

Autonomy and Emerging Political Structures in the Circumpolar Region

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Key Terms and Concepts

- * Civic nationalism
- * Devolution
- * Decentralization
- * Ethnic nationalism
- * Home Rule
- * Region-building
- * Self-rule
- * Sovereignty
- * State-building

Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Upon completion of this module you will be able to:

- * Define devolution;
- * Differentiate between devolution and decentralization;
- * Describe the difference between ethnic and civic nationalism and the role that each plays in motivating devolution;
- * List the two main types of demands and describe some of the corresponding jurisdictions;
- * Explain the main distinction between state-building and region-building;
- * List and explain the main principles behind devolution;
- * Describe the diverse ways that northern communities achieve self-rule; and
- * List some of the developments that may secure a legitimate and effective devolution transition.

Overview

This module introduces students to the concept of devolution and how it applies to the Circumpolar World. First, the module discusses the concept of devolution as a peaceful transference of power. Within this section is a discussion of the role that nationalism and regionalism play in motivating demands for devolution, as well as impacting on the different types of demands that may arise. The second section provides students with a framework with which to study the process of devolution by suggesting three areas of political development to consider. By investigating each of these three areas, students have a comprehensive view of not only the types of powers and institutions, but of the

forces creating those powers and institutions. The third section explores diverse ways that devolution has been manifested in the North. These examples extend from independence and sovereignty, as in the case of Iceland, to devolving control over a single **jurisdiction**, such as natural resources, in the Yukon Territory. This section of the module will focus on developing an understanding of why some northern regions have followed a path of independence while others remain part of a larger state.

Lecture

The Concept of Devolution

Devolution: A Transfer of Power

Devolution in the broadest sense means the transfer of powers from a higher or central order of government to a regional or local order of government. It occurs when a regional or local government formally receives either broad powers over a specific territory, or more limited powers over a specific jurisdiction. The process of devolution is connected to political development in the Circumpolar World. It is a peaceful way for northern communities to gain self-rule over their land, resources, society, and government. It is also a means the achieving recognition of minority cultures and regions, and the capacity to protect those cultures.

Basic Principles Behind Devolution

The two main principles behind the concept of devolution have their basis in precepts of democracy and self-determination. The first principle is a belief that large governments cannot make suitable policies or provide effective services to distant communities with unique climates, geography, economic systems, or cultures. Only governments that are “closer to the people” have the capacity to make meaningful policies and deliver better services. The principle of self-determination holds that culturally and regionally distinct communities must have a degree of control over those economic, political, and social institutions that impact on their ways of life.

The terms “**devolution**” and “**decentralization**” are often used interchangeably; however, there is a important distinction between them. Creating or strengthening a regional institution that represents the dominant government, and carries out its directives in a specific region, does not imply that meaningful devolution has occurred. The transferring of responsibilities must coincide with the transferring of actual power and capacity, including decision-making autonomy, to legitimate and representative institutions. Transferring responsibilities for health care from the central government to a regional health office, which is staffed with government officials and employees, is an example of decentralization. Transferring health care jurisdiction and autonomy to a regional health institution, which is representative of northern residents and communities, is an example of devolution.

A Framework for Studying Devolution

Cultural and Economic Explanations for Devolution

Although demands for devolution vary, they may be classified into two broad categories: cultural and economic. Demands related to cultural protection and self-determination tend to focus on devolving control over jurisdictions such as social programs, education, or language. Often these demands are motivated by ethnic **nationalism**, or loyalty to one's nation, where a "nation" is defined as a group of people with common identity, language, and culture. In contrast, strong civic nationalism, or loyalty to one's state-national or regional, tends to lead towards demands for devolving control over land, resources, and economic development. But, both types of demands cut across both ethnic and civic nationalism. In some cases, only one type of nationalism may be present, while in others both forces are at work. In cases where strong demands for devolution are motivated by both ethnic and civic nationalism, and the devolution path leads to independence and sovereignty, we can apply the term of state-building. Where the objective is to gain a high degree of autonomy over a region while still remaining connected to the larger state, we may use the term region-building.

Devolution and Political Development

In order for devolution to be successful, it requires political developments that will create the capacity of the region to handle the transfer of powers. One way to understand the process of devolution involves dividing political development in three areas: civic, institutional, and constitutional. Civic development involves the development of a political culture, an active and organized civil society, and the emergence of a civic elite or civic leaders who mobilize the public and articulate its demands. Development in this area not only promotes devolution, but also allows the process a high degree of legitimacy. Institutional development refers to the development of government and bureaucratic institutions and procedures. Leaders within these institutions also play an important role in articulating demands, as well as negotiating the transfer of powers with the higher orders of government. Development in this area increases the capacity of the local government to handle increased levels of jurisdiction and control. Constitutional development includes either formal, legal transfer of powers, or recognition of an increased status for the region.

