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## **The Dutch overseas territories in the Caribbean**

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# THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

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Despite being a relatively small European country, the Netherlands was one of the continent's main colonial powers, at various points in time controlling (parts of) contemporary Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and the United States. By the end of the Second World War, the Dutch East Indies (contemporary Indonesia) remained as the largest Dutch colony, but it soon became independent after a brutal decolonization war. This left the Netherlands with its remaining Caribbean colonies, among which Suriname (located on the South American continent) and five-and-a-half small Caribbean islands. Whereas Suriname eventually transitioned to independence in 1975, the Caribbean islands have resisted full independence and continue to remain part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands until the present day. As such, they are part of the world's relatively sizable group of non-sovereign jurisdictions: overseas territories that retain some constitutional relationship with a larger and often distant metropolitan state, usually the former colonial power (Aldrich and Connell, 2020; Baldacchino and Milne, 2006; Ferdinand *et al.*, 2020; Oostindie and Klinkers, 2003).

This chapter provides a chronological overview of transatlantic relations in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It starts by discussing the provisions of the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1954), which continues to be the constitutional foundation for relations in the Kingdom. As will be discussed, the Charter establishes a unique, quasi-federal entity that since its inception has generated conflict, confusion, and controversy. Whereas the content of the Charter has remained essentially unaltered since 1954, the structure and membership of the Kingdom have changed considerably in recent decades, and these changes will be discussed in detail. In particular, attention will be paid to the fragmentation of the Netherlands Antilles, the Kingdom country in which all Dutch Caribbean islands had been united since 1954. This fragmentation has resulted in different constitutional statuses for each of the islands, with three islands now being autonomous Kingdom countries, and three others being incorporated into the European Netherlands as public entities or "special municipalities" (Veenendaal, 2015).

Whereas constitutional rules and reforms will therefore be at the heart of this chapter, these legal provisions can, of course, not be seen in isolation from the (changing) attitudes and opinions towards transatlantic relations in the Kingdom. As a result, the latter part of the chapter will also pay explicit attention to public opinion about Kingdom relations on each of the six Caribbean islands, as well as in the European Netherlands. In order to do this, the chapter will discuss the outcomes of various elections and referendums that have been organized in recent decades. In addition, specific attention is paid to the results of two opinion surveys that were conducted in 1998 (Oostindie and Verton 1998) and 2015 (Veenendaal, 2016a; Veenendaal and Oostindie, 2018), to

gain a deeper understanding of the populations' attitudes towards specific components of Kingdom relations. The chapter ends with a conclusion in which a brief comparison is made with other non-sovereign territories in the Caribbean, and in which some future scenarios for the transatlantic Kingdom relations are presented and discussed.

### ***I. The Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1954)***

As discussed above, by the end of the Second World War the Dutch East Indies remained as the largest colony of the Netherlands. This archipelago had always been regarded as the “pearl in the crown” of the Dutch empire, and was seen as indispensable to the Dutch economy (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2012). Aware of rising anticolonial sentiments in the Dutch East Indies – which were occupied by Japanese forces in the spring of 1942 – on 6 December 1942 the exiled Dutch Queen Wilhelmina delivered a landmark radio address in which she proclaimed the end of colonialism, and promised the Dutch overseas territories far-reaching autonomy after the end of the war. This message had little impact in the Dutch East Indies, which declared itself independent immediately after the Japanese capitulation. While the Dutch military between 1945 and 1949 fought a brutal war to thwart Indonesian decolonization, in the end the Dutch government had to accept Indonesian independence. However, Queen Wilhemina's promises had also been picked up in the Dutch Caribbean territories, which had played a vital economic and strategic role during the German occupation of the Netherlands. Holding the Dutch government to its word, after the war ended these territories demanded the autonomy which had been promised to them (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2003, p. 68; 72).

