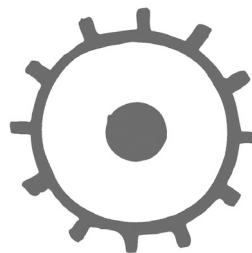


# Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies

**Volume 8 Issue 1 (2024)**



# Understanding Self-Government: Varieties of Territorial Autonomy

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Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies

8(1) 2024, 6–30

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61199/jass.142991>

## Abstract

Increasingly the go-to option for managing separatism, territorial autonomy provides special self-government for territorially concentrated minorities. Rather than an institution in its own right, autonomy is often studied as a form of decentralization and federalism or an endpoint in peace processes. To aid in conceptual development and demonstrate varied applications, this paper analyzes the varied forms and uses of territorial autonomy. The best-known forms are democratic and post-conflict. Less understood are indigenous, authoritarian, and ‘nested’ autonomies. These types of territorial autonomy are approached by distinct scholarly subfields and feature varied causes, institutions, effects, and defects.

## Keywords

Autonomy; self-government; separatism; minorities; independence; sub-national politics

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank colleagues at Soka University of America and the Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University. Useful feedback was provided from panelists at ISA in 2022, as well as the Subnational Politics and Regimes Network. Thank you to Research Assistants Sachi Nishida, Mahesh Kushwaha, Qiankuan Yang, and Mira Peregud, as well as the Åland Islands Peace Institute and the Global Autonomy Network Group.

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## 1. Introduction

Mirroring and then eclipsing the third wave of democracy, the world has seen a sustained shift towards decentralization. Arguments for shedding responsibilities and powers to subnational governments are numerous, including subnational governments being responsive to local needs, more democratic and closer to the people, sensitive to local ecological and social conditions, and national governments wishing to jettison responsibilities. Another reason for empowering subnational governments is to better represent minority groups, with subnational governments serving those with limited voices in national politics.

For some groups, decentralization is not enough. Many distinctive minorities seek special forms of self-rule and recognition, or even independence. The result has been a growth of territorial autonomy—special asymmetrical powers granted to governments representing minority regions. A rejection of uniform, one-size-fits-all models of governance, territorial autonomy has grown across world regions and regime types. This said, it has inspired limited dedicated research, mired by overlapping terms and siloed literatures. This paper seeks greater clarity, charting the varied purposes and forms of territorial autonomy, but also their limitations. What are some different varieties of territorial autonomy? What do they have in common, how do they vary? What can different forms of minority self-government realistically accomplish, and what are some potential pitfalls?

This paper identifies five forms of territorial autonomy. Democratic autonomy, as found in Québec and Scotland, sees regional parties empowered through the ballot box to rule their homeland and engage with national governments, gradually evolving new competencies. Post-conflict autonomy is different, typically created by peace agreements, with regional leaders linked to armed groups providing often illiberal rule amidst ongoing threats of violence. Examples include Northern Ireland and Aceh. A third, emerging form is indigenous autonomy, minority self-government for autochthonous communities. Powers may entail cultural protection, powers over land and resources, migration controls, and internally decentralized authority, evident in Nunavut, Greenland, Panama, and Nicaragua. A fourth form is authoritarian autonomy, as in Chechnya and Tibet. Considered illegitimate and a tool of central control, authoritarian autonomy is too often written off as meaningless, its provisions seen as having no effect. Finally, nested autonomy is found in smaller, third-tier governments, including those within larger autonomous regions. These varieties of territorial autonomy are approached by distinctive scholarly subfields, namely comparative federalism and peace studies, as well as Indigenous Studies and comparative authoritarian research. Rather than representing a complete, watertight typology, these are simply some of the many forms of territorial autonomy.

The first section of this paper provides some conceptual foundations. Here, I define territorial autonomy, examine the tremendous range and potential scope of powers, and address how autonomy is approached in scholarly literatures. Then I introduce five major forms of territorial autonomy, analyzing their logics, literatures, and examples, as well as key concerns related to independence and minorities. The paper concludes by summarizing key findings, identifying other potential types and noting cases that straddle categories. That some cases can exist in multiple categories shows how these types are imperfect, but also helps us to understand such cases, demonstrating the many varieties of autonomy.

## **2. Understanding Territorial Autonomy**

A middle ground between independence and incorporation, as well as a form of decentralization, territorial autonomy provides self-governance for territorially concentrated minorities. For Yash Ghai (2013, 5), autonomy refers to “the ability of a region or community to organise its affairs without interference from the central government.” Technically, any federal or decentralized political system involves territorial autonomy. Here, territorial autonomy refers to asymmetrical, ‘special’ powers to governments representing distinctive minorities.

Territorial autonomy aims to protect and empower minorities, especially ethnic minority nations. For some, the idea of minority nations may be confusing or threatening. Scholars still refer to nation-states as haughty synonyms for countries or states, reifying the idea that all nations should have their own state, and overlooking countries identifying as multinational (Basta 2021). A nation is not a country, but rather a people united through common descent, culture, or beliefs, typically inhabiting a territory with its own government (or aspiring to it) (Smith 2002). Host states may balk at referring to minority groups as nations for fear of eventual independence, preferring to see them as minorities. For an ethnic minority to be seen as a minority nation, it requires a political ‘edge’—recognized territory, perhaps a history of sovereign statehood or distinctive laws, and an existing or aspirational government. That a group identifies as a nation does not mean that all members agree on the nation’s contours or aspire to sovereign statehood. Territorial autonomy entails self-government, defined territory, borders, symbols, and policies. Almost by definition, ethnic minorities with widespread, sustained demands for self-government through independence or territorial autonomy can be seen as nations.

