

## COUNTRY PROFILE Mauritius

Perhaps less well known than its most famous former resident, the dodo, Mauritius is actually one of the most highly developed countries in Africa. The growth of tourism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century resulted in an economic windfall for the island. This prosperity, combined with decades of political stability, has resulted in high levels of human development. The country has a reputation for good governance and has been rated as the best governed country in Africa by the Ibrahim Foundation. Despite this, however, certain sectors of society still suffer from discrimination, poverty and human rights infringements.

### SUMMARY FACTS

<b>Population:</b> 1.3 million, <b>UK: 61.2 million</b>	<b>GDP per capita:</b> US\$11,296 (UN, 2008), <b>UK: US\$35,200</b>
<b>Capital:</b> Port Louis	<b>Monetary unit:</b> 1 Mauritian rupee = 100 cents
<b>Area:</b> 2,040 sq km (788 sq miles), <b>UK: 243,610 sq km (94,060 sq miles)</b>	<b>Main exports:</b> Sugar, clothing, tea, jewellery
<b>Major languages:</b> English, French (both official), Creole, Indian languages	<b>CO2 emissions share of world total:</b> < 0.1%, <b>UK: &gt;2%</b>
<b>Major religions:</b> Hinduism, Islam, Christianity	<b>Population without access to an improved water source:</b> 0% (UN, 2006), <b>UK: 0%</b>
<b>Life expectancy at birth:</b> 72 (UN 2008), <b>UK: 79 years</b>	<b>Population using improved sanitation:</b> 94% (UN, 2006), <b>UK 100%</b>
<b>Under-five mortality rate:</b> 17 per 1,000 live births (UN 2008), <b>UK: 6 per 1,000 live births</b>	<b>Government:</b> Social Alliance
<b>HIV prevalence:</b> 1.7% aged 15-49 (UN, 2007), <b>UK: 0.2% aged 15-49</b>	<b>President:</b> Sir Anerood Jugnauth
<b>Adult Literacy Rate:</b> 87% ages 15 and older (UN, 2008), <b>UK: &gt;99%</b>	<b>Prime Minister:</b> Navin Ramgoolam
	<b>Year Women received right to vote:</b> 1956, <b>UK: 1918, 1928 (equal rights)</b>

Sources: UN Statistics, UNICEF



## History

Unlike so many African countries before colonisation, Mauritius had no indigenous population predating European arrival. Arab traders certainly knew the island from around the **10th century**, naming it Dina Arobi ('Desolation Island'), but did not settle there. The first Europeans to discover islands were Portuguese explorers around the year **1507**, but they too were only interested in trade and had no desire to settle.

In **September 1598** five Dutch ships, bound for Indonesia and commanded by Vice-Admiral Wybrand van Warwyck, landed on the southeast coast of the island and claimed it for the Netherlands. Warwyck gave the island the name Mauritius, naming it after Prince Maurice of Nassau, the stadtholder of the Netherlands. For the next 40 years the Dutch used Mauritius for shelter and supplies for the journey to Batavia (modern-day Java). During this time the population of the island's most famous pre-colonial resident, the dodo, was decimated by non-indigenous species such as rats that came to the island on European ships. Mass killings of the slow, docile bird for the provisioning of ships also occurred, although most surviving manuscripts report that the dodo was not much liked as a food source.

In **1638** the Dutch East India Company set up the first permanent Dutch settlement, in the southeast of the island. A population of 25 colonists settled and, shortly after, many slaves were imported from Madagascar. The colony never flourished though, and many colonists left for the Cape of Good Hope after the Dutch established a new colony (Cape Town) there in **1652**. Food shortages and attacks by pirates led the few remaining Dutch to abandon the colony in **1710**, leaving behind a number of runaway slaves living in the forest.

Five years later, in **September 1715**, French captain Guillaume Dufresne d' Arsel landed on Mauritius and took possession of it in the name of King Louis XV and renamed it Île de France before sailing away three days later. The first colonists landed in **1722** at the place where the Dutch had settled 84 years previously but, finding the port unfavourable, they soon moved to the northwest of the island and named their new settlement Port Louis (today's Mauritian capital).

