

Autonomous Island Regions

Abstract

Research regarding autonomous island regions encounters a myriad of various definitions used in two overarching traditions within the field: autonomism and federalism. This short article sheds some light on some of the most common definitions used and maybe how we can derive some closure in the area. However, more research should be done in order to come up with a complete list of autonomous islands in the world.

Introduction

There are several authors that distinguish between territorial and non-territorial autonomies (see e.g. Hannum 1996; Olausson 2008; Légaré and Suksi 2008; Tkacik 2008). Territorial autonomies are seen as special regions within their metropolitan state having legislative and administrative rights and a large scope of issues controlled by the regional government, while the non-territorial autonomies are based on individual or group rights for minorities, indigenous peoples or other specific groups within the society at large with functional, cultural or personal matters in focus. Within the area of territorial autonomies there have been some comparative works where island autonomous regions have been in focus. Olausson (2008) is able to find 39 autonomous islands in the world, while Benedikter (2009) lists about 20 such islands amongst his list of territorial autonomies. I have in my dissertation mapped 44 autonomous islands amongst the territorial autonomies in the world (Ackrén 2009). The numbers vary due to the definitions used in the respective study.

Concepts such as territorial autonomy, federacy, quasi-federal arrangements and asymmetrical federalism are all interlinked with each other (see e.g. Watts 2005; Elazar 1987). Indeed, there is some confusion on these concepts in the academic literature. Furthermore, island regions which have reached a high degree of self-government are usually referred to as sub-national island jurisdictions (SNIJs) (see e.g. Baldacchino 2004; Baldacchino and Hepburn 2012) or partially independent territories (PITs) (see e.g. Rezvani 2014).

This short article will focus on autonomous island regions, but what should we call them? The next section will try to come up with a workable definition that can be used for further studies in the field.

Conceptual Clarifications

The island regions in the world which have reached some form of special status within their respective metropolitan state are usually former colonies (such as Aruba, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Greenland, Puerto Rico etc.), but this is not always the case (Ackrén 2009; Olausson 2008). There are also islands which have received their self-government based on other political, economic and/or cultural conditions (e.g. the Åland Islands, Faroe Islands, Guernsey, Jersey, and Isle of Man). Devolution or decentralization within unitary states can take many forms. Usually, the states are divided into some forms of regional and local entities, such as, counties, districts and municipalities. However, sometimes some asymmetrical features occur where some regions enhance a greater autonomy or self-government than other regional and local entities with special rights. Island regions lying in the periphery usually belong to this group, since it is more practical if this type of region can handle as much of its internal affairs as possible lying far away from the power centres in the country in question. Decision-making becomes more practical if these are made as close to the citizens as possible. This also means that a certain “island identity” might occur and this will then further shape the island policy and relationship towards its metropolitan state. Political parties and movements are formed to address regional matters and these parties and movements advocate more regional and local matters, which might be different from their metropolitan counterparts.

Autonomous islands can be seen as lying in the middle of a continuum going from dependency to sovereignty. The autonomous island regions are operating on the sub-national level of the state where they occur and therefore they combine “self-rule” with “shared rule” in various ways (Baldacchino 2004: 77). The autonomous island regions constitute entities with both federal and non-federal elements. Federal elements include the idea of multi-level governance with some power and governmental authority transferred to the regions, while the ultimate sovereignty remains at the state level; special status arrangements, which may be seen as asymmetrical federalism; and the principle of combining shared-rule with territorial self-rule (Lluch 2012: 141-144). Some of the non-federal elements are that the formal distribution of power between legislative and executive bodies is not constitutionally entrenched; the shared rule element is usually weak or non-existent; influence over the policymaking institutions of the centre is weak or negligible; and self-rule is established in an unequal way in relation to the core state apparatus (Lluch 2012: 139-41).

A short overview of the various definitions in the literature gives us a picture of which specific characters these islands might

uphold.