In essence, territorial autonomy is intended to help distinctive groups see themselves not just as national minorities, but as regional majorities able to manage their own affairs. In debates regarding how to best manage diversity, where integrationists demand aggregative, cross-cutting institutions while accommodationists build around identity, territorial

autonomy is squarely within the latter, best suited to cases where identity is already highly salient (Anderson and Choudhry 2019). Autonomy provides self-governance without independence, stopping short of sovereignty. Minorities may thus self-govern and imagine themselves as majorities within existing borders.

Territorial autonomy exists across world regions and regime types. History is replete with similar arrangements in multinational empires and associated principalities. The first modern example is Åland, formed in 1921 under the League of Nations for ethnic Swedish islands within Finland (Suksi 2011). This was followed in 1946, when Italy agreed to special rights to German speakers in South Tyrol. Territorial autonomy has since spread globally (Benedikter 2009). Autonomous regions are often relatively poor, but some are not especially disadvantaged (Scotland, Québec) and others (South Tyrol, Catalonia, Flanders, Hong Kong) are richer than their host countries. Autonomy may also be stated but be in reality limited (*de jure*) or may exist without a formal pronouncement (*de facto*). Autonomy may be constitutionally entrenched, or it may exist in myriad laws and norms. In these and other ways, territorial autonomy is a highly varied, flexible institution.

Autonomous governments tend to be highly active in their societies, developing interventionist states aimed at elevating their nations (Béland and Lecours 2008). Autonomous regions typically enjoy economic powers such as budget transfers, resource revenue, the ability to collect and set taxes, and separate budgets. Some autonomous regions can borrow money and manage debts, set interest rates, and feature special currencies—a regional mintage of a national currency (Scotland, Northern Ireland) or a currency of their own (Macau, Hong Kong). Politically, autonomous regions may feature distinct parties, electoral systems, and migration policies. Internationally, they may join or participate in international organizations, or establish consular offices abroad (Lecours 2002). Most autonomous regions take up broad cultural powers, overseeing language laws and education, religious affairs, cultural traditions and values, and symbols such as flags and anthems. In addition to powers of self-government, autonomy may involve special powers at the national level, with features of shared governance including vetoes, influence over national education, and special representation. The powers of autonomous governments also depend on the level of government being empowered. Autonomous governments are typically second-order (provinces, states), but may also be third-tier, within a province or state. This more precise language is essential, gaining precision lost with terms such as ‘local’ governments, a residual that varies across contexts. This distinction then allows us to differentiate between national minorities in an autonomous region and second-order minorities within an autonomous region.

The powers enjoyed by autonomous governments clearly matter. A region with a history of self-government and decades of struggle may not settle for merely symbolic powers.

However, scholars also recognize the importance of process, namely whether autonomy is simply pronounced and implemented by central government authorities or instead negotiated with regional minority leaders (Barter and Wangge 2022). Much depends on who governs, whether the reins of self-government are held by those loyal to the central government or popular in the region. Along with powers and process, relative power is also important—how ‘special’ autonomy is. Minority nations are likely to understand their power in comparison to other subnational units. For example, Québec enjoys substantial self-government, but Ontario enjoys similar competencies. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the Mosquito coast enjoys limited formal power, but in an otherwise centralized country, making autonomy more ‘special’ (Sánchez 2007). Autonomy also varies temporally, as it may be seen as a fixed, one-off agreement, or else a dynamic, ongoing dialogue adapting to new challenges. Observing sustained unrest in Scotland and Catalonia compared to Flanders and South Tyrol, Lecours (2022, 730) argues that “the key to autonomy regimes weakening secessionism is their capacity to adjust and expand over time.”

Territorial autonomy thus varies considerably, with different definitions, names, and powers making it difficult to study. The scholarly literature on autonomy is similarly divided. Most concretely, autonomy is approached as a form of decentralization, delivering power to subnational governments. Autonomous regions thus make their way into datasets measuring decentralization, existing as asymmetrical outliers (Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2021). Autonomous regions are also discussed as cases of federalism and ethnofederalism. Most dedicated books on autonomy are collections of case studies, with dozens of titles providing conceptual overviews and then rich case analyses, mostly on Western examples (Keating and McGarry 2001; Máiz and Safran 2000). Territorial autonomy is studied by scholars with a wide array of interests, including studies of decentralization and federalism, ethnic politics, multiculturalism, conflict resolution and peace studies, indigenous studies, and authoritarianism. This suggests the topic’s importance, but also its fragmentation, as autonomy is pulled in different directions and lacks dedicated scholarly discussion.

Despite fears from host states, no country has ever gained independence through meaningful special territorial autonomy. Although ethnic regions delineated the borders of new countries from the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia (Roeder 2007), these cases involved national government collapse in ethnofederalism, not special regional autonomy. The world has never seen a region enjoy meaningful special autonomy en route to independence. Independence for East Timor, South Sudan, Bangladesh, and Eritrea were consequences of a refusal to recognize autonomy. Although referenda in Scotland and Québec came close, and polls in Catalonia and Bougainville suggest a desire for independence, territorial autonomy has yet to lead to secession. However, demands for more powers and independence rarely go away. Autonomy thus manages rather than

resolves separatism and intergroup tensions. It works, though, as allowing autonomy may put the host state in a positive light, reduce perceived threats to minorities, force separatists to take on the responsibilities of governing, and expose divisions among minority groups.

Another perennial danger of territorial autonomy relates to the status of local minorities. Most groups attain autonomy through protracted struggle. Once in power, autonomous governments embark on something resembling nation-building, developing their identities after years of suppression (Keating 1996). This may then threaten regional ‘second-order’ minorities, including indigenous and migrant groups, especially those with national co-ethnic communities (Barter 2018). Although protecting minorities at one level, autonomy may threaten minorities at another, in effect transferring assimilationist politics, exclusion, and ethnic tensions downwards.