The French colony, administered by the French East India Company, struggled to gain a foothold on the island for its first 14 years, but this changed after the arrival of governor Bertrand Mahé de La Bourdonnais in **1735**. Labourdonnais transformed Port Louis from a primitive harbour to a thriving trading port by building forts, warehouses, docks and a road network. He increased agricultural production, setting up sugarcane plantations and encouraging settlers to plant cotton and coffee. This new prosperity was built on slavery, and many slaves continued to escape to the interior, occasionally sabotaging the plantations.

Britain and France both sought control of the Indian Ocean Trade during the Seven Years War (**1756-1763**) The British were decisively victorious in India and the French army blamed the French East India Company officials for defeat, accusing them of corruption: as punishment, Île de France was officially handed over to the King. Under Governor Vicomte de Souillac Port Louis became renowned for its hedonism and the administration of public affairs was largely neglected.

In **1803** Napoleon Bonaparte appointed the last French governor of the island, General Charles De Caen, to bring the colony back to a state of order. De Caen had schools constructed and promulgated the Napoleonic Code, an amended form of which is still on the statute books today. De Caen's reforms were not popular with the island elites, but he curried favour by allowing slavery and privateering to continue.

In **1810**, during the Napoleonic Wars, Britain launched a surprise attack on the north coast of Île de France and seized control. The British returned the island to its previous name, Mauritius, but allowed the Franco-Mauritians to retain their language and legal system. Sugar cane production increased, but the island's 70,000 slaves were freed in **1835**, two years after the official abolition of slavery. Their labour now had to be supplemented or replaced, and as many as half a million Indians responded to promises of a better life by immigrating to Mauritius. They had been promised good work contracts with a minimum wage, accommodation and the option of a return passage, but many indentured labourers found themselves living and working in appalling conditions with no way to return to India.

Mohandas Gandhi visited the island for ten days during **1901** and during his stay exhorted the by then majority Indian population to take greater interest in politics. The indentured labour system was abolished in **1910**, and the Mauritian Labour Party (MLP) was established in **1936** to campaign for better working conditions.

During World War II significant infrastructural development took place, as the British based warships off the island and built an airport and telecommunication station. After the war a new constitution was enacted that gave the vote to many Indians and Creoles (those of mixed Afro-European descent) previously excluded. The MLP won a majority in the first Legislative Council elections held under the new constitutional provisions, and repeated the success in **1953**. Internal self-government was introduced in **1957** and another new constitution, enacted the following year, provided universal franchise to adults over 21 years old. Doctor (later Sir) Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, leader of the MLP, became Chief Minister after the MLP again gained a majority in the **1959** elections (the first held following the further extension of the franchise).

The desire for independence grew through the **1960s** and a new coalition – the Independence Party (IP) – contested the **August 1967** elections. The IP was composed of three parties; the governing MLP, the Muslim Committee of Action (CAM) and the Independent Forward Block (IFB); and they won a significant majority. The election was interpreted locally as a referendum on independence and less than a year later, on **March 12 1968**, Mauritius became an independent country within the Commonwealth with Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam as the first Prime Minister.

A socialist opposition party, the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM), was founded in **1969** from a student movement led by Franco-Mauritian Paul Berenger. In **1971** the MMM, backed by trade unions, called a series of strikes. Ramgoolam declared a state of emergency until **1976** and imprisoned the party leadership.

Economically, the newly independent nation began transforming itself. Until the early **1970s** the Mauritian economy was entirely reliant on sugar, which represented more than 90 per cent of the country's exports. Periodically cyclones would devastate the sugar crop, or world prices would fluctuate, making sugar an unstable commodity to rely upon. Consequently the Government promoted textiles and tourism from the start of the **1970s** and Mauritius soon became a significant global exporter, with major brands such as Pierre Cardin and Lacoste manufactured on the island.