Considering political development from these three dimensions helps our understanding of the types of powers demanded and the strength of those demands. This division also illustrates the progression of the devolution process. It is important that constitutional and legal transfers of powers do not occur before the society and institutions have developed sufficiently. If constitutional development occurs at a faster rate, citizens may be alienated from the political process, and governments may in turn be unresponsive to their needs (Dacks, 1990).

Table 1: Three Spheres of Political Development and Devolution

Civic Development	Institutional Development	Constitutional Development
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Political Culture:</u></p> <p>Development of a political consensus on the basic units of representation.</p> <p>Development of a political consensus on underlying principles, norms, and values.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Civil Society:</u></p> <p>Development of an active and independent civil society within the region.</p> <p>Emergence of a civic elite/leaders capable of mobilising and articulating demands.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Impact:</u></p> <p>Political culture develops a ‘political will’ from within the region towards a desire for devolution.</p> <p>Presence of organized a civil elite/ society determines the strength of the demand and the specific form of devolution (broad or limited).</p>	<p>Development of effective and accepted governmental institutions and procedures.</p> <p>Ensures government is capable of handling additional authority and jurisdiction.</p> <p>Includes technical knowledge, effective representation, and efficient procedures for accountability.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Impact:</u></p> <p>Builds capacity of the institutions for enhanced jurisdiction and authority.</p> <p>Determines the emergence of an institutional elite.</p> <p>Determines the political will from within institutions towards a desire for devolution.</p>	<p>Development of a constitutional status of the region.</p> <p>May include additionally devolved authorities and responsibilities, or may merely entrench the existing level of authority.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Impact:</u></p> <p>May provide for equal status with other regions within the state.</p> <p>Effectiveness relies on a preceding and significant degree of development in the civic and institutional spheres.</p>

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Diversity of Outcomes

Examples of Devolution in Unitary States

a. Iceland and Independence

Iceland’s status as an independent and sovereign state is one example of the variety of ways that devolution is manifested. It also illustrates the importance of nationalism as a causal force for devolution. Iceland had existed as an independent land for over three centuries in the middle ages, and even developed a political assembly, the **Alþingi**,*

* Icelandic has two characters or letters that used to exist in English that we now write as th. The character “þ” is called thorn and is pronounced as a hard “th” sound: thin, theory, cathedral, or Thor. The other, “ð” is called eth and is pronounced as a soft “th” sound: the, other, or father.

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which continued to exist until the early 1800s (Karlsson 1995, 36). Although Iceland came under Norwegian rule in 1262, and was subsequently transferred to Denmark, this early period of autonomy contributed to the emergence of Icelandic independence. Its long history of existence (dating back to 900 AD), a relatively **homogeneous population**, development of an Icelandic language and literature, and isolation from the rest of Europe were all factors in the birth of a strong, Icelandic nationalism.

Democratic changes in Denmark in 1830 provided an opportunity for political development in Iceland's civil society, as both civic leaders and the people of Iceland focused their efforts on an independence movement. Institutional developments occurred when the Alþingi was restored as a consultative assembly to Denmark in 1843. The Alþingi was the first democratically elected parliament in Iceland, and, despite its limited power, it emerged as a rallying point for a strengthened Icelandic nationalism. Constitutional developments occurred in 1874, when Iceland received a constitution that abolished Danish absolutist rule. Finally, in 1904, **Home Rule** was implemented and the Alþingi parliamentary power was increased and expanded to include legislative authority. However, even Home Rule, defined as a "personal union" with Denmark, was not sufficient for Icelanders. Iceland's devolution path culminated in 1944 when 97 per cent of the population voted for independence in a referendum.



Iceland's Parliament House – The Alþingi

b. The Faeroe Islands and Home Rule

The Faeroe Islands currently have a home rule arrangement with Denmark. Home rule generally refers to a region that is granted limited autonomy while remaining a part of another state. The Faeroe Islands have similar historic circumstances to Iceland, and similar factors contributing to the development of Faeroese identity and expressions of nationalism. However, the Faeroes did not experience devolution to their own institutions as early as Iceland. It was not until 1852 that the ancient Løgting was recreated as an advisory council. Political developments continued in the civil and institutional sphere with the strengthening of an institutional elite in the Løgting and the development of political parties focused on devolution, those seeking independence, and those in favour of unity and home rule.

