

Discussion Paper

# Gozo's Regionality: Exploring Autonomy Options for Gozo within the State of Malta

April 2025



**GOZO REGIONAL**  
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



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Note: The coat of arms featured on the front page is a stone bas-relief located above the main entrance of the Banca Giuratale in Independence Square, Victoria, Gozo. This building served as the seat of the Regional Government of Gozo.

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The Banca Giuratale, Rabat (Victoria), Gozo. Seat of: the Gozo Università (1733-1819); the Gozo Nation (1798-1800); the Gozo Civic Council (1961-1973); the Victoria Local Council; the Gozo Regional Committee; and the Gozo Regional Council.



The Ministry for Gozo. The property used to serve as Gozo's General Hospital until 1975. Since January 2024, the planning portfolio has been added to that of the Minister for Gozo.



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## Abbreviations

BOT	British Overseas Territory
BPM	Barbuda People's Movement
ccTLD	country code internet Top-Level Domain
CCM	Concerned Citizens' Movement (Nevis)
CPMR	Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions
DRC	Dispute Resolution Commission (Trinidad & Tobago)
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
GBC	Gozo Business Chamber
GCC1	Gozo Civic Committee
GCC2	Gozo Civic Council (1961-1973)
GRA	Gozo Regional Assembly
GRC	Gozo Regional Council
GRDA	Gozo Regional Development Authority
GTA	Gozo Tourism Association
GUG	Gozo University Group
IIGA	International Island Games Association
IIS	Institute of Island Studies (Prince Edward Island, Canada)
LP	Labour Party (Malta) (see PL)
MCESD	Malta Council for Economic and Social Development
MLP	Malta Labour Party (now PL)
MP	Member of Parliament
NIA	Nevis Island Assembly
NP	Nationalist Party (see PN)
NSGT	Non-Self-Governing Territory
NSO	National Statistics Office
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (of the EU)
OCT	Overseas Country and Territory (of the EU)
OPR	Rodrigues People's Organisation
PDN	Partito Democratico Nazjonalista/ Partit Demokratiku Nazzjonalista
PL	Partit Laburista
PN	Partit Nazzjonalista
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RRA	Rodrigues Regional Assembly
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SNIJ	Subnational island jurisdiction
THA	Tobago House of Assembly
TIC	Tobago Island Council
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands (Scotland)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America

# Gozo's Regionality: Exploring Autonomy Options for Gozo within the State of Malta

Godfrey Baldacchino

*Gozo is Malta's only island region. Its regionality is undisputed; and Gozo has enjoyed different degrees of autonomy throughout history. This report adopts a global perspective in examining the politically dynamic Gozo-Malta relationship. It charts options for Gozo's future governance, within a wide-ranging review of the protocols that relate to various sub-national island jurisdictions around the world, but with a keen sensitivity to local realpolitik. 'Best practices' are proposed and discussed critically. Specific arrangements that are in place in island territories such as the Faroes, Greenland, Príncipe, Rodrigues and Tobago, deserve further scrutiny.*

## Authors Bio-Note:

### Godfrey Baldacchino

Godfrey Baldacchino is Professor of Sociology at the University of Malta. He is well known internationally as a scholar of islands and small states. From 2021 to 2024, he served as Malta's Ambassador-at-Large for Islands and Small States.

# Gozo's Regionality: Exploring Autonomy Options for Gozo within the State of Malta

## 1. A Personal Note

Explaining the motivation to embark on this exercise will probably help the reader understand its contents better.

I am a Professor of Sociology at the University of Malta, and my professional career in Malta over some 40 years has been best defined by my interests in worker participation, labour relations, cooperatives and trade unionism. I was closely involved in the preparation and/or amendment to three pieces of local legislation: the Malta Shipyards Amendment Act (1998), the Cooperative Societies Act (2001), and the Employment & Industrial Relations Act (2002). However, internationally, I have built a name for myself in advancing, first, the study of islands; and, later, the study of small states. For ten years, I was the beneficiary of a federally funded Canada Research Chair in Island Studies (2003-13), and then four more years as a UNESCO Co-chair in Island Studies (2016-20), both at the University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Canada. I served as Vice President for four years and then President for another eight years of the International Small Islands Studies Association (*ISISA*), the world's oldest and only global island studies organisation. I set up and served as the executive editor to an international journal dealing with the study of islands (*Island Studies Journal*) for eleven years (2006-16); then in 2018 I set up and continue running an international journal dedicated to the study of small jurisdictions: *Small States & Territories* (<https://www.um.edu.mt/sst/>). I also co-lead the editorial board of a Small State Studies Book Series for UK-based international publisher Routledge.

Throughout my time in Canada, I delved into many subjects using an 'island studies' perspective. One of these promising forays was into what I termed SNIJs: *subnational island jurisdictions*: islands that are not sovereign states, but have some degree of internal autonomy, which becomes a recognition – ranging from implicit to constitutional – of regional distinctiveness. These 'island enclaves' presented a fascinating diversity of how to balance the tensions between self-rule and shared rule (Baldacchino, 2006; 2010). I helped develop a general database of 114 such jurisdictions, with the support of a Canadian federal research grant. Gozo is included here. I also researched the consequences of bridges or tunnels when they connect islands to mainlands (Baldacchino, 2008).

It was a question of time before these two solitudes – my professional career in Malta and my professional career abroad – became better integrated. In 2020, I was inducted as one of Malta's thematic ambassadors, covering Islands and Small States, serving in this position until 2024. I participated in debates on the Gozo-Malta tunnel, including an event held in Gozo organised by



the *Front Favur il-Mina*. I now teach study units dealing with 'island life' as well as 'the international relations of small states and territories' at the University of Malta. I am curating and editing a book on the 'minor' islands of the Maltese archipelago – the three dozen-or-so named islets of the Maltese Islands, beyond Malta, Gozo and Comino – with (Gozitan) professional photographer Daniel Cilia, and with the kind support of the Environment Resources Authority (ERA). ISISA will be holding its prestigious international conference in Gozo in June 2028, co-hosted by the University of Malta (Xewkija Campus) and Queen Mary's University of London Gozo Campus; I am serving as the chair of the Organising Committee.

Gozo is an object of fascination and allure to most Maltese. It is often rendered wrongly and unidimensionally as a holiday island. I followed the pattern: as a child, my parents would take me and my brother to Gozo on day trips in summer; I repeated the ritual with my own family. We would occasionally spend a few days *villegġjatura* in Xlendi or Marsalforn in the peak summer months. I had to wait until I was 18 years old before I slept for the first time, without my family, for a few nights in Gozo (during a youth camp, at Xwejni Bay). In 1980, when I was 20 years old, I started organising a week long meteor astronomy camp in mid-August at the then Youth Hostel located at the San Lawrenz Primary School (to coincide with the Perseid meteor shower, or *Id-Dmugħ ta' San Lawrenz*). It was my first proper encounter with Gozitans, beyond the casual encounters that are all too common when the Maltese play tourists in Gozo. Maria Grech, *Ta' Bejża*, from Xewkija, was our camp cook, and she became our segue into Gozitan society, and some of its intrigues. We spent many happy weeks around Easter time based in Xewkija year after year. I acknowledged what I learnt from our friend Maria, her family, and other Gozitan contacts in some of my published work (e.g. Baldacchino, 2001; 2015a).

The examination of self-governance options for Gozo is an unparalleled opportunity for me to scour my international experience and expertise and bring it to bear on a topic that, let's face it, has had, and will continue to have, its fair share of commentary and polemic. It is inevitable that prominent members of Gozitan society in particular - for example, then Minister for Gozo Dr Anton Refalo (Times of Malta, 2017) – as well as some leading Maltese politicians, will find opportunities to flag what they may consider to be 'unfinished business': the transition of Gozo from an island to an island jurisdiction, with the rights, responsibilities and instruments to take those decisions that affect its future and those of its residents, within the wider ambit and purview of the Maltese sovereign state.

These aspirations find fuel in Gozo's own past, since it is clear that Gozo has enjoyed varying degrees and levels of autonomy throughout recorded history. Thus, any requests for 'regional government' are supported by claims that such requests will be a kind of *restoration* of Gozo's jurisdictional status; and not something new (e.g. Tabone, 2020). Moreover, the 2007 constitutional amendment that has allowed Gozo and Comino to preserve their integrity as a single and complete electoral district, irrespective of the relative size of their voting population, and passed unanimously by Parliament, is a clear signal in favour of Gozo's regional identity: Gozo is the only part of the territory of Malta to be so acknowledged, and at the highest, legal, constitutional level.

These sentiments are fuelled by the real and complex experience of double insularity; the inevitable predicament to align one's life and movements in accordance to two realities: the weather (that affects ferry services between Malta and Gozo) and the political decisions taken in Valletta (whether by government or in the legislature).

These aspirations are also *not* accompanied by sentiments of secession. Unlike various island jurisdictions that have, or aspire to have, regional status, there isn't, and there has never been so far, a single political party or movement that is advocating or lobbying for Gozo's independence and therefore secession from mainland Malta. This is both boon and bane, since it also means that Maltese Governments have no strong pressure to offer more 'autonomy' to Gozo, in order not to be outflanked by a Gozitan independentist party.

What makes this report different from any other is the considerable reference to *international* experiences and cases that are brought to bear on the merits or otherwise of 'self-governance options' for Gozo. This methodology helps us address some pertinent questions more squarely and comprehensively. For example: would not a regional assembly in Gozo end up in a permanent squabble with central government? How do we 'protect' Gozo and Gozitans from the clientelism, parochialism, nepotism and personal pique of its regional political leaders if these are left to their own devices, with less oversight from Valletta? What transitions and evolutions are advisable as subnational island regions secure, and learn to handle, more 'autonomy'? Such and similar questions can be better addressed by looking at the broader international picture, picking and choosing examples of 'good practice' in the interim.

## 2. Autonomy Arrangements: A Brief Background

The (sovereign) state is often taken for granted as the main, obvious, single unit of political analysis (Keating, 2005; Jeffery, 2008). This is however no longer the case. Governance may also 'happen' at the substate (municipal, domestic, regional) and supranational (confederal, international regional, international) levels. And recent practices of devolution – in Belgium, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and elsewhere – have energised and obliged political scientists to analyse the impact of the regional political environment on individuals, parties and governments.

A paper on self-governance arrangements and options for Gozo involves a consideration of the motivation for any such arrangements. Greater political autonomy and self-determination for a specific, defined segment of society is deemed to be a suitable and legitimate policy measure in order to protect individual and group interests in relation to much larger and/or more powerful social and political lobbies. Group-differentiated rights to autonomy can be seen as compensatory mechanisms; making up, for example, for systematic discrimination or structural disadvantage. It is one of many areas of public policy where true equality in the polity can only be brought about via differentiated treatment, and not via similar handling.

At the same time, there will be detractors. Some will express concerns about spiralling devolution, warning that satisfying demands for ever greater autonomy can get out of hand, possibly leading to the eventual break-up of the sovereign state (e.g. Mitchell 2000, about the United Kingdom).

Autonomy arrangements support the identitarian specificities of certain population groups, based on their distinct characteristics, and by which they differ from the majority population. In its maximalist form, autonomy underlines the right of a community to: determine the conditions of its existence; establish its own government in accordance with specific principles and ideas; and determine and decide its own legislation (e.g. Shikova, 2023, p. 235).

The basis of special arrangements can be territorial (geographical), cultural, ethnic or national. Territorial distinctiveness – such as being an island – is usually already enough material basis to fuel cultural, linguistic and pseudo-ethnic diversity; and Gozo is an apt example of this. Autonomous *regions* are typically territorial regions of a sovereign state in which the resident population espouses some cultural, national or ethnic characteristics that are inspired, conditioned or exacerbated by geography and materiality, around which arguments in favour of autonomy can be built and defended. Alternatively, the members of cultural, ethnic, pseudo-ethnic or national minorities can be accorded autonomy rights irrespective of their territorial basis or residence within the sovereign state.

### 3. The Case for Island Autonomy: From Self-Rule to Shared Rule

With their distinct geography, their physical separation from mainlands, and a history and culture that breeds a pseudo-ethnic identity, we should not be surprised that islands have developed the most numerous and innovative autonomy arrangements in the world. Also because many island populations are small, many small island peoples have – even repeatedly – rejected outright independence, instead favouring the development of unique and asymmetrical forms of constitutional status within a larger state or supranational body (Watts 2000; Baldacchino & Milne, 2000; Baldacchino 2006). Åland, Aruba, Bermuda, Cook Islands, the Isle of Man, Niue, Puerto Rico, Tokelau, and similar island territories have abandoned claims for outright independence and instead canvass to ‘share’ their sovereignty more equitably with larger political structures. While doing so, islands also tend to strike asymmetric arrangements with their mainland counterparts, meaning that rights and powers are conferred differentially. Rather than rights being enjoyed equally amongst all citizens or regions in the country, the islanders get away with relatively more or better rights (such as subsidised transport). Such situations of ‘shared rule’, and the particular arrangements they have spawned, have been described and defined in various terms, including: ‘autonomous province’ (Åland Islands, in relation to Finland), ‘overseas territory’ (British Virgin Islands, United Kingdom), ‘crown dependency’ (Jersey, Great Britain); ‘special region’ (Sardinia, Italy), ‘commonwealth territory’ (Cocos Islands, Australia), ‘overseas department’ (Réunion, France), ‘federal province’ (Prince Edward Island, Canada), ‘unincorporated territory’ (Guam, USA), ‘special administrative region’ (Hong Kong and Macau, China) and ‘autonomous region’ (Azores Islands, Portugal) (Hepburn, 2010).

The relationship between islands and their mainlands (which could also be islands themselves) is characterised by incredible diversity. A suite of legal protocols have been adopted to accommodate islands – and their islanders – within the territory of a state. These can extend from situations where: (a) the island is summarily incorporated within the public law of the state, without any distinctive relationship; (b) the island is equipped with some form of local government status, such as a regional unit or municipality; and (c) the island being the sole (or part of) territorial unit of a sub-national political unit (Hobbs & Rothwell, 2024, p. 611). The actual outcome often depends on specific legal cultures and constitutional mechanisms (where invoked), strategic military concerns, the (changing?) historical status of the island vis-à-vis the parent state, as well as the determination of the islanders themselves.

## 4. The Case for Island Autonomy: for Gozo or for Gozitans?

Gozo presents an interesting amalgam of these two distinct yet overlapping realities: geographical and cultural. On one hand, the condition of living on a small island, off another small (but bigger) island, which can only be accessed by ferry, affords a clear geographical and territorial specificity. On the other hand, there are the Gozitan people, with their own world view and dialects, crafted over the centuries as resilient, smart, doggedly perseverant and politically savvy islanders whose representatives have also occupied the highest offices of the local Church and State. Geography does not *cause* anything: but the condition of being an island and its associated consequences has certainly influenced and impacted on these quite distinct cultural traits.

And yet, the definition of who is, or can be considered, a Gozitan is fraught with indeterminacy: many (mainland) Maltese born have their main or second homes in Gozo; many Gozitan born have their main or second homes in (mainland) Malta, or outside Malta. And there are now many residents in Gozo, as in mainland Malta, who have not been born in the Maltese islands but are either European Union residents or Third Country Nationals, most of the latter on work permit arrangements, and some with refugee status. At least some of these have settled in Gozo or Malta and have families, with their children being born in Gozo or Malta and attending local schools. Are any 'special rights' to be enjoyed by the residents of Gozo, whoever they may be; or by those registered as Gozitans, whoever and wherever they may be?

