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Greenland's Political Crossroads: Autonomy, Independence, and International Relations

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Danish Realm and the Making of Modern Greenland
- **Chapter 2** From Colony to Home Rule: Political Evolution to 1979
- **Chapter 3** The 1979 Home Rule Act: Institutions, Powers, and Limits
- **Chapter 4** The 2009 Self-Government Act: Language, Resources, and Self-Determination
- **Chapter 5** Constitutional Law of the Realm: Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland
- **Chapter 6** Indigenous Rights and International Law: ILO 169, UNDRIP, and Self-Determination
- **Chapter 7** The Economics of Autonomy: Block Grants, Revenues, and Fiscal Capacity
- **Chapter 8** Resource Governance: Fisheries, Minerals, and Hydrocarbons
- **Chapter 9** Critical Minerals and Uranium: The Narsaq/Kvanefjeld Debate
- **Chapter 10** Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure in the Arctic
- **Chapter 11** Foreign and Security Competences: What Nuuk Can and Cannot Do
- **Chapter 12** Diplomacy in Practice: Representative Offices and Arctic Forums
- **Chapter 13** The United States, Thule/Pituffik, and Security Cooperation
- **Chapter 14** Denmark's Perspective: Unity of the Realm and Strategic Trade-offs
- **Chapter 15** The European Union and OCT Status: Law, Trade, and Fisheries
- **Chapter 16** China and Other External Actors: Investment, Standards, and Scrutiny
- **Chapter 17** Society and Language Policy: Building a Bilingual State
- **Chapter 18** Education, Health, and Human Capital in a Small Polity
- **Chapter 19** Political Parties, Elections, and Coalition Governance
- **Chapter 20** Municipal Reform and Local Administration
- **Chapter 21** Case Studies in Policy: Fisheries Quotas, Housing, and Welfare
- **Chapter 22** Scenarios for Independence: Referenda, Timelines, and Transition Costs
- **Chapter 23** Designing a Greenlandic Constitution: Models, Rights, and Institutions
- **Chapter 24** Defense, Maritime Governance, and Search and Rescue
- **Chapter 25** Comparative Lessons: Faroe Islands, Nunavut, Iceland, and Beyond

Introduction

Greenland stands at a political crossroads where questions of identity and sovereignty intersect with the practicalities of governing a vast, sparsely populated Arctic territory. This book traces the arc from colonial administration to Home Rule and onward to Self-Government, asking what each step has meant for democratic self-determination and everyday governance. It is a study of institutions and ideas—of how constitutions, statutes, and treaties shape the possibilities available to a people who are increasingly able to decide their own future.

At the heart of Greenland's autonomy lies a complex legal settlement. The Home Rule Act established elected institutions and transferred core domestic competences, while the Self-Government Act deepened powers over language, natural resources, and the recognition of the Greenlandic people as a distinct community under international law. Yet these advances coexist with enduring constraints, especially in foreign affairs, defense, and public finance. Understanding the balance between transferred and retained competences—what Nuuk controls, what Copenhagen oversees, and what must be negotiated—reveals both the mechanics and the limits of autonomy.

Resources are central to this story. Fisheries underpin livelihoods and public revenue, while mining and prospective hydrocarbons promise diversification—and controversy. Decisions about critical minerals, environmental safeguards, and the terms of foreign investment are not merely technical; they are constitutional choices about how risk, revenue, and responsibility are shared. In the Arctic, where climate change is transforming ecosystems and infrastructure planning alike, resource governance becomes a test of long-term state capacity as much as a source of near-term income.

Greenland's autonomy also unfolds on an international stage. Relations with Denmark are foundational, but they are only part of a wider diplomatic landscape that includes the United States and NATO, the European Union's trade and fisheries regimes, Arctic Council cooperation, and growing interest from non-Arctic actors. Each partnership offers opportunities and imposes conditions, shaping the room for maneuver as debates over independence gather momentum. The practice of diplomacy—through representative offices, technical agreements, and participation in regional institutions—demonstrates how a small polity can exercise agency even before formal statehood.

Domestic politics, society, and culture give these legal and diplomatic structures their meaning. Language policy, education, and public health are not adjuncts to the sovereignty debate; they are prerequisites for it, determining the skills, cohesion, and legitimacy on which any constitutional transition would rest. Party competition,

coalition governance, and municipal administration translate national aspirations into budgets, programs, and services—and occasionally expose tensions between rapid change and administrative capacity.

