

KIRIBATI

Banabans

Activity: 1979-1983; 2006-2020

General notes

- The island of Banaba is also known as Ocean Island.

Movement start and end dates

- Banaban separatism began in the 1960s and 1970s when Kiribati was still fighting for independence (Hermann 2004: 198). We found no exact start date; thus, we code 1960 as the start date of the movement. Kiribati became independent in 1979; accordingly, in the data set we only code the movement from 1979 and indicate prior, non-violent activity. Just prior to Kiribati independence, the Banabans formally submitted a petition to the United Nations to denounce British occupation. Pomerance notes that, “when, in July 1979, the Gilbert Islands received their independence as the new State of Kiribati, the independence ceremonies were boycotted by the Banabans of Ocean Island” (Pomerance 1982: 86). Hence, we begin to code the Banabans in 1979, the year of Kiribati’s independence, but note prior non-violent activity.
- When Kiribati attained independence, the Banaban fought for independence for another 4 years before accepting a financial settlement. The settlement also brought along some measure of autonomy as the Banabans were given dual citizenship in both Fiji and Kiribati. The 1983 settlement appears to have ended the movement (Hermann 2004; Hewitt & 2000; Keesing’s; Pomerance 1984). Thus, we code 1983 as the end of the movement. [start date 1: 1960; end date 1: 1983]
- We code a second phase from 2006. Around that time, Banabans had become increasingly frustrated with their access to compensation administered by the government of Kiribati, as well as the continued right of Kiribati to resource extraction. In 2006, the Banaban representative in Kiribati’s parliament therefore called for Banaba to secede and join Fiji (MRGI). This was supported by the Rabi Council. Roth (2015: 392) confirms this account. Writing in 2015, Roth suggests that the movement is “dormant”. Yet at the same time Roth writes that “this dispute is still far from being resolved, with some still arguing for either independence or annexation by Fiji”. Overall, this suggests that the movement should be coded as ongoing as of 2020, though the evidence is limited. [start date 2: 2006; end date 2: ongoing]

Dominant claim

- The Banabans started to make claims for independence in the 1960s (Hewitt & Cheetham 2000: 35; Hermann 2004; Pomerance 1984). [1979-1983: independence claim]
- In 2006, the Banaban representative in Kiribati’s parliament called for Banaba to secede and join Fiji (MRGI). This was supported by the Rabi Council. Roth (2015: 392) confirms this account, though he states that there were also claims for national independence. We code the more radical claim. [2006-2020: irredentist claim]

Independence claims

- See above. [start date: 1960; end date: 1983; start date 2: 2006; end date 2: ongoing]

Irredentist claims

- See above. [start date: 2006; end date: ongoing]

Claimed territory

- The territory claimed by the Banabans is the Banaba Island (also known as Ocean Island) west of the Gilbert Islands (Roth 2015: 392f). We code this claim based on the Global Administrative Areas database.

Sovereignty declarations

NA

Separatist armed conflict

- No violence was found so we code this as NviolSD. [NviolSD]

Historical context

- 1st phase:
 - o The inhabitants of the islands of Kiribati have unclear origins, with some accounts claiming migration from Samoa between 1000-1400 CE, with others claiming an initial migration from the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu around 2000 years ago (West, 2009: 405-6). The Banabans feel distinct from other Kiribati peoples as they see themselves as closer to the Melanesian culture of Fiji than the majority Micronesians of Kiribati (Roth, 2015: 392). Banaba is the only rock island of Kiribati, with the country's highest point, which once held one of the largest phosphate reserves in the world (West, 2009: 405).
 - o The Kiribati islands were first spotted by Spanish explorer Pedro Fernandez de Quiros in 1606. In 1788 British Captains Thomas Gilbert and John Marshall spotting several islands during their journey from Sydney to China, with the islands being named the Gilbert Islands in 1820. A three year drought from 1873 killed over three quarters of Banaba's population (Republic of Kiribati, 2012: Online). The British claimed the Gilbert Islands in 1877, and they became the British Protectorate of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1892, with Banaba (Ocean Island) being annexed by the British in 1900 due to its large phosphate reserves. The islands were formally colonized in 1915 (West, 2009: 406).
 - o In 1941 the Japanese bombed Banaba and occupied the island until US forces liberated it in 1945 (other Gilbert Islands were taken by US forces in 1943) (West, 2009: 406). During the Japanese occupation most of the population (Banabans and other Gilbert Islanders) were forcibly interned on other islands such as Nauru (Britannica, nd: Online; National Geographic, 2015: Online). Of those kept on the island as labourers, the Japanese killed all but one of the local peoples after agreeing to surrender to the USA (Britannica, n.d.: Online). After the war, the British government purchased the Fijian island of Rabi, and relocated remaining Banabans to this island under the pretext of wartime destruction, but phosphate mining continued after the war (West, 2009: 406: Minority Rights Group, 2017: Online).
 - o During the 1970s the Banabans attempted to separate from the Gilbert Islands, which was itself nearing independence (Britannica, n.d.: Online; Hermann 2004: 198). In an attempt to stop independence claims, in 1975 the Banabans were promised a special status for Ocean Island and a dedicated parliamentary seat, but this agreement was rejected by the Banabans (McAdams, 2016: 309). Just prior to Kiribati independence, the Banabans formally submitted a petition to the United Nations to denounce British occupation.