A main challenge in Gozo is to acknowledge the now significant proportion of the local population that consists in Maltese with a secondary home and address in Gozo, which allows them to qualify for Gozo Channel ferry subsidies. This status also gives them the right to vote in the 13<sup>th</sup> district. This constituency has become substantial enough to matter to those Gozitans aspiring to enter, or persevere, in party politics. Such 'Maltese voting in Gozo' – if they vote at all – would tend to vote for the *head honcho* of their favourite political party, one of whom would be the Minister for Gozo; the other being the Opposition spokesperson for Gozo affairs.

In spite of the alluring appeals of autonomy, in practice, its application can be problematic. One challenge is that other groups in the same society may deem themselves to also be suitable recipients of similar treatment and would clamour for such similar rights.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, states are always prone to preserve political unity and do not instinctively harbour a particular enthusiasm to support internal division and decentralisation of power.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, once having tasted a measure of autonomy, the target group may clamour for more, possibly even threatening secession: there is no natural point or stage where increased demands for autonomy just stop.<sup>3</sup> Fourth, autonomy

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<sup>1</sup> After Aruba secured 'separate status' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the 1980s, Curaçao and Sint Maarten campaigned to secure the same, and were successful in doing so, after a slate of referenda.

<sup>2</sup> A rare example of autonomy initiatives driven by the central state was that by the Blair Government in the UK which led to the devolution of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each with its own 'assembly' or parliament.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, for example, the Autonomy of Åland – a Swedish-speaking enclave within Finland – has had a 'Freedom Party' that has campaigned on a platform of independence from Finland. The Scottish National Party has campaigned on a platform in favour of Scottish independence. Various regions have secured autonomy arrangements involving minority rights and regional devolution. Some are deemed stable and others are liable to bouts of instability: examples include Euskadi (Basque Country), Catalonia, South Tyrol, Nunavut, and República Srpska.

arrangements must also protect the rights of any new minorities (such as citizens from other countries) created within such autonomous jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup>

In every case, autonomy is both a political strategy as well as a political tool: it is an aspiration, as well as a work-in-progress. The often tense negotiations between self-rule and shared rule will not go away and will rather tend to become the fabric of ongoing, political life.

## 5. Gozo: A Dynamic History of Autonomy (Secular)

Before the modern period, the distribution of the population of the Maltese islands between Malta and Gozo was much more equitable. The 1524 Report by an eight-man Commission of the Order of St John indicated an archipelago of around 20,000 persons, of whom a quarter (5,000) lived in Gozo (Boisgelin, 1804, pp. ii, 17; Fiorini, 2012, p. 6). As a result, we should not be surprised that Gozo and Malta were historically treated as worthy of separate administrations.

A single reference to Gozo, without mention of Malta, is found in a fragment from a work written around 490 BC by Hecataeus of Miletus. This source suggests that, at that time, Gozo was not necessarily ruled by the Carthaginians but was in their sphere of influence and, therefore, possibly having its own administration (Bonanno, 1990, p. 31). Already in 218 BC, the Romans probably found that Gozo was already governed autochthonously by a Council with Punic and Greek representatives. They granted Gozo, like Malta, the title of a *municipium*, which implied limited autonomy and an early form of self-government, possibly up to the end of the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius in 161 AD; during this time, Gozo minted its own coins (Bezzina, 2005, p. 26; Bonanno, 1990, p. 37). Five male councillors, or *quinqueviri* – one of whom was elected president, or mayor – administered Gozo as magistrates, over matters that included finance, public order, culture and religion (Vella, 1995).

Separate and autonomous, civic and military administrations for Gozo and Malta were also likely during the Arab period (Buhagiar, 1997). Later, a report from 1335 AD mentions a number of officers conducting the administration of Gozo separately from that of Malta (Luttrell, 1979, p. 61). A town council for Gozo, the *Universitas Gaudisii*, was set up in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Wettinger, 1990). It was led by a Captain, appointed annually by the King, and known to the locals as Capitano della Verga, or *Il-#akem*. It was autonomous from that of Malta and had its own consul in the Royal Court in Palermo (Bezzina, 2005, p. 380). The Gozitan *Universitas* was responsible for various local matters, including the upkeep of the Castello and the *dejma*, the coastal guard of the island.

A *Consiglio Popolare* was set up concurrently with the *Universitas Gaudisii*, around 1350 and was the constitutional body which watched over the conduct of the *Universitas*. By means of the *Consiglio Popolare*, social representatives including notaries, noblemen, businessmen, artisans, chaplains and laymen could supervise local affairs. Gozo had its own *Consiglio Popolare* which was distinct from that of Malta but functioned in the same manner.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, when the province of Quebec was threatening secession from Canada, both Anglophone Quebecers and Indigenous People in the province were concerned about the protection of their own rights.

The town council arrangement was initially maintained by the Knights of St John after they took over the administration of the Maltese Islands in 1530; but was then abolished by Grandmaster Juan D'Homedes in 1551. In that year, a Turkish *razzia* (raid) on Gozo took almost the whole population into slavery, and a Knight of the Order was subsequently appointed as Governor of Gozo.<sup>5</sup> He (always a man) served as a Chief Judge at the Courts of Law in Gozo, Commander of the local Gozitan militia, and was responsible for the supervision of that island's administration. The Gozo *Universitas* thus lost power but continued to function (Bezzina, 2005, p. 47). The running of the administration remained, as before, in the hands of the town council composed of two to four *giurati* assisted by several officials. The Knights also maintained the Courts of Gozo as separate from those of Malta, with their own Judge(s).<sup>6</sup>

With the demise of the Order's rule in 1798 and the brief French Occupation, a Commission of Government divided the Maltese Islands into ten municipalities, two of which were in Gozo. Meanwhile, riding the wave of a popular uprising, an emergency government was set up in Gozo in 1798 led by Archpriest Saverio Cassar, who was appointed *Sovraintendente Generale di Tutta L'Isola di Gozo* and – after the French in Gozo had surrendered – also Governor-General and Governing Head of Gozo for His Majesty the King of Naples. Gozitan Lawyer Francesco Pace was the Resident Ambassador for Gozo in the Sicilian Court. For 23 months, while the French were still besieged in Valletta, Gozo was run as its own state: there are official references to 'the nation of Gozo' (Bezzina, 2005, p. 60).

This status was short-lived, however: the onset of formal British rule – with Malta's transition from protectorate to crown colony – after 1814, and Malta's newly confirmed destiny as a British colony in 1815, witnessed the suppression of the title and office of the Governor of Gozo as well as the dissolution of the *Universitas Gaudisii* (and its Malta counterpart) by the British Governor for Malta Thomas Maitland as proclaimed in 1818, and coming into force the following year. And so, for 150 years, the Maltese Islands were administered centrally, as a fortress colony, in the grip of the centralising tendencies of British rule. In 1885, an Assistant Secretary to the Government was appointed to administer Gozo; this title was changed to Commissioner for Gozo in 1922 (Bezzina, 2005, pp. 65-67). However, after the Second World War, the title had become quasi ceremonial: "reduced to that of a civil servant, whose tasks were merely downsized to greeting visitors and to presiding boards" (Caruana, 2010, p. 42). The main episode of note in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the elevation of Gozo to the status of a diocese, with its own bishop answerable to Rome, as from 1864 (Bezzina, 1985): more about this below.

Fast forward to the turbulent year of 1958 and a Gozo Civic Committee (GCC1) is set up 'bottom up', following the initiative of a group of concerned Gozitans: its aims were to consider and satisfy the needs of Gozo and Gozitans in the cultural, economic and social fields, by direct and immediate dealings with the authorities. Some 15, similar, 'voluntary committees' had already been set up in Malta by the late 1940s: at Cottonera, Floriana, Birkirkara, and even one in Xewkija, Gozo, in 1952, with the Archpriest as its President (Portelli, 2008, pp. 44, 57). The Gozo Civic Committee paved the way towards assurances by the British Administration for some kind of local government for Gozo. Xewkija medical doctor Dr Anton Tabone was its first president; and Dr Joseph Cauchi from Nadur – who spent a few months representing the Gozo Party in Parliament (1950-1) – was its first

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<sup>5</sup> It was only in 1680 that Gozo returned to its 1551 population of 5,000 (Bezzina, 2005, p. 50).

<sup>6</sup> The right of a Gozitan to be tried in the Gozo Courts is maintained. The arrangement is termed *privilegium fori*.

vice-president. Bishop Pace of Gozo served as its Honorary President. District Committees, with elected members, were soon set up in various localities in order to facilitate the operation of the GCC1 and improve its democratic credentials. Meanwhile, the Colonial Government in Valletta was noting these developments. In July 1959, the newly appointed Governor Sir Guy Grantham, met the Committee while visiting Gozo, and promised "... finding means by which the Gozitans would in the future have a direct share in the conduct of their affairs" (Portelli, 2008, p. 75).

Indeed, actions were quickly taken to introduce some kind of regional government in the Maltese Islands, inspired by municipal government in the UK<sup>7</sup>, and with Gozo identified as the first exponent. By February 1960, consultant Sir John Imrie had delivered his report on the matter. The Gozo Civic Council (GCC2) – originally called the Gozo Municipal Council – was formally set up in April 1960, with supervisory powers over various government functions, but without executive powers.<sup>8</sup> The Commissioner for Gozo became the Principal Advisor and Chief Executive Officer of the GCC2. Thus, the GCC2 was entrusted with a largely consultative role, a role much diminished from that which the members of the GCC2 aspired to; but which, after some tense negotiations, they were willing to accept as temporary and as a 'start' in good faith (Bezzina, 2011, p. 143).

The Malta Labour Party was then already vociferous in its opposition to the GCC2: An extract from the party organ *The Voice of Malta*, published on 3 April 1960, mocked 'the great experiment':

Gozo makes world headlines! The greatest experiment in British de(mock)racy is launched! This tiny 25 square mile island is to have a Civic Council. A handful of self-appointed nobodies will sit on it. Stooges in the hands of the oppressors. Puppets screening the bungling of fumbling imported officials. The powers vested in this council stagger the most ambitious of men! It intoxicates with the thrill of omnipotence over lesser men! (quoted in Portelli, 2008, p. 89).

But the momentum did not slack: provisions for effective local government in Gozo were enacted via Ordinance XI in April 1961, modelled on British local government legislation. Elections were held in June 1961, with a turnout of 69.2%<sup>9</sup>, and where 84 (including two women) out of 128 candidates contesting were elected; each of the 14 districts elected six members.<sup>10</sup> The GCC2 was endowed with a legal personality and equipped with fourteen district committees, one for each town and village, meant to operate as the branches of local government. Anton Tabone (Bezzina, 1999) and Qala educator Anton Buttigieg were respectively elected as the first President and Vice-President of the GCC2.

Political independence was secured in September 1964, and the GCC2 continued with its work. Gozitan poet Ġorġ Pisani reflected on the Council's work in an opinion piece, and offered a vote of confidence, as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Local (or municipal) government as we understand it today was introduced in the UK by the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894.

<sup>8</sup> As had been agreed with the GCC1, the GCC2 was initially divided into three committees, covering health, roads and finance and general purposes respectively. (Tourism and street naming committees were added later.) Interestingly, local government authorities in Trinidad and Tobago were also divided into three, similar committees (Portelli, 2008, pp. 82-83).

<sup>9</sup> Compare this percentage to the 90.8% turnout in the February 1962 General Elections.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in ten out of these fourteen districts, a priest was elected (Portelli, 2008, p. 104).

Before the Council assumed responsibility, most of the roads in the villages were in a very bad state of repair, farm roads were in many cases inaccessible, access to certain beaches was difficult, half the streets in the villages were still without water mains and except in Victoria and two or three other villages, street lighting was very poor. The Council was also responsible for laying down street sewers in many districts of Gozo. ... After three years of Council works, the Island of Gozo now offers better roads to the tourist, and new landscapes which before were unknown (Pisani, 1964; cited in Portelli, 2008, p. 140).

But, already in November 1964, several sections of Ordinance XI of 1961 were amended. One change was that any civil servant or Government employee would cease to be qualified to hold office as a councillor.<sup>11</sup> Another amendment empowered the central Government to carry out certain works in Gozo, especially in relation to streets since, allegedly, secondary roads were given priority by the GCC2 over main thoroughfares: a stance blamed on excessive parochialism. Friction over who would have 'the final say' between Government and the GCC2 – from public works and public libraries to road building and emptying cesspits – persisted into the late 1960s, even though the GCC2 President, Anton Tabone, was a Nationalist MP, and the PN held four out of the five Gozo seats in the 1966-1971 Legislature.

Moreover, in what became a vicious cycle, subsequent elections to the GCC2 met with increasingly reduced enthusiasm and voter turnout. Of the main political parties, the Nationalist Party (NP) has been described as 'passive aggressive' in relation to the GCC2; while the Malta Labour Party (MLP), then in opposition, was avowedly and explicitly hostile to the very idea of local government for Gozo. Indeed, Caruana (2010, p. 110) wryly notes that:

"the Gozo Civic Council would have never been established under a Maltese Administration led either by the Nationalist Party or by the Malta Labour Party".

Gozitans were meanwhile realising that the real centre of power lay with the five Gozitan Members of Parliament, in Valletta, and not with the GCC2. As Bezzina (2005, p. 112) argues:

"the Government, first Nationalist and then Labour, had shifted the lion's share of power in Gozo to the members of Parliament elected from the island."

The five Gozitan MPs, whether Nationalist, Labour or from the *Partit Demokratiku Nazzjonalista*, made it a point to contest and get elected to the GCC2, thus assuring that they knew what was going on.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Caruana, (2010, p. 14) affirms:

"further Amendments made to the [1961] Ordinance ... in 1964 and again in 1968 and ultimately the Abolition Ordinance of 1973, indicate the strong will and effort of the Government of the day to eliminate the Gozo Civic Council as it presented a threat to centralisation of power".

By June 1971, the MLP was back in government. It was stated that the incoming 1971-76 Labour Administration found:

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<sup>11</sup> The 4 Gozitan PN MPs voted with the Government on this amendment, even though, as members of the GCC2, they disagreed with the amendments.

<sup>12</sup> By the way, no evidence is forthcoming that such a practice introduced moral dilemmas amongst these politicians.



“that, in the affairs of the [Gozo Civic] Council, there were complete stagnation, disorganisation, confusion, indiscipline, unspent funds and abandoned works” (Government of Malta, 1997, p. 21).

Moreover, the MLP claimed that public interest in the Council had waned: GCC2 elections in 1964 were held in only seven of the 14 districts, with a turnout of 50.4%; (no election was necessary in the other districts because the number of candidates was less or equal to the number of seats). In 1967, voter turnout was even less: elections were held in only one district, Żebbuġ, with a 36% turnout there. And in 1970, elections were held in nine districts, with a turnout of only 33.2% (Government of Malta, 1997, p. 21).

In any case, the work of the GCC2 over almost 13 years cannot be dismissed as a farce or a charade. Franco Masini, a member of the Victoria District Committee, outlined some of the Council's merits in a letter to the editor that appeared in print on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1963 in the left-leaning *L-Orizzont*:

The Council had served as a training ground in public administration; it put on hold the discrimination in public spending vis-à-vis Gozo; it overcame the lethargy towards Gozo of a number of public officials; it decided matters according to the needs and wishes of the Gozitans; and it succeeded to administer its finances with success and, while carrying out a number of projects, it did not resort to rating [i.e., additional taxation] (quoted in Bezzina, 2011, pp. 255-6).

After a referendum on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1973 – worded in such a way as to suggest a threat of new taxation – in which only 1.3% of registered voters cast their vote, the GCC2 was dissolved by Parliament – where the MLP enjoyed a one-seat majority – in December 1973. All duties and powers of the GCC2 reverted to the central government; an Assistant Secretary for Gozo (1973-1987) served as the head of the administrative and executive arm of the central government when dealing with Gozo affairs.