This book combines legal analysis, political interviews, and detailed case studies to illuminate how autonomy works in practice and what independence would require. Interviews with policymakers, civil servants, community leaders, and industry stakeholders capture the plural interests at play, while case studies—from fisheries quota reforms to mining approvals—show how high politics meets local realities. Comparative chapters draw lessons from other autonomy movements and small states, not as templates to copy, but as mirrors that clarify Greenland's distinctive choices.

The chapters that follow progress from history and law to economics, diplomacy, and institutional design. They examine fiscal options and trade-offs, map the distribution of competences, and explore pathways to sovereignty, including referenda, international recognition, and the negotiation of defense and foreign policy arrangements. By the end, readers will not find a single prescription but rather a grounded assessment of scenarios—what is feasible, what is costly, and what values must guide the decisions ahead. For students of constitutional law, Arctic policy, and comparative autonomy, Greenland offers a rare chance to watch a constitutional future being argued into existence.

CHAPTER ONE: The Danish Realm and the Making of Modern Greenland

Greenland is often imagined as a remote island of ice and solitude, but its political identity is anchored in a dynamic, modern constitutional arrangement known as the Danish Realm. This Realm binds three distinct entities—Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands—under a single monarch and a shared constitutional framework, while recognizing significant differences in their internal governance. For Greenland, the Realm is the legal architecture within which autonomy has been built, expanded, and contested. It is neither a federation nor a classic colonial dependency; rather, it is a flexible union that has evolved through negotiation, legislation, and occasional constitutional reinterpretation. Understanding the Realm is the first step to understanding Greenland's political trajectory.

The term "Realm" (in Danish, *Rigsfællesskabet*) refers to the historical and legal community that unites Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands as parts of the Kingdom of Denmark. The monarch serves as the head of state for all three, and they share certain constitutional norms and institutions, but each has its own administrative structure and competences. In practice, this means Greenland is not an independent state but has a degree of self-rule that far exceeds typical local government. The Realm is governed by the Danish Constitution, yet its day-to-day functioning is shaped by specific acts that delegate authority to Greenland's government, known as Naalakkersuisut.

The Danish Constitution, enacted in 1953, forms the legal bedrock of the Realm. At that time, Greenland was incorporated into Denmark as a county (*amt*), ending its formal colonial status. This constitutional change reflected a broader post-war shift toward integration and equality, but it also set the stage for later demands for greater self-determination. The Constitution does not explicitly detail the relationship with Greenland; instead, it provides general principles of governance, parliamentary sovereignty, and the monarchy's role. Over time, these principles have been interpreted and supplemented by statutes tailored to Greenland's unique circumstances, including the Home Rule Act of 1979 and the Self-Government Act of 2009.

Greenland's path within the Realm illustrates a distinctive model of autonomy in a small population context. With roughly 56,000 inhabitants spread across a territory larger than Mexico, Greenland's governance challenges include vast distances, harsh climates, and a reliance on a narrow economic base. The Realm allows Greenland to manage internal affairs—such as education, health, and natural resources—while

benefiting from Denmark's support in areas like foreign policy and defense. This division of labor is not static; it has been shaped by political movements, economic changes, and international dynamics, making the Realm a living framework rather than a fixed constitution.

Historically, Greenland's integration into the Realm began long before the 1953 Constitution. Danish colonization started in the early 18th century, with the establishment of trading posts and missionary activities that gradually extended Danish influence. For centuries, Greenland was administered as a colony under the Danish crown, with limited local participation in decision-making. The transition from colony to county in 1953 marked a significant shift, granting Greenlanders Danish citizenship and representation in the Danish Parliament (Folketing). However, this integration did not fully address cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, leading to calls for more tailored governance.

The 1979 Home Rule Act represented a major milestone in Greenland's constitutional evolution within the Realm. It created a Greenland Parliament (*Inatsisartut*) and government (*Naalakkersuisut*), transferring powers over areas like education, health, and social services. This act recognized Greenland's cultural identity and provided a framework for self-administration, but it left key areas such as foreign affairs, defense, and certain economic policies under Danish control. The Home Rule arrangement was a compromise—enhancing autonomy while preserving the unity of the Realm. It set a precedent for negotiated devolution, showing how a small population could gain meaningful self-governance without full independence.

