Upside-Down Decolonization

by Rosemarijn Hofte and Gert Oostindie

What do less-developed countries stand to gain or lose, as the US, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union seek to reduce their geopolitical commitments? Uncertainties abound, as illustrated by the case of the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean.

The prospects for the independence of Holland’s Caribbean possessions are clouded by questions of economic viability and political fragmentation, as well as domestic politics in the Netherlands. The Antillean understandably hold that these problems need to be solved before changes in the relationship with the Netherlands can be addressed.

With Aruba things are different. According to the 1983 amendments to the law (Statut) that governs decolonization, this island must become independent in 1996. But neither the Aruban government nor the population is willing to take this final step because they are content with their present status as an autonomous partner in the Dutch Kingdom.

The most extreme scenario would make the Netherlands Antilles a Dutch overseas province. The almost unanimous opinion of politicians in the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean is that this option is not preferable. The larger islands certainly would not want to take such a regressive step. Nevertheless, it is not out of the question that in case of further fragmentation of the Netherlands Antilles, smaller islands such as Saba, Bonaire, and St. Eustatius would eventually opt for the status of the 15th province of the Netherlands. Saba and Bonaire have already expressed their interest in doing so.

If some, or all, of the islands choose to become a sort of Département d’Outre Mer, each island would become a separate municipality with a so-called “Article 12” status. This means that each island would be under the financial tutelage of the Dutch state. Such an arrangement could provoke the possibility of growing Antillean resentment against renewed Dutch involvement in local affairs.

When discussing the decolonization of small islands, such as the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, one wonders why the metropole wants such mini-states to become independent. What is the burden it finds too heavy to carry? Sociologist Harry Hoetink has suggested that Dutch policymakers fear two things: a revisit to the social unrest and rioting of “Willemstad 1969” and mass migration from the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba to the Netherlands. A third fear might be added: the financial costs.

Responsibilities and Image

In our interview with the Dutch minister of Social Affairs and Netherlands Antilles Affairs, Jan de Koning, his Excellency volunteered his view on decolonization. Koning preferred the term “decolonization” to “decolonization.” This was not meant to be a play on words. He emphasized that, since the signing of the Statut, relations in the Dutch system are no longer regarded as “colonial,” a fact recognized by the UN. The minister underlined that the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba are equal partners, even though the former nation supplies financial and technical assistance. Moreover, in the area of foreign relations the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba are included in relevant negotiations and treaty signings. In short, the Caribbean partners possess a high degree of autonomy, in spite of the social and cultural traces the colonial past may have left.

Koning’s remarks are justified. Yet they are telling with regard to the Dutch concern with world image. Many Dutch felt the events of May 1969 severely tarnished this image. Even though no shot was fired and the Dutch were required by Article 43 in the Statut to restore order, the episode left a bitter taste for two main reasons.

First, the Dutch, especially the young, believed the Netherlands should lead Europe and the US in improving relations with the Third
World. They resented their country’s seeming reversion to its old role as a colonial power ready to intervene when its interests are threatened. Some politicians like Koning still talk about May 1969 as a nightmare for both the Netherlands Antilles and the Netherlands. But the majority of the Dutch do not think the international community still labels the Netherlands as a colonial power, or did so even in 1969. Ironically, pushing the Netherlands Antilles into independence today might be considered a repulsive colonial act.

A second difficulty concerns Article 43, which mandates the Dutch to guarantee “adequate administration” of their overseas territories. Article 43 stipulates that the Dutch government may be called upon to control internal unrest. “May 1969” suggests this provision is no dead letter. Most Antillean politicians do not resent the “colonial” connotations of this part of the article, but would not mind if it were removed. Henny Eman, the former prime minister of Aruba, has said that internal defense and adequate administration are “our own responsibility; we will never call upon the Netherlands for help as far as these are concerned.”

The Dutch are still uneasy, though. Despite their obligation to intervene, they are not supposed to exert any influence on Antillean politics. Nevertheless, with the constitutional and economic problems in the Netherlands Antilles, Dutch involvement has intensified to the dismay of politicians in the Netherlands. With this growing involvement Dutch disaffection with the political system in the Netherlands Antilles has increased proportionally. The nature of Antillean politics, including relatively large social and economic inequalities and patronage, is not always appreciated by the more Calvinistically-inclined officials and politicians in The Hague.