Territorial autonomy is an important tool for accommodating ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other territorially concentrated minorities. This is a global, growing institution involving varied powers. However, our knowledge of territorial autonomy remains limited, largely because it is approached in various scholarly literatures and focuses on a handful of Western cases. There is a real need to better understand the many forms, benefits, and dangers of territorial autonomy.

### **3. Types of Territorial Autonomy**

To demonstrate the value and diversity of territorial autonomy, as well as to make sense of its varied goals and scholarly literatures, this paper delineates five major varieties. Democratic autonomy is the most extensively researched, but is often lumped in with post-conflict autonomy, which sees different powers, governments, problems, and prospects. Studied separately from these cases, indigenous autonomy entails self-government for diverse autochthonous peoples. Fourth, authoritarian autonomy features well known, but undertheorized cases. Here, autonomy is too often dismissed as meaningless because it serves the central government. Finally, nested autonomy involves lower administrative tiers of self-government, and sometimes autonomy for minorities within autonomous regions. These types of autonomy vary in their origins, scope of powers, leadership, governance, and the extent to which they threaten eventual independence and their own minorities.

Establishing typologies is an essential task in social science research, helping to better understand complex institutions and phenomena. The nominal, descriptive typology presented in this paper is based on observations of real-world cases, noting constellations of traits in a way that may usefully distinguish between core forms. This is what Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright (2012, 218) refer to as a “partial order” category, one where there exists exclusive ordering in some but not all categories, an effort to develop “an overarching

concept that brings together previously established concepts and traditions of analysis”. Some of the below categories are based on types of governance, while others are based on administrative tiers or the nature of the minority group. Far from being a limitation, cases straddling multiple categories are all the more interesting, discussed towards the end of the paper. These varieties are not intended to represent an exhaustive, complete typology. Instead, they draw together different forms of territorial autonomy siloed into separate scholarly literatures.

### **3.1 Democratic Autonomy**

When we think of special autonomy, the cases that come to mind, and those most thoroughly researched, tend to be in Western, developed, democratic countries. This includes the two early examples of Åland (Finland) and South Tyrol (Italy), which both recognize a minority group speaking the dominant language of a neighboring country. Among the most prominent examples of democratic autonomy are Québec (Canada), Catalonia (Spain), and Scotland (United Kingdom), as well as Flanders (Belgium), Wales (United Kingdom), the Faroe Islands (Denmark), and Galicia (Spain).

Democratic autonomy emerges when ethnic minorities with histories of self-rule mobilize to demand recognition and political power. Often against the backdrop of centralized and assimilationist states, minorities may confront the host government and demand independence. In a democratic context, radicalism and violence may be less attractive, and institutional channels may exist to expand political power and organize referenda. Fears of independence may lead reluctant host governments to grant new powers to appease minority groups, but they rarely do so immediately, with several rounds of mobilization, concessions, and counter-mobilization (Basta 2021). Democratic autonomy tends to feature regional parties whose platforms include cultural protection and regional nationalism. Examples include the Parti Québécois; Scottish National Party; Catalonia’s Convergence and Union (CiU); Plaid Cymru (Wales), and the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and People’s Union (VU) in Flanders. Such parties typically articulate missions to protect and enhance national identity, doing so through the provision of social services and highly interventionist states. Béland and Lecours (2008, 5) argue that social policy “has become a central focus” for nationalist parties, used as “an identity building tool”.

Most books on territorial autonomy are edited volumes, with chapters focusing on Western cases (Ghai 2000; Keating and McGarry 2001; Máiz and Safran 2000). Other studies are explicitly comparative (Keating 1996; Greer 2007). Thematically, cases of democratic autonomy are included in studies of decentralization, as with most forms of autonomy, but are especially likely to be approached in studies of comparative federalism



as instances of asymmetry or ethnofederalism (Burgess 2006). Democratic autonomy is also analyzed in studies of minority rights and multiculturalism. For Kymlicka (1995, 52), autonomy helps a minority group “sustain a life of its own”, developing competencies to engage with majorities on a more equal footing.

To date, territorial autonomy has successfully managed separatist sentiment in democratic, industrialized countries. This said, in no case has autonomy extinguished regional nationalism or demands for independence. Scotland continues to pressure for independence, especially post-Brexit, while Catalanian voters show continued support for independence. There is always a possibility that an autonomous region will gain independence at some point, but if so, this will be carried out through a referendum, followed by drawn-out legal battles. Dion (1996) observes that secession has been avoided because democratic autonomy allows/forces opposition groups to govern, protects minority rights, results in more reasonable national governments, and independence requires majority support alongside due process. While democratic rule makes independence easier in some ways, “it also decreases the sense that secession is likely” by reducing minority insecurity (Dion 1996, 281).

Even if the threat of independence is somewhat overstated, even democratic autonomy sees tensions between regional majorities and their minorities, especially as regional governments promote regional identity. That regional governments empowered with autonomy embark on nation-building is perhaps understandable, especially given their distinctive status and legacies of assimilationist host states. In democratic contexts, second-order minorities may have recourse to national courts and rights mechanisms, but nonetheless face assimilationist pressures in autonomous regions. Keating (1996) suggests that nationalism in democratic autonomous regions need not be exclusionary and ethnic, but may instead be civic, tolerating local minorities and encouraging integration, although not recognizing minority identities (see also Breton 1988). Barter (2018) finds that Scotland has rejected ethnic nationalism, embracing multiculturalism, partly in contrast to conservative British governments. This said, regional parties in democratic autonomy are nationalists, struggling to find support among regional minorities. Some regionalist ethnic parties, such as Vlaams Belang in Flanders, are far right, anti-minority groups (van Haute, Pauwels, and Sinardet 2018).