The establishment of the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1954 can be regarded as the remarkable outcome of this historical turn of events. In line with Queen Wilhelmina's promises, the Charter established a Kingdom consisting of three equivalent “countries” which would have their own constitutions and be strongly autonomous in regulating their domestic affairs (Van Helsdingen, 1957). In addition to the European Netherlands (which at that time had a population of approximately 10 million), the Kingdom consisted of Suriname (population: 250,000) and the multi-island country of the Netherlands Antilles (population: 250,000; cf. Broekhuijse, 2012, p. 41). While the Charter primarily emphasizes the autonomy of the constituent countries, it also lists a limited number of Kingdom competences, among which defense, foreign affairs, and matters related to nationality and the Dutch passport. In addition, article 43 of the Charter stipulates that the protection of human rights, the rule of law, and good governance is a responsibility of the Kingdom as a whole. This regulation is clearly in contradiction with the domestic autonomy of the countries that is highlighted in other sections of the Charter. Overall, however, it can be ascertained that the Charter in many ways establishes the Kingdom as a federal or even confederal entity, with a very weak overarching Kingdom administration (Hillebrink, 2008; Nauta, 2011; Van Helsdingen, 1957).

The lopsided populations of the Kingdom countries and the (historical) dominance of the European Netherlands entailed that the “equivalent” position of the countries would not be reflected in the Kingdom's institutions. After much deliberation, it was decided that the Charter would not establish a completely new constitutional order, but would essentially add a number of provisions to the preexisting Dutch constitution

(Broekhuijse, 2012). The consequence of this decision was that the Kingdom would not have its own government or parliament, but that the political institutions of the Kingdom would largely overlap with those of the European Netherlands – one of the Kingdom’s three constituent countries (Hillebrink, 2008, p. 146). Hence, the Kingdom government is essentially the same as the Dutch government, with one “minister plenipotentiary” (Dutch: *gevolmachtigde minister*) added for each of the other Kingdom countries. These ministers plenipotentiary are selected by the governments of their home countries, but in contrast to regular Dutch ministers they do not have voting rights, cannot countersign laws, and cannot submit bills to parliament. Yet while the representation of Caribbean countries at the executive level is unbalanced to say the least, there would be no representation at all for these countries at the legislative level. The Charter did not establish a Kingdom parliament, but since the parliament of the European Netherlands controls the Dutch government (which largely overlaps with the Kingdom government), *de facto* this parliament functions as the Kingdom’s parliament (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2012, p. 97-98). Problematically, however, the populations of the Caribbean countries are not represented in this parliament, even though the parliament ratifies (international) treaties and laws that pertain to the Kingdom as a whole. In this respect the Charter clearly created a democratic deficit, and while over the years various efforts have been undertaken to remedy this deficit, so far these attempts have been unsuccessful (Hillebrink, 2008, p. 153-154).

In sum, therefore, it can be concluded that the Charter for the Kingdom establishes a truly unique institutional entity, which contains various contradictions and ambiguities (Broekhuijse, 2012, p. 18; Oostindie and Klinkers, 2003, p. 86; Veenendaal, 2017). The Kingdom appears federal in nature, and each of the Kingdom countries are legally equivalent, but institutionally one of them clearly dominates the others. The overlap between the Dutch and Kingdom governments creates ambiguity and confusion, because it is not clear when this executive operates as the Dutch government, and when it acts as the Kingdom government (De Jong, 2009, p. 90). The absence of Caribbean representation in the Dutch parliament, furthermore, means that the Caribbean countries and their populations cannot control this government, or hold it accountable for its actions. In the decades after the establishment of the Charter, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic have repeatedly acknowledged and renounced its flaws. However, the provisions of the Charter can only be changed if all Kingdom countries agree, and the lack of consensus between the European Netherlands and the Caribbean countries has entailed that the content of the Charter remains essentially the same as when it was adopted in 1954 (Veenendaal, 2017).