In addition to internal order, Article 43 covers the external security of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. External defense is a hornets’ nest. The Antilleans and Arubans cannot defend themselves, yet the Dutch are not able to do much more than show the flag in the hope it will thwart outside aggressors. At present, such external threats seem relatively remote. The Dutch presence in the Caribbean still provides some stability in a volatile region, much to the satisfaction of the US and Venezuela. Major problems, however, could develop if the Statuut is changed or revoked, leaving no adequate provisions for defense. The vacuum could be filled by other powers, thereby threatening Antillean sovereignty.

It seems Article 43 will become one of the major issues in discussions regarding constitutional changes in the Statuut. Minister Koning and former Netherlands prime minister Barend Biesheuvel are most specific in identifying why the Netherlands wants to discard its responsibilities vis-à-vis the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. Both refer to Article 43. Biesheuvel argues external security is the disputed point. In contrast, Koning thinks the obligatory Dutch guarantees of internal security and decent administration under Article 43 are the main problems, because they interfere with the autonomy of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba.

The latter problem seems easier to solve than the external defense issue.

In short, the provision for intervening in the case of internal or external threats will probably serve as a stimulus to Dutch desires to decolonize and an irritant in future relationships between the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba.

Migration

The inhabitants of the Netherlands Antilles have Dutch passports and are thus entitled to unrestrained settlement and social benefits in the Netherlands. Independence will take away Dutch nationality and close the borders. It may thereby limit mass migration to the Netherlands. Fortunately the future of the Netherlands Antilles is not a major issue in the Netherlands; Dutch political parties do not openly seek to capitalize on latent xenophobia. All parties deny that racism or xenophobia plays any role in their decisions. Instead, other reasons, such as costs incurred to the islands by the brain drain and the bad employment situation for Antilleans and Arubans in the Netherlands, are used to defend measures limiting the number of incoming migrants.

The liberal-conservative Peoples’ Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) yearly calls in parliament for stricter admission rules, yet
never receives support from any other major party. The VVD seems to be guided by the spectre of the Surinamese exodus of the 1970s. On the eve of independence in 1975, or shortly after, 150,000 people (one-third of the total Surinamese population) settled in the Netherlands. The VVD claims this led to political and economic disaster in Suriname and represented a burden on the Dutch welfare state, because Surinamese immigrants—as Dutch citizens—were entitled to social benefits. A brain drain will leave the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba with a shortage of trained executives. The problem with this argument is that it easily might be abused to cover less noble motives to limit migration.

The total “ethnic” population of the Netherlands is an estimated 700,000 people, or less than 10 percent of the population. Approximately 50,000 of these “ethnics” are from the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, islands which have a total population of 260,000. More than 40 percent of these Antillean and Aruban migrants are unemployed. This situation makes their position in the Netherlands vulnerable. It also gives rise to local resentment against “the foreigners” who put pressure on the Dutch entitlement structure. Support for racist parties declined in the parliamentary elections of 1986. Nevertheless, it seems that many Dutch citizens have reached the limits of tolerance and acceptance of foreigners. This, too, may influence Dutch policy.

On the other side of the ocean, the Antillean and Aruban governments use the migration issue to put pressure on their Dutch counterpart. They sometimes cunningly threaten that immigration to the Netherlands will escalate if the Dutch, for example, refuse to increase their financial assistance to balance the budget or if the Netherlands tells them to prepare for independence. Such threats, which indeed frighten many Dutch politicians and citizens alike, seem to be one of the few trumps the Antilleans and Arubans are holding in their negotiations with The Hague. Of course this could also be a self-defeating argument, prompting the Dutch to curtail free immigration.

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**Finances**

Former Aruban prime minister Eman thinks Dutch financial support is a factor in decisions regarding the future of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. One of the most important goals of his administration was to become financially independent: “Money should not cloud decisions on your constitutional future,” he said.

In these islands development aid per capita is among the highest in the world. The Netherlands disburses about 25 billion guilders per year to its partners overseas. This amount excludes defense, administration of justice, and occasional budget support. The sum is fixed at 5 percent of the Dutch development aid budget, which in turn is fixed at 1 percent of the total budget. Per capita, this is Dfl1000 or $500, many times more than the aid from all other sources that the English-speaking Caribbean receives.

Most Dutch politicians we have talked to confide that money is of no consequence in the debate, and some even call the amount of financial support “peanuts.” Only the VVD representative expresses some reservations. His party thinks the remittance of money from the Netherlands to the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba is “excessively high.” Two arguments are used. Poorer countries in the world may have stronger claims and the Dutch have experienced painful cuts in the social and educational budgets. In other words, the money might otherwise be used to balance the budget in the Netherlands.

