

The Dutch Path; The route towards independence of the Dutch Caribbean

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Abstract

On 10 October 2010 Curaçao and Sint Maarten became autonomous countries within the Dutch Kingdom. This after the Netherlands Antilles was abolished and the three smaller islands (Saba, Sint Eustatius and Bonaire) became a sort of Dutch municipality. This is the latest development of the long journey towards emancipation of the Dutch Caribbean people. The journey that took off in 1954 with the emergence of the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname as countries within the Dutch Kingdom via the Charter of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Statuut) and went through many stages. In this paper we will describe the Dutch route towards emancipation and have critical review by comparing this to the route of independence. The question that will be answered is what would have happened if these islands had chosen for independence in the fifties? The next question that is answered is: will these islands once become independent? These questions are answered in the context of: are the people better off?

Background

This article is written from the perspective of the people of Curaçao. Curaçao, with its 444 square kilometres, since 10 October 2010 is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, is inhabited by approximately 142,180 inhabitants of over forty nationalities. It has three official languages: Dutch, Papiamentu and English. The Dutch Kingdom is currently made up of the Netherlands, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten are Dutch overseas self-governing countries in the Caribbean. Defence and foreign affairs are Kingdom responsibilities, while the people hold Dutch nationality and citizenship and have full mobility to the Netherlands. Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius have become a sort of Dutch municipality.

The island of Curaçao was discovered in 1499 by the Spaniards and went through several life-cycles. The social and economic structure of Curaçao was formed over time, creating a complex, low trust, traditionally segregated and partially rational western society (Goede, 2008). The main stages in the island's development were:

- The slave trade from the seventeenth century until 1863, the agricultural age combined with international trade
- The oil era started in 1918 and went into decline in the 1960s, the industrial age

- The financial services era started to grow in the 1960s and went into decline in the 1980s, the post industrial age
- Tourism had a restart in the late 1980s and is currently in a phase of accelerated growth.

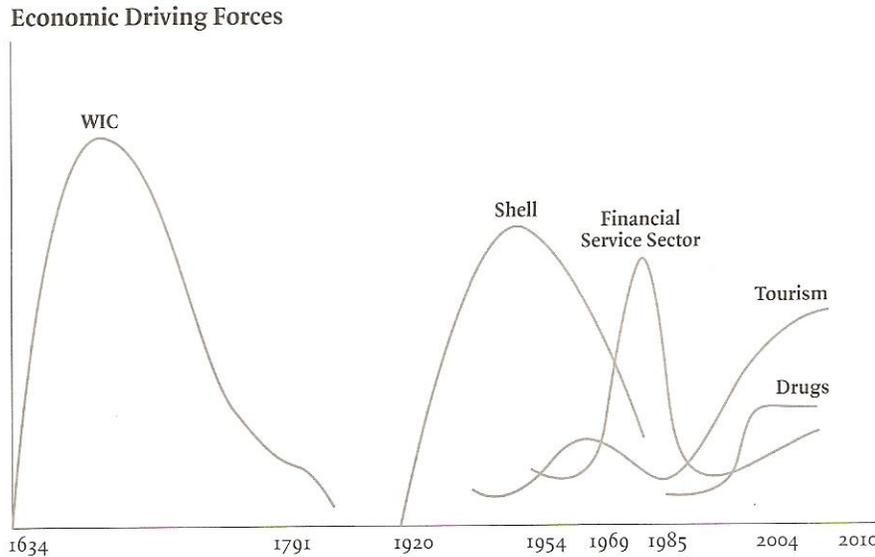


Figure 10: The Life-cycles of Curaçao (Curiel, 2005)

In the middle of the seventeenth century the Dutch West Indies Company (WIC) entered the very lucrative slave trade using Curaçao as a transshipment port. Slavery would continue for two hundred years until 1863. This phase set the ground for a segregated society based on ethnicity and culture that is still one of the origins of today's social and economic problems.

After a period of economic stagnation the arrival of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company in 1918 started a second period of economic growth and the western, rational, Anglo-American system of management was introduced to the island.

In 1954, in the oil stage, and based on the prosperity brought by the oil trade, the Netherlands Antilles obtained internal self-government, as part of the global process of decolonization after the Second World War. A Dutch political and governmental structure was imported and based upon the characteristics of the society of Curaçao it developed into a system of political patronage. In May 1969 as a consequence of the layoffs at the oil refinery a revolt took place.

In the 1940s the international financial sector of Curaçao started. It took off in the 1960s and flourished for twenty-five years, after an attractive fiscal regime was put in place.

The sector declined as a consequence of measures taken by the governments of the United States and the Netherlands in the 1980s (Curiel, 2005; Gibbes et al., 1999).