The intransigence of the Charter stands in marked contrast to the membership of the Kingdom, which has changed significantly since the Charter was adopted. In 1975 Suriname, one of the two Caribbean Kingdom countries, became independent and departed from the Kingdom. This left the Netherlands Antilles as the only remaining Kingdom country in the Caribbean. Consisting of three southern Caribbean islands (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao) and two-and-a-half northeastern Caribbean islands (Saba, St. Eustatius, and the southern half of St. Martin) which are separated by 900 kilometers of Caribbean Sea, this country was a curious political union between islands

with very dissimilar cultures, histories, economies, and languages. The political headquarters of the Netherlands Antilles were based on Curaçao, the most populous island. While people on this island despised their obligation to “take care” of the smaller five islands,<sup>1</sup> the other islands loathed their dependence on Curaçao, and felt that they were continuously neglected and under-resourced as “colonies of a colony”. Despite these tensions, for three decades after the establishment of the Charter, the Netherlands Antilles remained intact as a Kingdom country. Its archipelagic nature entailed that this country itself had a very decentralized political structure, as part of which each island had its own legislative council and executive institutions.

## ***II. The fragmentation of the Netherlands Antilles (1986-2010)***

In striking contrast to Indonesia, which as mentioned above was regarded as crucial to the Dutch economy, in the European Netherlands the Dutch Caribbean territories increasingly came to be seen as an economic liability and an anachronistic colonial legacy (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2012). This perception was strongly amplified after Dutch soldiers helped squash a labor revolt on Curaçao in May 1969, a move that was broadly condemned as a (neo)colonial intervention. Following this event, the Dutch government actively aimed to get rid of its Caribbean territories, and in 1975 it succeeded in convincing Suriname to accept independence (Hoefte, 2013). On the Dutch Caribbean islands this campaign was much less successful, and it became increasingly clear that the islands not so much wanted to terminate their relationship with the Netherlands, but rather aimed to cut the ties with each other. Unsurprisingly, the island that voiced this demand most strongly was Aruba, the second largest island of the Netherlands Antilles which had come to strongly resent its dependence on neighboring Curaçao (Alofs and Merkie, 1990). In the mid-1970s the Dutch government indicated that Aruba would be allowed to secede from the Netherlands Antilles, but only on the condition that it would become fully independent. A 1977 status referendum resulted in a staggering 95% majority for independence, but after this result Aruban politicians quickly made clear that they did not favor independence, and rather wanted Aruba to become a (non-sovereign) Kingdom country of its own. Unable to deny the Arubans this request under international law, the Dutch government finally had to accept this outcome, and in 1986 Aruba finally received its much-desired *status aparte*, as a result of which the Kingdom once again consisted of three countries (Lampe, 2001).

In hindsight, the secession of Aruba foreshadowed the complete disintegration of the Netherlands Antilles. After 1986 the remaining five islands extended their troubled political union, but a tourist boom on the next-largest island, St. Maarten, spearheaded increasing calls for separation on this island as well (Badejo, 1990). A St. Maarten status referendum in 2000 produced a clear majority of nearly 70% for becoming a Kingdom country. Subsequent status referendums on the other islands resulted in a Curaçaoan preference for becoming a Kingdom country as well, while majorities on

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1. On Curaçao, the smaller islands were often referred to as *bultu di buriku* or “donkey’s load” in the local Papiamentu language.

Bonaire and Saba opted for “direct (constitutional) ties with the Netherlands”. St. Eustatius, finally, was the only island that expressed a preference for remaining part of the Netherlands Antilles (Duijf and Soons, 2011). Since this option was ruled out by the referendums on the other islands, in the end St. Eustatius joined Bonaire and Saba in their negotiations for direct ties with the Netherlands.