Faeroese society was divided between those who wanted absolute independence and those who desired a "union" relationship with



Map of the Faeroe Islands

Denmark. Although a 1946 plebiscite indicated that a majority of Faeroese chose independence, politicians negotiated a home rule arrangement instead. The Home Rule Act changed the function of the Løgting from consultative to legislative, and the status of the Faeroe Islands to a “self-governing community within the Danish state” (Debes 1995, 63). While the Løgting is competent to legislate in almost all matters, it does not have control over defense and foreign policy, nor does it have an independent judicial system. In 1998, a coalition government was elected to the parliament with the mandate of securing independence; a strong indication that the devolution process may be still underway in the Faeroe Islands.

Examples of Devolution in Federal States

The examples of Iceland and the Faeroe Islands present examples of devolution in a **unitary state**, a state with only one sovereign level of government. Examining territorial political development within federal states also presents another opportunity to examine devolution as a peaceful process of regional self-determination, or region-building. These regions must balance a desire for greater autonomy with the need to cooperate and compromise with other levels of government. The Yukon Territory in Canada and the Republic of Sakha in Russia are examples devolution processes as region-building in federal states.

a. The Yukon – Region-Building

Canada’s Yukon Territory was established in 1898 when it was carved out of the Northwest Territories as a result of the Klondike gold rush. Control over the territory was held by the central government in Ottawa and it was administrated by federal representatives both internally and externally. The Yukon functioned as a quasi-colony of Canada until it received full, responsible government in 1979. Unlike Canada’s provinces, however, the Yukon does not have an entrenched constitutional status. Instead, its powers descend from the *Yukon Act*, federal legislation that created a subordinate status for the territory. Some major differences from Iceland and the Faeroes include the fact that the territory is connected to the mainland of Canada, and that it does not have the same long history of European settlement contributing to a separate territorial language and identity. Although some residents desire devolution to the territorial government to include an increased status, there is no real motivation or voice for complete independence.

Institutional development in the Yukon has been extensive, and includes the establishment of a stable political party system, an effective bureaucracy, a Legislative Assembly similar to that of Canada’s provinces, and the emergence of institutional leaders who voice demands for devolution. The territorial government has had numerous pow-



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ers devolved to it that are commonly held by other provinces in the federation, with the exception of control and ownership over natural resources.

In many ways, the Yukon Territory looks like and functions as a province. Why then, has the devolution process in the Yukon not concluded with increasing its status to that of a province? One answer lies with the direction of civic development in the territory. Although the idea of devolving extensive powers to the territorial government has been on the table for several decades, the process was halted in the 1980s in order to settle land claims and self-government agreements with the territory's Indigenous communities. These communities, motivated by ethnic nationalism, are also demanding devolution; however, their focus is not with the territorial government, but with local community governance. Aboriginal people have developed organizations and leadership directed towards furthering their goals of self-government. Thus, "the territorial governments continue to press for jurisdictional transfers, but Aboriginal groups in the NWT and the Yukon oppose such action until greater progress on self-government is realized, or unless they are involved in negotiations as full participants" (Cameron & White 1995, 131).

Furthermore, Aboriginal people are a minority in the Yukon Territory, with only 21 per cent of the population, which means their ethnic nationalism is not expressed by a majority of the territory's population (Yukon Territorial Government n.d.). While devolution and "provincehood" have primarily been the goals of non-Aboriginal people, their civic nationalism has not developed into a substantial force to support "provincehood." Non-Aboriginal people in the territory tend to be short-term residents, and civic nationalism has not become a substantial force for devolution. The devolution process in the Yukon is described as evolutionary, and may only progress when the people of the Yukon express a strong desire for its completion.

b. The Sakha – An Autonomous Republic

The Republic of Sakha, part of the Russian Federation, is another example of region-building within a federal state. The Republic of Sakha was a pre-existing political territory (Yakutia) before being consumed by the Soviet Union in 1922. During the fall of the Soviet Union, the republic joined other regions in issuing a declaration of sovereignty as part of a strategy to gain economic control from Moscow. This sovereignty claim did not mean absolute independence from the federation, but rather was "a bid for greater republican rights within a federal system" (Young 2000, 183). Not only has the Republic of Sakha been granted—or assumed—many self-governing powers, its constitutional status as an autonomous republic gives it a fairly prominent role in the Russian Federation.