In the mid 1980s the island entered a new stage of globalization by implementing a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) or variations on such a programme.

The tourism phase started at the beginning of the twentieth century and took off in 1950s and 1960s, but was temporarily stopped after 1969. In the mid 1980s tourism was taken up again to mitigate the consequences of the economic crisis. It was difficult to stimulate

the economy. In the last few years the tourism industry grew tremendously and broke all records.

If we examine key performance indicators of Curaçao, such as population growth, economic growth, the unemployment rate, the budget deficit and government debt, Curaçao has not done too well over the last twenty years. But the signs indicate that the economy has finally taken off in 2006 and 2007. And Curaçao partially escaped the global financial crisis of 2008 and beyond.

Year	Population in millions	Nominal GDP/capita (%)	Real GDP growth (%)	Unemployment rate (%)	Debt in millions Naf.	Budget deficit in millions Naf.	Inflation (%)
1980	0.148						14.6
1981							12.2
1982							6.1
1983							2.8
1984							2.1
1985					396.8	-57.1	0.4
1986					489.0	-24.9	1.3
1987					640.6	-13.3	3.8
1988				23.2%	612.1	20.6	2.6
1989				20.1%	649.2	-37.8	3.9
1990				17.8%	768.4	-102.1	3.8
1991	0.145	9,358		14.6%	868.4	-82.6	4.0
1992	0.145	10,079		16.9%	927.6	-154.4	1.4
1993	0.145	10,526		13.6%	993.6	-108.3	2.1
1994	0.145	11,152		12.8%	1615.0	-222.9	1.8
1995	0.145	11,536		13.1%	1684.4	-125.8	2.8
1996	0.145	14,043		14.0%	1646.8	-146.5	3.6
1997	0.147	14,256	-3.4	15.5%	1691.5	-62.6	3.3
1998	0.147	14,251	0.0	16.8%	1824.2	-70.6	1.1
1999	0.142	14,355	-2.3	14.8%	1785.5	-15.5	0.4
2000	0.137	14,663	-2.3	14.2%	2150.9	-29.7	5.8
2001	0.131	16,448	-0.7	15.8%	2155.1	42.4	1.8
2002	0.127	17,193	0.4	15.6%	2368.1	-89.8	0.4
2003	0.130	16,972	0.3	15.1%	2447.3	-79.9	1.6
2004	0.133	16,974	0.2	16.1%	2676.8	-134.9	1.4
2005	0.135		0.8	18.2%	2492.4	-75.3	4.1
2006	0.136		1.5	14.7%	2660.7	-101.6	3.1
2007	0.136	17,000	3.8	12%			3.0
2008			3.5				

Table 1: Some economic indicators (Source: Bank van de Nederlandse Antillen). The population of Curaçao over time (Source: Central Bureau of Statistics)

As a consequence of the debt relieve by the Netherlands the debt has decreased enormously.

Current situation¹

In the new constitutional structure, Curaçao and Sint Maarten have acquired the status of countries within the Kingdom (like the now abolished Netherlands Antilles and Aruba after 1986). Aruba retains the separate country status it has had since 1986. Thus, as from 10 October 2010, the Kingdom consists of four, rather than three, equal countries: Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten are not Dutch overseas dependencies, but full, autonomous partners within the Kingdom, alongside the Netherlands, and each enjoys a degree of internal autonomy.

The three other islands, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba have voted for direct ties with the Netherlands and are now part of the Netherlands, thus constituting ‘the Caribbean part of the Netherlands’. The relationship’s legal form is that each island has the status of public body within the meaning of article 134 of the Dutch Constitution. In broad terms, their position is now like that of Dutch municipalities, with adjustments for their small size, their distance from the Netherlands and their geographic situation in the Caribbean region. For the time being, Netherlands Antillean legislation will still be applicable in large part to the public bodies. Every resident of the three islands who has Dutch nationality now has the right to vote in elections to the Dutch House of Representatives alongside the existing right to vote in European Parliament elections. They are not, allowed to vote in Provincial Council elections because the public bodies are not part of any Dutch province.

The constitutional changes do not affect the way in which the Kingdom conducts its foreign relations. The Kingdom’s external borders have not changed. Foreign relations and defence remain ‘Kingdom affairs’. These are dealt with in the Council of Ministers for the Kingdom, which meets in The Hague. The governments of the Caribbean countries are represented in the Council by a minister plenipotentiary. The Aruban government has its seat in Oranjestad, the government of Curaçao is based in Willemstad and the government of Sint Maarten in Philipsburg.