The consequence of these votes was that the country of the Netherlands Antilles, which had existed since 1954, would be dismantled. This happened on the symbolic date of 10 October 2010 (“10-10-10”), when each of the five islands acquired a new status (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2012). Curaçao and St. Maarten joined Aruba in becoming autonomous Kingdom countries, meaning that the Kingdom since 2010 consists of four countries. After extensive negotiations, Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba were constitutionally integrated into the European Netherlands as public entities, a status provided for by Article 134 of the Dutch Constitution. Since the political institutions of these islands were reshaped according to the model that is used in Dutch municipalities, these islands – often referred to by the acronym of BES-islands – also became known as “special municipalities” or “Caribbean municipalities”. Importantly, as a result of these islands integration into the country of the (European) Netherlands, this country has now become a trans-Atlantic country of its own, and Bonaireans, Sabans, and St. Eustatians have gained the right to vote in Dutch parliamentary elections. In contrast to the French Overseas Departments, which are also completely integrated into the political system of France, the special municipalities are not (yet) part of the European Union and for now remain part of the group of Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT).<sup>2</sup> In table 1, an overview of the six Dutch Caribbean islands and their respective constitutional statuses after 2010 is presented.

**Table 1**

*Overview of the Dutch Caribbean Islands*

Island	Status	Location	Population	Landmass (km <sup>2</sup> )
Aruba	Kingdom Country	Southern Caribbean	120,000	180
Curaçao	Kingdom Country	Southern Caribbean	150,000	444
St. Maarten	Kingdom Country	Northern Caribbean	45,000	34
Bonaire	Public Entity	Southern Caribbean	20,000	294
St. Eustatius	Public Entity	Northern Caribbean	3,000	21
Saba	Public Entity	Northern Caribbean	2,000	13

**Source :**

2. Some of the French overseas territories are also part of this group (French Polynesia, New Caledonia, St. Barthélemy, St. Pierre and Miquelon, the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF), and Wallis and Futuna).

As new Kingdom countries, both Curaçao and St. Maarten experienced a turbulent political start. Political fragmentation on both islands has resulted in recurrent political crises and government collapses, creating profound political instability. In 2013 one of Curaçao's leading politicians, Helmin Wiels, was assassinated on a beach, setting off a criminal investigation that implicated several members of the island's political and business elite. In 2017, St. Maarten was hit by hurricane Irma, which completely devastated the island and its tourism industry. Both islands came in repeated conflict with the government in The Hague about their budget deficits and government integrity issues (Clegg et al., 2017). Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic and its negative impact on tourism has resulted in even more economic problems for the islands, and in the end the Netherlands agreed to provide financial assistance in return for a significant reduction of islands' (financial) autonomy. As a result, while Curaçao and St. Maarten formally are autonomous Kingdom countries, since 2010 their dependence on the Netherlands has strongly increased, and their autonomy has been considerably restricted.

The situation is completely different for the three islands that became public entities of the Netherlands. The constitutional integration of these islands is arguably the most dramatic status change that any of the Caribbean non-sovereign territories has experienced in recent decades, and constitutes a marked break with the Dutch tradition to keep its overseas territories at a distance (Veenendaal, 2015). Since 2010, the islands have gradually implemented metropolitan Dutch laws, but for financial and economic reasons they adopted the US dollar rather than the Euro as their currency. In addition to the local political institutions which have been reorganized in line with those of Dutch municipalities, the Dutch ministries are now represented on these islands in the shared service organization *Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland* (National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands), which is headed by a *Rijksvertegenwoordiger* (Lieutenant-Governor). The establishment of these institutions has resulted in a significant influx of Dutch civil servants and their families, which in light of the diminutive size of the islands creates considerable social pressures. Since 2010, the Dutch government has primarily invested in education, health care, law enforcement and tax collection on these islands. However, the adoption of the US dollar and the more complex importation of goods from neighboring Curaçao and St. Maarten (which are now different countries) have resulted in a strong increase of the cost of living, resulting in growing poverty on the islands. Since 2015, poverty reduction has become a new priority for the Dutch government, but remains as the most serious challenge on the islands.