On November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983, a Parliamentary Committee for Gozo was set up by virtue of a resolution moved by then Deputy Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici and approved by the House of Representatives. The Committee was set up to discuss the problems of Gozo and so meant to help the Gozitans better understand the decisions that affected their daily life. The Committee was composed of: the Minister responsible for Gozo (typically the Prime Minister); another Minister whose portfolio responsibilities were to be discussed in the particular sitting (in the Chair); and the five Gozitan Members of Parliament. The Committee was however boycotted by the Nationalist Party members of Parliament for Gozo, mainly because the majority enjoyed in Gozo by the NP (3 out of 5 district seats) was not reflected in the composition of the committee.

Significant changes had to wait until the return of a Nationalist Government in 1987, when the Ministry for Gozo was established, and Dr Anton Tabone, son of the Dr Anton Tabone of the GCC1 and GCC2, was appointed as its first Minister, a position he kept until 1996. The Ministry was then suspended and replaced by a Parliamentary Secretary (PS) for Gozo during the 22-month Labour Government of Prime Minister Dr Alfred Sant (1996-98), with Dr Anton Refalo as the PS. During the same time, in 1997, a Regional Council for Gozo was proposed: this would be composed of all five Gozitan MPs, representatives of all local councils in Gozo, the parliamentary secretary responsible for Gozo Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister, who would preside the Council. The idea was however overtaken by political events and abandoned

after the Sant Government's collapse and early elections held in September 1998 that saw the PN return to power. The Ministry for Gozo was immediately reintroduced by the incoming Nationalist administration, with Giovanna Debono as Minister (1998-2013). The subsequent Labour Governments since 2013 have kept the Ministry, but removed education and health from its responsibilities. MLP Gozo Deputies Dr Anton Refalo (2013-2017), Dr Justyne Caruana (2017-2020) and the incumbent Mr Clint Camilleri (2020- ) have served in the post as Ministers for Gozo. Since January 2024, Mr Camilleri is also Minister responsible for planning.

Additionally, by means of Act XXI of 2007, the Constitution was amended with the unanimous approval of Parliament, such that Gozo and Comino were declared as their own electoral district, irrespective of the size of their voting population. This occurred after the population of the 13<sup>th</sup> district (Gozo and Comino) had grown so much that it went beyond the deviations allowed for electoral district purposes by the Constitution: and it had thus been proposed to transfer Għajnsielem (2,020 voters) to the 12<sup>th</sup> District on mainland Malta. Thus Gozo's "electoral identity" and geographical integrity was acknowledged and maintained (Xerri, 2007, p. 12).

In 2009, a Regional Committee for Gozo was set up within the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD), to strengthen social dialogue with and within Gozo. By means of this committee, MCESD extends its functions to Gozo and receives suggestions and proposals on various issues related to Gozo's socio-economic development by and from Gozitans themselves, while deepening cooperation with and between civil society organisations within Gozo (MCESD, 2024). The Gozo Regional Committee of the MCESD was set up via legislation (Act 4 of 2012) (AICESIS, 2014). A representative of this Gozo Regional Committee sits on the main MCESD.<sup>13</sup>

In parallel, as from 1994, Local Councils have been enacted in 68 localities in the Maltese Islands, of which 14 in Gozo (and including Comino). The practice of municipal government (*il-Gvern lokali*) in the Maltese islands, as with other countries, has identified various justifications for 'scaling up'. Hence, a growing rationale for 'clustering' local councils into regions.

Meanwhile, Malta submitted its application to join the European Union in 1990 and the stage was set for some kind of formal recognition of Gozo as a regional entity within the Maltese republic (more on this below). Gozo's regional status was enhanced by a tier of regional government for the Maltese islands, itself an offshoot of Malta's Europeanisation.

The GRDA, set up via Act 18 of 2019, is a government authority, launched in September 2020, for the exercise of regulatory and consultative functions regarding the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy for Gozo. It is the executive development arm of the Ministry for Gozo. It has its own Board, composed of a Chairperson and between four and six other members, each with 3-year terms; the Chair and 3 members are appointed by the Minister for Gozo; the (up to) 3 other members are appointed by the Minister, representing and being recommended by: the Diocese of Gozo, the local councils in Gozo; and the Gozo Regional Committee of the MCESD (Parliament of Malta, 2019).

The Gozo Region – known better via its Maltese name, Reġjun Għawdex – incorporates all the 14 local councils of Gozo. Since 2009, it has operated via a Regional Committee (Kumitat Reġjonali) that was elevated via an Act of Parliament (Act XIV of 2019) to a Regional Council (Kunsill

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<sup>13</sup> There is only one other committee set up under the auspices of the MCESD: the Civil Society Committee.

Reġjonali) with effect from January 2022, as one of six regions (changed from five via the same Act) throughout the whole of the Maltese Islands. The other five regions are: Tramuntana, Punent, Lvant, Nofsinhar, and Port. This is, so far, the only regional level of governance in the Maltese Islands. Each Regional Council consists of: a Regional President, a Deputy President, an Executive Secretary, and 10-12 members. The budget for these six regional bodies is derived from EU Funds allocated by the Ministry for EU Funds: further testimony that the impetus here has been strongly driven by the need to align the Maltese Islands with European regionalisation and its institutions.

According to Article 37B of the Local Government Act, the functions of Regional Councils include: issuing calls for tenders for waste management services, conducting social impact assessments, providing sundry professional services to local councils, coordinating with government entities, and preparing annual work plans to address financial and human resource requirements.

Both the Ministry for Gozo and GRDA are national entities responding to the national government, not regional ones. The difference between them and all the other ministries and authorities is that they are the only ones to have a regional remit within the national territory.

Gozo's 14 local councils serve a population of around 40,000 (according to the 2021 census), or an average of less than 3,000 residents per council (Gozo News, 2023a). This makes the Gozitan local councils by far the smallest (in terms of residents covered), on average, in the Maltese Islands. The Gozo Regional Council is also the smallest of the six (in terms of residents covered); although it covers the largest number of councils (14). Gozo's total population is not much larger than that covered by Malta's single largest local council: St Paul's Bay, with over 35,000 residents (Balzan, 2023). As had been argued by the 1997 White Paper to set up a Gozo Regional Council, such an administrative arrangement would be better suited to deal with common problems and to fully exploit opportunities that a single and small unit – such as a single local council – cannot adequately handle (Government of Malta, 1997).

Thus, for the purpose of both serving as an electoral district and as a region, Gozo (and Comino) is allowed to serve a smaller constituency in order to respect its geographical specificity.

## 6. Gozo: A Dynamic History of Autonomy (Religious)

One clear example of the dynamics of self-governance involving Gozo is the manner in which the island managed to wrest itself from the bishopric of Malta and establish its own diocese. Bezzina (1985; 2014) provides the details of the chronology that culminated in the installation of Gozitan-born Mikiel-Franġisk Buttigieġ as the first Bishop of Gozo in October 1864. Note however that, in January 1944, Gozo became the only suffragan diocese of the newly erected Metropolitan Seat of Malta, whereby the Maltese Islands became an ecclesiastical province. The first archbishop to serve under this new metropolitan title was Michael Gonzi, Bishop of Gozo (Grech, 2022).

The following lessons can be gleaned from this experience:

- It took time – 66 years – and unruffled persistence for the echelons of the Gozitan clergy and professional classes to lobby multiple power-holders, particularly the Kingdom of Sicily, the British Monarchy and the Papacy, to secure their goal. The first formal request was submitted in 1798, when Matriċi Archpriest Saverio Cassar was also the Governor General of Gozo.

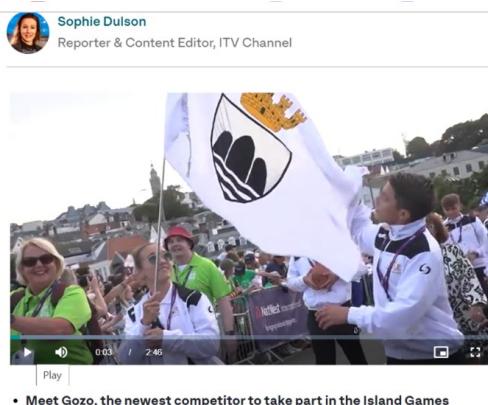
- The main argument peddled by the Gozitans to secure their own diocese was the negligence and logistical challenges brought about by the Malta-Gozo channel. Inter-island travel was hazardous, long and uncomfortable. Between 1798 and 1857, the bishops of Malta only visited Gozo six times; and one particular bishop, Franġisku Saverju Caruana, bishop for 16 years (1831-1847), never set foot on Gozo. Any Gozitan candidates for the priesthood had to study, sit for exams, and be ordained in Malta.
- As soon as it got wind of what was going on, the Diocese of Malta formally protested and registered its disagreement about a separate diocese for Gozo, which would see its demesne diminished. However, the British Colonial Authorities were sympathetic to the Gozitan cause, probably seeing this initiative as a convenient tactic to 'divide and rule' the local, powerful Catholic Church.

## 7. The Island Games: An Innovative Approach to examine the Autonomy of Gozo

We now propose an examination of the Island Games to better understand the status of Gozo. We do so to follow the advice of that old Maltese proverb: *Għidli ma' min tagħmilha u ngħidlek x'int.* (I can tell you who you are when you tell me which friends and networks you frequent.)

The Island Games (IIGA, 2024) are the brainchild of Members of the House of Keys in Tynwald, the Parliament of the Isle of Man, itself a subnational island jurisdiction of Great Britain. The organisers of the original 1985 tournament first invited fellow crown dependencies Jersey and Guernsey, afterwards moving to invite other 'British' islands of varying jurisdictional description, including: Shetland, Orkney, the Isle of Wight, Ynys Môn (Anglesey), Malta, and distant St Helena, the British overseas territory in the South Atlantic Ocean. Manx organisers also built on the island's own Nordic heritage when inviting Iceland, the Faroe Islands (a Danish territory), Gotland (an island and municipality on Sweden's east coast), Hitra, Frøya (small islands in Norway's Trøndelag region), and Åland (an autonomous, demilitarised Finnish archipelago populated by Swedish speaking residents) (McDowell, 2021; Corlett, 1995).

Figure 1: Gozitans at the 2023 Island Games, with their own flag.



Malta sent a few team members to the first event in the Isle of Man in 1985, and again to the second event in Guernsey in 1987, but then quit the Games. Iceland, the only other sovereign island state participating in the Games after Malta's departure, also left the Games, in 1997. Since then, no sovereign state has participated in these games.

The year 2023 saw the inaugural participation of Gozo in the Island Games, held in Jersey (Dulson, 2023). At these games, Gozo won four medals (Gozo News, 2023b). Gozo's first ever medal competing under its own flag was won by Lara Calleja, winning a silver medal in sport trap shooting.

Source: Still from video (Dulson 2023).

On this occasion, *Times of Malta's* Mark Laurence Zammit took the opportunity to refer briefly to the history of Gozitan autonomy:

Gozo rarely features as its own representative in sports and politics and is almost always considered a region of Malta. But ideas about Gozo's independence or autonomy have been thrown around for decades, although they never gathered enough steam to develop into a movement that leads to a change in Gozo's status. Up until 1973, Gozo had an elected regional authority – called the Gozo Civic Council – that even had the power to impose taxes and allowed Gozitans to have a direct say in the running of their island. Gozo has not had any self-governing status since, and the closest it got to have some form of say in its own affairs was in 1987 when the government set up a Gozo Ministry for the first time (Zammit, 2023).

To get a quick sense of the status of Gozo, it pays to examine the other 23 current members of the Island Games (IIGA, 2024).

All have their own flag and their identifiable territory. (Although for two – Gibraltar and Falklands – their territorial integrity is contested, by Spain and Argentina respectively. So, participating in these Games, as in other international fora, is also indirectly an assertion of their separate jurisdictional status.)

None of these are sovereign states. (Malta and Iceland, the only two sovereign states who were ever members of the IIGA, have pulled out of the Games.)

All except one are islands or archipelagos. The exception is Gibraltar, which is a peninsula off southern Spain. But, since big neighbour Spain claims Gibraltar, then this territory can be considered to be the most islanded of all the IIGA members.

All the current 23 members have some kind of political or administrative status and can be identified as subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs). This type of status is however quite diverse in its details and functions.

FIVE of the IIGA members are integrated within the United Kingdom.

Three – the Shetland Islands (population: 23,000), the Orkney Islands (22,000) and the Western Isles (26,000) [or Outer Hebrides; or Eilean Siar, in Scottish Gaelic] – are the only three council areas in Scotland formed entirely by islands, and possibly amongst the most politically active in the U.K. Their three Island Councils have jointly collaborated to develop the 'Island Growth Deal', signed in 2023, which will see significant investments in the three jurisdictions, built around low carbon, supporting industries, and thriving sustainable communities (UHI, 2023).

One – Ynys Môn (or Anglesey) (69,000) – is an island county off the north coast of Wales. It is also the local authority with the second highest proportion of Welsh speakers. A County Council is committed to deliver effective community leadership, democratic renewal and continuous improvement in its services.

One – the Isle of Wight (141,000) – is an English county. It has been administered since 1995 by a single tier Island Council which has the same powers as a unitary authority in England: a type of local authority responsible for all local government services in an area. Currently with a single member of parliament in Westminster.

None of these 5 IIGA members have a country code top level domain.

FIVE fall under the British Crown, but are not part of the United Kingdom:

Four – Alderney (2,000), Guernsey (63,000), Jersey (106,000) and Sark (600) – form most (but not all) of the Channel Islands. They constitutionally fall under the British Crown, but are not part of the United Kingdom. Politically, they are divided into two Crown Dependencies: the Bailiwick of Jersey and the Bailiwick of Guernsey. The Bailiwick of Jersey is a single island jurisdiction; but the Bailiwick of Guernsey is divided into three jurisdictions – Guernsey, Alderney and Sark – each with its own legislature. The United Kingdom's government, as executive to the British Crown, is responsible for the islands' defence and security and represents them abroad. (ccTLD is assigned to the two Bailiwicks, not to the individual islands: .gg for Guernsey, .je for Jersey).

One – the Isle of Man (84,000) – shares with the Channel Islands the title of a Crown Dependency. Again, the United Kingdom's government, as executive to the British Crown, is responsible for the island's defence and security and represents it abroad. The island's parliament, Tynwald, is claimed to have been in continuous existence since at least 979 CE, purportedly making it the oldest continuously governing body in the world. (ccTLD: .im)

FIVE would have been referred to earlier as British colonies, having fallen (and remained) within the British orbit by virtue of colonialism.. They are now referred to as *British Overseas Territories* (BOTs).

All these five – Bermuda (64,000), Cayman Islands (80,000), Falkland Islands (3,400), Gibraltar (33,000) and St Helena (5,600) (St Helena includes its own 'dependencies' of Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha) – have locally elected governments who are delegated varying degrees of internal self-governance; while the United Kingdom retains responsibility for defence, international relations and internal security, as well as the ultimate responsibility for their good governance. The King/Queen of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is their head of state and is represented in each BOT by a Governor, whom s/he appoints on the advice of the UK Government. The Governor has special responsibilities in four areas: external affairs, defence, internal security, and policing. They all have their own country code, top level Internet domain name (ccTLD): .bm, .ky, .fk, .gi and .sh respectively. (Note that Ascension Island has its own ccTLD: .ac). All of these issue their own stamps. In some cases, such as in Bermuda in 1995, they have held an 'independence referendum', which however failed to pass (Davison, 1995). (The Maltese Islands, as a whole, would have probably been a BOT today, had they not secured independence in 1964.)