There is one Minister of Foreign Affairs, who has ultimate responsibility for foreign relations for the Kingdom as a whole.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the embassies, consulates and permanent missions/representations abroad continue to work for the Kingdom as a whole and all its constituent parts.

As of 10 October 2010, the Caribbean countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten) each have their own Foreign Relations Department. While treaties and conventions may be concluded only by the Kingdom and not by its constituent parts, their applicability may be confined to one or more countries. In other

¹ In this section I made generous use of the paper by the Agency of External Affairs of the former Netherlands Antilles “The Kingdom of the Netherlands: new constitutional structure”.

words, such agreements may be concluded by the Kingdom for one or more individual parts of the Kingdom.

Like Aruba, the new countries, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, each have their own government and parliament. Together, these institutions are empowered to enact legislation in regard to the countries' own affairs. The Dutch public bodies of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba have the power to regulate their own internal affairs. Each public body has a local executive and a local council. For the time being, Antillean legislation will continue to apply to these islands wherever possible. It will gradually be replaced by Dutch law. The residents of the public bodies are eligible to vote in elections to the Dutch House of Representatives (and in European Parliament elections). In each public body there is also a branch of the Dutch government's new Department for the Netherlands in the Caribbean, in which each government ministry is represented.

Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba now maintain two tiers of government, i.e. a local authority and the Dutch central government. Broadly speaking, central government has taken over the duties performed previously by the Antillean authorities. The local government is under the control of the local representative assembly ('the island council'). As well as taking over the tasks of the Netherlands Antillean authorities, the Dutch government has also taken on certain tasks previously the responsibility of the islands, such as management of the fire service.

The implementation of the Netherlands' tasks on Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba (and the related support services) is the responsibility of the Department for the Netherlands in the Caribbean, which has a branch on each of the islands. In addition, the Department implements the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations' official tasks as the employer of all public servants on Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, including the police, the fire service and employees of the care administration office. That said, the police force and fire service maintain their own management structures.

In the short term, the aim is to improve education, public safety, public health, infrastructure and other facilities and services on the islands.

A Financial Supervision Authority has been established for Curaçao and Sint Maarten to supervise public finances under the ultimate responsibility of the Council of Ministers for the Kingdom. A similar body has been set up for Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba under the minister responsible for Kingdom Relations. This type of oversight structure will continue to exist in the new constitutional situation. The underlying supervisory principles are a balanced budget, prudent financial management and a cap on contracting debt.

The existing Joint Court of Justice of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba has become the Joint Court of Justice of Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten and the Caribbean part of the Netherlands (i.e. Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba). The Supreme Court remains the court of cassation for the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom.

On 1 January 2011, the US dollar will replace the Antillean guilder on Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba. Curaçao and Sint Maarten have a joint Central Bank. The Caribbean guilder will be introduced on 1 January 2012 as the countries' common currency. Until that time, the Antillean guilder will remain the official currency.

The Netherlands is a European Union member state, but Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, and the Caribbean part of the Netherlands (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) are not. Instead they have the status of Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT). As a result, the islands enjoy a number of advantages, for example where the export of goods to the EU is concerned. In addition, the islands receive funding from the European Development Fund (EDF). And since citizens of the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom are Dutch nationals and thus EU citizens, they may also vote in European Parliament elections. The constitutional reform does not affect the islands' relationship with the EU.

On 1 January 2011, the Representation of the Netherlands in the Netherlands Antilles and the Representation of the Netherlands in Aruba will be integrated to form the Representation of the Netherlands in Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. It will be a single Representation led by a single Representative, with an office in each of the three countries. The head of each office will be the deputy Representative in that country. The Representation will continue to represent all Dutch ministries (apart from the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, whose responsibilities span the Kingdom as a whole). It may thus be considered an 'outpost' of the Netherlands. As well as reporting to the Netherlands, the Representation is tasked with preparing and assisting with visits by members of the Dutch government, officials and other dignitaries. It also provides information on Dutch policy with respect to Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, and general consular assistance to Dutch nationals in difficulty and detainees. The activities of the Representation in the Caribbean are thus comparable to that of an embassy.

Timeline

Looking at the current situation one might ask: But wasn't the aim of the Dutch Caribbean islands always about becoming independent? How did they end up here? The Antillean Parliament has existed for 72 years when it was absolved on 9 October 2010. First it consisted of six islands. Aruba left the constellation in 1986 and obtained an autonomous status within the Kingdom, the so called *Status Aparte*. The parliament first assembled on 5 April 1938 after elections of 20 December 1937. The political parties emerged.

