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Greenland moves toward independence - who's afraid of 'separatism' ?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 22nd June 2009

1. Denmark's enlightened readiness to permit the secession of Greenland is the stance of a staunch member of the Western alliance that has contributed to the allied war-efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that was the object of Islamist hatred in the cartoon controversy.

2. In general, the more undemocratic and repressive a regime, the more uncompromisingly and brutally it will respond to the demand for self-determination or for national rights from a subject people - as the examples of Russia, Iran and China demonstrate.

3. Since genuinely democratic states have nothing to fear from

secessionist movements, but repressive and anti-Western states do, it is in the interest of the Western alliance to accept the principle that, in certain circumstances, subject peoples do have the right to secede unilaterally from a parent state.

Yesterday, Kalaallit Nunaat – Greenland – moved a step closer toward **independence from Denmark**. The Arctic country has become a subject in its own right under international law; its language, Kalaallisut, has become the sole official language; and it is taking over control of its own police and judiciary, as well as greater control over its natural resources. This move was based on a referendum that took place in November, in which 75% of Greenlandic voters opted in favour.

The festivities in the Greenlandic capital of Nuuk marking yesterday's event were attended by Denmark's Queen Margrethe and its prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen. For the Greenlanders are fortunate in having, in Denmark, one of the world's most enlightened imperial overlords. This is the same Denmark that has proven a staunch member of the allied coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the object of Islamist hatred over the Danish cartoon controversy. We may compare Denmark's enlightened readiness to permit the peaceful secession of one of its territories and its sterling record as a member of the Western alliance, with the sorry record of Spain, Slovakia and Romania. These countries' exaggerated fears of 'separatism' have led them, despite being members of NATO, to break ranks with most of the rest of the alliance to oppose Kosovo's independence from Serbia, and to align themselves instead with hostile Russia. Denmark, the more enlightened country on the issue of national self-determination, is the better member of the Western alliance.

Denmark's ready acceptance of Greenland's right to secede is in keeping with a **proud Nordic tradition** of enlightened resolution of national questions. Norway seceded peacefully from Sweden in 1905, as did Iceland from Denmark in 1944. Territorial disputes between Sweden and Finland over the Åland Islands in the 1920s and between Denmark and Norway over

eastern Greenland in the 1930s were peacefully resolved by international arbitration. Finland granted autonomy to the Aland Islands in 1920; Denmark to Greenland in 1979, allowing the latter to secede from the EU in 1985.

The contrast between the enlightened Nordic acceptance of the right of nations to self-determination on the one hand, and the nationalist resistance to 'separatism' on the part of Spain, Slovakia and Romania on the other, is not unrelated to the fact that, whereas Denmark has a long history of liberal constitutional government, Spain was still a dictatorship less than thirty-five years ago; Slovakia and Romania twenty years ago. Spain's continued refusal to recognise the right of the Basque Country and Catalonia to self-determination is a [continuation](#), in softer form, of the repression of these countries by the fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco. For their part, Slovakia and Romania have been among the most unreconstructed of the former Eastern bloc countries to join NATO and the EU.

Further still from the Danish ideal of tolerance of secession are repressive states with ruling ideologies hostile to liberal democratic Western values, such as Russia, Iran and China. These states rely on massive violence or forced assimilation to crush subject peoples. They are able to do this precisely because they reject Western values. Equally, as they are unconstrained by concern for human rights, they are ready to support other states that brutally suppress subject peoples. Thus, on 27 May of this year, Russia and China were among those members of the United Nations Human Rights Council that [voted](#) for a resolution in praise of Sri Lanka's brutal campaign against the Tamil Tigers, who are fighting for a separate Tamil state, while Britain, France, Germany and other democratic states voted against. Other states that voted for the resolution included Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Egypt, Nigeria, the degree of whose concern for human rights is suggested by their alignment on this question.

The reality is that, by and large, the more enlightened and democratic a state is, the more ready it will be to accept the secession of a constituent territory or subject people. Conversely, the more repressive and undemocratic a state is, the less willing it will be to countenance such a

move, and the more ready it will be to support the brutal suppression of such a move by another such state. It is very possible that Scotland will eventually secede from the United Kingdom; conceivable that Wales will do so, or that Puerto Rico will secede from the US. But while we Britons and Americans may or may not hope against such acts of secession, few of us are enraged by their prospect.

