

COUNTRY PROFILE

Seychelles

The smallest country in Africa, both by population size and area, Seychelles has only been inhabited since the arrival of French colonists in the 18th century. After gaining independence from Britain in 1976 the country lurched from coup to attempted coup until multi-party electoral democracy was re-established in 1992. Today, Seychelles has the highest level of human development in sub-Saharan Africa. However, economic instability in recent years and a lack of media freedom are both causes for concern.

SUMMARY FACTS

Population: 87 thousand, UK: 61.2 million	GDP per capita: US\$16,394 (UN, 2008), UK: US\$35,200
Capital: Victoria	Monetary unit: 1 Seychelles rupee = 100 cents
Area: 455 sq km (176 sq miles), UK: 243,610 sq km (94,060 sq miles)	Main exports: Canned tuna, other seafood, cinnamon bark
Major languages: English, French, Creole	CO2 emissions share of world total: < 0.1%, UK: >2%
Major religions: Christianity	Population without access to an improved water source: 13% (UN, 2006), UK: 0%
Life expectancy at birth: 73 years (CIA 2009), UK: 79 years	Population using improved sanitation: 97% (UN, 2006), UK: 100%
Under-five mortality rate: 12 per 1,000 live births (UN 2008), UK: 6 per 1,000 live births	Government: Parti Lepep
HIV prevalence: 0.3% aged 15-49 (UN, 2007), UK: 0.2% aged 15-49	President: James Michel
Adult Literacy Rate: 92% ages 15 and older (UN, 2008), UK: >99%	Year Women received right to vote: 1948, UK: 1918, 1928 (equal rights)

Sources: UN Statistics, UNICEF



History

Before the establishment of a French colony in **1768**, the widely scattered archipelago of over 100 islands known today as Seychelles was uninhabited by humans. The first European to discover the islands was Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in **1502**, but it is thought that Arab traders knew of the islands over a century before then. A British East Indian Company expedition in **1609** was the first recorded human landing in the islands. The French were the first to take a serious interest in the islands, and sent an expedition in **1742**, which was followed by a second expedition and an assertion of formal possession in **1756**. It was at this point that the islands were given their present name, in honour of the French finance minister at the time, Jean Moreau de Séchelles (Seychelles being the Anglicised name). It was over a decade later that France established a permanent human presence, when a small party of Frenchmen and a number of slaves settled on St Anne (a small island off the largest island, Mahe). Seychelles was made a dependency of Mauritius.

The islands began to be used more and more for provisioning by traders on the lucrative sea-route between Europe and the East Indies, and British attempted to gain control by blockading the islands in **1794**, and again during the Napoleonic Wars in **1804**. The French surrendered Mauritius to the British in **1810**, and Seychelles fell to the British by default. The islands were formally ceded to Britain under the terms of the **1814** Treaty of Paris, along with Mauritius.

Britain abolished slavery in **1835**, and when this was enforced in Seychelles, many French landowners left for mainland Africa, taking some of the slaves with them. Thousands of slaves were liberated, and they mostly squatted on the land they had already been working. Plantation owners introduced Indian labourers to their fields from this time.

In **1872** Seychelles received greater autonomy from Mauritius through the creation of a Board of Civil Governors. In **1888** this autonomy was increased further by the establishment of both a Legislative and an Executive Council. Fifteen years later, in **1903**, the archipelago became a British Crown Colony and was no longer a Mauritian dependency. The first direct elections were held in **1948** to fill four seats on the Legislative Council.

It was not long after these elections that political leaders and the first political parties began to emerge. James Mancham was the pro-British leader of the Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP) and Albert René was the pro-independence leader of the Seychelles People's Unity Party (SPUP). Both were formed in **1964**.

In **March 1970**, representatives of colonial and pro-independence parties met in London where they agreed a new constitution. Elections took place in **November**, bringing the constitution into effect. Mancham's SDP won 10 of the 15 seats in the Legislative Council, while René's SPUP won the remaining 5. Mancham became Chief Minister of the colony.

Further elections were held in **April 1974**, and both main parties campaigned for independence. The SDP increased their majority by three seats (due mainly to boundary changes – they actually received a smaller percentage of the popular vote than in **1970**). Following the election, an agreement on independence was negotiated

with Britain and the SDP and SPUP formed a coalition Government in **June 1975** to facilitate the transition from colony to sovereign republic. Upon independence on **29 June 1976**, Mancham assumed the office of President, while René became Prime Minister.

Although the SDP/SPUP coalition initially held together, political divisions between the parties quickly became more pronounced. The conflict came to a head when, while Mancham was in London for a conference in **1977**, René and the SPUP seized power in Seychelles through a bloodless coup d'état. René dismissed the Legislative Council, suspended the constitution and ruled the archipelago by decree for a short time.