### **3.2 Post-Conflict Autonomy**

Autonomy has emerged as a go-to option for overcoming violent separatist conflict, providing a compromise between state unity and independence. Post-conflict autonomy may resemble democratic autonomy, especially when post-conflict contexts feature

elections and regional parties. Many democratic cases have featured some violence or originated in international disputes, blurring the lines between the two types. There are, though, important distinctions. Post-conflict autonomy is typically created as part of a peace agreement, sometimes designed by external mediators, rather than evolving more slowly. Post-conflict autonomy tends to be illiberal, as leaders may be former combatants or have spoilers looking over their shoulders and may be especially opposed to national governments. Governance may be complicated by post-war demobilization and reconstruction. While democratic autonomy is found mostly in the West, post-conflict autonomy is global, with examples including Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Aceh (Indonesia), Mindanao (Philippines), and Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), and potentially the Basque region (Spain), Kashmir (India), and the Kurdish region (Iraq), as well as various ethnic states in Myanmar.

Scholarship on post-conflict autonomy overlaps with democratic autonomy. Many case-driven edited volumes feature both types, although others focus on conflict cases (Weller and Wolff 2005). Post-conflict autonomy is approached mostly through conflict and peace studies. Conflict scholars may see the creation and implementation of autonomy as an extension of longer conflict processes. Peace studies scholars may approach autonomy as an outcome, the endpoint of negotiations (Rothchild and Hartzell 1999; Shaykhutdinov 2010). For Schulte (2020), successful conflict resolution through territorial autonomy is a result of international mediation and a recognition of minority groups as part of the host country. A limitation in the peace studies approach is that autonomy may represent an endpoint or dependent variable rather than a long-term political system. This said, scholars also look beyond autonomy as an agreement to end war and toward how it may sustain peace. Jarstad and Nilsson (2008) show that peace accords detailing territorial autonomy are more likely to endure than other forms, as autonomy represents a serious commitment and can be difficult to rescind. Cederman et al. (2015) show that power-sharing indeed reduces conflict, finding that territorial autonomy diminishes long-term violence.

Post-conflict autonomy is typically established through peace agreements, negotiated by state and rebel representatives, often with third-party mediators. Autonomy is thus designed rather than evolved. Negotiations for the autonomous region may involve unelected rebel forces, who might design self-government for their own benefit. One example of autonomy as a peace agreement is the Memorandum of Understanding, signed between Acehnese separatists and the Indonesian government, overseen by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, which contained the provisions for a new autonomous government (Aspinall 2005). Others include the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (Philippines, involving Malaysia), the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (United Kingdom, involving the United States), the Oslo Accords (Israel-Palestine, involving Norway and other countries),

and the Bougainville Peace Agreement (Papua New Guinea, involving Australia and New Zealand). As violence declines and conflicts end, autonomous governance begins, typically with former fighters at the helm. We might see parties linked to armed groups, as with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, or parties battling extremists, such as the Basque Nationalist Party (Irvin 1999). We should expect post-conflict autonomy to be illiberal, as former combatants may be unaccustomed to democratic competition and govern with a strong hand, seeing autonomy as their reward for years of war. Post-conflict autonomy may see limited political turnover, with rulers creating one-party systems. They may use budgets as a peace dividend, rewarding former fighters through demobilization programs and former commanders with state contracts (Lyons 2016).

In democratic autonomous regions, there remains the potential for independence through referenda, something less likely in post-conflict autonomy. Paths to independence may exist when peace agreements include provisions for a referendum. For instance, the 2000 Bougainville peace agreement promised a referendum within 10–15 years. When it was finally held in 2019, the result was nearly unanimous support for independence. This has not, however, birthed a new state, as the Papua New Guinea government has always regarded the referendum as non-binding (Ghai and Regan 2006, 600). It is possible that, with time, post-conflict autonomy may develop into democratic autonomy, where liberal host governments may allow an independence referendum. It is at least as likely that autonomy will fail, shattering fragile peace agreements and returning to violence. This may occur if states claw back provisions of self-government, as occurred previously in Aceh and Mindanao, or else when regional crises or violence spark national intervention. For post-conflict autonomy, collapse and a return to war are very real threats, and as a result, illiberal but stable rule is often tolerated.

The illiberal nature of post-conflict autonomy brings real dangers for second-order minorities. During separatist conflicts, regional minorities are often afforded limited attention; when they are discussed, it is as militias, seen as proxies for national governments rather than mobilizing for local reasons (Barter 2022). Regional minorities are typically excluded from peace talks and the creation of autonomous zones, and the centralized, illiberal nature of post-conflict autonomy may afford little role for them. The political economies, electoral competition, and nation-building efforts of post-conflict governments typically serve regional majorities, pressuring and excluding second-order minorities. Examples include Lumad in Mindanao (Paredes 2015; Perez 2021), Javanese and Gayo in Aceh (Barter 2015), Buka Islanders in Bougainville, Christians in Palestine, and Assyrian Christians in Kurdistan (Kruczek 2021). Ill treatment of minorities by regional governments may trigger violence, perhaps justifying intervention by national governments and jeopardizing peace as well as autonomy.

### 3.3 Indigenous Autonomy

A third type of territorial autonomy, indigenous autonomy has grown through the ongoing mobilization of indigenous peoples and revived treaty processes. Only sometimes approached as a form of territorial autonomy, indigenous autonomy seeks to restore native sovereignty, wrestling with histories of betrayal, rural poverty, and piecemeal self-government afforded by settler governments. While most autonomous regions involve nativist sentiment, indigenous autonomy sees a stronger emphasis on precolonial traditions, typically among smaller communities.