The remaining EIGHT are not associated with the United Kingdom or the British Crown:

Two – Faroe Islands (54,000) and Greenland (56,000) [or Kalaallit Nunaat in Greenlandic] – form part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Due to their special status, both these islands have an extensive degree of self-government. The Faroe Islands' Home Rule was established in 1948 and Greenland's Home Rule was established in 1979. Neither of the two jurisdictions is part of the European Union. (ccTLD: .fo and .gl respectively).

Two – Frøya (5,300) and Hitra (5,200) – are two neighbouring archipelagos in Norway, connected via underwater tunnel. Each are local councils with their own mayor. Hitra is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest island in Norway.

One – Åland (30,000) – benefits from a unique, *sui generis* arrangement. An archipelago of over 6,000 islands, islets and skerries, it falls constitutionally within the Republic of Finland, but is a recognised, demilitarised, autonomous, Swedish speaking jurisdiction, according to an 1920 International Treaty brokered by the League of Nations. Åland has issued its own postage stamps since 1984; and uses .ax as its ccTLD since 2006. Currently it sends a single member to the Finnish Parliament in Helsinki.

One – Gotland (61,000) – is Sweden’s largest island and its only island region. Due to its island geography, the administrative county (*län*) of Gotland and the municipality (*kommun*) Region Gotland cover the same territory. Region Gotland, the island’s administrative body, fulfils the functions of both a regional and municipal government. It does not have its own internet domain name.

One – Menorca (97,000) – is the third most populated of the four Balearic Islands, a subnational region of Spain. The island elects 13 deputies to the Government of the Balearic Islands. Since 1978, it also has its own Island Council, responsible for mobility (land transportation) and territorial planning (including its coastline). Menorca does not have its own internet domain name.

One – Saaremaa (31,000) – is the largest and most populous island in Estonia. Since 2017, Saaremaa Municipality council forms the local self-government unit for the whole island. It leads and directs local development, including the compilation of the local development plan and local spatial plans. Saaremaa does not have its own internet domain name.

Gozo sits comfortably with these 23 other IIGA members. It is an archipelago (comprising the populated islands of Gozo and Comino, plus various uninhabited islets and rocks). It is not a sovereign state. Its population is close to the average of the IIGA membership. Like 11 of the other IIGA members, it does not have its own ccTLD and does not issue its own postage stamps.<sup>14</sup> Unlike most of the other IIGA members, however, *it is not a single municipality*: there are 14 local councils in Gozo. Since 2022, however, Gozo enjoys an island-wide regional council. Gozo is also Malta’s only island region.

Gozo’s unique island-wide coordinating institution is the *Ministry for Gozo*. It was set up in 1987, replaced temporarily by a parliamentary secretariat (1996-1998) and renamed in the Cabinet reshuffle of January 2024 as Ministry for Gozo and Planning (Borg & Zammit, 2024).

Gozo and its satellite islands are locally considered as a unique and single district *only* for the purposes of general elections, and thus since 2007, Gozo (with Comino, and any other populated islets) is, by constitutional decree, the only territory of Malta whose boundaries cannot change for the purpose of determining electoral districts. It retains its electoral identity irrespective of its population size, because an amendment to the Constitution provides that “the Island of Gozo and the islands of the Maltese Archipelago other than the Island of Malta shall together be treated as one electoral division and may not be divided between two or more electoral divisions” (Act No. XXI of 2007: An Act to further amend the Constitution). This amendment was unanimously approved by Parliament on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2007 (Xerri, 2007).

In Declaration 36 appended to the Treaty of Accession to the European Union of ten countries, including the Republic of Malta, in May 2004, Gozo is acknowledged as an ‘island region’ and is

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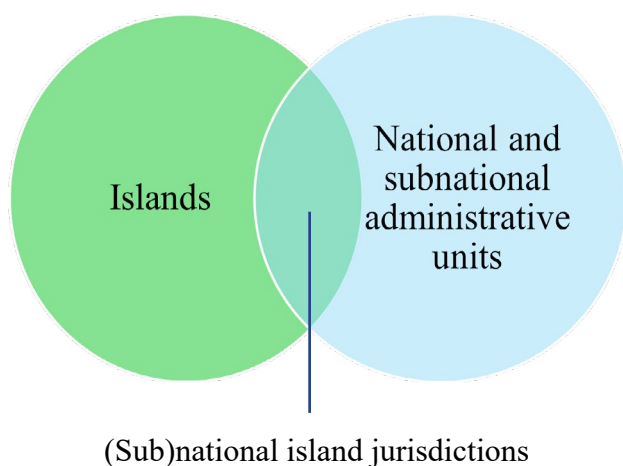
<sup>14</sup> Gozo could explore the possibility of having its own ccTLD, when and if its regional status is ratified. The ccTLD .gz is, so far, available

categorized as NUTS III for statistical purposes only (European Commission, 2004). Indeed, Gozo is “one of the smallest NUTS III regions in Europe in terms of population size” (NSO, 2012, p. xi). In the declaration, it is furthermore stated that:

The island region of Gozo has economic and social specificities as well as handicaps arising from the combined effects of its double insularity, its environmental fragility, its small population size coupled with a high population density as well as its inherent limited resources.

Note however, that “The Declaration on the Island Region of Gozo is a unilateral declaration made by Malta. It binds no one else except Malta, and therefore is meaningless when it comes to asserting Gozo’s status as an island region vis-à-vis the EU” (Times of Malta, 2005).

## 8. Gozo in a World of Subnational Island Jurisdictions: Some Ideas, Facts & Numbers



Speaking about island jurisdictions which are subnational – that is, non-sovereign – obliges us to look at the intersection of two sets of material objects: islands on one hand, and subnational jurisdictions on the other. These are partially overlapping sets, since there are many islands which are not subnational jurisdictions (the smallest islands do not even have a local council or municipal status); and there are many subnational jurisdictions which are not islands (these being peninsular, coastal or landlocked regions).

### 8a. Islands (concepts)

Let us start with the obvious: islands are a valuable unit of analysis in order to examine a wide range of political, constitutional and other legal issues pertaining to territory. Geographical separation, even by a few kilometres, can engender a unique sense of identity, distinct from the neighbouring territory which can easily be ‘othered’, with an ‘us versus them’ discourse and with a focus on difference rather than similarity. Where an island falls within a larger political unit, that distinctive identity may create pressure for discrete and bespoke political and/or legal arrangements, that differ from other regions of the same state. These arrangements can provide for enhanced levels of autonomy or self-determination, and/or recognise the specific cultural, linguistic and other human qualities of the islanders (Hobbs & Rothwell, 2024, p. 621).

Before starting to consider actual cases from around the globe, two caveats are necessary. First, the legal status of islands is dynamic: some are advancing towards greater autonomy and eventual



independence; others are losing their autonomy; others have made it clear that they do not wish independence. The legal relationship between island and mainland is a story of change and adaptation, of stroke and counterstroke, especially where the island has its distinct, organised and articulate politico-economic elite, possibly with its own political party infrastructure. Second, there is no simple formula or status for the 'best' or 'most appropriate' island-mainland relationship. The number of *sui generis* arrangements that have emerged and evolved in the interaction between island and metropole are too many to count. A plethora of terms characterise these arrangements. They include: the crown dependency, the autonomous province, the special administrative area, the dependent territory, the unincorporated territory, the overseas territory, the associated state, the overseas department, the overseas collectivity, the federal province, the special municipality, and the special region (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012).

## 8b. Islands (examples)

There are innumerable islands all over the globe. Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago (by number of islands and by population) officially counts over 18,000 islands (Cribb & Ford, 2009). The Philippines, the second largest archipelagic state by population, officially counts 7,641 islands. Japan, third largest island state by population, counts 14,125. In Europe, Sweden boasts some 250,000 islands (including islets); while Finland is not far behind, with around 147,000 islands. The British Isles is a geographical term describing an archipelago of over 6,000 islands.

The number drops dramatically when only *populated* islands are considered. After all, every jurisdiction must have a permanent population. In Malta, there are currently there populated islands. There are 210 inhabited islands in the United Kingdom; 430 in Japan; 549 permanently inhabited islands in Finland; just over 900 populated islands in Sweden; around 2,000 in The Philippines; and around 6,000 in Indonesia. It is calculated that there are around 85,000 populated islands in the world.

The *European Union* includes many islands. The EU's combined island population exceeds 20 million residents: these include three member states (Cyprus, Ireland, Malta) and relatively large and heavily populated islands, such as Sicily (over 5 million), Sardinia (over 1.6 million) and Crete, Mallorca and Tenerife (almost 1 million each) (Haase & Maier, 2021).

A 2015 paper – with an EU of 28 member states at that point in time as its database – identifies 2,160 populated islands belonging to 20 EU member states: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Baldacchino & Pleijel, 2015). (Two populated islands are shared: Ireland, shared between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which forms part of the UK; and Usedom [or Uznam], which is shared between Germany and Poland).<sup>15</sup> The eight other EU member states – Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Slovenia – do not have populated islands, excluding a few in lakes and rivers. Four inhabited islands – Britain, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta – are home to four sovereign states; 32 inhabited islands are counties, regions or provinces of other states; 206 inhabited islands

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<sup>15</sup> There is also Cyprus, divided *de facto* between the Republic of Cyprus, which is recognised by the EU, and the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, which is however only recognised by Turkey.

are municipalities, while 1,918 inhabited islands – 89% of the total number of European islands – are local communities with no official political autonomy or jurisdiction unto themselves, not even at local government/ municipality level. Just 31 of the 397 bridged islands in the EU – less than 8% - maintain their own political jurisdiction.

The Mediterranean has the largest proportion of large islands as well as the largest proportion of islands with large populations in Europe. There are 284 populated European islands in the Mediterranean. Of these, 131 are coastal, or 'near islands', amongst which 104 are local communities with no political jurisdiction unto themselves (Starc, 2020). Another 146 islands are situated in the high seas. 83 islands are municipalities or regions. There are only eight populated islands in the Mediterranean that have a 'fixed link' – a bridge, in all these cases – to their respective mainland: Euboea and Lefkada (Greece), Čiovo, Krk, Pag, Vir and Pelješac (the latter is, strictly speaking, a peninsula, but recognised as an island under Croatian law) and Venice (Italy). Out of these, only Lefkada is its own, single municipality.

There is a strong and still under-researched correlation between physical remoteness and jurisdictional status: the further an island is from its respective mainland, the greater the political autonomy it is likely to enjoy (Baldacchino, 2020). This observation is partly a function of necessity: historically, it would have been expedient to locate administrative capacity on a remote island, if the closest alternative is simply too distant for practical and logistic reasons (Baldacchino, 2010, p. 55). The converse correlation also applies: the closer an island is to its mainland, culminating in a fixed link, the less the necessity or appetite for that island to maintain, or obtain, jurisdictional autonomy of any sort, and especially with low resident populations.

No island has secured political autonomy after the construction of a fixed link that connected it to its mainland. And a few other islands – like the Isle of Skye in Scotland, have actually lost their jurisdictional autonomy after they obtained their fixed link to the mainland. Since 1996, the Scottish municipality that includes the Isle of Skye (the island) also includes Lochalsh (which is part of mainland Scotland). The Skye bridge opened in 1995 (McQuaid and Grieg, 2007).

By the way, according to one estimate, there are 30 named islands, islets and rocks in the Maltese archipelago, apart from Malta, Gozo and Comino (Baldacchino & Cilia, 2026; Sciberras & Sciberras, 2010). These include what we today refer to as Manoel island, formerly Isola del Vescovo (Bishop's Island) where, should current development plans materialise, there will soon be residents. This would make Manoel Island Malta's fourth populated island ... assuming that a resident population (currently consisting of two persons) is maintained on Comino.

## **8c. National and Subnational units**

There are 147 non-island states in the world. Most are coastal states but, unlike almost all island states and territories, their capital city is not coastal, but more usually located inland, closer to the geographical centre of the country. Gozo, like Cyprus and Madagascar, is a rare exception in being an island in *not* having a coastal capital city.

Most federal states would have landlocked or coastal regions that are identified as bearing some level of self-rule. These include: the 49 states that comprise the United States of America (all except Hawai'i); 12 provinces and territories of Canada (all except Prince Edward Island); 5 states and 10 territories of Australia (all except Tasmania); and 20 provinces of China (all except Hainan and Taiwan; the latter is claimed, but not administered, by Beijing). Cities are also sometimes included as having special powers, greater than those granted habitually to municipalities. For example, Germany consists of sixteen 'states', but three of these are 'city states': Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg. The list of regional powers wielded by the states in Germany includes health care, education, policing, cultural policy and construction planning.

## 8d. (Sub)national island jurisdictions

There are around 85,000 populated islands in the world; but the number of populated islands *which are also jurisdictions* drops further still. By jurisdictions, we are using here a generous definition, indicating all those islands that have some level of recognized local authority or regional government: from being a municipality or being a special administrative unit to being a fully-fledged, independent, sovereign state. Note that 46 of these jurisdictions are *sovereign* island and archipelago states, and including Malta since 1964. (There are 47 if one includes Taiwan which, however, is currently only recognised as a sovereign state by 12 out of 193 countries.) Note also that only ten populated islands are *geographically divided* jurisdictions. The Caribbean island of Hispaniola/Quesqueya, for example, is divided between two countries: French-speaking Haiti on its west, and Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic on its east (Baldacchino, 2013).