- Pomerance notes that, “when, in July 1979, the Gilbert Islands received their independence as the new State of Kiribati, the independence ceremonies were boycotted by the Banabans of Ocean Island” (Pomerance 1982: 86).
- By the time Kiribati gained independence, phosphate reserves on Banaba had ran out, leaving much of the island destroyed and uninhabitable (West, 2009: 406). As the Banaban homeland was heavily damaged, this could count as an autonomy restriction. However, due to this process occurring since 1900, and the island being largely destroyed whilst under British rather than Kiribati rule, no restriction is coded.
 - 2nd phase:
 - In 1994 a general review of the Kiribati Constitution was launched, with the results published in 1996 (McAdam, 2016: 326). The constitution was changed later that year, with the definition of Banaban’s changed to “the former indigenous inhabitants of Banaba and their descendants”. This had the effect of limiting the voting rights of Banabans on Rabi in Kiribati, for example preventing non-Banaban spouses from voting (McAdam, 2016: 320). This is a limitation on the political rights but not on autonomy or access to power, so is not coded.
 - No concessions or restrictions were found in the ten years before the first and the second phase.

Concessions and restrictions

- Calls for Banaban independence continued after Kiribati independence, particularly from 1980. The movement lasted until 1983 when a settlement was reached with Kiribati, concerning revenue sharing and financial matters (Hewitt and Cheetham, 2000: 35). Banaba also received a special status within Kiribati, with the island governed by the Rabi Council of Leaders and Elders, based in Fiji (Roth, 2015: 392). The Republic of Kiribati state that Council “has various rights on Banaba including the right to allow the occupation of land or dwellings formerly under the control of the British Phosphate Commission, and the right to appoint the Banaban representative to the Kiribati Parliament” (2012: Online). However, the 1983 arrangement has only seen the sparse repopulation of the island (Britannica, n.d.: Online). The settlement of 1983 represents significant autonomy concessions due to the special status it received and the rights afforded to Banabans. [1983: autonomy concession].
- In 1985, the Kribati government attempted to lift constitutional restrictions on the resettlement of non-Banabans onto Banaba Island, but this decision was stopped by the 1985 Commission of Inquiry (McAdam, 2016: 315). As the policy was not implemented, no restriction is coded.
- In 2006, Fiji allowed dual citizenship (McAdam, 2016: 307). This opened the path for Banabans to have dual Kiribati-Fijian citizenship, allowing them to vote in both states (Minority Rights Group, 2017: Online). Dual citizenship is not a cultural rights or autonomy concession as defined here and furthermore it was Fiji that granted dual citizenship pand not Kiribati.

Regional autonomy

- The 1983 settlement gave Banaba a degree of autonomy. Revenue sharing and other financial arrangements are under the control of the Rabi Council. However, the sparse repopulation of the island and continued resource extraction rights held by Kiribati raise questions over the effective excercise of autonomous power (Britannica, n.d.: Online; Roth, 2015: 392). However, autonomous power is controlled by a Banaban council, so regional autonomy is coded from 1984 due to the 1st January rule. [1979-1983: no regional autonomy] [2006-2020: regional autonomy]

De facto independence

NA

Major territorial changes

- [1979: host state change (new)]
- [1983: establishment of regional autonomy]

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Banabans
<i>Scenario</i>	No match
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	-
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	-

Power access

- o McAdam (2016: 316) claims that “The Kiribati Constitution provides for two elected parliamentary representatives to safeguard the Banabans’ interests. They do not have to be citizens of Kiribati”. MRGI notes that “Banabans can vote in Fiji and also in Kiribati, and have a member of parliament in Kiribati” (2017: Online). The Rabi Council also has the right to appoint the Banaban representative (Republic of Kiribati, 2012: Online). However, we found no evidence for representation in the national executive. Therefore the Banabans are coded as powerless. [powerless]

Group size

- According to MRGI, most Banabans now live in neighboring Rabi, which is part of Fiji, as they were removed from Banaba in the 1940s. A small number of Banabans have since returned to Banaba; Roth (2015: 392) suggests that Banaba now has a population of 335. We include Banabans in Fiji in the population estimate because are eligible and play a part in Kiribati politics (see above). According to a 2021 article, the total number of Banabans, including those in Fiji, is ca. 6,000. As of 2020, Kiribati had a population of ca. 120k, suggesting a relative group size around 5%. [0.05]

Regional concentration

- According to MRGI, most Banabans live on Rabi island, where they make up 95% of the local population of ca. 5,000. [regionally concentrated]

Kin

- MRGI suggests that most Banabans live in neighboring Fiji; however, their number does not exceed a few thousand and so the numeric threshold is not met. [no kin]

Sources

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