Like democratic autonomy, indigenous autonomy evolves through dynamic processes of mobilization and negotiation. Its core elements include an emphasis on land and resource rights, truth and justice mechanisms, cultural preservation, restrictions on in-migration and settler property ownership, community-owned businesses, and social programs (i.e., community policing and justice) (González 2015, 16). Indigenous autonomous regions often work with national governments, which may provide significant budgets. Although a form of decentralization, most varieties of territorial autonomy tend to be internally centralized, with power concentrated in the regional capital.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous autonomy is different. Because indigenous nations tend to be diverse and settler colonialism has fragmented their territories, indigenous autonomy involves either large decentralized units or else a patchwork of smaller ones. Among many challenges faced by indigenous peoples, political borders often bisect communities, meaning that efforts to restore self-government demand negotiations with several governments.

Greenland is the largest and most powerful indigenous autonomous region. After gaining ‘Home Rule’ within Denmark in 1979, enabling the territory to exit the European Community in 1985, the 2009 Self-Governing Act provided Greenland with powers related to currency, language, symbols, mining, and the right to an independence referendum. For Kuokkanen (2017, 191), “Greenlanders have achieved one of the most far-reaching self-determination arrangements of all Indigenous peoples worldwide.” To its immediate west, Canada’s Nunavut territory was separated from the Northwest Territories in 1999 to represent Inuit peoples. Nunavut saw new powers provided to various agencies, with governance shared between the territorial government and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated serving Inuit people (Rodon 2014).<sup>2</sup> Consistent with indigenous autonomy, Nunavut is decentralized, reflecting local identities and geographic distance (Henderson 2007, 108). In Central America, Nicaragua is weighted towards the mestizo Pacific,

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1 A rare exception is the Basque region, comprised of the three Basque provinces and Navarre (Lecours 2007).

2 This brings up an interesting issue in indigenous autonomy, and for autonomy more generally, as there may be special agencies serving titular ethnic groups parallel to territorial governments serving all residents. Indigenous autonomy thus may mix forms of territorial and non-territorial autonomy.

neglecting the isolated Afro-indigenous Atlantic ‘Moskito’ coast. After years of struggle, two coastal autonomous regions were created to recognize indigenous rights and languages, collective land ownership, local education, and resource management (Sánchez 2007).

Excepting the above examples, indigenous autonomy often unfolds through smaller administrative units. The reality for many indigenous peoples is in-migration and fragmented territories. Third-tier autonomy represents one potential, imperfect response. Scholars have noted that indigenous autonomy claims have grown despite indigenous communities being small and spread out, rarely controlling a state or province (Papillon 2011, 290). In Canada, several dozen indigenous nations have negotiated renewed powers, including the Nisga’a in British Columbia, Ojibway in Manitoba, Nipissing in Ontario, and many others. In the United States, indigenous communities have negotiated new competencies, including those related to gambling, taxation, courts, culture, and land. The US is home to over 300 indigenous reservations; among the most powerful indigenous government is the Navajo/Diné, known for its distinctive legal system (Austin 2009). Latin America has also seen autonomy granted to small indigenous communities, evident in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Mexico (González 2015). Panama features six *comarca indígenas* – four second-order and two third-order units (Postero and Tockman 2020). Some Latin American autonomy laws allow the possibility of smaller indigenous regions to confederate into larger units, balancing a concern for community self-rule with economies of scale. Although more localized autonomy may involve limited government powers and capacities, this nonetheless represents a novel arrangement for smaller minority groups, discussed further below in terms of nested autonomy.

Beyond the Americas, indigenous peoples around the world have struggled for autonomy. Australia has limited indigenous self-government, with the partial exception of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. In ‘old world’ countries of Europe, Africa, and Asia, indigeneity unfolds in different contexts. Where ethnic majorities are also autochthonous, many remote or highland communities have embraced being ‘indigenous’, especially following the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Baird 2019). Small autonomous governments exist in Finland (the Sámi Domicile), Russia (the Sakha Republic and four autonomous okrugs), and various communities in northeast India. The Philippines, one of few Asian countries to recognize indigenous peoples, has seen efforts to establish an autonomous highland Cordillera region (Bertrand 2011). In Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak feature unique state-level powers related to migration and citizenship, resource management, cultural institutions, political parties, and development policies (Salleh, Puyok, and Bagang 2019).

Research focusing on territorial autonomy, especially through comparative federalism and peace studies, rarely examines indigenous autonomy. The exceptions may be

Greenland or Nunavut, two larger indigenous autonomous regions, which when studied alongside other forms of autonomy, tend not to have their indigenous elements emphasized. Indigenous autonomous regions are typically approached through case studies, in terms of multilevel governance and Indigenous Studies (Papillon 2011; Rodon 2014). Many Indigenous Studies scholars are, perhaps justifiably, skeptical of autonomy. Informed by critical theory and legacies of broken promises, many scholars reject reconciliation and self-government. For Coulthard (2014, 3), self-government “promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend.” Clearly, indigenous communities feature diverse attitudes towards self-government. Autonomy will not undo centuries of colonial expansion and disregard for indigenous cultures, but may allow space and power to begin to do so.

For host states, independence is not a major concern for indigenous autonomy, especially smaller, third-order units. Indigenous autonomy, however, may threaten second-order minorities. Critics may cite the presence of settlers within indigenous regions, generating a settler-rights backlash to scuttle autonomy (Spitzer 2022). Concern has been expressed for gender minorities, as indigenous governments are often ruled by elder male leaders with conservative church affiliations (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 2005). Potential responses include recourse to national rights mechanisms and social change within empowered indigenous communities.