Overview of some common definitions in the field

Concept	Definition	Author	Cases
<i>Autonomy</i>	To rule over oneself according to one's own laws or rules.	Dinstein (1981)	Here we could place various kinds of cases, not just island regions, but also individuals, churches, municipalities, minority groups etc.
<i>Personal and political autonomy</i>	"The right to be different and to be left alone; to preserve, protect, and promote values which are beyond the legitimate reach of the rest of the society".	Hannum (1996: 4)	Including not only autonomous islands, but minority and indigenous groups as well
<i>Territorial Autonomy</i>	A geographical defined area which differs from other sub-national units within the state and which enjoys a special status including some legislative powers within the state, but does not constitute a federal unit or an independent state.	Ackrén (2009); Olsson (2008)	American Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Aruba, Azores, Balearic Islands, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, Falkland Islands, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Åland Islands, etc.
<i>Asymmetrical federalism</i>	Political units with differences of interest, character and makeup and where local governments possess varying degrees of autonomy and power.	Tarleton (1965: 869)	Including not only autonomous island regions, but also other regions such as Catalonia, Basque Country, Nunavut, South Tyrol etc.
<i>Federacy</i>	"Asymmetrical permanent linkage between two self-government units with the larger having specific powers within the smaller in exchange for specific privileges". Any change in this relationship needs decision on a mutual basis by both parties. Federacies usually refer to peripheral or remote territories or islands.	Elazar (1987: 55); Elazar (1996); Watts (2005)	Faroe Islands and Greenland (in relation to Denmark); Åland Islands (in relation to Finland); Azores and Madeira (in relation to Portugal); Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey (in relation to Great Britain); and Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico (in relation to the USA)
<i>Sub-National Island Jurisdiction (SNIJ)</i>	Non-sovereign states with strong levels of internal autonomy, whether <i>de jure</i> or <i>de facto</i> or both; sub-national entities associated to a larger sovereign state with a distinct society and culture and constitute islands.	Baldacchino (2010)	Åland Islands, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, New Caledonia, Niue, Puerto Rico, Turks Caicos Islands, etc.
<i>Partially Independent Territory (PIT)</i>	"Partially independent territories are nationalistically distinct and constitutionally differentiated territories that share and divide sovereign powers with a core state. They are neither member units of federations nor are they fully controlled parts of unitary states."	Rezvani (2014)	Åland Islands, Aosta Valley, Aruba, Azores, Basque Country, Bermuda, Bougainville, British Virgin Islands, Catalonia, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, Curacao, Faroe Islands, French Polynesia, etc.

This list is not in any way exhaustive, but gives us some indications of how to define the territories in question. Similar features can be drawn from this list, such as, that autonomous islands seem to be self-ruling territories with a special status constitutionally within the core state and have legislative powers and some authors also go so far as to include ethnicity and culturally distinct features.

Possible Case Selection

How can the autonomous islands then be chosen if we are interested in investigating these territories in more depth? One point of departure would be to go through the countries' constitutions in the world to see if we can find autonomous islands mentioned in these constitutions. Those countries without written constitutions need, of course, a different approach where self-government acts or other forms of legislative regulations might be an option. There are also cases where special regions are only regulated through ordinary laws or acts and not mentioned in the constitutions (here we find examples of American Samoa, the American Virgin Islands, Cook Islands, Faroe Islands, and Greenland to mentioned just a few cases). Another approach might be to select cases from an institutional approach regarding multi-level governance or from a power perspective. The power that autonomous regions uphold can vary between the centre and the local majorities within the same area. Sometimes these powers are approaching quasi-statehood and at other times they are more limited. Autonomous regions may feature distinctive administrative units, electoral systems, political parties, political symbols, passports and membership in international organizations. Furthermore, autonomy may entail the ability to control natural resources, collect local taxes and set tax rates, obtain external loans, and more. In cultural spheres, autonomy may feature control over official languages, education systems and religious life. There might also be various legal traditions. The case selection will come down to the definition used in any study that we undertake, so therefore there might be various opportunities for different studies. A good study would also include contrasting cases of land-locked territories and not just islands and even the whole continuum going from dependency to sovereignty.

The Case of Greenland

Greenland is a good example where the status has changed over time. First, Greenland was a colony from 1721-1953. In 1953, Greenland became an integrated part of Denmark as a county amongst other counties in Denmark, but then in the end of the 1970s nationalistic movements among the local population started to demand more autonomy and even secession from Denmark. This led to the Home Rule Act in 1979. Greenland then began to take over a lot of various areas of competences from the Danish side. Later a new Self-Government Act in 2009 was implemented and gave Greenland even more powers approaching a kind of quasi-statehood. Now in the recent election campaign the independence issue is on the agenda. This example shows that autonomy is not a static phenomenon. Autonomy is always in a state of flux.

Conclusion

This short article has tried to elucidate the concept of autonomous island regions and how we can define these territories. It is clear that we encounter two traditions within research: autonomism and federalism. Sometimes these overarching strategies are combined and sometimes not. The debate will probably still go on for decades to come regarding how we perceive both traditions.

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