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Independence Parties in Subnational Island Jurisdictions

Godfrey Baldacchino and Eve Hepburn (editors)

Abstract:

Keywords: independence, islands, nationalism, sovereignty, political parties, subnational jurisdiction

Editorial

With the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the United Nations (UN) now has 193 members; but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has 204 ‘National Olympic Committees’ (NOCs) within its membership. South Sudan is, in fact, so far the only recognised sovereign state and UN member not to have an NOC: Guor Marial, a marathon runner from South Sudan, had to compete under the Olympic Flag in the 2012 London Olympics (BBC Sport, 2012).

Meanwhile, 12 other ‘nations’ have their own NOCs, even though they may not be widely recognised, or not recognised at all, as sovereign states. These are: Taiwan (replaced by the People’s Republic of China in the UN in 1992 and recognised as a state by 22 UN members); Palestine (which has full diplomatic relations with 106 UN states); the US Territories of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands; the UK Overseas Territories of Bermuda, (British) Virgin Islands and Cayman Islands; Aruba (a ‘country’ within the Kingdom of the Netherlands); Hong Kong, a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China) and the Cook Islands (in ‘free association’ with New Zealand). Following rule changes in

1996, the IOC has henceforth only accepted members that are also recognised as sovereign states by the UN, but the rule is not applied retroactively. There are at least 14 other ‘countries’ and/or regions that have ‘Olympic Committees’ but are not recognised by the IOC: Abkhazia, Anguilla, Catalonia, French Polynesia, Gibraltar, Kosovo, Kurdistan, Montserrat, Native Americans, Niue, Northern Cyprus, Northern Marianas, Somaliland and the Turks & Caicos Islands. Other ‘stateless nations’ such as Scotland have also been agitating for their own Olympic Team.

What may initially come across as slippage and inconsistency however highlights the real difficulties in looking at sovereignty as something indivisible, much like binary computer code: it is either 0 or 1: one is either sovereign or isn’t, with no room for dithering in between. Yet, timely improvements have been advised in how ‘sovereignty’ is measured, and the glib and reductionist use of dichotomous (sovereign/non–sovereign) variables has been cautioned against (Armstrong et al., 1998: 639, 641; Armstrong and Read, 2005, *passim*). The European Union has developed into a more flexible, yet more complex, ‘multi-speed’ institution with various countries enjoying various levels of opt-out (e.g. Warleigh, 2002), and more of this may yet unfold in the current euro crisis. Decades ago, Willoughby and Fenwick (1974) identified various candidates for ‘restricted sovereignty’ or ‘colonial autonomy.’ In reviewing such cases as Taiwan, Palestine but also Bosnia, Tibet and Hong Kong, Krasner (2001) speaks of ‘problematic sovereignty.’ Lake (2003: 310) suggests a gradation, or ‘a continuum of increasing hierarchy in international relations.’ He also warns (*ibid.*: 314) that ‘anomalies may be more commonplace than we often realize.’ Dommen (1985) had proposed a stratified continuum of jurisdictions, including a rather vacuous category of ‘more or less independent’ jurisdictions. Kerr (2005: 504) undertakes a similar exercise, using actual cases to illustrate different points on his continuum.

Indeed, unusual authority relations are quite typical in today's international domain; and the rationale for their existence and operation may be steadily increasing. Ong (2004) has identified a tendency on the part of governments to condone a progressively more variegated zonal capitalism or 'graduated sovereignty'; this has been described geographically as a 'complex and uneven experience of selective boundary crossings, subjectivities and exclusions' (Sidaway, 2007: 352).

In the complex game of politics, what impacts on the disposition of governments to condone constituent parts of their territory to assume autonomy, up to the point that they may be sovereign in all but name? After all, initiatives for devolution do not usually happen in an unsolicited fashion. They may be triggered by strong demands for self-determination; strong and historically traced grounds for cultural and linguistic specificity amongst national groupings within the state; a withdrawal from former colonial relationships; and/or a pragmatic response to the difficulties of operating a unitary state mechanism in such contexts.