During the Second World War on 22 March 1942 Queen Wilhelmina held her famous London Speech promising the colonies self government after the war. 1954 the New Order became a fact. The Netherlands Antilles and Suriname were removed from United Nations decolonization list after a small majority of the General Assembly voted pro the removal. Some state that it was incorrect as self-government was not yet obtained. It was stated from the start that the Statuut (the Charter) was not forever but just the beginning of a new phase in the path towards emancipation of the people of the Dutch colonies.

In 1975 Suriname became independent and a socialist Dutch government put a lot of pressure on the Dutch Antilles also to become independent. “We will send you your independence by mail” was said by some Dutch politicians.

1 January 1986 Aruba was granted autonomy on its way to becoming independent in 1996. The right of self-determination per island was created. The famous Curaçao politician Mr. Evertsz predicted that 6-1=0. Meaning that without Aruba the Netherlands Antilles was not sustainable.

The 1990s. In 1993 Curaçao held referendum on constitutional change. 74% of the voters wanted to continue as the Netherlands Antilles and less than 1% considered independence.

	1993	2005
Option	%	%
Option A: Restructuring the Netherlands Antilles	73.56%	23%
Option B: Becoming a self governing country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands	17.93%	68%
Option C: Becoming a direct part of the Netherlands	8.02%	4%
Option D: Independence	0.49%	5%

Table2: Results of the referenda of 1993 and 2005

The reconstruction of the Netherlands Antilles was unsuccessful. At the beginning of the new millennium in 2000 Sint Maarten was stepping out. They held a referendum and 70% of the voters opted to become an autonomous country within the Dutch Kingdom.

In 2005 Curaçao is the last island to hold a second referendum. This time 68% of the voters opted for an autonomous status equal to Aruba. The option of independence grew from less than 1% to 5%.

From the start it was clear that new status needed to be negotiated with the partners within the Kingdom. On the basis of an outline agreement concluded on 26 November 2005, which set out agreements on constitutional reforms, financial and economic issues, law enforcement and good governance, a series of conferences was launched with the aim of taking a coordinated and parallel approach to dealing with the complexities of this process. This agreement divided the people into two camps Yes and No. This led, in October and November 2006, to final declarations on the constitutional position of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, and of Curaçao and Sint Maarten. At the Round Table Conference in Curaçao on 15 December 2008, the Netherlands and the other Kingdom partners reached agreement on the new constitutional structure of the Kingdom. For the third time Curaçao went to a referendum on 15 May 2009. This referendum as all the others was also under the supervision of the United Nations to approve or reject the package. A narrow majority accepted the deal. The Yes was rallied by the parties in government and No by the parties in opposition. The No camp also stated to be pro independence.

	2009
Option	%
Option A: Yes	51.99%
Option B: No	48.01%

Table3: Result of the referendum 2009

This cleared the path for the last Round Table Conference. The conclusions of the final Round Table Conference were signed on 9 September 2010. These stated that the amended Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands would enter into force as planned on 10 October 2010.

On 27 August 2010 Elections were held for the last island council of Curaçao that also would become the first parliament of the new country on 10 October 2010. The result of the elections and the formation of a coalition resulted in a political shift giving the opposition a minimum majority of 11 – 10. So after more than a decade the leading government party was in opposition. The PS party that stands for independence of the island obtained 19% of the votes.

On 14 October 2010 the Dutch also held elections and there also there was a change in government. There was a move to the right. Over the years surveys in the Netherlands have indicated that almost 50% of the Dutch voters want to get out the islands.

There were concerns if the constitutional changes would continue. But new island government decided to continue the process. And the Dutch parliament approved the constitutional change. This concluded a debate and process that lasted for more than three decades, taking much time and occupying the best brains of the island at the expense of developing and implementing a policy forwarding the development of the people.

Evaluation and conclusions

On 10 October 2010 the Netherlands Antilles ceased to exist as a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is now made up of the countries of Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten (each with its own government) and, as public bodies of the Netherlands, the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba. As in Aruba, the government of the Kingdom is represented in the new countries of Curaçao and Sint Maarten by a Governor.

Autonomy is not an objective but a means to an objective. The objective is the well being of the people. The question is: are the people of the islands better off? Many state that they are as the Netherlands provide a safety net and provides extra checks and balances for good governance. Others state that the Dutch hinder the development of the people by keeping responsibility away from them and intervening against their interest and that the

islands are less autonomous than before 10 October 2010. Some even state that the islands were re-colonized. The fact is that the percentage of voters considering independence is on the rise.

Before 1996 Aruba lobbied reversed the process towards independence and to remain part of the Dutch Kingdom. And now Aruba is considering the European Union UPG status.

In Suriname, who started the journey on this Dutch path at the same time as the island in the 1950s, and reached its independence in 1975 is now government by the former dictator Bouterse and Chinese invest heavily in the economy of Suriname.

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