Stuart (2008) proposes 119 *non-sovereign, subnational, island jurisdictions*. Watts (2009, p. 23) identifies "at least 89 islands or sets of islands [that] are involved in some combination of autonomous self-government combined with formal collaboration in a wider political partnership". So, the exact number is clearly contested, and depends on the definitions used. These jurisdictions include:

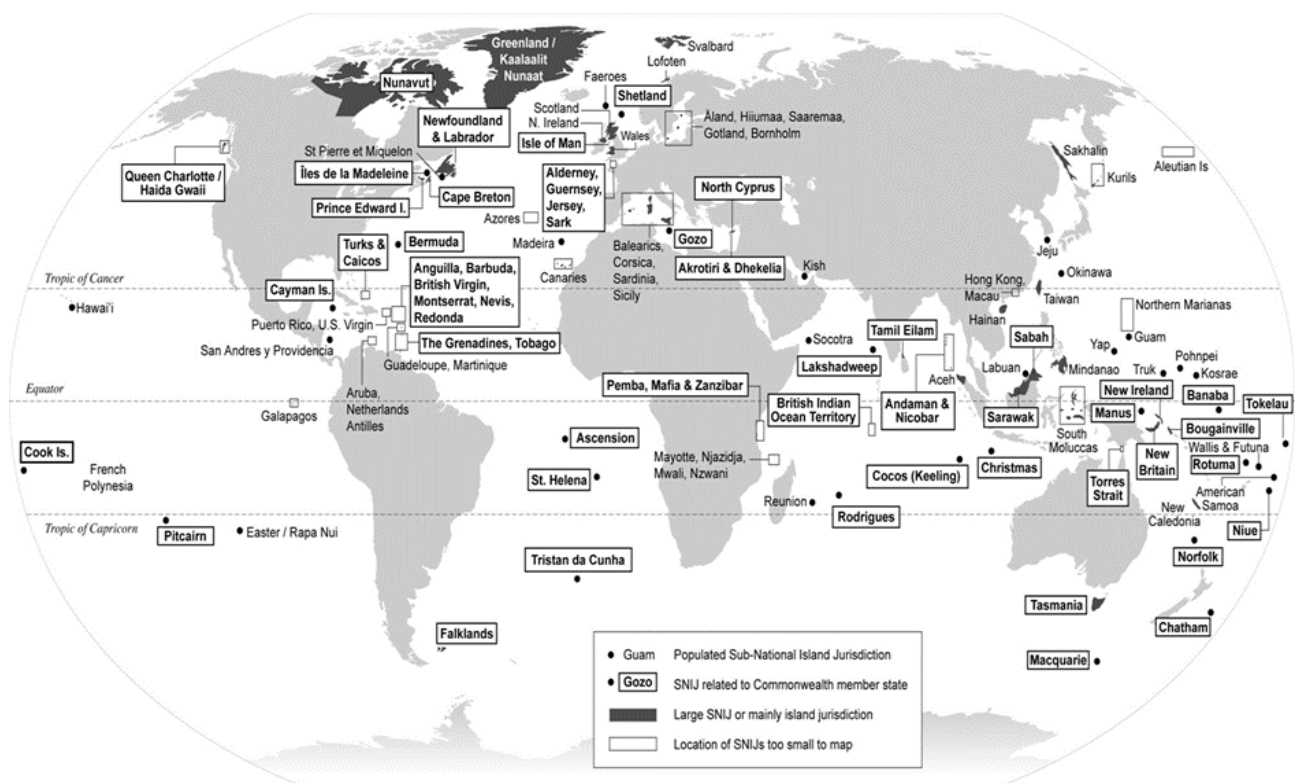
- island provinces of federal states (such as Hawai'i in the USA; Prince Edward Island in Canada; Tasmania in Australia; Hainan in China; Sardinia and Sicily in Italy);
- overseas territories – usually former colonies – of Australia, Denmark, France, The Netherlands, New Zealand, the United States and United Kingdom (such as Norfolk Island, Faroe Islands, New Caledonia, Bonaire, Niue, Guam and Bermuda, respectively);
- island or archipelagic regions of European states (such as Corsica in France; the Canary Islands and the Balearic Islands in Spain; Madeira and the Azores in Portugal; Sardinia and Sicily in Italy; and Crete, the Aegean and Ionian Islands in Greece);
- special island administrative units (such as Hong Kong in China; Jeju in South Korea; the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man under the British Crown; Svalbard in Norway; Tokelau in New Zealand; and Åland in Finland); and
- territories under specific Indigenous or Aboriginal title (such as the Haida Gwaii/ Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, Canada).

Being added to this list are subnational jurisdictions that have a *coordinating ministry* covering the island(s), and whose minister is a member of the national, central Cabinet. Gozo is one such example. The Caribbean islands of Carriacou and Petite Martinique, parts of Grenada; as well as the so-called Family Islands, parts of the Bahamas, are other examples.

Some of these islands come in *groups* that together form single municipalities, such as the Western Isles, the Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands in Scotland, UK. Gozo is one such example, since the territory includes Comino. Others are just *single* islands that are complete municipalities, which means that they are run as a single local council: such as the territorial collectivity of Corsica, France; or the Isle of Eigg, in Scotland, UK, run by its Heritage Trust.

For the sake of being exhaustive, the map also includes the *de facto* Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is only recognised by Turkey; and Tamil Eelam, an aspirational and proposed sovereign jurisdiction of some Tamils in Sri Lanka which, however, was extinguished following a brutal civil war.

Excluding Taiwan (population: 23 million; land area: 36,200 km<sup>2</sup>) – which the People’s Republic of China considers as a renegade province – the largest subnational island jurisdiction by land area would be Greenland (2.16 million km<sup>2</sup>) followed closely by the largely island Canadian Indigenous territory of Nunavut (2.1 million km<sup>2</sup>). While the largest subnational island jurisdiction by population would be Hong Kong (7.3 million), followed by Puerto Rico (3.2 million). The Cook Islands (17,000) and Niue (2,000) are island territories in free association with New Zealand; which means that they can declare independence when and if they want to.<sup>16</sup> The world’s smallest subnational island jurisdiction is Pitcairn, the only remaining British Overseas Territory in the Pacific, with a population of around 50.



<sup>16</sup> The main reason for not declaring independence is the inevitable loss of their current, prized New Zealand passport.

## 8e. Examples of European Island Regions

The Malta Government White Paper for a Gozo Regional Council (Government of Malta, 1997) makes reference to a number of subnational island jurisdictions as “examples of regional government”, presumably to draw comparisons and contrasts between their jurisdictional status and that of Gozo. The report also reminds readers that “there are many European islands, with administrative set-ups permitting different degrees of autonomy” (p. 21).

In any case, the eight European islands (or island groups) singled out for special mention are: Åland, Canary Islands, Madeira, Azores, Corsica, The North Aegean, Gotland and the Channel Islands. Of these, Åland’s status as a special Swedish-speaking autonomy within Finland is protected by a 1921 International Treaty; the Canary Islands, Madeira, Azores and Corsica have a regional parliament or a legislative assembly, with elected deputies; the North Aegean Region, consisting of nine Greek islands, has a regional council; each of the Channel Islands has its own primary legislature, known as the States of Guernsey the States of Jersey, Chief Pleas in Sark and the States of Alderney; being part of the British Isles but not the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands are not represented in the UK Parliament; while Gotland is a province/county (Swedish: län), municipality and diocese fully integrated within Sweden, without a special regional assembly or special regional autonomy.

## 9. Sovereignty and Political Parties

We should also here venture into a discussion of sovereignty since, after all, if Gozo were to ever become independent, it would not be the smallest county in the world: Nauru (population: 12,000); Tuvalu (12,000) and Palau (22,000) are all sovereign states and full members of the United Nations General Assembly. So is Liechtenstein (39,000), with a registered population similar to that of Gozo. Of course, should Gozo become independent, then a thorny question of Gozitan citizenship would arise: assuming a democratic system of government, who would be eligible to vote in Gozitan elections? The manner of becoming independent would also be relevant: should Gozo secede from Malta in a manner that would be approved by both jurisdictions, then presumably Gozo and Malta would remain as separate members of the European Union? Or would one, or both, have to reapply for membership to the club? There are other, vexing, questions.

There has never been an independence referendum in Gozo, nor has there ever been a request for such an exercise. There have however been two occasions where Gozo-based political parties have been set up and competed in national elections.

The first episode occurred during the first elections to the legislative assembly of October 1921. One of the four parties contesting this election was the *Partito Democratico Nazionalista* (PDN), led by Enrico Mizzi, who spent his early years living in Gozo. The PDN contested the four seats in the Gozo district only, and, with its four candidates securing 2,465 first preference votes out of 2,791 valid votes cast, won all four, securing some 12% of all votes cast: a record in Maltese electoral history that is hard to beat. Although a clear minority, the four PDN members had a strong influencing position in the 32-seat Parliament, and lobbied to extend the supply of electricity to Gozo, as well as to improve the Gozo-Malta ferry service. The Party however had national aspirations and

considered its performance in the 1921 election to have been disappointing overall: it did not see itself as a 'Gozo' Party. The PDN merged with the Maltese Political Union in 1926 to form the *Partito Nazionalista* (PN).

The second episode had to wait until October 1947. Both the Gozo Party and the Jones Party were Gozo-only based political parties which fielded candidates for the 1947 General Election (the first where Maltese women had the right to vote). They were also both successful in getting candidates elected to Parliament on that occasion. The Gozo Party, led by lawyer Francesco Masini, secured 5,492 first-preference votes out of the 10,727 valid votes cast, and elected three deputies; while the Jones Party, elected two deputies. Together, these two parties obtained 8.6% of the valid votes cast in the Maltese Islands in that election. For three years, Gozo's interests in Parliament were represented by these two parties *only*, whereas the remaining 35 seats – covering mainland Malta – were shared between the Malta Labour Party (24 seats), the Nationalist Party (7 seats) and the Democratic Action Party (4 seats). This is the *only* time in Malta's 100-year-old electoral history that both the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party did not win *any* seats in a particular district. This success was short-lived, however: active members with political ambitions within the two Gozo parties noticed the way the wind was blowing. They drifted away and joined either the MLP or the PN. The Gozo Party was already disbanded when the following (inconclusive) elections took place in September 1950; and the Jones Party secured just 852 first-preference votes, electing no one. The Jones Party again contested the May 1951 general elections, securing 957 first count votes; it subsequently also disbanded. In the 70+ years since, no Gozo-based political party has emerged on the Maltese political landscape.

## 10. Independence referendums

During recent decades, independence referendums have occasionally been held in some island territories, whether instigated by the islanders (and their representatives) or by their mainland government. They have generally not been successful.<sup>17</sup> The exception here is the 2019 referendum held in Bougainville, currently part of Papua New Guinea (Regan, Baker, & Oppermann, 2022). Such referenda are more likely when there are political parties in the subnational jurisdiction that differ from those in the 'mainland': a situation that only existed in the Maltese Islands in the period 1948-1950 (as explained above). Moreover, independence referenda are more likely when: (1) the unit campaigning for independence feels that it is under a colonial and oppressive relationship with the 'motherland'; (2) the distribution of wealth, resources and political office is (seen to be) unjust and discriminatory, favouring the rest of the territory, at its expense; or (3) when the unit campaigning for independence has access to significant wealth or resources that it is loathe on sharing with poorer parts of the same state (Hepburn & Baldacchino, 2013).

None of these three sentiments appear prevalent amongst Gozitans with respect to Malta. Gozo is not blessed with abundant natural resources which it is 'forced' to share with the poorer Maltese. Indeed, regional statistics suggest that the average annual basic salary of Gozitans per capita is

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<sup>17</sup> A case in point is New Caledonia, which went through three independence referendums, in 2018, 2020 and 2021. All three rejected the prospect of self-determination; although the third was controversial since it was boycotted by the independentist faction, citing pandemic-related health concerns (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

quite similar to that of the 'mainland' Maltese (NSO, 2024). Additionally, if Gozo were in a colonial relationship with mainland Malta, it would probably have been added to the list of non-self-governing territories (NSGTs) regularly monitored by the Committee on Decolonisation at the United Nations. (More about this below.)

## 11. Island States versus Sets of Islands (Unions or Federations)

There are 42 small island states in the world<sup>18</sup>, which is 21.2% of the total membership of the United Nations.<sup>19</sup> 37 of these are members of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) 'family', that is also recognized by the UN.<sup>20</sup> The other five, non-SIDS, island states are: Cyprus and Malta – which were part of the SIDS grouping until they joined the EU in 2004 – along with Iceland, Ireland and New Zealand.

Only five of these 42 states are *single*, populated island units: Barbados, Cyprus, Dominica, Nauru and St Lucia. The remaining 37 small island countries are actually archipelagos, with each having at least two populated island components.

From this list of 42, only Grenada and Malta consist of three, and only three, populated islands.<sup>21</sup> Both have a ministry coordinating the two smaller islands. The two countries have a similar land area, but a very different population size.

The Caribbean sovereign state of Grenada, independent since 1974, consists of the populated islands of Grenada (the main island; land area = 310km<sup>2</sup>; population =106,000) plus Carriacou (land area=34km<sup>2</sup>; population=9,600) and Petite Martinique (land area=2.4km<sup>2</sup>; population=900). It is the eleventh smallest country in the world, by land area (Telesford and Baldacchino, 2024). The Mediterranean sovereign state of Malta, independent since 1964 and a Republic since 1974, consists of the populated islands of Malta (the main island; land area=250km<sup>2</sup>; population=490,000) plus Gozo (land area=66 km<sup>2</sup>; population=39,000); and Comino (land area=3.5 km<sup>2</sup>; population=2). Malta is the tenth smallest country in the world, by land area (316 km<sup>2</sup>).

Grenada and Malta have a high land area or population ratio of the secondary islands in relation to the respective main (is)land: for Grenada, 12% by land area; and 10% by population; for Malta, 28% by land area; and 7% by population. *Malta and Grenada are the world's best examples of populated tri-island states.*

The 37 small archipelagic states, members of the United Nations, are constitutionally recognised as multi-island units, with special arrangements for (some of) the island components of the

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<sup>18</sup> Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Haiti, Iceland, Ireland, Jamaica, Kiribati, Madagascar, Maldives, Malta, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Mauritius, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

<sup>19</sup> The complete list of island states would include the addition of Indonesia, Japan, The Philippines, and the United Kingdom. (Australia is geographically an island state but is often listed as a continent.)

<sup>20</sup> The UN SIDS grouping includes Belize, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana and Suriname, which are small and coastal but not island states.

<sup>21</sup> The situation would change with Malta if Manoel Island becomes a residential area, and therefore becomes Malta's fourth populated island.

sovereign state. One can refer to these as island unions or island federations. This plurality is immediately identifiable in the name of six of these countries:

*Antigua and Barbuda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Solomon Islands, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.*

Within these six, four multi-island states legally recognise the specificity of the second, smaller island, and mention it in the official name of the country.

#### *São Tomé and Príncipe*

Article 137 of the Constitution of *São Tomé and Príncipe* recognizes the island of Príncipe and its small surrounding islets as constituting an autonomous region, with its own politico-administrative regulations, in recognition of its specificities (STP, 2024). Administratively, the country is divided into seven municipal districts, six on Sao Tome and one comprising Principe. A Regional Government and a Regional Assembly, in place since 1995, serve as the organs of the Principe autonomous region (STP, 2024). Príncipe has a land area of 142 km<sup>2</sup> and a resident population of around 8,000. Compare this to the land area of 822 km<sup>2</sup> and a resident population of 200,000 of the main island of São Tomé. Since July 2012, Príncipe has been classified by UNESCO as a World Biosphere Reserve.

#### *Antigua and Barbuda*

Barbuda is an autonomous island region of *Antigua and Barbuda*. It has a population of 1,630 and a land area of 160 km<sup>2</sup>, compared to 98,000 resident population in Antigua, with its land area of 280 km<sup>2</sup>. In spite of its low population, Barbuda is guaranteed at least one member in the House of Representatives and two members in the Senate. The country includes various small uninhabited islands, including Redonda, which was formally annexed to the state in 1967 and is now an ecosystem reserve. Tensions have emerged after Hurricane Irma destroyed Barbuda in 2017 and obliging the whole island population to be evacuated to Antigua; in the meantime, the Antigua based government set in motion a major luxury development project and international airport construction on Barbuda, a decision that has been criticised by Barbudans as an erosion of their communal land rights, a land grab and an example of 'disaster capitalism' (Mohammed, 2023). The London-based Privy Council has flagged procedural irregularities in the development, including the commencement of construction without a proper development permit and inadequate public consultation (CLN, 2024). Meanwhile, the single seat allocated to Barbuda for the House of Representatives has been almost always occupied by the Barbuda People's Movement; the BPM is active only on the island of Barbuda and campaigns for secession.

#### *St Kitts and Nevis*

According to the constitution of *St Kitts and Nevis*, the island of Nevis enjoys considerable autonomy, including the right of secession. The Nevis Island Assembly (NIA) has 8 members (5 directly elected; 3 appointed), a premier, and a deputy governor-general. Under certain conditions, it may secede from the federation. In 1996, the Nevis Island Administration under the Concerned Citizens' Movement (CCM) of Premier Vance Amory initiated steps towards secession from the Federation. However, a 1998 referendum failed – by a few votes – to secure the required two-thirds majority for secession. The clamour for secession has since abated (Corbett and



Byron, 2023). The CCM contests general elections in St Kitts and Nevis but only fields candidates in Nevis. Mark Brantley has been Premier of Nevis since the 2022 assembly elections, where the CCM won 4 out of the 5 elected seats on the NIA. The CCM currently also holds all 3 seats allocated to Nevis in the 15-member St Kitts and Nevis House of Representatives. Nevis has a land area of 93 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 11,000; compare these values to those of 'mainland' St Kitts: a land area of 168 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 47,000. The two-island basis of this country is reflected in the two white stars that occupy the centre of its flag. Note also that St Kitts-Nevis has had an episode of successful secession. The country became an associated state of the UK in 1967 as St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla, but – as it argued – Anguilla preferred remaining a colony of Britain than a colony of St Kitts, and it was excised from the new country after non-violent but high-profile protests and a UK military intervention (Walichek, 2017).