### ***III. Attitudes and opinions of the Dutch Caribbean Populations before and after 2010***

While non-sovereign territories are sometimes claimed to have obtained “the best of both worlds” (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 49), or as having acquired an optimal political arrangement (Rezvani, 2014), in most non-sovereign territories around the world the enduring constitutional ties with the metropolitan power continue to create ambiguities, conflicts, and controversies (Aldrich and Connell, 2020; Ferdinand et al., 2020). This is particularly the case for Caribbean non-sovereign territories, in which the cruel colonial legacy of slavery and indentured labor unavoidably cast a shadow on the

enduring ties with a former colonial power (Bonilla, 2015). While elections, referendums and opinion surveys in these territories time and again show that a majority of the population opposes full independence, this does not mean that continuing relations with the metropolitan state are accompanied by a lot of enthusiasm or support. In fact, throughout the Caribbean, non-sovereign arrangements are often perceived as a continuation of colonialism or as a neocolonial scheme. The question, then, is why such arrangements are still preferred over independent statehood. The answer can be found in the various tangible advantages that non-sovereignty brings, which includes benefits related to: 1) nationality, passport, and the right of abode, 2) economic access and financial support, 3) military protection, and 4) the safeguarding of democracy, human rights and good governance (Veenendaal and Oostindie, 2018). In short, for populations of non-sovereign jurisdictions, non-sovereignty is often experienced as a head-versus-heart dilemma: it is seen as a pragmatic and rational choice (head), which at the same time is ideologically and normatively resented (heart).

This conundrum can also be seen when looking at the attitudes and opinions of the Dutch Caribbean island populations. In 1998 and 2015, two large opinion surveys were carried out on these islands to enquire about a variety of specific elements of the Kingdom relations (Oostindie and Verdon, 1998; Veenendaal, 2016a).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the first of these surveys took place when five of the islands were still united in the Netherlands Antilles (Aruba had already departed), while the second one was conducted five years after the dissolution of this country. Both surveys deliberately had similar questions, allowing for an intriguing comparison of public opinion between 1998 and 2015, and facilitating the observation of public opinion trends. Unfortunately, as a result of fraud committed by the interviewers on that island, the 2015 opinion survey failed to yield reliable results on St. Maarten.

A first question that both surveys asked relates to the political status of the islands. As table 2 shows, both in 1998 and in 2015 wide majorities of survey respondents on all islands rejected independence, even though support for independence has grown slightly on all islands. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the size of the pro-independence group appears directly related to the population size of islands, with support for independence being the strongest on Curaçao and the weakest on Saba. However, in line with findings in other non-sovereign territories, full independence is very much a minority preference, and this likely remains the case in the future. None of the major political parties on any of the islands explicitly strives for independence, even though adherence to the ideal of independence remains strong. But if anything, developments after the completion of the 2015 survey – among which hurricane Irma and the Covid-19 pandemic – can be assumed to have further undermined the support for independence on the islands.

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3. See these specific publications for more details about survey methodology, response rates, etc.



**Table 2**  
*Support for Full Independence*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	5,2 %	1,8 %	6,6 %	0,0 %	1,5 %	15,3 %
2015	7,4 %	2,6 %	14,4 %	3,2 %	7,3 %	-

*Source :*

Subsequently, both surveys asked a range of questions related to the oft-perceived benefits of non-sovereignty. Sequentially, questions were asked about the importance of Dutch military protection (table 3), the importance of Dutch financial support (table 4), the right to live in the European Netherlands (table 5), and the importance of Dutch administrative supervision (table 6). As all of these tables show, the (predominantly material) advantages of non-sovereignty continue to be experienced by the Dutch Caribbean populations, although there have been some noteworthy decreases on some of the islands. The importance of Dutch military protection and Dutch financial support continue to be felt most strongly on all islands, and there have been remarkably few shifts in this opinion from 1998 to 2015. When it comes to the right to live in the Netherlands and the importance of administrative supervision, rather pronounced declines can be observed in the three “special municipalities”. The constitutional integration of these islands into the Netherlands might be responsible for the decline of importance of the right of abode. When it comes to administrative supervision, resentment against increasing Dutch political interference was arguably the strongest on these islands. At the time that the survey was conducted, the island of St. Eustatius had just been placed under political supervision due to persistent maladministration issues, which is likely the cause of the declining support for administrative supervision on this island (Veenendaal, 2016b).

