blight destroyed almost the entire taro crop. Before the outbreak of that disease, the import to export ratio was 3 to 1. Following the disease, the situation deteriorated considerably to an import-export ratio of 14 to 1 (see Grynberg 1996: 5).

An additional serious difficulty for Samoa as an insular microstate is undoubtedly its small domestic market in general and its small domestic job market, both of which are considered the main reasons for emigration from Samoa. In contrast to other Pacific states, Samoan citizens are allowed to work in New Zealand or in the USA via American Samoa. Samoa's net migration rate is -10.81/1000 (3). Samoa depends on the remittances of the Samoans abroad which constitute around 25 % of its GDP. Official deve-

lopment assistance makes up another 25% of Samoa's GDP. These figures reflect Samoa's situation as a so-called MIRAB economy which is an acronym for an economy based on **m**igration, **r**emittances, **a**id and **b**ureaucracy (see Bertram/Watters 1985: 497-519).

### Samoa's Political System

Samoa's politics and its political system are deeply rooted in the country's societal tradition. Samoa's traditional leaders bear the title Matai. Currently there are around 25,000 Matai in Samoa, of whom only five percent are women. Traditionally a Matai is determined by the extended family (aiga). The Matai are separated in two sub-groups (ali'i and tulafale) which balances out their power. This kind of balance of power is typical for Samoan politics, while Samoa's state-building is also seen as a good combination of modern and traditional elements. This becomes most obvious in the Samoan election system. In 1962 the Samoan

people decided to disclaim their right to vote and stand as a candidate. Only the Matai were allowed to vote and to be voted. In another referendum held in 1990, this was changed to grant everyone a general right to vote. However, the right to stand as a candidate for the Fono, the parliament of Samoa, is still an exclusive right for the Matai. This system solves the otherwise typical contradiction between traditional and modern systems, by merging both tradition and modernity into one unique and unitary system which is the main guarantee of stability in Samoa.

However, critics of this system emphasize that this process of democratization does not aim to improve democracy but to maintain the power of the Matai. Since 1969 it is possible to bestow one title upon different persons. This has led to a real inflation of title holders which in turn reduces the power of the already established Matai. Within this context, democratization merely serves to protect traditional hierarchies.

Domestic stability is also a solid basis for sustainable action on an international level. Samoa is acknowledged as a reliable partner within the regional institutions like the Pacific Islands Forum. Samoa is aware of its weakness to most other states and does not consider itself a player in global politics. On the contrary, the country has in fact transferred important parts of its sovereignty to New Zealand. Following the 1962 treaty of friendship between New Zealand and Samoa, Wellington is responsible for Samoan security and its defense policies: "(...) to consider sympathetically requests from the Government of Western Samoa for technical, adminis-

Source: Kaufmann/Kraay/Mastruzzi 2012

	Ø Pacific	Cook Islands	Fiji	Kiribati	Marshall Islands	Micronesia	Nauru	Palau	PNG	Samoa	Solomon Islands	Tonga	Tuvalu	Vanuatu
Voice & Accountability	0.46	-0.30	-0.99	0.69	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.24	0.07	0.46	0.12	0.30	0.75	0.50
Political Stability/ Absence of Violence	0.96	1.45	-0.15	1.48	1.22	1.22	1.52	1.52	-0.85	0.99	0.45	0.76	1.48	1.40
Government Effectiveness	-0.68	-0.85	-0.74	-0.85	-1.28	-0.79	-0.58	-0.87	-0.75	-0.06	-0.95	-0.34	-0.49	-0.27
Regulatory Quality	-0.56	-1.38	-0.68	-1.29	-1.00	-0.91	1.06	-0.89	-0.54	-0.27	-1.18	-0.54	1.17	-0.78
Rule of Law	-0.04	-0.90	-0.90	0.07	-0.27	-0.08	0.41	0.74	-0.93	0.65	-0.70	0.09	1.02	0.25
Control of Corruption	-0.36	-1.14	-0.91	-0.05	-0.36	-0.13	0.01	-0.50	-1.14	0.13	-0.46	-0.31	-0.22	0.35

Figure 1: World Bank's ratings of governance indicators

trative, and other assistance, and also, (...), to help, when requested, in the conduct of Samoa's international relations" (New Zealand 1962: 5f). Samoa maintains diplomatic relations to 56 states and institutions (Samoa 2012) (4) organised by only eight embassies and consulates. Samoa's treaty of friendship appears as a blueprint for what Randall Schweller called bandwagoning for profit (Schweller 1994:72-107) and Robert Keohane already described in 1969 as a system-infected small state (see Keohane 1969: 295f).

