

The pursuit of Inuit sovereignty in Greenland

Rauna Kuokkanen

Since 2009, Greenland has had extensive political and economic autonomy. The passing of the *Self-Government Act* (SGA) marked an end to three decades of limited “home rule” autonomy and most significantly, the taking over of the country’s mineral and oil rights (previously co-managed with Denmark). With the introduction of greater self-government, Greenland was also granted the right to full independence from Denmark, should the country so choose in the future.

In March and April 2013, I had an opportunity to visit Nuuk as part of my research on Indigenous self-determination. I interviewed 17 Greenlanders about their experiences and views of self-government.¹ There were three issues that were seen as most important: the recognition as a people, the right to independence and to mineral resources.

The *Greenland Self-Government Act* is an extension of the powers enacted in the *Home Rule Act* of 1979. It establishes new political and legal opportunities for Greenland to gain extensive self-governance and ultimately, independence (if the population of Greenland so chooses in the future). The *Home Rule Act* contains 33 areas of jurisdiction, including mineral resources, fisheries, environment, justice, policing and law. Under the *Self-Government Act*, Denmark retains control of the constitution, citizenship, Supreme Court, foreign affairs, defense and currency; however, Denmark is expected to involve Greenland on foreign affairs and security matters that affect or are in the interests of Greenland.

Through the *Home Rule Act* and the *Self-Government Act*, Greenland has the right to elect its own parliament and government, the latter with executive authority over the areas of jurisdiction included in the Acts. The Inatsisartut (the legislative assembly) consists of 31 members, who are elected by the population of Greenland for a four-year period. Since home rule, Greenland’s governance structure has been a Nordic-style cabinet-parliamentary system. There were no changes to the governance structure in the *Self-Government Act* except a cosmetic name change: the Danish terms for the parliament and the government were replaced with Greenlandic

ones. Unlike Nunavut, the other Inuit jurisdiction, Greenland has expressed no intention of establishing a government based on Inuit values and governance principles. In negotiating the self-government agreement, there was no discussion of Inuit values or governance; there was no public or political discourse on the topic before self-rule and has been none since. For former premier Aleqa Hammond, however, the self-government agreement unequivocally reflects Inuit governance because of the strong Inuit involvement in the drafting process:

Absolutely, absolutely, because it’s formed by us, and adopted by Danes. ... When I say “by us,” that’s the members of the Commission for Self-Governance, and the Joint Commission between Denmark and Greenland. So yes, I’m fully happy about the agreement and I don’t think we could have got a better agreement than we have today, in all respects, to all parties that have been working with us, for us. (Interview, April 11, 2013).

A Path to Independence?

Most Greenlanders hope to see their country become an independent nation in their lifetime. They echo the sentiment of former premier Lars-Emil Johansen, according to whom independence is a legitimate aspiration “deeply anchored in the Inuit soul” (AFP, 2008). The significance of economic and political independence was mentioned by all the interviewees, most of whom took future independent Greenland more or less for granted. The *Self-Government Act* explicitly recognizes the right to an independent Greenland by stating that the “decision regarding Greenland’s independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland” and that “independence for Greenland shall imply that Greenland assumes sovereignty over Greenland territory” (*Act on Greenland Self-Government*, 2009). The first and necessary step toward that goal would be the full implementation of the self-government, which implies gaining authority over all 33 areas of jurisdiction included in the agreement. Faced by such an enormous undertaking with considerable economic, logistical and

social challenges, it is perhaps not so surprising that the rhetoric of Indigenous rights has been pushed to the backstage. Practical challenges such as the lack of educated work force and the competence of the self-rule administration are emphasized over more abstract questions of the rights of Indigenous peoples which are of less importance in a setting where nearly 90 percent of the population are Indigenous Inuit.