### **3.4 Authoritarian Autonomy**

Another form of autonomy features well known examples, but has escaped much attention as a form of autonomy. Authoritarian autonomy consists of non-democratic states granting special status to minority regions whose politics are similarly undemocratic. Because it does not allow for meaningful self-government, authoritarian autonomy is rarely considered a form of autonomy at all. Authoritarian autonomy is instead intended to tether the minority region to the center, a centripetal force rather than a centrifugal one. However, just because it is not genuine does not mean it lacks political consequences.

Authoritarian autonomy has many examples in the early Soviet Union, which was recognizing minority nations and ruling through local allies in authoritarian, top-down systems (Brubaker 1994). Martin (2001) refers to the early Soviet Union as an Affirmative Action Empire, elevating titular leaders of minority regions and protecting local languages. Contemporary examples of authoritarian autonomy include Tibet, Xinjiang, and Macau (China); Chechnya, Dagestan, and other ethnic republics (Russia); Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan); Gorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan); Zanzibar (Tanzania); Puntland (Somalia);

and various states in Myanmar. Some examples discussed in previous sections were, at one time, examples of authoritarian autonomy, i.e., Aceh and Mindanao. This shows the fluidity of these types, and that authoritarian autonomy may evolve, especially amidst regime change in the national government.

Because authoritarian autonomy is regarded as illegitimate, it is rarely studied as a form of autonomy. Authoritarian cases almost never make it into studies of autonomy, seen as “sham federacy” (Rezvani 2014, 192), with autonomy only possible in democratic settings (Benedikter 2009, 62). One exception is Henders’ comparison of Catalonia, Corsica, Hong Kong, and Tibet. Henders observes that authoritarian autonomous regions are rarely studied in terms of power-sharing or self-government, seen as “formalities, offering minority communities no meaningful self-rule” (2010, 3). She agrees that we should be skeptical of authoritarian autonomy, but cautions against dismissing it. This echoes the growing literature on comparative authoritarianism, where scholars have opened the black box of non-democratic rule and the effect of autocratic institutions (Gandhi 2008). Pepinsky (2014) observes that authoritarian governance represents an important area of research, but these arrangements may at any time be bypassed by central authorities unhampered by the rule of law. This is a useful reminder for approaching authoritarian autonomy, as formal rules may be undercut by personalist, perhaps random interventions by ruling regimes.

Authoritarian autonomy does not typically feature direct rule by the center, but instead indirect rule through loyal minority elites. Authoritarian rulers cultivate classes of regional elites invested with considerable resources to lead cultural revivals. Examples are found in New Order Indonesia and Marcos-era Mindanao. In Aceh, the New Order did not rule through Javanese elites or seek to assimilate the rebellious province. Instead, it developed networks of ethnic Acehnese leaders and elevated Acehnese culture (Aspinall 2009, 35). Similarly, Philippine rule in Mindanao has been strengthened by loyal Moro political elites. For example, Ali Dimaporo was a long-time friend of President Marcos, supporting the dictator and even naming a son after him. When Marcos declared Martial Law, Dimaporo was rewarded for supporting the President. Dimaporo amassed a personal army and looted state budgets, ensconcing his warlordism in local culture, promoting himself as Sultan, with pageantry and historiography serving as a “vivid illustration to his remarkable accumulation of power” (Bentley 2002, 58).

Contemporary Chechnya also exemplifies authoritarian autonomy. After years of conflict, Putin pursued a strategy of Chechenization in the 2000s, empowering local allies. Central here is Ramzan Kadyrov, whose personal loyalty to Putin is rewarded with considerable power. Kadyrov and his circle have used this power to lead “somewhat of a reassertion of national and cultural identity” (Russell 2011, 1073), mixing brutal oppression with local nationalist revivals. Another key example is Tibet. Here, it is not that Han

administrators rule the autonomous province, but instead ethnic Tibetan administrators educated by and loyal to Beijing. Yang (2017) details how China's Minzu universities cultivate ethnic leaders, teaching them official versions of their cultures and needs. Instead of simply suppressing Tibetan Buddhism, China has cultivated its own brand and leaders, with central and provincial authorities investing in temples (Powers 2017). China seeks to control rather than eliminate Tibetan Buddhism, evident in the communist government recognizing its own Panchen Lama.

Authoritarian autonomy may provide some space for cultural expression, and leaders can wield considerable power, but in the service of the central government. There is a pressing need for more research focusing on such cases, informed by the comparative authoritarian literature. It is not genuine self-rule, but has important political, economic, and cultural consequences. In terms of independence, it seems that authoritarian autonomy can place regions in a sort of holding pattern, as resistance is rarely extinguished, but may be contained. In its efforts to compensate for a lack of legitimacy, authoritarian autonomy may even indulge minority identities through state cultural celebrations. There is always a danger that, in the event of a national crisis, minority groups will demand independence, perhaps led by regional elites previously loyal to the central government. An especially important aspect of authoritarian autonomy relates to the position of second-order minorities. As pro-state regional elites promote local identity, and rebellious or exiled counter-elites are also nationalists, neither have much space for smaller groups outside of these visions. Sometimes, smaller minorities make for easy targets for rebels or scapegoats for autonomous governments. Examples include disproportionate violence against ethnic Chinese Muslims (Hui) in Xinjiang (Côté 2015), Jews and Christians in Dagestan, and LGBTQ+ communities in Chechnya (Katsuba 2023). Second-order minorities face persecution from multiple sides in authoritarian autonomy, as national and regional governments seek to elevate regional identity in a bid for legitimacy.