Antilleans counter these arguments with arguments of their own. First, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba have a 300-year-old tie with the Netherlands that makes them special. This argument is supported by some Dutch politicians, especially older ones. Second, Antilleans rightly claim that they must cut their budget more drastically than their Dutch colleagues. Another argument is that development aid sustains a high standard of living and high wages in the Dutch Caribbean, a disadvantage in the intra-Caribbean competition for investments and employment. Antilleans correctly stress, however, that this standard is not a consequence of development aid but of past industrial activity, particularly in the oil sector.

Even though most Dutch say they want the amount of aid to remain the same, some of them suggest that the donor country should have a larger voice in allocation. This is a new development. During the past two decades, presenting the money with strings attached was “not done.” In the 1980s even social democrats support Koning’s viewpoint that the Netherlands should direct and control the spending of its development aid. Stimulation of social and economic development, not theaters or community development projects, should be its thrust, they say.

Dutch politicians deny that the possible independence of the Caribbean partners, most likely followed
by a commonwealth construction, would have consequences for the amount of Dutch aid to the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. A VVD spokesperson suggests that aid may be reduced if the status quo is maintained, rather than when the islands become independent. The Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, nonetheless, may express some reservations about Dutch guarantees for development aid. After all, following the so-called “December murders” of 1982, when the Surinamese military junta executed 15 members of the opposition, the Dutch suspended all economic aid to the former colony. In short, the islands may rightly feel the Statuut offers more guarantees for financial support than any other treaty between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba ever will.

Why Independence?

Do the Dutch want to extricate themselves from their “colonial” relationship because of political pressure from the rank and file in the metropole or because there is a lack of interest for the welfare of the citizens overseas? Or is it just the opposite: Dutch concern for the welfare of their overseas territories? There might, of course, be another reason for decolonization: using the threat of independence as a lever to influence Antillean and Aruban politics. Finally, there may exist a general uneasiness about the idea of having “dependencies” in the late 20th century.

The first two motives seem unlikely explanations of Dutch policy, since the overseas territories are not a political issue in the Netherlands. One Curaçaoan politician even complains about this “detrimental lack of interest.” Probably the only way the overseas territories could move into the limelight is when the Netherlands Antilles or Aruba make negative headlines, as happened in May 1989, or when demagogues get the upper hand, expressed in xenophobia, or if the cost of keeping the islands afloat is set off against cutbacks in the Dutch welfare system.

Even among policymakers, whose actions are guided predominantly by Dutch interests, a total absence of concern for citizens in the West Indies seems no ground to push the Netherlands Antilles into independence. Some genuinely believe independence would help the development of the territories. This argument, rejecting continued dependence, receives support in Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles. When we asked the Aruban pro-independence politician, the late H. S. “Betico” Croes, why his country should become independent, he answered, “That question has been answered by more than 140 countries. You have to fend for yourself and accept your own responsibility.” Antillean premier Maria Libera Peters expresses it even more crisply, “It’s your pride, it’s your dignity.”

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As real as these nationalist sentiments are, they do not reveal the actual dynamics that characterize the present decolonization process. Indeed, to the Antillean, the idea of independence is a long-term one, not a matter for immediate implementation. The Dutch, though, are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, many policymakers in the Netherlands want independence for the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba mainly because of their qualms about a colonial relationship as we approach the magic year 2000. Words such as “unnatural,” “anachronistic,” and even “futureless” are used to express these misgivings.

Supposedly, the wheel of history dictates that independence is the next logical step for the Caribbean partners. A member of the Dutch parliament, however, implies it is not so much the wheel of history as it is the wheel of politics that directs the future of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba: “It is hard to retrace one’s steps if there exists no immediate reason to do so.”

On the other hand, Antillean resistance to any clear-cut and immediate independence might tempt the Dutch to use the idea as a threat, indeed, as a punishment, to achieve two goals. First, the threat applies pressure on the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba to balance their budgets and reorganize their disproportionately large civil services. Obviously the Dutch minister of Antillean affairs cannot reveal whether he employs the threat of independence as an incentive to ensure that the islands change their financial and administrative ways. But some experts doubt such a line of action would have any effect, since nobody reckons with a forced independence. Secondly, and much more effectively, the threat suppresses possible inclinations in other islands towards attaining a separate status. When, for example, St. Maarten in 1988 expressed its desire to become a separate country within the Kingdom, the Dutch answer was clear: the choice is between participating in the Antilles-of-five or outright independence.

The upshot is that decolonization in the Dutch Caribbean departs from previous patterns and experiences. It is an “upside-down” process. Since a colonially-imposed independence is not expected, what is unfolding is a complex and often perplexing, but in the final analysis eminently-civilized, minuet between metropole and colonies. ■