In such matters, independence-leaning movements and political parties can make a difference. They may reflect existing nationalistic sentiments on the ground, as well as agitate for their ascendancy in national or regional political contests. In exceptional circumstances, they may secure political power and manoeuvre their nation towards independence. However, sometimes gaining government incumbency is more of a hindrance than an advantage for independence-seeking parties: in order to win the next election, they must prove that they have done a good job – without being independent – which may inadvertently 'contain' their aspirations if the electorate are content with their performance (Hepburn, 2010a).

The Scottish National Party (SNP) now finds itself in this position: having secured a majority of seats in the May 2011 elections to the Scottish Parliament, it has committed itself to

an ‘independence referendum’ in autumn 2014 (e.g. Scottish Parliament, 2012). In this situation, it joins territories like Bougainville (with an independence referendum envisioned by the Peace Agreement with Papua New Guinea, scheduled between 2015 and 2020); and New Caledonia (with its independence referendum expected between 2014 and 2019). However, the SNP faces a considerable challenge in persuading the electorate to choose ‘freedom’ from the UK; public opinion polls consistently show that independence is a minority preference; the majority of voters instead prefer the option of further strengthening the Scottish Parliament through a form of ‘maximum devolution’, including more substantial fiscal powers. Indeed, polls suggest that the London Olympics 2012 may have had a negative impact on support for independence. Former UK Prime Minister and Scot, Gordon Brown, even went so far as to claim that the ‘pooling and sharing’ of national resources and expertise – exemplified by Team GB – is a reason to oppose Scottish independence (Higgins and Carrell, 2012). But even he would not argue against augmenting Scotland’s autonomy within the Union.

Particular cases such as Scotland aside, one cannot help noting that many such candidates for increased autonomy are relatively small islands or archipelagos. Their distinct and discrete physicality, at times fairly remote from the administrative centre of their associated metropolitan country, makes them likely to secure separate administrative status as well as facilitate the generation of considerable local identity: the stage is therefore set for autonomy claims, and for a clearly identified territory over which such claims are meant to operate.

This special collection of papers was inspired by a deep seated curiosity to find out more about the function of independence movements in the 21st century. This follows the editors’ own complementary research interests in subnational island jurisdictions and nationalist and regional parties respectively (e.g. Baldacchino, 2010; Baldacchino & Milne, 2009; Hepburn 2010a,

2010b). And, with the eventuality of a Scottish independence referendum a distinct political reality, an international workshop was convened – most *à propos* - at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in September 2011, to discuss the dynamics of independence movements in sub-national island jurisdictions. The workshop brought together political activists and academics to discuss the strategies, modalities and aspirations of island SNRPs in the 21st century. They considered the opportunities and challenges to independence in an area of supranational integration and globalisation, and compared and contrasted these with different expressions of sub-national autonomy. The papers first presented at this workshop, and now revised and edited for this collection, investigated the role and impact of (nascent) nationalism in the context of domestic politics, as well as broader international influences, such as European integration. They also critically examined a number of ‘best practices’ in island sub-national autonomy and capacity in relation significant policy areas. All in all, this was a uniquely stimulating forum for an exchange of ideas between academics and practitioners.

Content Review

This collection kicks off with a comparative examination by Jerome L. McElroy and Courtney E. Parry of the socioeconomic profiles for 25 dependent island jurisdictions and 30 sovereign island states, all with populations of less than one million. The evidence presented is clear: the non-sovereign cluster now manifests ‘consistently superior performance’; whereas the same performance indicators were decidedly reversed in favour of the larger, soon-to-be sovereign islands back in the period 1945-1985. What exactly has happened to bring about this reversal of fortune merits further research; meanwhile, the ‘material advantage’ is not conducive to entertaining intimations of sovereignty in the current period.

In this scenario, then, we should not be surprised that independence movements and parties in non-sovereign island territories are ‘withering on the vine’. This is the argument proposed by Peter Clegg in his contribution, focussing on the Caribbean, where subnational units belonging to France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States continue to persist, and thrive. Popular calls and overriding motivations for reform have not been directed towards the securing of independence but, are rather fuelled by an ‘inter-island antipathy and rivalry, and insular particularism’. There is hardly any desire to break-away from the respective metropole.