### *Trinidad and Tobago*

*Trinidad and Tobago* is a bi-island sovereign state since 1962. However, though geographically proximate, the two islands have quite different constitutional histories. Tobago first came into the possession of the British in 1763. Tobago's Assembly held its inaugural session in 1768, at which point Trinidad was still a Spanish colony. It would be a further 28 years before Trinidad too came into British control.

Trinidad's population today, with a sizeable Indo-Caribbean segment, is around 1.3 million, and its land area is 4,830 km<sup>2</sup>; Tobago's population, largely of African descent, is around 61,000 and its land area is 300 km<sup>2</sup>. Tobago is allocated two of the 41 constituencies of Parliament. The two islands were joined by administrative fiat, with hardly any resistance, in 1889, when Tobago was downgraded to a district of the new country. "From inception the union was problematic. Tobagonians soon became disenchanted over a number of issues and soon demanded control of their own affairs" (Luke, 2007, n.p.). The island of Tobago has been agitating for several decades for greater autonomy from its larger and wealthier sister island, Trinidad. Tobagonians developed their own strain of identity politics. Three main positions emerged: separatists, integrationists, and secessionists: the separatists saw the island as a distinct entity from Trinidad, though still a part of the state; the integrationists saw the island as a part of Trinidad, albeit underdeveloped; and the secessionists wanted a separate state. Tobago has also regularly spawned its own political parties; and these parties tend to control the Tobago House of Assembly (THA).

At first, the Government of *Trinidad and Tobago* maintained a Ministry of Tobago Affairs which had been responsible for directing governments' policy perspective on the island and managed all government activities beyond local government since the country's independence in 1962. The Ministry was a coordinating arm of the Central Government. "It was plagued with problems, as essentially line ministries in Trinidad retained direct control over administration in Tobago" (Hazel, 2005, p. 6). In 1977, a Parliamentary motion in favour of "internal self-government" for Tobago was passed unanimously. It was proposed by Arthur N.R. Robinson, the political leader of the Democratic Action Congress and the MP for Tobago East; he was subsequently Prime Minister (1986-1991) and the third president of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1978, a Joint Select Committee of Parliament recommended that legislation be enacted to facilitate the institution of a Tobago Island Council (TIC). It was recommended that the Council would have responsibility for the environment, infrastructure, physical planning and community services, as well as be granted powers of finance (except external borrowing) and economic development. However,

when the draft TIC bill was presented, Government was concerned because it was seen to be inimical towards the maintenance of the unitary state of Trinidad and Tobago. The TIC Bill was abandoned.

Soon after, in 1980, another Bill was drafted, this time with the proposal to establish a Tobago House of Assembly (THA); one could say, after a hiatus of almost 100 years. This Bill was considered less contentious, particularly because the THA could only exercise delegated powers with respect to policy formulation and implementation. The Bill was passed, and the THA was given responsibility to formulate and implement policy on all matters referred to it by the Minister and to implement government policy in Tobago. Over the years, the interpretation and operationalization of the Act has run into problems: the THA was merely an implementation agency for central government, with no executive powers.

1996 was the turning point: With Act 40 of 1996, the process of decentralization to the THA was strengthened. Section 5(1) of the Act stipulated that the Assembly is constituted as a body corporate, thus conferring on it a legal identity. Section 25 (1) of the THA Act stipulates that, without prejudice to the Constitution, the THA shall, in relation to Tobago, be responsible for the formulation and implementation of policy in respect of matters set out in the Fifth Schedule. These matters include, but are not limited to: Finance, State Lands, Tourism, Agriculture, Fisheries, Town and Country Planning, Infrastructure, Highways and Roads, Industrial Development, the Environment, Customs and Excise and Education. Section 26(1) states that the Assembly shall not have responsibility for matters set out in the Sixth Schedule. These matters include: National Security, Foreign Affairs, Judiciary, Immigration and Legal Affairs. The THA has no legislative power: however, Section 29 provides for the making of Assembly Laws. Once proposed by the THA, these are transmitted to Cabinet for approval and, if so, introduced to Parliament for debate and ultimately for possible approval. Section 56 stipulates that a body known as the Dispute Resolution Commission (DRC) be established to resolve disputes between the Assembly and the Government on budgetary allocations to the THA and related matters. In 2000, the DRC recommended that the THA annually receives a percentage (in the range of 4 to 6.9%) of the national budget to cover both recurrent and development allocations. The 1996 Act mandates the Assembly to collect monies by way of taxes, fees, duties, levies and other imposts in respect of operations in Tobago and to credit these sums to the Fund recognized in the Act. Section 49(3) stipulates that revenues collected by the THA shall be set-off against the annual allocation appropriated by Parliament (THA, 2024).

Further amendments were proposed in 2018, and passed unanimously by Parliament in 2020, thus enabling amendments to the country's Constitution. These had been spearheaded by Keith Rowley, himself a Tobagonian, who was elected Prime Minister at the head of the People's National Movement in September 2015.

“The right to self-determination of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, including the right of the people of the Island of Tobago to determine in Tobago their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”, has been enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago since 2021;

A formal recognition of the 'equality of status' between the Island of Tobago and the Island of Trinidad (Clause 5);

A Tobago Legislature is set up, consisting of the President, a House of Assembly and a People's House and would have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Island of Tobago, except with respect to certain matters listed in a proposed Fourth Schedule to the Constitution, which shall remain under the purview of the Central Government (Clauses 9 and 18);

A Tobago Executive Council, comprising a Chief Secretary and other Secretaries, responsible for the general direction and control of the government of the Island of Tobago, except with respect to matters listed in the Fourth Schedule (Clause 12);

The duty of the President to act in accordance with the advice of the Executive Council with respect to all matters in Tobago, excluding the matters listed in the proposed Fourth Schedule (Clause 13);

The responsibility of the Chief Secretary to keep the President fully informed concerning the general conduct of the Government of Tobago and to furnish the President with such information as he may request with respect to any particular matter relating to the Tobago Island Government (clause 14);

A Tobago Island Government, a Tobago Service Commission and a Tobago Civil Service (Clauses 6, 15 and 16); and

The annual appropriation of not less than eight per cent of the national budget to the service of Tobago and financial provisions similar to those in the Tobago House of Assembly Act (Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago).

Beyond these legislative measures, relations with the central government in Port of Spain have been strained. A measure of self-government and representation has been 'restored' to Tobago; but relations between the Tobago House of Assembly and the national government have not run smoothly (Brereton, 2007, p. 182).

Note that Barbuda, Nevis, Principe and Tobago – like Gozo – do *not* come with their own country code internet top level domain (ccTLD).

While not self-evident, small archipelagic states typically acknowledge the existence of multiple islands within the country; and some of the residents of these minor islands could also be accorded special or distinct rights. Malta falls into this category. Within this group of countries, it is worth identifying the following 10 sovereign states: Bahamas, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cuba, Iceland, Ireland, Micronesia, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea and Seychelles. Each of these, like Malta, has some special arrangement with one or more of its constituent islands, even though (as with Malta) this relationship is not reflected in the name of the country.

- *Bahamas* holds the office of a Minister of Agriculture, Marine Resources and Family Island Affairs. However, requests for devolved governance for its 30 populated 'family islands' continue to be made (e.g. Johnson, 2017; Simms, 2023). Municipal governance has been in place since 1996. 24 out of the 39 seats in the Lower House are based on New Providence, by far the most heavily populated island in the country. Only Long Island constitutes a single electoral district. There are no specific island-based political parties.

- *Comoros* is officially a federal state. Under the constitution, the four islands of Grande Comore, Mohéli, Anjouan, and Mayotte form the Union of the Comoros. Mayotte, however, is administered by France as a department, and does not participate in the government of the Union. Mayotte had been an overseas collectivity, but became a French department in 2011, after a referendum.
- *Cuba* includes the Island of Youth, La Isla de la Juventud, which is the only special municipality of Cuba, and is governed directly from and by the central administration.
- *Iceland* includes the Vestmannaeyjar, (anglicized as the Westman Islands), a municipality and archipelago off the southwest coast of Iceland. Heimaey is the largest amongst 18 islands, with a population of 4,400.
- *Ireland* boasts 30 populated minor islands. These islands and their communities are considered “an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland ... and have a special significance in Irish culture”. They are the focus of a specific, ten-year national policy and action plan (Government of Ireland, 2023).
- *Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)* is the world’s smallest federal state. The country is divided into four states: Chuuk (or Truk), Kosrae, Pohnpei and Yap. Each has its own constitution, elected legislature, governor, and lieutenant governor. The state governments maintain considerable power, particularly regarding the implementation of budgetary policies. There are no political parties in FSM. The total land area of FSM is around 700 km<sup>2</sup>, but the islands are spread over 2.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of ocean. The resident population is around 110,000.
- *Mauritius* is a multi-island republic which includes the smaller island of Rodrigues (land area= 108 km<sup>2</sup>; population= around 45,000) over 500 km to the east of the main island (also called Mauritius, land area= 2,040 km<sup>2</sup>; population= around 1.26 million). Rodrigues is a constituency of the Republic of Mauritius. Its population is mainly Christian, and descendants of African slaves; while the population in (mainland) Mauritius is mainly Indian, with Hinduism as the most prevalent religion. For many years, and formally at least since 1915, the local population lobbied for the recognition by the central Government of Mauritius of the specificities of the island which were often not catered for by central government policies. Moreover, what should have been simple administrative procedures were taking an excessive amount of time to implement when compared to similar situations in mainland Mauritius. In November 2001, the Mauritius National Assembly unanimously passed legislation that created a decentralised government system. Since October 2002, Rodrigues has been governed by the 18-member Rodrigues Regional Assembly (RRA) – 17 elected members plus an appointed chairperson – and its own Executive Council (the latter being similar to the role of a Cabinet of Ministers). The President of the Republic is the only person who can remove the Chief Commissioner, at their own judgement. The RRA has been modelled on the Tobago House of Assembly (see above) (RRA, 2024). Its autonomy extends notably to socio-economic affairs and the management of the natural resources of the island and surrounding waters. There is also a local, successful political party: the Rodrigues People’s Organisation (French: *Organisation du Peuple Rodriguais*, OPR). The party has tended to win the two seats allocated to Rodrigues in the national parliament (which has 70 seats in all). The OPR has also been in and out of power in the RRA over the years.

- Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a multi-island archipelago and includes the island of Bougainville (land area=9,384 km<sup>2</sup>; population=250,000). Bougainvillean separatism dates from the 1960s, and a short-lived 'Republic of the North Solomons' was declared shortly before the independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975; Bougainville was subsumed into PNG the following year. Conflict over the large Panguna copper mine became the primary trigger for the Bougainville Civil War (1988–1998), which resulted in around 20,000 people losing their life. A peace agreement resulted in the creation of the Autonomous Bougainville Government. In late 2019, a non-binding independence referendum was held, with 98% voting for independence rather than continued autonomy within Papua New Guinea (Regan et al., 2022). As a result, the regional authorities intend to become independent between 2025 and 2027, pending ratification by the PNG government. However, major disagreements about how the ratification process should work have led to a breakdown in talks between the national and Bougainville governments. A bone of contention is that Bougainville wants the parliamentary vote to be a simple majority, while PNG says it should be a two-thirds majority (Wilson, 2024).
- *Seychelles* is a multi-island state. The archipelago has a post-independence history of rigid central planning and control, set up and finessed during decades of one-party authoritarian rule. None of its islands, singly or collectively, has any powers of self-determination. Apart from Mahé, where 95% of the population of around 100,000 lives, the next largest inhabited island Praslin, has a resident population of just around 8,800. Three out of the country's 27 electoral districts are located outside Mahé: two on Praslin, and one on La Digue (population: 2,970) and which includes all the other small islands in its constituency (combined population: 583). These islands have never spawned their own political party, which would have been a clear sign of a distinct political consciousness, island-based proto-ethnicity and mobilisation (Baldacchino, 2013). The only island with special status here is Aldabra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of the largest coral atolls in the world, and contains one of the most important natural habitats for studying evolutionary and ecological processes. Aldabra has no resident human population and any visitors require a special permit (UNESCO, 2024).

## 12. Island Territories and Non-Sovereign Units

Moving away from sovereign island states, Watts (2009) identifies various islands (or sets of islands) that are fully-fledged jurisdictional units (subnational states, provinces or territories) in/of different federations. These subnational island jurisdictions which form a constitutionally recognized part of a federal state include:

*Tierra del Fuego* (an island shared between Argentina and Chile); *Tasmania* (the only island state in the Commonwealth of Australia); *Prince Edward Island*, *Newfoundland* and *Labrador* and *Nunavut* (all three in Canada: the first being a totally enisled province; the last two being jurisdictions comprising both islands as well as mainland territory); *Njazidja*, *Mwali* and *Nzwani* (three islands in the Comoros Federation, also known as Grand Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan); *Kosrae*, *Pohnpei*, *Truk* and *Yap* (being the four federated states of Micronesia); *Penang*, *Sabah* and *Sarawak* (in Malaysia; the latter two

sharing the island of Borneo with the Sultanate of Brunei and parts of Indonesia known as Kalimantan); the *Balearic Islands* and the *Canary Islands* (both parts of Spain); and *Hawai'i* (as the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the United States of America).

Malta, however, is *not* a federal state. Gozo is *not* an officially recognised subnational island jurisdiction.

### 13. Subnational Island Units of Non-Island States

Other subnational island units are components of larger political systems, mainly by virtue of a colonial past.

These include most of the *British Overseas Territories*, each of which has its own Constitution, its own Government and its own local laws. There are currently 14 BOTs, of which only two are not islands: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory (not an island), British Indian Ocean Territory<sup>22</sup>, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar (not an island), Montserrat, Pitcairn (with its non-populated dependencies of Henderson, Ducie and Oeno), Saint Helena, with its (populated) dependencies of Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the UK Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, both located on the island of Cyprus.

They also include the 'five and a half' islands that form part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands: Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, St Eustatius, Saba and Sint Maarten (the last of these shares an island with French Saint Martin).

Insightful cases to examine in relation to Gozo are the two constituent members of the Kingdom of Denmark: Greenland and the Faroe (or Faeroe) Islands.

#### *Greenland*

The most prominent example of this category is Greenland (Or Kalaallit Nunaat in Greenlandic). After Australia, Greenland is the world's largest island according to land area (2.1 million km<sup>2</sup>) but has a small population of 56,400 (as at 2021). Nuuk is the capital, with 18,800 inhabitants. Greenland is an autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark, with a unique status under the Self-Government Act of 2009. This Act replaced the 1979 Greenland Home Rule. It serves as the constitutional foundation for Greenland's position within the unity of the Danish Realm, alongside the Danish Constitution. Greenland also sends two representatives to the Danish Parliament (Folketing).

The Self-Government Act came into effect after a referendum in Greenland in November 2008, where 75.5% voted in favour. Its aim is to transfer authority and responsibility from Danish authorities to Greenland in areas where it is constitutionally feasible, emphasizing a balance between rights and obligations.

The political structure in Greenland consists of the democratically elected Inatsisartut (the Greenland Parliament, with 31 members elected for four year-terms) and the Naalakkarsuisut (the

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<sup>22</sup> To be 'returned' to Mauritius after a decision by the UK Government.