As they aspire for independence from Denmark, Greenlanders have to deal with economic realities of budget shortfalls and thus, the pressure to pursue an aggressive agenda of resource extraction. Their political dream hinges on economic self-sufficiency but in order to achieve it, Inuit leaders have to actively go against not only the stance of most Indigenous rights advocates globally but also prevailing notions of Indigenous worldviews that emphasize the relationships with the land and seek to protect its integrity. Economic realities such as collapsing commodity prices, however, might play a bigger role. They already have, in effect, dampened the dreams of independence but also thrown into sharp relief how unsustainable such dreams are as long as they are premised on global capitalism. As the result of the recent downturn in the market prices of minerals, oil and gas, the likelihood of Greenland becoming independent in the lifetime of current politicians have become quite a bit slimmer. The prospects of offshore oil and gas development, once considered a best long-term option for Greenland, are even dimmer as several major oil companies have returned their exploration licences and pulled out from West Greenland (Hannestad 2015).

Nearly half of the respondents cited the right to mineral resources as the most undeniably significant aspect of the *Self-Government Act*. Yet with the right to mineral resources has come the pressure to develop these resources as a main means of achieving greater autonomy and implementing self-government. In fact, given the constraints of the agreement, expanding the economic base and becoming more financially self-sufficient is the precondition of expanded self-government. Not surprisingly, then, the first years of self-rule have been dominated by the political debate and public discourse on mineral exploration and the entry of multinational corporations.

The dilemma for nearly everyone is the challenge of finding the balance between the pressing need for new revenue sources, for diversifying the country's struggling economy and engaging in resource extraction, while meeting high environmental and social standards so that the Inuit hunting and fishing culture (which is dependent on healthy natural resources) is not jeopardized.

While most Greenlanders welcome economic development and see mining in particular as inevitable, there is a substantial degree of unease with regard to the environmental, cultural and social changes that would follow large-scale resource extraction projects. The impact on Greenlandic life and culture is potentially immense and many referred to the insufficient consultation – particularly with regard to the approved USD 2.3 billion iron-ore open pit mine located in Isukasia, 150 kilometers from the capital in the Nuuk Fjord. Known as the Isua project, it has been criticized for a number of reasons, including inadequate public consultation and considerable environmental, cultural and socioeconomic impacts, including the importation of several thousand foreign labourers to construct and operate the mine. A widely-shared sentiment is that in spite of public hearings and environmental and social impact assessments, the speed of planning of the Isua Project has been such that ordinary Greenlanders have not been able to follow the development and thus, feel anxious about, if not opposed to, this and other development projects.²

The first years of self-rule have not engendered considerable changes in Greenlanders' daily lives, beyond exposure to the relentless public debate and politics of developing extractive industries. Several interviewees noted that, internally, things have changed very little. Problems that plagued the functioning of the home rule administration³ have not yet been eliminated under self-government. Needless to say, the implementation of Greenlandic self-government depends to a great extent on the competence of the self-rule administration. There is an increasing number of Greenlanders in the administrative apparatus, especially in the areas of language and culture, but many key positions continue to be occupied by Danish professionals. These are often young Danish men who come to Greenland to start their careers, build their resumes and make money. They stay in these jobs for only a couple of years, resulting in high staff turnover, which gives rise to a lack of continuity and inconsistent political goals. There is also a tendency for the Danish administrative staff to import consultants from Denmark and to direct trade to Denmark and Danish companies (interview with municipal civil servant, March 16, 2013).⁴

While possessing the appropriate education for the job, during their brief stints Danish professionals do not acquire an understanding of Greenlandic culture, values or language, which is widely seen as a considerable problem. Dependency on Danish expertise and civil servants who lack cultural competence may impede the implementation of a more Greenlandic version of governance and erode the

sense of ownership, among Inuit Greenlanders, toward the process of self-government.

The self-rule government represents successful implementation of Indigenous self-determination in that Greenlanders are now practically in control of nearly all of their own affairs. They have sole authority over their resources and have chosen their political mode of organization, even if it is largely a model directly adopted from Denmark. Yet arguably, and as pointed out by several interviewees, indirect, subtle colonial control continues in the presence of a large number of Danish civil servants who come with mainstream, Western institutional and cultural practices and priorities.