### **3.5 Nested Autonomy**

To possess sufficient scale for meaningful self-government, autonomous regions are typically found among second-tier administrative units, i.e., states and provinces. With indigenous autonomy, we began to discuss devolving power to smaller administrative units, which while lacking some formal power, can nonetheless play important substantive and symbolic roles in minority governance. This paper has emphasized the tendency of regional majorities to use self-government to protect and enhance their national identities, in doing so threatening regional second-order minorities. A final form of territorial autonomy provides one way to manage these tensions, with smaller forms of autonomy nested within states and provinces.



The idea of nested autonomy borrows from work on federalism. Wilson (2001) refers to ‘Matryoshka federalism’ in Russia, where autonomous okrugs are federal units that also exist in regions, akin to nesting dolls. However, unlike other varieties of autonomy discussed thus far, this different scale of autonomous regions sees cases with limited scholarly attention. Nested autonomy may refer to third-tier self-government within ordinary second-tier administrative units. China, India, Russia, and Myanmar feature several third-tier autonomous regions, such as Sipsongpanna, an autonomous prefecture for ethnic Thais in Yunnan, China. Especially interesting are cases of autonomy nested within autonomous regions. In such cases, much depends on whether third-order autonomy is granted by the regional or national government; if the latter, nested autonomy may be used to undermine autonomous regions.

Because the universe of cases is limited to regions already enjoying special autonomy, there are only a handful of examples of autonomous regions nested within autonomous regions. In Catalonia, Val d’Aran is a remote mountainous region with its own Occitan language. In 1990, Val d’Aran was recognized as an autonomous entity with a distinct language within Catalonia by a regional government led by Catalan nationalists (Villarroya 2012). Meanwhile, in South Tyrol, the Ladin minority enjoys special status, with powers related to language, education, and political representation. In Scotland, we see growing autonomy for the Hebrides, Orkneys, and Shetlands, islands with different economies (offshore oil and fishing) as well as Gaelic and Norse cultural traits. In 2013, the Lerwick Declaration initiated limited autonomy, creating councils, veto powers, and cultural rights for outlying islands. Another example is in Yogyakarta (Indonesia), where Paku Alam maintains special status within the Sultanate, its prince standing as a hereditary Vice Governor alongside the region’s hereditary Sultan / Governor (Dwiyanany and Wardhani 2019). China has several autonomous prefectures, counties, and townships, including several within designated autonomous provinces, such as the Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture within Xinjiang.

Canada is also home to nested autonomy, here overlapping with indigenous autonomy. There are numerous examples of third-tier indigenous autonomy, such as Nunatsiavut in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in Yukon and Northwest Territories. In terms of autonomy within autonomy, the Nunavik region continues to move towards self-government within Québec. Sovereignists have long had tense relations with provincial minorities, with Anglophones and migrants perceived as tools for assimilation. This has led Québec’s leaders to criticize Canadian multiculturalism and to create their own ‘interculturalism’, where minorities are encouraged to integrate and accept ‘Québec National Values’ (Bouchard 2015). Indigenous peoples represent a different challenge, possessing prior claims to land and cultural protection. After all, any claim for special status

for Québec can be made simultaneously for its indigenous minorities. In 1978, the Cree and Inuit gained some autonomy with the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, which created the Kativik Regional Government along with the Makivik Corporation to serve Inuit communities. Aided by funding from federal and provincial authorities, as well as resource revenue, Nunavik gained control over education in indigenous languages, hunting grounds, and local resource rights, but limited political authority. A 2011 Nunavik referendum to create an autonomous regional government failed, as locals felt the proposal lacked sufficient powers (Rogers 2011). In December 2020, the provincial government announced plans to create a new autonomous region of Nunavik, which will represent a case of nested indigenous autonomy.

There exist few studies on nested autonomy, in part because the regions are small, but also because it can be difficult to envision minorities of minorities. There are few cases of autonomous regions within autonomous regions, partly because few regional autonomous groups recognize their minorities, even though doing so aligns with the principles that their own autonomy is based upon. Those ruling autonomous regions fought hard to attain power, and smaller minority groups may represent an ideational threat to their claims. Several second-order minorities that have opposed separatism and regional nationalism would benefit from self-rule, including Pemba islanders in Zanzibar, Gayo in Aceh, and Lumad in Mindanao. Nested autonomy may also benefit autonomous majorities, since the treatment of minorities represents an occasion for national governments to interfere in regional affairs (i.e., India using violence against Pandits as a pretext for incorporating Kashmir). Nested autonomy has the potential to help special regions manage internal diversity and sustain autonomy.

#### **4. Analysis and Implications**

This paper has analyzed territorial autonomy as a widespread and varied institution, a tool to manage the demands of distinctive minority nations. Along with democratic and post-conflict autonomy, it has illuminated some less researched forms such as indigenous, authoritarian, and nested autonomies. While all are examples of special territorial governance for distinctive regions, it is useful to disaggregate different types of autonomy. Below, Table 1 summarizes these types, providing key features, relevant scholarly literatures, and examples.

These varieties of autonomy differ and overlap in unexpected ways. For example, while post-conflict autonomy is often discussed alongside democratic autonomy, the former is typically more top-down, with autonomy created as part of a peace agreement, looking more like authoritarian autonomy. All forms of territorial autonomy may threaten second-

order minorities, with nested autonomy alone safeguarding the rights of smaller, internal groups.