Greenland Government).<sup>23</sup> The Act does not specify the composition of these bodies, leaving that decision to Greenland's authorities. (Note that the first political party in Greenland, an Inuit party, appeared in 1964.) Greenlandic is the principal language, with Danish used in official contexts.

The economic arrangement under the Act includes a fixed subsidy from the Danish government to Greenland, which adjusts if Greenland generates income from its own resources (such as minerals).

Greenland has assumed control over various legislative and administrative functions, particularly in public finances. As far as competences over which Greenland enjoys autonomy are concerned, 17 policy areas were already transferred and taken over as a consequence of the 1979 Home Rule Act. These are: central and local government affairs, taxation, the Greenlandic (state-sponsored Lutheran) church, fisheries and hunting, conservation, landscape planning, competition law, social affairs, labour market regulation, culture and education, business affairs, health, housing, supply of goods, internal transport, protection of the environment, offshore environmental protection and mineral resources.

Trust-building and bilateral negotiations unfold regularly between the Greenlandic and Danish governments. Specific commissions are established, with an equal number of representatives from both sides.

Appendices to the Greenland Self-Government Act identify several functions where there is agreement that they can be transferred to Greenland authorities when Greenland wants to do so. Additionally, a number of functions, currently administered by the Danish state, can be transferred to Greenland if an agreement can be reached after further negotiations between the Government of Denmark and the Greenland Self-Government. When policy areas are transferred to Greenland, they are financed by the Greenland Self-Government from the date of transfer.

A number of policy issues cannot be transferred to Greenland. These are: Constitutional affairs, the Supreme Court, citizenship, monetary policy, defence and security policy, and foreign policy. However, the Self-Government Act involves Greenland in any matters of international law that significantly affect the island and its immediate, Arctic region (such as climate change negotiations).

The Act also includes a provision for Greenland's path to independence, obliging negotiations and agreements between Greenlandic and Danish governments, approval from the Greenlandic Parliament, and a referendum. Independence would mean full sovereignty over Greenland's territories and their citizens for Greenland (Ackrén, 2022; Jakobsen and Larsen, 2024).

Greenland was obliged to join the European Economic Community with Denmark in 1973, but a majority voted 'no' in a referendum on accession and it left the Union in 1985. It is now recognised as an overseas country and territory (OCT) in relation to the European Union. This means that Greenland has bilateral agreements in the form of a partnership agreement and a fishery agreement with the EU. Greenland has also its own representation in Brussels as well

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<sup>23</sup> For the 2021-25 legislature (2021) election, the Government of Greenland consisted of 11 departments: Premier's Office; Finance and Home Affairs; Housing, Infrastructure and Equality; Natural Resources; Education, Culture, Sports and Church; Fisheries and Hunting; Agriculture, Self-Management, Energy and Environment; Health; Social Affairs and the Labour Market; Children, Youth, Family and Justice; and Business, Trade, Foreign Policy and Climate (Ackrén, 2022, p. 9).

as in Washington DC, USA. The Greenlandic government also has the right to sign international agreements within areas of special interests to Greenland (Ackrén, 2022).

As of the last general elections, held in March 2025, there are five political parties represented in the 31-member Greenlandic parliament: The Democrats (10 seats), *Naleraq* (7 seats), *Inuit Ataqatigit* (7 seats), *Simiut* (4 seats) and *Atassut* (2 seats). All these parties broadly support independence, but differ on tempo and detail. *Naleraq* wants improved relations with the US. The ensuing governing coalition includes all the parties that won seats except *Naleraq*, which now forms the official opposition.

### *The Faroe (or Faeroe) Islands*

Similar to Greenland, the *Faroe Islands* are also considered as a nation with special historical, cultural and geographical ties to Denmark. Unlike Greenland, as early as 1946, the Faroese voted narrowly (50.7%) in favour of independence via referendum. Although independence was then declared by the Speaker of the *Løgting* (Parliament), the declaration was not recognised by Denmark. Danish King Christian X dissolved the *Løgting* and called fresh elections, which were won by unionist parties. The islands were subsequently given a greater level of self-rule.

The islands are vested with internal and external autonomy within the Realm of the Kingdom of Denmark, established by the Home Rule Act of 1948. The Act became the legal basis for facilitating the transfer of specific competences over certain fields from Danish to Faroese authorities. These areas include: the conservation and management of marine resources, protection of the environment, continental shelf resources, external trade relations, financial policy, business regulation, taxation and customs, energy, transport communications, emergency preparedness, social security, culture, education and research.

The scope and procedures for the transfer of legislative and administrative powers to the government of the Faroe Islands are regulated by the Assumption Act of 2005. According to this Act, the Government of the Faroes has unilateral authority to assume legislative and executive competences in the jurisdiction of the Faroe Islands in all matters not already under Faroese authority, with the exception of the constitution, citizenship, the supreme court, foreign, security and defence policy, and monetary and currency matters. Fields of responsibility not already assumed the Government of the Faroes remain under the authority of the Danish Government and Constitution. These include the police, the prison and probation service, law of legal capacity, immigration and border control, financial regulation and aviation supervision.

As with the case of Greenland, the Faroese authorities gain legislative and administrative authority over each field they take over, and also become responsible for the financial cost associated with these fields.

The Danish Government grants an annual subsidy to the Faroe Islands. This 'Block Grant' is being phased down: it made up 2.4% of the Faroese GDP in 2023, compared to 11.2% in 2000.

The Foreign Policy Act (2005) provides for Faroese autonomy and competences in foreign relations. According to this Act, the Government of the Faroes may enter into negotiations and agreements with sovereign states and international organizations, on behalf of the Realm, in regard to fields the competence of which is (already) assumed by Faroese authorities. The 2005 Act does not apply to agreements covering defence and security, nor to accession protocols to international organizations where Denmark is a member.



Additionally, according to the so-called Fámjin Declaration (2005) - the Faroese authorities are to be involved in the relevant international negotiations regarding matters of special interest to, or which impact, the Faroe Islands. They are also to be consulted prior to the ratification of any international agreements resulting from negotiations they were involved with, as part of the Fámjin Declaration, or which have a particular importance to the Faroe Islands (Government of the Faroe Islands, 2024).

Since 2022, there are six political parties represented in the 33-seat Løgting; of these, two – The Social Democratic Party and the Union Party, currently with 16 seats – are unionists, in favour of a continued political relationship with Denmark. The other four parties – currently with 17 seats – describe themselves as ‘in favour of independence’, although they disagree on modality and timing. These are: the People’s Party (*Fólkaflokkurin*), the Republican Party (*Tjóðveldi*), the Progress Party (*Framsókn*) and the Centre Party (*Miðflokkurin*). Another party, the Self-Government Party (*Sjálvstýrisflokkurin*) is also in favour of independence, but currently has no seats in Parliament. The current coalition government is formed by the Social Democratic, Republic and Progress Parties.

## 14. Non-Self-Governing Territories

Since 1946, the United Nations has been keeping a controversial list of ‘non-self-governing territories’ (NSGTs) which the UN considers as deserving of ‘graduation’ to sovereign status, while most of the citizens of these same territories have democratically rejected the independence option (Baldacchino, 2004; Connell, 2009). There are currently 17 jurisdictions on this UN list, of which 15 are island units:

*American Samoa, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falklands, French Polynesia, Guam, Montserrat, New Caledonia, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena and its dependencies, Tokelau, Turks and Caicos Islands, the US Virgin Islands.*

The two non-island units are *Gibraltar* and *Western Sahara*. (UN, 2024).

These territories are on this list because the UN considers it its obligation to nudge each of them towards independence. None of these territories is or has been campaigning actively for its independence, however.

## 15. Gozo as an Island with a Formal (but Non-Constitutional) Arrangement for an Element of Self-Rule struck with and by Central Powers

Watts (2009) also refers to Stuart (2008) and explains why the latter’s list includes 30 more island jurisdictions than his own. He explains how Stuart added the following island units as examples of subnational island jurisdictions:

- formal (but non-constitutional) or otherwise informal ‘special’ or asymmetrical arrangements for elements of self-rule struck with central powers (such as Kish Island in Iran; Jeju Island Autonomous Province in South Korea; Rotuma in Fiji; *Gozo in Malta*;

Hong Kong and Macau Special Autonomous Regions in the People's Republic of China (my emphasis);

- Indigenous island-based communities with some sovereignty within another state (such as Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands in Canada; Aleutians in Alaska, USA; and the Torres Strait Islands in Australia);
- *De facto* island powers, sometimes in open confrontation or contestation with a central state, such as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, the former Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, and the secessionist movements in Southern Mindanao in the Philippines. Taiwan could possibly be added to this list.

Thus, Gozo is included in Stuart's list; but not in that compiled by Watts. Gozo finds itself within the sub-category of *an island with a formal arrangement for an element of self-rule struck with and by central powers*. But this arrangement, while formal, is not constitutional. The Ministry for Gozo is not an obligation, and exists at the discretion of the Prime Minister, who names and designs the Cabinet which they lead (hence *prime minister*). Indeed, the latest Malta Cabinet reshuffle in January 2024 has rejigged the unit in question as a *Ministry of Gozo and Planning*, combining a traditional ministerial portfolio (planning) with the coordinating role of the Ministry for Gozo. This reduces clarity in the functioning of this ministry; and reduces oversight from Valletta in the administration of planning permits.

Even beyond Gozo, independence or secession no longer appear as attractive 'go to' options for most autonomous island units. Greenland and (perhaps) Bougainville are currently the only two island units heading towards independence. Otherwise, autonomous territories have instead preferred deepening and broadening levels of autonomy which allow them to be actively involved in and responsible for local administration without challenging their inclusion and integration into broader and stronger political units (Constant, 2024). As argued by the late island geographer David Lowenthal:

At the end of the day, a certain level of autonomy is key for [the islands'] development. I am not advocating for official sovereignty ... but for sufficient autonomy so as to allow people to feel that they own their house enough to have it renovated (1992, p. 28).

## 16. Constitutional forms that small islands may adopt in larger political settings

Political scientist and constitutional expert Ronald Watts offers a useful overview of the varying constitutional forms that small islands may adopt in larger political groupings (Watts, 2000).

The *federacy* is the best known type: in this arrangement, an island may form a relationship with a larger state (often a colonial power), whereby the smaller island unit enjoys the benefits of association with the state, but at the same time is able to retain substantial autonomy and self-government (Elazar 1987). The competences and powers that islands enjoy tend to be negotiated directly with the larger polity. Constitutional asymmetry ensures that the smaller island unit has little influence or power in state decision-making, and vice versa. These bilateral systems of self-

and shared-rule occur almost exclusively on islands. Islands meeting the 'federacy' definition include: Åland (Finland), Faroes and Greenland (Denmark), Azores and Madeira (Portugal), Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey (UK/Great Britain) and Puerto Rico and Northern Marianas (USA). Federacies provide a considerable measure of self-rule, whereby the island has powers over all domestic matters; while the larger polity remains responsible for foreign affairs, defence and currency. In addition, the relationship is relatively stable, as it can only be dissolved by mutual agreement. A disadvantage is that there is limited shared-rule: the island has little influence over decision making at the central (state) level..

The second type of autonomy arrangement is the *associated state*. Like federacies, smaller units are linked to a larger polity in an asymmetrical relationship. However, unlike federacies, associated states can be dissolved by either of the minor or the major unit in the partnership. Thus, the associated state has the right to declare independence or withdraw from the relationship . Such entities, again unlike federacies, are usually also recognised by international law and subject to international conventions. Islands exemplifying this type of constitutional arrangement include the Cook Islands and Niue in relation to New Zealand, and the Marshall Islands and Palau in relation to the USA. The advantages of associated statehood are that the island in question is internationally recognised as a 'self-governing state' and may establish diplomatic missions abroad. The main disadvantage is that this type of constitutional relationship is less stable than a federacy, as either unit may dissolve the unit acting unilaterally.

A third type of common constitutional arrangement is the *federation*. This is the case for twenty island regions which form parts of Canada, the Comoros, Malaysia, Micronesia, Spain, St Kitts and Nevis, and the USA. An advantage of this type of constitutional arrangement is that political partnership constitutes a strong sense of shared rule, which enables redistribute policies to be enacted, in addition to substantial influence over the policies and decision-making of the larger polity. A downside to federation status is constitutional complexity, and to some extent the fact that island autonomy is limited to the powers assigned to it by the constitution, which is very difficult to amend.

## 17. Why do Islands seek Autonomy? A Scoreboard

Political scientist Eve Hepburn (2010) has proposed a set of variables, grouped into five themes, that might play an important role in shaping demands for island autonomy. These variables can help explain why some islands seek autonomy, others seek independence, and others still aspire for an integration and assimilation into the structures of the central state. These five themes are: (1) distinctiveness of the party system; (2) strength of identity; (3) economic resources; (4) external relations with state and supranational bodies; and (5) state territorial management. A sixth variable – factors associated with 'islandness' – acts as a control variable for testing the 'distinctiveness' of autonomy demands on islands per se. The arguments behind each of these themes are presented below as hypotheses. (For each hypothesis, one can assess how particular islands score, leading to a template that would allow inter-island comparisons<sup>24</sup>. This exercise is undertaken with Gozo as the subject below.)

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Guasch (2022) applies the 6 Hepburn variables to analyse the situation in the Balearic Islands.

- Hypothesis from Theme 1: The greater the degree of decentralisation of country-wide political parties, the more distinctive the regional party system, and the existence of one or more nation-specific or territorially-specific political parties (and other mass organisations) seeking self-determination, leads to demands for a stronger degree of autonomy.

Gozo does not have any regional political party. Its political landscape mirrors the one on the Maltese mainland perfectly and has done so for most (but not all) of Malta's 100+ years of electoral history. In the same vein, only two trade unions with a focus on specifically organising Gozitans have been set up and had a short-lived existence: the *Gozo Workers Association* (1977) which folded up within a year; and the *Haddiema u Studenti Għawdxin Magħquda*, which reported 500 members in 1975 and 660 members in 1976 and was struck off the register at its own behest in 1982. Score 1/10.

- Hypothesis from Theme 2: The larger the share of citizens who identify (either exclusively or predominantly) with the region as opposed to the state, the stronger the demands for autonomy.

Various residents in Gozo and/or born in Gozo identify as Gozitan, apart from – and not necessarily to the exclusion of – Maltese. The existence of specific local dialects and a local sense of identity in contradistinction to mainland Malta fosters a distinct quasi-ethnic quality of 'being Gozitan'. Maltese proverbs about Gozitans refer to the latter's alleged miserliness (e.g. *Għawdx i żokrati l-gremxul ħasbu kavati*)<sup>25</sup> and cunning (e.g. *Għawdx i tajjeb aħarqu; aħseb w ara ħażin*).<sup>26</sup> But: this sense of cultural identity is usually over and above to being Maltese, rather than to its exclusion: Score 5/10.

- Hypothesis from Theme 3: The greater degree of economic wealth and resources of the region, the higher the degree of autonomy will be sought.

Over the years, Gozo has tended to come across as economically inferior and less developed than Malta in terms of official statistics; although this gap has narrowed, and possibly disappeared, of late. Gozo is also much more dependent on employment related to (a more seasonal) tourism industry and to public administration than mainland Malta. It would thus be fair to say that some funds raised by the State in mainland Malta – from such sources as taxes, duties and levies – are transferred for use in Gozo. What Gozo still holds in terms of 'wealth' is its landscape aesthetic, its cultural charm, its 'island of villages' character: the features that drive its tourism economy and (still) make it attractive to mainland Maltese and foreigners. This is a wealth that some Gozitans at least seek to protect and safeguard: Score: 4/10.