In **1978** the SPUP was re-branded as the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) and a new constitution in **1979** transformed the country into socialist, one-party state with the SPPF as the only legal party.

In **1981** a group of 54 mercenaries led by Irish-born 'Mad' Mike Hoare landed on Mahé Island in an attempted coup aimed at returning Mancham to power. The mercenaries disguised themselves as a rugby team, but a customs official found a rifle concealed in a bag belonging to one of the 'players'. Hoare attempted to lead a take-over of the airport but Seychellois troops repelled them. Hoare aborted the coup, hijacked an Air India plane and flew with a number of his men to South Africa. In the decade following the aborted coup attempt other plots were alleged and an army mutiny in **August 1982** was only ended with the assistance of Tanzanian troops.

René was re-elected as President unopposed in **1984** and again in **1989**, but internal dissatisfaction and pressure from foreign aid donors led René to make democratic reforms in **December 1991**. An amended constitution that legalised opposition parties was promulgated and multiparty elections for a Constitutional Commission were held in **July 1992** (the first in 18 years). René's SPPF gained a majority of seats on the Commission, but Mancham's returning SDP also gained significant representation.

The newly-elected commission drafted a new constitution that affirmed multiparty elections and gave official status to opposition leaders. It was accepted by popular vote in a referendum at the second attempt (a majority did endorse it the first time, but not the 60 per cent needed to bring it into law).

The first National Assembly and Presidential elections took place in **July 1993**. The SPPF, SDP and a number of minor parties contested 33 seats, 22 of which were directly elected with the other 11 being awarded on a proportional basis. The SPPF received a large majority of seats, 27, while the SDP won five of the remaining six. René won the Presidential election.

René and the SPPF were both re-elected by an enlarged majority in **1998** and again, although by a smaller majority, in the Presidential election of **2001** and the Assembly election of **2002**. Mancham and the SDP gradually lost popularity and were replaced in opposition by the Seychelles National Party (SNP), led by Wavel Ramkalawan. René stepped down from the Presidency in **April 2004** and appointed former Vice-President James Michel to replace him. In **2003**, before he had stepped down, René announced that Seychelles would withdraw from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on the grounds that for Seychelles it was not good value for money. The pull-out became effective shortly after Michel had been appointed (although the country rejoined in late **2006**).

On **26 December 2004**, Seychelles was affected by the tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean. The waves caused widespread damage to beaches, roads, bridges, other infrastructure and houses. The damage to the economy was estimated at US\$30million: a small figure in absolute terms, but significant for a country as small as Seychelles. The knock-on effects on the tourism industry, which accounts for 50 per cent of the national income, were also severe.

Presidential elections were held in **July 2006** and Michel won his first elected term, narrowly beating Wavel Ramkalawan. Although international observers declared that the election results reflected the will of the people, the SNP boycotted the National Assembly for the next six months. While the SNP were boycotting the Assembly, it passed a law banning political or religious groups from running radio stations: this sparked a rare outbreak of civil unrest in the country. Michel dissolved the Assembly in **March 2007** and called an early National Assembly election. The **2007** results left the SPPF's majority unchanged from the **2002** elections, and the procedure followed was determined to be credible by international observers. Following the **2007** elections, Michel began to focus much of Government policy on environmental issues, which have an important bearing on Seychelles' desirability as a tourist destination. The name of Michel's party was changed in **2009** from the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) to the Parti Lepep (PL).

In recent years the global financial crisis, coupled with an expansion in the activities of Somali pirates, has had a severe effect on vital tourism-based income and in **2009** President Michel asked creditors to cancel half the archipelago's US\$800 million foreign debt. The US supplied Seychelles with drone spy planes in **October 2009** to help combat piracy, although it remains a real danger to shipping in the region. In **July 2010** the first successful prosecution of Somali pirates in Seychelles took place.

The next Presidential and National Assembly elections in Seychelles are due to be held in **July 2011** and **May 2012** respectively.

Population

With a population of fewer than 90 thousand, Seychelles is the smallest country in Africa. As the islands had no indigenous population before European settlement, the Seychellois are composed of people who have immigrated to the islands. Most Seychellois are of mixed French and East African origin, with a small percentage originating from South Asia and China.

Most of the 155 islands in the Seychelles archipelago are uninhabited and uninhabitable, and 90 per cent of Seychellois live on the largest island, Mahe. Small populations live on Praslin and La Digue, to the north-east of Mahe, with private residences on a few other tiny islands.

The vast majority of Seychellois identify their religion as Christian, most of those being Roman Catholic. A number of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists also live in Seychelles, as do a small number who don't identify with any religious group.

94 per cent of people speak the French-based Seychellois Creole language, which is officially recognised by the Government along with French and English (spoken by most as a second language). English is the language of government and commerce.

Human development in Seychelles is the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with literacy levels the best in the region. Infant mortality and HIV rates for Seychelles are among the lowest in Africa.