The 2009 Self-Government Act further advanced Greenland's position in the Realm. This act acknowledged the Greenlandic people as a distinct people under international law, with the right to self-determination. It expanded Greenland's competences, particularly over natural resources, allowing the territory to take control of subsoil resources like minerals and hydrocarbons. Financially, it introduced a mechanism where Greenland could claim revenue from resource extraction, potentially reducing dependence on Danish block grants. The act also allowed for greater involvement in foreign policy matters, though ultimate authority remained with Denmark. This evolution reflects the Realm's capacity to adapt, balancing unity with increasing autonomy.

A key feature of the Danish Realm is its asymmetrical nature. Unlike federal systems where states have equal powers, the Realm recognizes differences between its parts. The Faroe Islands, for example, have their own autonomy arrangement, distinct from Greenland's. Greenland's autonomy is deeper in some areas, such as resource control, but similar in others, like shared foreign policy. This asymmetry is rooted in historical, cultural, and economic factors, and it requires constant negotiation. The Realm's flexibility allows it to accommodate these differences, but it also means that no single model fits all, making each autonomy agreement a bespoke solution.

The monarchy plays a unifying role in the Realm, symbolizing continuity and shared history. While the monarch's powers are largely ceremonial, the monarch's presence in Greenland—through visits and symbolic acts—reinforces the connection to Denmark. However, the monarchy is not a focus of political debate in Greenland; instead, discussions center on the practical aspects of governance and autonomy. The constitutional monarchy thus serves as a backdrop to the more active negotiations between Nuuk and Copenhagen over the distribution of powers.

Within the Realm, Greenland's government, Naalakkersuisut, operates under a parliamentary system. The Inatsisartut, elected every four years, holds legislative power and can pass laws within its competence areas. The executive, led by a Premier, is responsible for implementing these laws and managing the administration. This system mirrors Denmark's but is scaled to Greenland's size and needs. Political parties in Greenland often focus on autonomy issues, resource management, and social welfare, reflecting the territory's specific challenges. The interaction between Greenland's institutions and those of Denmark is a constant feature of governance, requiring coordination and occasional conflict resolution.

Foreign policy and defense are shared competences in the Realm, but with Danish primacy. Denmark handles overall foreign relations, including treaties and international organizations, while Greenland has a say through consultations and representation. For instance, Greenland participates in the Arctic Council, where it advocates for issues like climate change and indigenous rights. Defense is managed by Denmark, with key facilities like the Thule Air Base under Danish oversight but often involving US cooperation. This arrangement has practical implications, such as in the Svalbard Treaty or maritime boundaries, where Greenland's interests must be balanced with Danish and international commitments.

The Realm's financial structure is another critical aspect. Greenland receives an annual block grant from Denmark, which supports public services and infrastructure. The Self-Government Act introduced the possibility of reducing this grant if resource revenues increase, creating an incentive for economic development. However, this also means Greenland bears greater fiscal risk, especially in volatile sectors like mining. The Realm provides a safety net, but it also ties Greenland's economy to Danish fiscal policies. This interdependence is a constant topic in political debates, as Greenland seeks to build self-sufficiency while relying on Danish support.

Climate change adds a new dimension to the Realm's dynamics. As Arctic ice melts, Greenland's strategic importance grows, with potential for new shipping routes and resource access. This environmental shift influences how the Realm manages external relations, such as with the US or China, and raises questions about Greenland's role in security matters. For example, increased interest from foreign powers in Greenland's resources has led to debates about investment screening and sovereignty. The Realm

must adapt to these changes, ensuring that Greenland's autonomy is not undermined by external pressures.

International law shapes the Realm's framework, particularly through indigenous rights. Greenland's status as an indigenous territory brings obligations under UN conventions, such as the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169). The Self-Government Act aligns with these principles by recognizing the Greenlandic people's right to self-determination. This legal grounding adds weight to autonomy discussions, but it also complicates matters when Danish and international interests diverge. The Realm thus operates in a global context, where local decisions can have international repercussions.