A similar story unfolds in the broad insular Pacific: as Stephen Levine argues in his contribution, there are various ‘semi-sovereign’ island territories in the region and they can be realistically expected to continue their economically oriented diplomacy into the foreseeable future. The presence of ‘external powers’ - Britain, Chile, France, Indonesia and the United States - restricts full sovereignty, which providing an impetus to the semi-sovereign territories to seek some inroads into self-determination that however do not threaten their political status.

The situation is, however, somewhat different in the French Pacific. As discussed by Nathalie Mrgudovic in this collection, here has never been any pro-independence group or political party in Wallis and Futuna; but pro-independence movements have, since the 1980s, ‘evolved from illegal movements to democratically elected political forces wielding political power at every level of governance’ in both New Caledonia and French Polynesia. With the Cook Islands-New Zealand relationship in mind, nationalist forces in both islands are probably heading towards some kind of status of sovereignty association with France.

The situation is extremely different in the Mediterranean, where independence movements in the Canaries, Corsica and Sardinia must contend not just with their respective

metropolises – Barcelona Madrid, Paris, Rome - but with the European Union of which they form part and where pooled sovereignty limits room for manoeuvre. As André Fazi makes clear in his contribution, however, one cannot judge these movements simply on the basis of their ideological underpinnings and (not so strong) electoral support; they *do* have an impact on the policies of other, more mainstream parties, as well as the political system as a whole; and this, perhaps, is the best that they can hope for.

Still in Europe, Maria Ackrén and Bjarne Lindström take us with their contribution to Scandinavia in order to critically review the tensions in the island-mainland relations of three different island jurisdictions: Åland, Faroes and Greenland. While the latter two territories are on a gradualist but steady path towards looser ties with Denmark, their metropolitan state, Åland may be obliged towards ‘a gradual adaptation to the linguistic and political realities’ of metropolitan Finland despite the recent growth of an Alandic independence party.

Next is a ‘what if’ contribution: Britt Cartrite examines the likely implications of a successful 2014 independence referendum in Scotland on the rest of the British Isles: this is especially so in the outlying archipelagos of Orkney and Shetland that have maintained strong Norse identities and cultures that are distinct from the Gaelic identity of northern and western Scotland, and which have demonstrated antipathy towards the Scottish nationalist project. ‘An extension of the same logic used to justify an independent Scotland’ may very well manifest itself there, triggering a ‘domino effect’.

Do the travails of island states and territories have any bearing on the political evolutions and trajectories of other, non-island jurisdictions? In his contribution, Barry Bartmann describes the sovereignty march of another cluster of small jurisdictions: the European microstates. The case is convincingly made: differences in country size are no longer significant in dealing with

claims for sovereignty: but there are ‘huge economic differences’ between the European microstates and the world’s small island developing states, and this also impacts on the latter’s ability to pursue their diplomatic relations. Being sovereign is, therefore, not enough: sovereignty needs to be well managed, and ‘the resourcefulness of jurisdiction’ needs to be properly exploited.

Bringing up the rear, Godfrey Baldacchino and Eve Hepburn look back but also forward: we are not likely to see many small territories deliberately cut off their lucrative connections to their current metropolitan patrons; but many will continue to agitate for enhanced and improved opportunities for self-determination, even as the metropolitan powers seek to use their financing – apart from their sheer political clout - as leverage towards the pursuit of social reform, fiscal responsibility and the upholding of good governance practices.

With a sovereigntist party poised to return to power in Quebec, which has nurtured a close association with its Scottish independence-seeking counterpart over the years, the ‘domino effect’ remains a distinct possibility. But whatever the constitutional outcome in Quebec, Scotland and SNIJs such as Puerto Rico, Corsica, Sardinia Aland, Faeroes, Greenland, New Caledonia and Bougainville, jurisdiction definitely remains an interesting work in progress.

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August 2012

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