*Table 1. Five Types of Territorial Autonomy*

<b>Types</b>	<b>Features</b>	<b>Examples and Scholarship</b>
<b>Democratic</b>	Origins: Evolves slowly, negotiated, bottom-up Leadership: Regional political parties Governance: Cultural protection, nationalism Independence: Potential through referenda Minorities: Threatened by assimilation, exclusion	Québec; Catalonia; Scotland; Åland; South Tyrol; Wales; Flanders  Comparative Federalism
<b>Post-Conflict</b>	Origins: Peace agreements, external actors, top-down Leadership: Former combatants, regional parties Governance: Illiberal, nationalist, corruption Independence: Possible or return to violence Minorities: Threatened by violence, exclusion	Northern Ireland; Aceh; Mindanao; Bougainville  Peace and Conflict Studies
<b>Indigenous</b>	Origins: Evolves slowly, court rulings, mixed Leadership: Elder males, councils Governance: Culture, resources, decentralized, third-tier Independence: Limited threat Minorities: Excludes settler, gender minorities	Nunavut; Greenland; Mosquito Coast (Nicaragua); Panama; Gran Chaco; Sabah and Sarawak  Indigenous Studies; Multi-Level Governance
<b>Authoritarian</b>	Origins: National governments, top-down Leadership: Loyal regional elites Governance: Promote culture, development Independence: Controlled, potentially in crises Minorities: Threatened by government and opposition	Chechnya and Dagestan; Xinjiang and Tibet; Zanzibar  Comparative Authoritarianism
<b>Nested</b>	Origins: Regional or national governments, varies Leadership: Varied Governance: Limited powers, mostly cultural Independence: Limited threat Minorities: Provides protection	Val d'Aran (Catalonia); Nunavik (Québec); Scottish Islands  N/A

Again, this exercise is not intended to develop a cohesive typology, leaving potential alternative types and mixed cases. Another potential form could be administrative autonomy, in which special government powers are provided to capital cities and special economic zones for the sake of efficiency. Examples of capital cities with special powers are numerous, including the Greater London Authority, the Seoul Capital Area, Tokyo Metropolis, Buenos Aires Autonomous City, and many others, while special economic zones include Cheju in Korea, Hainan and Shenzhen in China, Labuan in Malaysia, and more. This type was excluded on the grounds that it is not related to ethnic minorities and does not threaten separatism, although there may be pressures against minority migrant workers. Other potential types might include de facto autonomy in occupied regions, i.e., Crimea, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, the Spanish Sahara, and Turkish

Cyprus. One could refer to marginal autonomies, places with limited formal powers such as Rotuma (Fiji); Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan); the Canary Islands (Spain); Svalbard (Norway); Corsica (France); Norfolk or Christmas Island (Australia); the Cook Islands and Niue (New Zealand); and the Isle of Man, Jersey, and Guernsey (Britain). One distinctive case is Mount Athos in Greece, an autonomous region that stands as the monastic center of the Greek Orthodox Church (and completely bars females from its territory). A large set of cases may be colonial autonomy, where non-contiguous colonies possess special governance powers, such as Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Gibraltar, and the Falkland Islands (United Kingdom); Guam, American Samoa, and the US Virgin Islands (United States); French Polynesia, Réunion, Martinique, Guiana, and New Caledonia (France), and others. Although the varieties of autonomy identified in this paper cover considerable ground and the categorization has analytic value, one could and should identify other types, so as to gain a broader understanding of asymmetrical special forms of self-government for distinctive minority regions.

Many important and interesting cases do not fit neatly into the five varieties outlined in this paper. As with any social science typology, it is essential to be explicit regarding overlapping traits and cases; even classic typologies, from regime types to exit, voice, and loyalty may not be entirely mutually exclusive (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 224). One complex case is Papua. Although Indonesia has enjoyed over two decades of democratic rule and has overcome many conflicts, Papua remains unstable. Papua has elections and autonomy, but the nature of its autonomy is top-down, cultivating a class of Papuan politicians amidst ongoing conflict and large-scale protests (Barter and Wangge 2022). It seems that Papua mixes post-conflict and democratic autonomy, but with elements of authoritarian and indigenous autonomy forms. Taiwan is also hard to place, as it is a self-governing *de facto* state seen by China as a breakaway province. The Hong Kong autonomous region struggles to uphold democratic self-government within an authoritarian state. The former British colony features own currency, passports, migration restrictions, language policies, and political system. However, its autonomy has an expiration date (2047) and China has already restricted self-government, controlling dissent and elections while cultivating loyalists (Fong 2017). It thus contains elements of both democratic and authoritarian autonomy. Another uncertain case is Puerto Rico. Although the term 'autonomy' is rarely used, the island has its own language policies, weights and measures, political parties, political system, taxation, and more, possessing many trappings of autonomy. Commentators typically focus on what the island lacks, namely representation in federal politics, framing Puerto Rico as a US colony (Lluch 2014). Of course, all American states are products of colonialism, and many autonomous regions can be understood as colonial artefacts. Puerto Rico thus stands as a case of democratic

autonomy, although it is not consciously labeled as such and has authoritarian legacies of colonialism.

All told, territorial autonomy represents a valuable tool to overcome conflict and empower distinctive, territorially concentrated minorities. This paper has provided glimpses into dozens of cases, but the world features many regions that could benefit from self-government: Tuareg (Mali), Okinawa (Japan), Patani (Thailand), Donbas (Ukraine), Khalistan (India), Rojava (Syria), Kurdistan, indigenous regions in Hawaii and Alaska, and many more. This is not to mention the numerous existing autonomous regions where self-government has been stunted. Hopefully, a better understanding of the many faces of territorial autonomy can be useful in tailoring different forms to specific contexts. Autonomy represents a varied, complex institutional response to difference, one that can be better refined and has the promise to empower minority nations.

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