Nonetheless, under self-government Greenlanders have achieved one of the most far-reaching self-determination arrangements of all Indigenous peoples worldwide. Greenland's self-government has great significance for a global Indigenous rights movement focused on achieving self-determination in various forms. Unquestionably Greenland serves as an inspiration for Indigenous peoples worldwide, especially for other Inuit in the Arctic. Duane Smith, former president of the ICC Canada, saw the enacting of Greenland's *Self-Government Agreement* as the pursuit of Inuit sovereignty. In his congratulatory letter to former premier of Greenland, Hans Enoksen, Smith proclaimed :

We in Canada see this event as a major step by a circumpolar region of people gaining significant control of its rights and livelihood which is now seen by other groups and Inuit throughout the Circumpolar Arctic as hope and opportunity for their chance to gain better control of their own destinies. Your fight is our fight and although you may be a public government, it is made up primarily of Inuit to govern an area inhabited by Inuit for Inuit (Smith, 2008).

Conclusion

Three issues stand out when discussing the most significant aspects of the *Self-Government Act*: the right to mineral resources, the recognition of Greenlanders as a people in international law, and the prospect of independence. Many however, point out the challenge of implementation, particularly at the individual level, where the meaning of self-government may remain obscure as the political and public discourse focuses on economic development. A number of people have serious reservations about the process and speed of planned resource extraction. This all leads the country to uncharted territory, as reflected in several interviewees' sense of ambivalence about the future of their country.

As an example of a successfully negotiated self-government agreement, Greenland's self-rule

serves as an inspiration for other Indigenous peoples, especially other Inuit in the Arctic. With its main focus on modern nation-building within the framework of Western institutionalism, the *Self-Government Act* constitutes a unique means of implementing Indigenous self-government. It revisits the norm of the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination understood primarily as a collective human right, and sets a precedent within the framework of Indigenous rights in international law.

Greenland is in an interesting juncture in its unique process of implementing its *Self-Government Act*, which some consider also an exercise of Indigenous self-determination. However, unlike the majority of Indigenous peoples globally, Greenlanders equate Indigenous self-determination with independence, and thus, at least implicitly, with the Western (Westphalian) concept of sovereignty vested in the nation-state. For Greenlanders, self-government means modern nationhood and nation-building within the framework of Western institutional arrangements. The current focus is on ensuring and increasing the participation of Inuit Greenlanders in the administration of the government rather than adopting governance principles deriving from Inuit traditional knowledge or worldview. The question of Indigenous or Inuit self-determination in Greenland is a matter of representation – who sits in the parliament and who runs the government – rather than changing the existing institutional arrangements, structures and policy frameworks that are heavily influenced by and dependent on Danish models. ●

Rauna Kuokkanen is Professor of Arctic Indigenous Research at the University of Lapland, Finland. Prior to that she was Associate Professor of Political Science and Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto. Her new book tentatively titled "Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination and Governance in Canada, Greenland and Scandinavia" is forthcoming by Oxford UP. Rauna is Sámi from Ohcejohka (Utsjoki), Northern Finland.

Endnotes

- 1 Most interviewees (14) were women and the age range varied from the mid-20s to mid-60s. Interviewees included politicians, civil servants, leaders of institutions and organizations, educators and individuals working in media and culture. Some of the interviewees requested to remain anonymous while others gave the permission to use their names.
- 2 A steep downturn in iron ore prices in 2014 led to the collapse of London Mining, the company initially involved with the project, which put the Isua project on hold until January 2015 when it was acquired by General Nice, one of China's largest coal and iron ore producers (Hornby, Milne et al. 2015).
- 3 These include 'underdeveloped infrastructure, financial dependency on Denmark, insufficient economic resources, the significant size of the public sector (which is a strain on the Greenlandic economy), a shortage of skilled and educated

workers and social problems' (Loukacheva, 2007, p. 69).
 4 See also Jonsson, 1997, and Loukacheva, 2007, p. 69.

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