Comparing the Danish Realm to other autonomy models reveals its uniqueness. Unlike the UK's devolution to Scotland or Canada's relationship with Nunavut, the Realm involves a small population in a vast Arctic territory with a shared monarchy. The Faroe Islands offer a parallel case, but Greenland's emphasis on indigenous identity and resource control sets it apart. These comparisons highlight the Realm's adaptability but also its challenges, such as managing expectations for further autonomy versus independence. Lessons from other systems inform debates in Greenland, but the Realm's specific history makes direct copying difficult.

Political parties in Greenland play a crucial role in navigating the Realm's complexities. Parties like Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA), Siumut, and the Democratic Party often prioritize autonomy or independence, resource revenues, and social issues. Elections reflect public sentiment on the Realm's balance, with some parties pushing for more devolution and others cautioning against rapid change. The multi-party system fosters coalition governments, which must negotiate with Copenhagen on various matters. This internal diversity means that Greenland's approach to the Realm is not monolithic but shaped by shifting political dynamics.

The administration of the Realm involves frequent consultations between Greenlandic and Danish officials. This dialogue occurs through various channels, including joint committees and direct communication between governments. For example, on matters of health or education, Greenland sets its policies but may coordinate with Danish agencies for efficiency. In areas like fisheries, which are vital to Greenland's economy, there is close cooperation but also competition over quotas. These interactions demonstrate the practicality of the Realm—autonomy exists, but interdependence requires ongoing management.

Looking at the economic side, Greenland's reliance on fishing underscores the Realm's relevance. Fisheries are managed by Greenland, but international agreements involve Denmark, and the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy affects access. The Self-Government Act's resource provisions aim to diversify the economy, but progress has been slow, partly due to global market conditions. The Realm provides stability, but it

also means that Greenland's economic policies are influenced by Denmark's broader strategies, such as its EU membership for other parts of the Kingdom.

Socially, the Realm shapes identity in Greenland. Many Greenlanders hold Danish citizenship and speak both Greenlandic and Danish, reflecting historical integration. Yet, there is a strong cultural revival, with efforts to promote Greenlandic language and traditions. The Realm's framework supports this through funding for education and cultural programs, but tensions arise when Danish norms clash with Greenlandic values. This cultural dimension adds depth to political discussions, making the Realm not just a legal construct but a lived experience.

In terms of governance capacity, Greenland has built robust institutions within the Realm. The civil service in Nuuk manages complex tasks like environmental regulation and public health, often with Danish technical assistance. However, challenges remain, such as brain drain and limited resources for innovation. The Realm's support includes training and shared services, but it also means that Greenland's administration is sometimes intertwined with Danish structures. This can lead to efficiency gains but also questions about autonomy in practice.

The Realm's evolution continues to be debated. Some argue that further devolution is necessary to address Greenland's unique needs, while others warn of the risks of overextension. International events, such as geopolitical tensions in the Arctic, influence these discussions. For instance, US interest in Greenland's minerals has prompted calls for stronger autonomy in economic decisions. The Realm must respond to such pressures, ensuring that Greenland's voice is heard without fragmenting the Kingdom.

Practical examples illustrate the Realm's functioning. In health care, Greenland runs its own system but benefits from Danish medical expertise and supplies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, coordination with Denmark was essential, yet Greenland imposed its own restrictions. In education, Greenlandic is the primary language, but Danish is taught, and universities in Denmark are accessible. These examples show how autonomy and interdependence coexist in daily life.

The Realm also involves legal nuances. Danish law applies in Greenland unless specified otherwise, and Greenland can pass its own legislation. Disputes are resolved through dialogue or, rarely, through Danish courts. This legal pluralism is a hallmark of the Realm, allowing for tailored solutions while maintaining coherence. It requires skilled interpreters of the law, from civil servants to politicians, to navigate the boundaries.

As the Arctic changes, the Realm's relevance grows. Melting ice opens new opportunities and challenges, such as navigation and resource extraction. Greenland's autonomy allows it to pursue these opportunities, but the Realm ensures a

coordinated response to external threats, like climate impacts or foreign encroachments. This dynamic is key to modern Greenlandic politics, where local initiatives meet global forces.

In essence, the Danish Realm is a framework for managing diversity within unity. For Greenland, it has enabled a journey from colony to autonomous territory, with increasing control over its destiny. The next chapters will delve into the historical steps and legal instruments that built this system, showing how theory translates into practice. Through this lens, the Realm emerges not as a constraint, but as a platform for Greenland's ongoing political development.

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