**Table 3**  
*Importance of Dutch Military Protection*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	95,3 %	96,1 %	92,5 %	93,7 %	94,9 %	89,6 %
2015	91,6 %	90,3 %	78,3 %	91,7 %	90,1 %	-

*Source :*

**Table 4***Importance of Dutch Financial Support*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	91,5 %	94,5 %	94,2 %	96,3 %	94,9 %	81,5 %
2015	88,0 %	88,6 %	83,4 %	92,6 %	89,4 %	-

*Source :***Table 5***Importance of the Right to Live in the European Netherlands*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	81,7 %	81,9 %	78,7 %	78,8 %	84,8 %	68,6 %
2015	77,3 %	58,2 %	69,6 %	70,4 %	50,4 %	-

*Source :***Table 6***Importance of Dutch Administrative Supervision*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	86,4 %	87,4 %	85,2 %	91,5 %	85,4 %	70,9 %
2015	75,4 %	48,6 %	61,0 %	60,8 %	31,1 %	-

*Source :*

Finally, the two surveys included a number of questions relating to the “heart”-element of non-sovereign relationships. The most prominent among these were a question about the perceived Dutch knowledge of the local island culture (table 7) and the perceived Dutch respect for the local island culture (table 8). Combined, these tables reveal a rather dramatic decline in perceived knowledge and respect from 1998 to 2015, and this decline is most pronounced in the islands that in 2010 became “special municipalities” of the European Netherlands. Especially when it comes to perceived respect, a dramatic decline can be observed. The results poignantly demonstrate that the constitutional integration of these three islands has not (yet) had the anticipated

effects, and that despite considerable financial investments of the Dutch government, resentment against the European Netherlands on these islands has only grown. This finding is in line with a 2015 evaluation of the constitutional integration that was commissioned by the Dutch government. The evaluation concluded that while some improvements in specific areas had been made, the predominant sensation on the three islands was disappointment (Spies et al., 2015).

**Table 7**

*Perceived Dutch Knowledge of the Island Culture*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	26,5 %	25,9 %	29,9 %	18,5 %	15,7 %	6,5 %
2015	15,5 %	3,1 %	10,1 %	9,5 %	5,9 %	-

*Source :*

**Table 8**

*Perceived Dutch Respect for the Island Culture*

	Aruba	Bonaire	Curaçao	Saba	St. Eustatius	St. Maarten
1998	41,1 %	45,3%	42,8%	63,0%	50,5%	21,4%
2015	19,6%	5,8%	11,2%	14,6%	6,0%	-

*Source :*

On both sides of the Atlantic, the 2010 reforms were lauded as a fresh start of transatlantic Kingdom relations. The widely despised governance structure of the Netherlands Antilles was finally cast aside, and each of the islands would now have direct relations with the European Netherlands. Ten years later, it must be concluded that most of these hopes have not materialized, and that if anything, the relations between the Caribbean and the European parts of the Kingdom have further deteriorated. While Kingdom relations are not a prominent issue for most metropolitan Dutch politicians and citizens (many of whom appear scarcely aware that the islands are part of the Kingdom), a majority of them would prefer to terminate all ties with the Caribbean islands, which are broadly considered to be a drain on Dutch resources. An opinion survey in the European Netherlands in 2008 revealed that 50% of respondents would prefer to “get rid” of the Caribbean islands, and by 2015 this figure had increased to over

60%. However, while international law prohibits the Netherlands to force the islands to accept independence, the islands have very little instruments to prevent increased Dutch intervention and administrative oversight. As a result, all Kingdom partners continue to remain locked in a postcolonial predicament that continues to be structured on the basis of the deficient and broadly renounced Charter of 1954 (Veenendaal, 2017).