This being so, it is not in the interests of the Western alliance rigidly to uphold the principle that subject peoples should not be allowed to secede unilaterally from existing independent states. Our respect for human rights means that we shall never be able to support acts of repression by states against subject peoples as unequivocally as our undemocratic enemies, while even our moderate expressions of concern at human rights abuses committed during such acts of suppression will earn us the ire of the states in question. Western support for Russia against Chechen rebels during the 1990s did not earn us any Russian gratitude, but Western criticism of Russian human-rights abuses in Chechnya certainly earned us Russian ire. Meanwhile, Russia's crushing of Chechnya strengthened its grip on the Caucasus region, making possible the assault on our Georgian ally last summer. Simply put, Western support for Russia against Chechnya was a blunder; the democratic world should have recognised Chechnya's independence in 1991, alongside the Soviet republics that declared independence at the same time. Equally, in the event that democratic Taiwan should declare independence from Communist China, while we may regret the clash with the latter that this will inevitably occasion, support for Taiwan would be the only honourable policy. In supporting Kosovo's secession from Serbia, Western statesmen have **erred** in pretending that this instance of secession is unique. Erred both because it is factually untrue that Kosovo is a unique case, and because pretending that it is will only tie our hands in the future, when dealing with states ruled by hostile, repressive regimes carrying out acts of mass violence against subject peoples.

Genuine democracies have nothing to fear from 'separatism'; dictatorships and other repressive states do. It is time to accept the principle that, in certain circumstances, subject peoples should be permitted to secede unilaterally

from a parent state. Such circumstances might include those where the subject people in question has suffered particularly extreme persecution, or conversely where it has proved itself worthy through practising good, democratic governance. Should they ever choose to exercise this right, the people of Darfur would qualify under the first condition; the Taiwanese under the second. Other conditions or combinations thereof might also warrant qualification. Kosovo, for example, qualified not only because of the extreme persecution its people had suffered under Serbian rule, but also because of the constitutional status the territory had enjoyed in the former Yugoslavia. The question of whether a subject people has earned the right to secede should ultimately be decided in the court of public opinion in the democratic world.

But this does not mean that every secessionist movement or act should be supported indiscriminately – far from it. For the right of nations to self-determination is open to abuse. There are cases where an expansionist, predatory state conquers part of a neighbour's territory, using the pretext of support for a national minority; the predatory state then ethnically cleanses the unwanted population from the conquered territory, creates an artificial demographic majority in favour of 'independence', then declares that this artificial majority has the right to 'self-determination'. This is what Serbia did in Bosnia, Turkey in Cyprus and Russia in Abkhazia. There are cases where the population of a territory is split relatively evenly between supporters and opponents of secession, or where the secessionists are in the minority.

Clearly, in such cases, support for the right to secede should not be the default position. Rather, each demand for secession has to be judged individually, on its own merits – like a case in court. The example most often cited by opponents of national self-determination is that of the southern US states' attempted secession in the 1860s; as this secession was motivated by the desire to preserve the barbaric institution of slavery, it is not an example that can be used to deny the right to secede to secessionist peoples with more legitimate motives.

The very real possibility that the democratic world might intervene to support a secessionist movement on its territory would act as an incentive for repressive states, both to improve their treatment of their subject peoples and to lessen their hostility to the democratic world. The possibility of losing Darfur would be likely to act as a greater deterrent to Khartoum's genocidal policies there than the toothless indictments of the International Criminal Court. Conversely, where it is a case of a repressive state allied to the West, pressure to reform would take a different form. Because Turkey is a member of NATO and an EU candidate country, there is no possibility that the Western alliance will intervene militarily to end Turkey's rule over its Kurdish-inhabited regions; Turkey's territorial integrity is therefore secure. But the 'price' that Turkey pays for this is that it is required to improve its treatment of its Kurds and its human-rights' record generally - something that, over the past decade, it has actually done. So long as Turkey continues to democratise, Kurdish support for secession is likely to wane, or at least to be increasingly channelled away from support for violent insurgency to support for peaceful, constitutional nationalist parties.

As surely as night follows day, more peoples that today are unfree will join the ranks of the Eritreans, Croatians, Kosovars and others which have already seceded in recent decades after fighting bitter wars of independence. There is no point regretting this, or attempting to halt the process. The Western alliance should be on the right side of history.

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