Politics

Since 1977 one party has dominated Seychellois politics. The Parti Lepep (PL), formerly SPPF and SPUP, seized power in a coup and established a one-party state until democratic elections were held in 1992. Since then, the PL has won every multi-party Presidential and National Assembly election. The main opposition is the Seychelles National Party (SNP), led by Wavel Ramkalawan.

Seychelles is a multi-party republic with a unicameral National Assembly. The 34 seats in the Assembly are split between direct election (25 seats) and allocation on a proportional basis to parties polling at least 10 per cent of the vote (nine seats).

The President of the Republic is head of state and head of government, and is directly elected for a five-year term. The cabinet consists of a Council of Ministers, appointed by the president.

Economy

Seychelles' economy is reliant on tourism and tuna fishing. Employment, commerce and foreign earnings are all largely dependent on these industries. Strong growth rates between 2004 and 2007 were replaced in 2008 and 2009 by negative growth as tourism and tuna fishing both suffered as a result of the global financial crisis. The spread of piracy activities in and around Seychelles territorial waters resulted in the total tuna catch declining by around 50 per cent in 2009. However, a gradual recovery in the tourism industry and US-sponsored efforts to combat piracy mean that the economy is predicted to attain positive growth of around 4.2 per cent by 2011.

The shortage of arable land on the small islands that make up Seychelles means agriculture makes only a small contribution to national output and many foodstuffs must be imported from elsewhere. This makes the Seychellois vulnerable to price fluctuations.

The archipelago is in the World Bank's 'upper middle-income' bracket, and as such is low on the agenda of international donors. However the country has a severe and mounting debt burden, exacerbated by the global crisis, and this remains one of the biggest challenges to economic stability. Far-reaching tax reforms started in 2010 seek to reduce concessions and broaden the tax base, with an overall aim of increasing tax revenue while reducing the tax burden on Seychellois.

Civil society and trade unions

Although Seychelles is an electoral democracy and the Government provides services such as healthcare and education, because the Government operates fairly strict control over the media there is a necessity for strong civil society organisations (CSOs) to call the PL to account.

Generally, the Government is receptive to civil society views and participation; this co-operation is treated with suspicion by some, who are concerned that it may lead to co-option. CSOs in the country often lack adequate financial and human resources, making it difficult for them to operate independently from the state.

The main civil society body in Seychelles is the Liaison Unit of Non-Governmental Organizations (LUNGOS). LUNGOS is an umbrella body with about 60 member organisations ranging from environmental NGOs to craftsmen's associations. It is run along democratic lines by an elected board.

Due to the unique nature of Seychelles' flora and fauna, and perhaps also the country's reliance on tourism, environmental NGOs are some of the most active CSOs on the islands. Nature Seychelles, for example, is active in the conservation of unique species and manages Cousin Island (two miles west of Praslin), an important Hawksbill turtle nesting site.

Compared with other countries in southern Africa, Seychelles' trade union movement is small and lacks independence. The Seychelles Federation of Workers' Unions (SFWU) is the only major active union in the country, but is aligned with the ruling PL. The 1993 Trade Union Industrial Act did give Seychellois workers the right to join and form their own unions but the only substantial independent union to be set up, the Seychelles National Trade Union (SNTU), ceased operations in 2007. Workers do have a right to strike, but this is restricted and requires the permission of the PL.

Achievements

1. Human development: Seychelles is considered by the UN Human Development Programme to have 'High Human Development' and is the highest ranked sub-Saharan African country in the 2009 Human Development Report. The country's life expectancy, adult literacy and GDP per capita figures are all the highest of any country in the Southern African Development Community.
2. Electoral democracy: despite lurching from coup to attempted coup shortly after independence, Seychelles has managed to entrench electoral democracy, with Presidential and National Assembly elections both taking place four times since 1992. Although the ruling PL has retained power each time, international observers consider the elections to have been free and fair.

Development Challenges

1. Media freedom: the government controls much of the islands' media, operating radio and television stations and the only daily newspaper. High licensing fees and government interference have discouraged the establishment of independent media outlets. This control over media gives the PL a distinct advantage over opposition parties at the polls.
2. Economic stability: reliance on tourism and tuna fishing makes Seychelles particularly vulnerable to global economic fluctuations. The 2009 debt crisis and ongoing struggle to generate growth are the result of a downturn in tourist traffic and tuna catches. Given that Seychelles has little arable land and few natural resources other than the beaches that attract tourists, economic diversification is a major challenge to the Seychellois.

For more information on Seychelles, visit the following websites:

- Government of Seychelles: <http://www.egov.sc/>
- Nature Seychelles, a leading environmental NGO: <http://www.natureseychelles.org/>
- Marine Conservation Society Seychelles: <http://www.mcscs.sc/index.html>
- Parti Lepep website: <http://www.sppf.sc/lepep/index.php>