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### ***Conclusion: What will the future bring?***

In comparison to other non-sovereign jurisdictions and their metropolitan powers in the Caribbean, the constitutional position of the Dutch Caribbean islands is quite extraordinary. Since *Départementalisation* in 1946, the French overseas departments have been fully integrated in the French state, while the overseas territories of the United Kingdom and the United States have acquired distinct yet clearly inferior statuses vis-à-vis their metropolitan powers (cf. Clegg and Gold, 2012; Daniel, 2009; Duany and Pantojas-García, 2005). As a result, the Dutch Kingdom countries are the only ones to have obtained a distinct *and* legally equivalent position to the metropolitan European Netherlands. However, as discussed extensively in earlier sections of this chapter, the institutional structures of the Kingdom of the Netherlands entail that this equivalence does not materialize in practice. As a result, while the Caribbean Kingdom countries formally have a much more autonomous position than other non-sovereign territories in the Caribbean, in practice their position is actually much more similar. Increasing infringements on the domestic autonomy of the Caribbean countries by the Kingdom government entail that the discrepancy between these formal and informal realities has become even more profound.

The situation is markedly different for Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius, which in 2010 were constitutionally integrated with the European Netherlands. As a consequence of their integration, these islands lost the relative autonomy they had as constituent parts of the Netherlands Antilles. In return, as integral parts of the European Netherlands they acquired many of the benefits and rights that ordinary Dutch citizens enjoy.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the constitutional integration of these three islands contains some striking parallels to the French *Départementalisation* of Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Martinique in 1946, and the three islands have now joined these French overseas departments as Caribbean territories that are integral parts of a predominantly European state. As discussed above, the constitutional integration of these diminutive “special municipalities” is arguably the most dramatic status change in the entire non-sovereign Caribbean in

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4. However, much to the frustration of the island populations, the Dutch government continues to treat the islands somewhat differently than regular Dutch municipalities on the grounds of their particular geographic circumstances. In 2017, their status as special municipalities was enshrined in the Dutch constitution, including the “differentiation principle” which entails that some laws on the islands can be different than in the European Netherlands. In practice, this means that some Dutch laws and provisions continue to be denied to the islands.

recent decades. Remarkably, it also goes against the broader trend towards increasing autonomy that can be witnessed in non-sovereign territories around the globe (Aldrich and Connell, 2020).

As Aldrich and Connell correctly concluded more than two decades ago (1998, p. 24), “status issues in the territories are never fully resolved.” Indeed, as this chapter has demonstrated, despite the high hopes that accompanied the 2010 dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles and the acquirement of a new political status by five Dutch Caribbean islands, ten years later it must be concluded that disappointment and frustration remain the prevailing sentiments about Kingdom relations. After having gained the much-desired status of Kingdom country, Curaçao and St. Maarten experienced successive political crises and disasters that have significantly reduced their autonomy. Despite having obtained direct ties with the European Netherlands, Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius are still treated on an unequal basis, and the increasing Dutch presence on these islands is broadly begrudged. Finally, in the European Netherlands, the hopes that the breakup of the malfunctioning Netherlands Antilles would make relations with the Caribbean partners more harmonious and efficient have not materialized. In sum, over the past ten years Kingdom relations have only become more antagonistic, even as the Charter continues to legally bind the partners together.

This raises the question what the future of the Kingdom will look like. The Charter stipulates that its provisions can only be changed on a unanimous basis, and according to international law the European Netherlands cannot force the Caribbean islands to become independent, and also cannot declare itself independent from the Kingdom. Recognizing these limitations, the Dutch government has shown an increasing preparedness to intervene politically on the islands, and to provide economic support only in return for significant reductions in island autonomy. Faced with hurricanes and the Covid-19 crisis, the Caribbean governments can only grudgingly agree, as for them the obstacles of independence only appear to have grown. In the end, therefore, despite growing Caribbean resentment about increasing Dutch involvement and interference, the Dutch government seems poised to play an even more influential role on the islands.

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