After narrowly losing the elections in **1976**, the socialist MMM were swept to power in **1982** after serious budgetary problems, repression and a devastating cyclone contributed to a loss of public faith in Ramgoolam and the IP coalition. The MMM, in coalition with the Mauritian Socialist Party (PSM), won 60 out of 66 seats. The British-trained lawyer Anerood Jugnauth (of the PSM) became Prime Minister, with

Berenger as Minister of Finance. The following year MMM defectors joined the PSM, which was renamed the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM). Mauritius became a republic, but remained within the Commonwealth, in **1992**. The Legislative Council became the National Assembly and the office of Governor General (the head-of-state in lieu of the Queen) was replaced by a largely ceremonial Presidency, indirectly elected by the Assembly for five-year terms.

Various complex coalitions of parties held power after the **1982** elections, but the MSM dominated and Jugnauth remained as Prime Minister until **1995**, when a coalition led by the MLP was elected. MLP leader Navin Ramgoolam (son of the late Sir Seewoosagur) became Prime Minister. The MLP had enough seats for a majority without their MMM coalition partner, so Ramgoolam dismissed them in **1997**. In **1999** Creole frustrations at their disproportionate poverty and unemployment reached a head when the singer Kaya died while in police custody. Kaya was an ardent campaigner for the Creole populations' rights, and his death sparked riots that brought Mauritius to a standstill for four days.

The MMM re-emerged in a winning alliance with the MSM in **2000** and MSM leader Sir Anerood Jugnauth once again became Prime Minister, with the caveat that half way through his term, Jugnauth would step down to be replaced by MMM leader Paul Berenger. Jugnauth did step down, in **September 2003**, and Berenger became the first Franco-Mauritian to head the government. Jugnauth was sworn in as President shortly after stepping down and remains in the post (as of **August 2010**).

Frustration over rising unemployment led to electoral victory for the opposition coalition the Social Alliance in **2005**. This victory returned MLP leader Ramgoolam to the Premiership. In **2008** legislation established a Truth and Justice Commission to examine Mauritius' history of slavery and indentured labour. Ramgoolam's government came under pressure in the following years due to economic concerns, but he retained the Premiership after a new MLP-led coalition, the Alliance for the Future, gained a majority in the **May 2010** National Assembly elections.

## Population

Various ethnic and religious cultures exist in Mauritius. Around 68 per cent of the population are Indo-Mauritian, 27 per cent are Afro-Mauritian, with the remaining 5 per cent largely of Chinese or French origin. The ethnic groupings largely live at peace with each other, although the Afro-Mauritian 'creoles' suffer poverty and complain of unfair treatment.

The most significant source of inter-group conflict in the country stems from religious difference within the Indo-Mauritian population, in the form of tensions between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority.

The Mauritian people have some of the highest literacy rates and longest life expectancy figures in Africa, and the 2009 Human Development Report declared the island to be one of only three African countries with 'High Human Development'.

## Politics

Politics in Mauritius is a vibrant affair and has been characterised by coalition-building since independence in 1968. Free, fair and competitive elections began occurring a decade before independence, and have happened regularly since then. Nine post-independence general elections have taken place, and power has been

transferred between parties on numerous occasions, showing that electoral democracy in Mauritius has become a firmly entrenched concept.

The head-of-state is the President, currently Sir Anerood Jugnauth, and it is largely considered a ceremonial role. The President is elected by the unicameral National Assembly every five years. The Assembly itself consists of 70 members, 62 of whom are directly elected. Unusually, the remaining eight are appointed from among the 'best losers': the most popular unsuccessful candidates. The Prime Minister, appointed by the President from the party or coalition with the most Assembly seats, has executive power.

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Ibrahim Index combines factors such as security, respect for human rights and human development to produce a governance rank for African countries. Mauritius has consistently been ranked first in the Index, which gives rankings from the year 2000.

### **Economy**

Mauritius has one of the most successful economies in Africa, and it is built on tourism, textiles, sugar and financial services. Recently, government policy has been to diversify the economy by encouraging services-oriented industries centring on information and communication technology (ICT). Investment in infrastructure and education is seen by the Government as the best way of achieving this diversification.

Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis GDP growth has dropped considerably, from 5.1 per cent in 2008 to 2.8 per cent in 2009, despite government stimulus measures. The fall in growth reflects a fall in external demand for textiles and tourism services. The number of tourist arrivals in the country dropped by almost a tenth in 2009. Despite the fall in growth, government measures have helped to limit job losses, with only a marginal increase in unemployment between 2008 and 2009.

The Government mostly leaves production to the private sector and acts instead as a facilitator, encouraging investment and production in certain areas (such as ICT). Certain key utilities remain state owned, including electricity, water and postal services. The parastatal State Trading Corporation (STC) controls the import of rice, petroleum and other essential commodities.

### **Civil society and trade unions**

Mauritius has a long history of civil society engagement with social, economic and political issues. Around 6,000 voluntary organisations are registered with the Registrar of Associations, although most are ethnic- or special-interest based and few are oriented towards human development.

Due to the entrenched tradition of democracy in the country, there is little civil society involvement in electoral processes. However, when a 2001 report highlighted the under-representation of women in the Mauritian National Assembly civil society made a strong response. Gender-based NGOs addressed the problem through protests, workshops and forums: the result was a rise in female representation in parliament.

Civil society has also been vocal in the area of political party funding. In 2008 Transparency Mauritius (an affiliate of Transparency International) started a campaign seeking to make political parties be more transparent concerning donations (both to and from the parties).

Trade union rights are protected under the constitution. However employers frequently harass or even dismiss union activists, particularly those working in export processing zones (EPZs). In the EPZs, unionists are often denied access to industrial sites, and consequently find it difficult to approach workers. Union membership in the EPZs is understandably low, below 12 per cent.

Migrant workers are also especially vulnerable to labour rights violations. If these workers go on strike the response by employers and the authorities is to send them back to their country of origin on the grounds of “breach of contract”. The linguistic barrier makes it difficult for unionists to explain to migrants their labour rights. Migrant workers’ contracts are also unacceptably vague when mentioning what rights they will have.

The Government and private sector are campaigning to make Mauritius a ‘24/7 economy’ in order to encourage western investment, particularly in telesales – a key component of the Government’s service-oriented economic diversification programme. Trade unionists have criticised the move and say it will force Mauritians into night shifts, which unionists believe will have serious social consequences.

Mauritius has three trade union centres that are affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The largest of these is the National Trade Unions Confederation (NTUC) with around 40,000 members. The others are the Mauritius Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and the Mauritius Labour Congress (MLC), founded in 1946 and 1963 respectively.

### **Achievements**

- 1. Governance:** Mauritius has been consistently ranked as the most well governed country in Africa by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. In the most recent study, of the four categories used to measure governance Mauritius came top in two (‘participation and human rights’/‘sustainable economic opportunity’) and second behind Cape Verde for ‘safety and the rule of law’.
- 2. Human Development:** Mauritius came 81<sup>st</sup> out of 182 countries in the 2009 UN Human Development Report, making it one of only three African countries considered to have ‘high human development’. This is a significant achievement, however, the ongoing poverty and illiteracy of many Creoles mean that there is still room for improvement.

### **Development Challenges**

- 1. Workers’ rights:** both migrant workers and workers in Mauritian export control zones suffer violations of trade union and labour rights. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has highlighted the need for greater protection of trade unions from interference in their activities by employers.
- 2. Creole poverty:** Although incidences of poverty in Mauritius are rare compared with the rest of Africa, many members of the Afro-Mauritian Creole population do still live below the poverty line. A lack of education and the perception among Indo-Mauritians that Creoles are lazy act to hamper employment prospects, exacerbating the poverty they suffer.
- 3. Women’s rights:** despite an increase in the number of women in the National Assembly, women remain inadequately represented in Mauritian society: women occupy only 5 per cent of senior positions in top Mauritius countries, for example. Although many discriminatory laws have been repealed, laws that protect women are

not rigorously enforced and domestic violence in particular is considered a major problem in the country.

**For more information on Mauritius, visit the following websites:**

- Government of Mauritius: [www.gov.mu](http://www.gov.mu)
- Mauritius Times, independent newspaper:  
<http://mauritustimes.com/index.php/the-news>
- UNDP Human Development Report, Mauritius page:  
[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_MUS.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MUS.html)