Why the Dutch flag waves in the Caribbean

By Gert Oostindie

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is a transatlantic state, uniting a middle-sized European country with six small islands in the Caribbean that were colonised in the 1630s. The islands have not been decolonised in the classic sense, in as much as there has been no transfer of sovereignty from the Netherlands to its former colonies. Rather, three of the islands (Aruba, Curaçao and St Maarten, with a joint population of just over 300,000) are autonomous countries within the Kingdom, while the less populated ones (Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba, with a total of just over 25,000 inhabitants) recently became overseas public bodies of the Netherlands with a status comparable to municipalities. Some may think of this continuity from a colonial to a post-colonial model, perpetuating the existence of non-sovereign polities in the Antilles, as a new form of colonialism. Clearly, however, the great majority of these islands' inhabitants do not want to break with the Netherlands.

Why is this? The 'Dutch Caribbean' is a remnant of a once impressive colonial empire, with its centre of gravity in Asia. Indonesia became an independent country after a bloody war of independence and protracted negotiations between 1945 and 1949. It took the Dutch a long time to accept the loss of their biggest colony, which they saw as indispensable to the Netherlands both economically and geopolitically. Suriname gained its independence in 1975 under completely different circumstances. By then, the Dutch government had little economic or geopolitical interest in the Caribbean and was eager to transfer sovereignty. Surinamese independence was therefore simply the outcome of negotiations between two governments that both had the same aim in view.

This was not true of the 'Netherlands Antilles', as the six islands were known at the time. While the Dutch government had been insisting since the early 1970s that this six-island entity should become a sovereign state, the mood on the islands was completely opposed. The islanders consistently refused to cut the umbilical cord that tied them to the former colonial power, and felt decreasing enthusiasm for keeping the six islands together. It took the Dutch a long time to accept that independence could not be imposed on the islands, and that the Antilles' centrifugal tendencies could not be held in check. The outcome, sealed in 2010, was nonetheless that the Kingdom would remain transatlantic, and that the six-island 'Netherlands Antilles' would no longer exist. The constitutional arrangements underlying today's transatlantic Kingdom date back to the early days of post-war decolonisation. Adopted in 1954, the Charter (Statuut) for the Kingdom of the Netherlands has remained the key

document for relations between the Netherlands and its former colonies in the Caribbean. The Charter's main formal features can be briefly summarised as follows: the participating states declare that they are voluntary partners in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, exercising their right to self-determination by forming it. The Kingdom is defined as an entity made up of autonomous countries, pledging to promote common interests on the basis of equality and to accord one another aid and assistance where appropriate. The four countries currently constituting the Kingdom – Aruba, Curaçao, St Maarten and the Netherlands – are autonomous in their internal affairs. A number of specific matters are defined as 'Kingdom affairs', the main ones being nationality, foreign affairs, defence and the safeguarding of good governance. The constitutional monarch reigns over each of the countries of the Kingdom; the governors in the Caribbean countries represent the monarch and thus the Kingdom, while at the same time they head the country's governments, formed by democratically elected parliaments.

Kingdom affairs are decided by the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom, consisting of the Dutch government supplemented by ministers plenipotentiary of the participating Caribbean countries. There is no Kingdom parliament, but as with the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom, other Dutch institutions like the Council of State function as Kingdom institutions with the addition of a representative of each Caribbean country.

No one would claim that this is a perfect post-colonial arrangement. The Kingdom has a 'democratic deficit', since the Dutch dominate the Kingdom government. The Netherlands' scale (17 million inhabitants) and resources make it the dominant partner in the Kingdom. There are also considerable cultural differences between the European and Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. The structure obviously has drawbacks and leads to tensions. Yet it is manifest over the past few decades, overwhelming majorities on all six islands have consistently voted to prolong the post-colonial ties embodied in the transatlantic Kingdom. The arguments are clear. Antilleans feel that the Kingdom guarantees democracy, human rights and liberties, and territorial integrity. They welcome the development funds it provides and the confidence it gives foreign investors. And then value the right of residence in the Netherlands and in the broader European Union that Dutch citizenship entails. Pragmatism prevails over nationalist ideology. This is not an exceptional situation. All over the world, similar arguments have led citizens of small, non-sovereign territories to refrain from struggling for full independence.

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