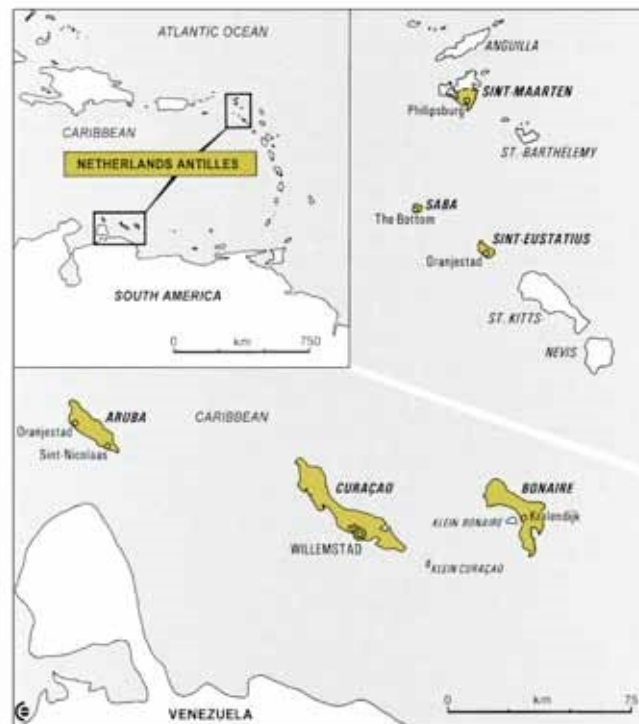


Politics

Things Fall Apart The New Kingdom of the Netherlands

At midnight between October 9 and October 10, 2010, the flag of the Netherlands Antilles, part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Caribbean, was lowered for the last time on the West Indian islands of Curaçao, Bonaire, St Martin, St Eustatius and Saba. These islands, which used to constitute the Netherlands Antilles, a separate 'state' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, started 10-10-10 as new entities within it. Curaçao and St Martin became autonomous 'states' within the Kingdom, whereas the so-called BES islands, Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba, became special municipalities within (the 'state' of) the Netherlands. Erroneously, the 'state' of the Netherlands is commonly identified with the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Even though the 'state' of the Netherlands is the biggest player within the Kingdom, it is only one of the constituent parts of the Kingdom.

The dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles is a compromise that has been agreed upon as a solution to long-running dissatisfaction with the central influence of Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles and the desire of the islands of Curaçao and St Martin to receive the same autonomous status as Aruba, another Caribbean island 'state' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, without them having to take the step of becoming completely independent. Because the Dutch Antillean constellation is one of the last remnants of the Dutch colonial period, these new developments need to be seen from the perspective of (post-) decolonization. After the Indonesian colony claimed independence in 1945, the need to establish a new relationship between the Netherlands and the remaining colonies became very clear. As a consequence the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands, originally intended as a decolonization document, came into force in 1954, granting the West Indian territories, i.e. Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, self-government. Suriname



was granted full independence in 1975 and Aruba seceded from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986, becoming an autonomous entity within the Kingdom on the condition that it would get full independence in 1996.

In fact Aruba never did become independent, preferring to remain within the Kingdom in exchange for a number of concessions on good governance and inspiring the drive for other islands of the Netherlands Antilles to attain the same level of autonomy. During the ensuing twenty years, different strategies were explored and tested in referenda. These have resulted in the recent new structure in which the Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of four 'states' - the Netherlands, Aruba, Curaçao and St Martin - and, since the 10th of October of this year, the 'state' of the Netherlands includes three special Caribbean municipalities - Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba (BES).

This new political construction has created an interesting transition period for the partner 'states' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands: new relations have to be built up, new governments have to be established and new legislation has to be drafted and implemented. Illustrative of this process is the complexity of the legal construction in the BES islands. Though officially they are a municipality of the Netherlands and one would expect Dutch law to apply there, large parts of old Antillean law still remain in effect. Having become part of an EU Member State, i.e. the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, one would also expect the BES islands to be part of the European Union. On the contrary, the BES islands remain OCTs (Overseas Countries and Territories), countries which are related to an EU Member State. The new structure of the Kingdom implies huge legislative and administrative transformation within the new 'states' and within the new municipalities of the Netherlands; this transformation can only be achieved by gradually bringing existing law and administrative structures into conformity with the new situation.

The re-engineered relations between the 'states' of the Kingdom of the Netherlands will probably have a big influence on the exchange of Dutch and West Indian culture. Due to the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles, the different islands have more

direct relations with the Kingdom; as a consequence the relations between, for example, Curaçao and the Netherlands could become closer, resulting perhaps in increased exchanges of cultural, educational and social projects, which could lead to an improvement in mutual understanding. On the other hand, the complexity of the new construction could also put more distance between the partners within the Kingdom

At present the Kingdom of the Netherlands acts as the binding factor between the Netherlands and the West Indian islands. This relationship between the Kingdom and the 'states' which constitute the Kingdom is re-enforced in the current political construction, but it is very clear that the Caribbean discussion about autonomy and independence is not yet finished, and that the Dutch call for political and budgetary transparency within the Caribbean territories of the Kingdom still exists. The new construction leaves some parties dissatisfied, and these parties will continue to raise their voices and to question their responsibilities within the Kingdom and the responsibilities of the Kingdom towards the Caribbean 'states'.

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