Nationalism in the Sakha is complicated by the presence of several aboriginal groups, the Sakha people who have lived in the region for centuries, and Slavic populations. Aboriginal people in the Sakha exhibit ethnic nationalism that is parallel to that of the Yukon in that they are generally oriented towards their local communities as the



layer of government that will protect their cultures and ways of life. The Sakha people also express ethnic nationalism, which is strong enough to serve as a causal force for the process of devolution, or even an independent Sakha nation-state. However, many authors argue that Republican leaders realize that extreme Sakha ethnic nationalism could lead to a division of the republic or contribute to an extensive out-migration of Slavic people. Since either a division of the territory or increased out-migration could have negative impacts on the republic's economy, Sakha leaders have not pursued political objectives that could inflame existing ethnic tensions. The strong ethnic nationalism has been tempered by both pragmatism and a strong sense of loyalty towards the republic.

Institutional development in the Republic of Sakha reflects and promotes the strong civic nationalism existing in the territory. The new Sakha constitution specifically did not entrench a notion of citizenship based on Sakha nationality, but instead granted citizenship to any person who had lived in the republic for ten years. In 1993, the republic dissolved its parliament and replaced it with a new parliament, the Il Tu-men. Although the majority of representatives have Sakha ethnicity, moderate deputies "say that they would prefer to have more local Russians and indigenous minorities in the parliament, because these non-Sakha would then feel that they had a greater stake and responsibility as citizens within the republic" (Balzer 1996, 291). Some members of the institutional elite also embarked on a successful strategy to extract extensive devolved powers and resources from the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

Devolution plays an important role in the political development of the Circumpolar North. As North-to-North connections increase and regions play an increasingly important role in the world economy and political affairs, we should expect to see increased demands for devolution to northern regions. At the same time, new institutions of higher learning in the North are helping to create new generations of political and civic leaders who have the capacity to achieve and exercise greater autonomy for their regions. We should expect to see new forms of political arrangements across the Circumpolar World.

Supplementary Readings/Materials

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Useful Web Sites

Worldwide Governments on the WWW

<http://www.gksoft.com/govt/en/world.html>

The Icelandic Language: The Alþingi

http://www.worldkidmag.com/iceland_language_2.htm

Iceland

<http://www.iceland.org/>

Greenland Home Rule Government

<http://www.gh.gl/uk/govern/frameset.htm>

The State of Alaska

<http://www.alaska.gov/>

Alaska Statewide Electronic Directory (SLED)

<http://sled.alaska.edu/>

Yukon Territorial Government

<http://www.gov.yk.ca>

Government of the Northwest Territories

<http://www.gov.nt.ca>

Government of Nunavut

<http://www.gov.nu.ca/Nunavut/>

Virtual Sweden

<http://www.sweden.se/>

Norway: Information on Government

<http://www.odin.dep.no/odin/engelsk/index-b-n-a.html>

Finland Council of State

<http://www.valtioneuvosto.fi/vn/liston/base.lsp?k=en>

Online Translator

<http://www.translate.ru>

Russian Federation (mostly in Russian)

<http://www.gov.ru/>

Sakha Republic (Yakutia) (in Russian)

<http://www.sakha.gov.ru>

Study Questions

- * Explain the difference between decentralization and devolution and provide

examples of each.

- ❄ Outline some jurisdictions that a community expressing ethnic nationalism might seek to control through devolution.
- ❄ What are the main principles contributing to the concept of devolution?
- ❄ What are some of the main factors that made the devolution process in Iceland and the Faeroe Islands different from that in the Yukon and Sakha?
- ❄ List and describe some of the different developments that need to occur before there can be legitimate and effective devolution.

Glossary of Terms

Alþingi: The Icelandic parliament.

Decentralization: Creating or enhancing a regional institution that continues to represent and be in control of a central government.

Devolution: The transfer, by mutual consent, of power from a higher or central order of government to a lower or regional order of government.

Home Rule: Home rule describes a degree of autonomy short of independence; a self-governing community within the structure of another state. Typically, a region under home rule will have jurisdiction over all institutions except foreign policy, defense, and higher courts. The governments of the Faeroe Islands and Greenland are referred to as Home Rule governments.

Homogeneous population: An entire population of a country or region that includes people from only one cultural or ethnic background.

Jurisdiction: The legal or other authority over public institutions, such as education, health, or economic development. Devolution is the transfer of jurisdiction to a local government. In decentralization, jurisdiction is not transferred.

Løgting: The Faeroe Islands parliament.

Nationalism: A strong sense of patriotism or a holding of patriotic principles. Nationalism may be ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, etc. In another sense it means promoting a policy of national independence.

Unitary state: A state with only one level of government.