Domestic stability, reserved behavior in an international context, and delegation of cost-intensive realms to regional major powers seems to be the key for Samoa as a successful Pacific insular microstate. Ironically, this success has its price. Samoa was uplifted from the group of the least developed countries (LDC) what, for example, makes it more difficult to obtain loan financing. Within this context, Samoa tries to play its card of microstate vulnerability: "(...) our LDC status (...) is a consequence of our being a small island developing state, and not the other way round" (Elisaia 2012: 2).

In reality, this formal state of no success equates to an improvement for Samoa.

## Endnotes

(1) According to the CIA World Factbook currently (2012) around 194,000 people live in Samoa (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ws.html>, 11.11.12).

(2) Voter turnouts in **Polynesia** (in brackets: last election, e.g. last assessable data): Cook Islands 82.81% (2010), Fiji 64% (2006), Samoa 90% (2011), Tonga 90.85% (2010), Tuvalu 79.99% (2002); Voter turnouts in **Melanesia** (in brackets: last election, e.g. last assessable data): PNG 64.74% (1997), Salomon Islands 52.36% (2010), Vanuatu 70.38% (2008); Voter turnouts in **Micronesia** (in brackets: last election, e.g. last assessable data): Kiribati 67.54% (2007), Marshall Islands 50.07% (2007), Micronesia 52.58% (2007), Nauru 92.69% (2010), Palau 42.66% (2008) (Sources: <http://www.idea.int/>, <http://www.ipu.org/english/home.htm>, 11.11.12). In this approach a trend appears which shows that the ethnical heterogeneous



Tourist attraction besides the beaches

and egalitarian states of Melanesia as well as the geographical fragmented states of Micronesia (with Nauru as an exception) have worse outcomes of democratic participation than ethnical homogenous and socially stratified Polynesian states (exception: Fiji with its biethnic population after the last politically contested election. Fijian turnout 2001: 81.05%).

(3) Source: see EN 1.

(4) See Samoan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <http://www.mfat.gov.ws/embassies.html> (11.11.12).

## References

- Bertram, Geoffrey/Watters, Ray (1985): "The MIRAB Economy in South Pacific Microstates", in: *Pacific Viewpoint*, 26(3), 497-519.
- Dubreuil, Benoît (2010): "Human Evolution and the Origins of Hierarchies", Cambridge.
- Elisaia, Aliioaiga Feturi (2012): "Turning Challenges into Opportunities through Genuine Partnerships", New York (<http://www.unobrrls.org/UserFiles/File/LDC%20Documents/AHWG%20on%20smooth%20transition/Samoa%208%20May%202012.pdf>, 11.11.12).
- Fraenkel, Jon (2010): "Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions", SSGM Discussion Papers 2010/5, ANU Canberra.
- Ghani, Ashraf/Lockhart, Clare/Carnahan, Michael (2005): "Closing the Sovereignty Gap: an Approach to State-Building", Working Paper 253/September 2005, Overseas Development Institute London.
- Grynberg, Roman (1996): "Economic Prospects for the Pacific Islands in the 21st Century", USP Suva.
- Islands Business (2011): "Employees of Samoa's Yazaki Plant Hit by Japan Crises", Suva ([www.islandsbusiness.com](http://www.islandsbusiness.com), 11.11.12).
- Kaufmann, Daniel/Kraay, Aart/Mastruzzi, Massimo (2012, serial): "World Bank Governance Indicators", Washington (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>, 11.11.12).
- Keohane, Robert O. (1969): "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics", in: *International Organization*, 23(2) March 1969, 291-310.
- McLeod, Abby (2008): "Leadership Models in the Pacific", SSGM Discussion Papers 2008/6, ANU Canberra.
- New Zealand (1962): "New Zealand and Western Samoa - Treaty of Friendship", Wellington. For details see here: [http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/library/online/texts/Pacific\\_archive/Samoa/Treaty%20of%20Friendship.pdf](http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/library/online/texts/Pacific_archive/Samoa/Treaty%20of%20Friendship.pdf) (11.11.12).
- New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2012 serial): "Country Profile Samoa", Wellington.
- Noya, Javier (2005): "The Symbolic Power of Nations", Working Paper No. 35/2005, Real Elcano Instituto de Estudios Internacionales y Estratégicos, Madrid.
- Pacific Trade and Investment Commission (2009): "Pacific Trade and Invest: Yatzaki - Samoa", Sydney ([www.pitic.org.au](http://www.pitic.org.au), 11.11.12).
- Schweller, Randall L. (1994): "Bandwagoning for Profit. Bringing the Revisionist State Back in", in: *International Security*, 19(1) Summer 1994, 72-107.
- UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) (2006): "Vulnerability Profile of Samoa", Geneva.
- Weber, Max (1980): "Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß einer verstehenden Soziologie", Tübingen.

Dr. Andreas Holtz [Holtz@giga-hamburg.de], Political Scientist, Saarland University, Campus, 66123 Saarbrücken, Germany