- Hypothesis from Theme 4: Being cheated from access to, or being under-represented in, higher levels of national office, as well as being cheated from participating in regional and supranational organisations – such as the European Union or the Nordic Council – will lead to increased demands for autonomy.

The President of the Gozo Regional Council sits on the EU's Committee of the Regions. The Vice President of the Gozo Business Chamber (GBC) is the current President of Insuleur

<sup>25</sup> <https://qawl.mt/kategorija/animali>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/from-gorgeous-gozo-to-the-gozitans.187010>.

(the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the EU). The GBC participates in the Islands Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), an EU lobby organisation. Two of Malta's elected members to the European Parliament have been Gozitan: Josianne Cutajar (2019-24 EP session) and Thomas Bajada (2024-29 EP session). Three Gozitans (including the incumbent) have served as Presidents of the Republic of Malta. The current Gozo Minister Clint Camilleri's sister Francesca Camilleri Vettiger has been Malta's Permanent Representative, or ambassador, to the Council of Europe since 2023 (The Shift, 2023). Victoria (Rabat), Gozo's capital, is preparing to bid for the title of 2031 European Capital of Culture; and Gozo has been recommended for the title of European Region of Gastronomy 2026. The percentage of Gozo's population within the Republic of Malta is practically equivalent to the proportion of members of parliament elected from the district of Gozo (5 out of 65): 7%. However, none of the 14 men who served as Prime Ministers of Malta since the office was created in 1921 have been Gozitan.<sup>27</sup> Score: 2/10.

- Hypothesis from Theme 5: The state's unwillingness to recognise and accommodate the identity and interests of a region will lead to demands for greater autonomy.

Gozo and the Gozitans are regularly acknowledged in political speeches and statements. Institutions such as the Gozo Civic Council, the Ministry for Gozo and the 'Reġjun Għawdex' are some of the institutional expressions of the central state's willingness to recognise and accommodate Gozo's identity and interests as a region (albeit with limited autochthonous executive autonomy). Score: 2/10.

In view of the specific (small) island condition of our concerns, Hepburn adds the following:

- Hypothesis from Theme 6: The more remote the island is in relation to its mainland and its centres of power; the poorer the transport connectivity between the island and its mainland as well as to other regions/states; the lower the degree and amount of state economic concessions the island region receives, and the absence of strong clientelist networks ... all these will fan and lead to demands for (more) autonomy.

Gozo is a 'near island'; it is not remote from mainland Malta. The Gozo Channel is just 4.5 km wide at its narrowest. Connectivity by sea is regular, assured by the state and with subsidised fares to passengers with a main address in Gozo. There is no airlink, although it remains a possibility, and a helicopter service is available in emergencies. The proposal for an undersea Gozo-Malta tunnel occasionally resurfaces and highlights persisting disgruntlement at current transport options. Strong and informal clientelist networks exist and channel grievances and requests through the system: over a third of sampled Gozitans admitted resorting to politicians "for assistance" (Xuereb, 2023). 10% of EU funding is ring-fenced and earmarked for spending in Gozo (Balzan, 2021). The core social psychological process of *nirrangaw* ('getting by') both enables and inhibits Gozitans in developing their resourcefulness (Azzopardi & Mann, 2006). Score: 4/10.

Total score for Gozo: 18/60.

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<sup>27</sup> The closest would be: (1) Enrico Mizzi, who lived and studied in Gozo for some years, and was elected to Parliament from the Gozo district; and (2) Dom Mintoff, whose father, Wenzu, is said to have had 'Gozitan roots'.

The constitutional legal status of islands is characterised by diversity; and yet, after empirical analysis, Olausson (2002; 2007) and Olausson & Ackrén (2008) argued that three factors would largely explain whether an island territory sought and secured an autonomous status within a larger state: cultural distinctiveness, a previous history of self-administration, and a geographical distance of at least 100km from its respective mainland. Gozo clearly has the first and second attribute; but what about the third? It may be argued that Gozo is simply 'too close' to Malta to warrant a separate jurisdictional status. Indeed, Gozo is a 'bridgeable' island and, once bridged, the impetus to political autonomy could easily vanish. "Lightly populated islands proximate to a mainland coast may be less likely to be governed under distinct arrangements" (Hobbs & Rothwell, 2024, p. 622).

However Olausson is only partially correct. There are various island autonomies that are located less than 100 km from their mainland: examples include the Balearics (80km), Zanzibar (70km), and Hiiumaa (22km). The Muhu archipelago is a municipality located just 6km from mainland Estonia. The Isle of Wight is an English county and unitary authority in the English Channel, 3km off the coast of Hampshire. Nevis is less than 2km away from St Kitts, with which it forms a federal state. And the island region of Sicily, the EU's largest and most populated non-independent island, and perhaps the world's "most bridgeable island" (Baldacchino, 2015b), is 3.1km away from mainland Italy, separated by the Strait of Messina. There is no reason to 'disqualify' Gozo's potential to secure some level of self-governance simply because it is located close to mainland Malta. A 'fixed link' (tunnel or bridge) between Malta and Gozo is a much more serious threat to Gozo's regional autonomy than its distance from mainland Malta.

## 18. Now, let's talk Politics

This is the proverbial elephant in the room. Whatever self-governance 'option' is being proposed must be weighed in relation to its intended or unintended consequences on the exercise of power in and for Gozo. And the exercise of power, since 1966, has depended on just two, single and majoritarian, political parties: the Malta Labour Party (now *Partit Laburista*) and the Nationalist Party (*Partit Nazzjonalista*) have commanded the legislature uninterruptedly, while replacing each other at the helm as either Government or Opposition. In the sixty years since independence, the political system has been stable: only one legislature was cut short by a vote of no confidence, in 1998. The two parties have changed sides only five times over six decades: in 1971, 1987, 1996, 1998 and 2013. In spite of a plethora of new parties, and a dogged performance by *Alternattiva Demokratika*,<sup>28</sup> a third party, over many decades, these have yet to secure a single seat in parliament.<sup>29</sup>

The paradigmatic grip of the two political parties on the electorate has been considerable. During particular times – such as the tense 1981-84 period – Malta may have been on the cusp of a civil war. Overall, this situation has meant that there have been, for at least sixty years, two powerful and self-excluding narratives about Malta's development. One highlighting independence and entry into the European Union; the other highlighting decolonisation and republican status.

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<sup>28</sup> Currently named ADPD, after a merger with the Democratic Party.

<sup>29</sup> In the 2017 general elections, 2 candidates with the Democratic Party (PD) were elected to parliament, but as part of a joint ticket with the PN. They both did not survive the whole legislature.

Malta may be a sovereign state; but it lacks a clear sense of nationhood: most Maltese cannot agree on symbols and figures of national unity – except perhaps Eurovision singers. We celebrate ‘the Great Siege’ and the ‘Second World War’ when these were not really *our* battles. No Maltese national has fought and died for their country. Malta is the only country in the world with five national days (Baldacchino, 2002).

Self-excluding narratives, which dramatize events that are denigrated by the other side, and vice versa, have affected many significant episodes in Malta’s recent history. The Gozo Civic Council was caught in a similar bind. Enacted *de facto* by a Nationalist majoritarian push – its longest serving president was a Nationalist MP for Gozo - it was criticized and vilified by the MLP from the start, and was eventually wound down by an MLP Government in 1973. In 1997, the MLP continued arguing that the GCC2 had been associated with “complete stagnation, disorganisation, confusion, indiscipline, unspent funds and abandoned works”. (Government of Malta, 1997).

Local government, also a PN initiative, was eventually accepted by the PL (and continued to be accepted by the PN) albeit with diminished powers. A reference to local government made its way into the constitution as Chapter XA in 2001.

Any decision on how to govern Gozo must factor in political party power and calculation: *how will any decision affect their respective power base?* And, perhaps crucially, how significant will the respective political party machine remain in order to effectively serve Gozitans and address their concerns and requests?

To be also noted is that a majority of Gozitan voters have tended to vote for the Nationalist Party in general elections. With its petty mercantilism, artisanal farming and non-industrial employment, plus a stronger adherence to and respect for Roman Catholic Church leadership, the demo-Christian conservatism associated with the ideology of the PN is a more natural fit with the mainstream Gozo populace than the traditionally more left-wing MLP/PL. The PN secured most votes in Gozo in 13 out of the 19 elections held since 1947. In contrast, the MLP/PL managed this feat just three times; two of which in the last two elections (**see Table 1**).<sup>30</sup>

Table 1: Votes Cast in General Elections in Gozo, 1947-2022: 8<sup>th</sup> District (1947-1955); 10<sup>th</sup> District (1962-1971); and 13<sup>th</sup> District (1976- ).

Year	PN	MLP/PL	Other Parties & Independents	Total
1947	606	308	9613	10527
1950	2138	399	8048	10585
1951	4540	739	5816	11095
1953	5054	4059	2179	11292
1955	4735	6869	45	11649
1962	6892	843	5634	13369
1966	8188	2767	1526	12481

<sup>30</sup> Note also that, in the last two rounds of country-wide, local council elections (2019 and 2024), the PL won the majority of votes cast in Gozo in 2019 (11,750 versus 10,900 for the PN, with 683 votes going to other parties and independents); while the PN won the majority of votes cast in Gozo in 2024 (12,791 versus 11,664 for the PL, with 832 votes going to other parties and independents).

Year	PN	MLP/PL	Other Parties & Independents	Total
1971	7465	6107	47	13619
1976	9075	6892	0	15967
1981	10165	6988	7	17160
1987	9429	7975	0	17404
1992	10979	7529	120	18628
1996	10700	9066	168	19934
1998	11495	8700	134	20329
2003	13217	9177	90	22484
2008	13141	10185	417	23743
2013	12551	12311	301	25163
2017	12361	13233	198	25792
2022	11580	14110	665	26355

Sources: Electoral Commission (2024); University of Malta (2024).

It should also come as no surprise that, by and large, the person who the Prime Minister has appointed as Minister for Gozo since 1987 has been the party candidate who secures the highest number of first count votes from the 13<sup>th</sup> district. This is true for Giovanna Debono (two legislatures), Anton Refalo (two legislatures) and Clint Camilleri (since 2020). The connection between voter base, secured through assiduous customer care, and ministerial office, is robust. PM Joseph Muscat exceptionally appointed Justyne Caruana as Minister for Gozo in 2017, even though she secured less first-count votes than Anton Refalo.

The MLP/PL-PN alterity has lived through most of the 12-year Gozo Civic Council (GCC2) ‘experiment’ in regional government in the 1960s, and then the introduction of local government in the early 1990s. Both occasions offered opportunities for a devolution of power that could have threatened the central national power hub of both parties. But both initiatives were eventually ‘neutered’ so as not to offer any threat to the central powerbase. The Labour Party effectively boycotted the GCC2 – which ended up by default being a largely PN outfit, as is wont to happen in a bipartisan climate.<sup>31</sup> The GCC2’s first and longest serving President was a PN Gozo MP. It may have been ‘tolerated’ during the Nationalist Administrations of 1962-66 and 1966-71 precisely because it facilitated the PN’s organisation, appeal and grassroots operations in Gozo. Once the Government changed in 1971 however, this PN machinery in Gozo was an obvious irritation and the GCC2 was quickly silenced. In much the same way, we could say that the MLP/PL first objected to political parties taking part in local council elections in the 1990s, supporting only notionally independent candidates; but then changed its mind and started fielding its own candidates, while legislating to progressively reduce the executive power of local councils.

It is inconceivable to expect any of the two political parties to support or vote for a change in the self-governance machinery of Gozo unless their respective powerful clientelist apparata remain vibrant and able to offer real resources to the Gozitan faithful and needy.

<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Kelinu Galea, the single Gozitan Labour MP elected to Parliament for the 1966-71 legislature, was a member of the Gozo Civic Council.



Additionally, there is “evident reluctance from central government to release power and decentralise it” (Tabone, 2020, p 123). Malta is not and has never been a federal state. And, while there is clearly more ‘multi-level governance’ than ever, especially since accessing the EU in 2004 (Baldacchino, 2014), central government remains firmly in control of both the political agenda and the purse strings. Granting Gozo regional (including possibly fiscal) autonomy places Maltese politics and politicians in somewhat uncharted waters, and only the GCC2 years prove somewhat instructive.

## 19. Discussion

“At the end of the day, Gozitans are shrewd enough to know that what counts is not whether their island is called a region, a province, or nothing at all, but where [and how] the money flows” (Vassallo, 2003).

*Should a Gozo Regional Assembly (GRA) be considered?*

A Gozo Regional Assembly (GRA) would need to be widely representative of the Gozitan people, and would therefore need to have various members. The inevitable ‘oversight’ by Valletta would also need to be clearly articulated.

A GRA could be elected *directly*, in which case its likely composition is to see its seats being taken up fully or mainly by representatives of the PL and PN. If so, it would enter into a permanent political (and rhetorical) battle with Valletta (Government and/or Parliament). This could however change, possibly with the election of some ‘independents’ and/or representatives of new, Gozo-based, political parties who would sense an opportunity for organisation.

The members of a GRA could all be elected *indirectly*, where all its members would have been already elected on other bodies. The *Gozo Regional Council (GRC) [Reġjun Għawdex]* is such a body already, and since 2022. The *Gozo Civil Council (1961-73)* was also such a body: just like the GRC, its members had been elected to local committees in each of the 14 localities in Gozo. In its 1996 political manifesto, the MLP proposed a *Gozo Regional Council* with 20 members, as follows; the Prime Minister (as chair); all (typically 5) Gozitan MPs; and one elected representative from each of the 14 local councils of Gozo. (It was also proposed to set up a broad-based Consultative Committee to advise the Council, with around 30 members, half of whom would be parish priests.)

To the directly elected members of a Gozo Regional Assembly could be added other members who represent and occupy positions on a number of voluntary and economic organisations.<sup>32</sup> Thus, a GRA could consist of *both* some members who would have been elected on other

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<sup>32</sup> These organisations may include the following: – Each of the 14 Local Councils in Gozo; the Local Councils Association (LCA); – Reġjun Għawdex; – Gozo Tourism Association (GTA); – Gozo Business Chamber (GBC); – Student Organisations (Gozo University Group - GUG); and these Environmental NGOs: Din I-Art Helwa Għawdex, Għawdix, Kummissjoni Ambjent, Birdlife Malta, Nature Trust Malta, Ramblers Association of Malta, Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar, Friends of the Earth Malta, Żminijietna, Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, GAIA Foundation, Light Pollution Awareness Group, Moviment Graffiti, Malta Organic and Agriculture Movement, Malta Water Association, Youth for the Environment, Noise Abatement Society of Malta.

bodies, *and* of other members who sit on the Assembly by virtue of occupying positions on a number of voluntary and economic organisations (to be determined). The environmental pressure group *Għal Għawdex* is such a body. The counter-argument to this set-up is that the members of the GRA who represent voluntary and economic organisations (such as the GBC, the GTA, GUG) could easily end up holding the balance of power on the GRA and be drawn into partisan political roles, supporting the policies of one political party or another with their strategic voting.

Any such Assembly would need to have functions and powers. Would they be: consultative (can recommend only); coordinative; veto-based (without the right to propose; but with the right to reject legislation); proto-legislative (with the right to propose laws and/or by-laws); fiscal (with the right to collect and/or levy taxes); and/or executive (driving forward and supervising ideas and policies into implementation and action)?

Another counter-argument to the setting up of a GRA is that it could easily end up consisting of individuals who already occupy political and other leadership positions in Gozo. The same individuals would, thus, have yet another forum where they meet and take decisions. In fact, Gozo is probably already the *most governed territorial sub-unit* in Malta. Would a GRA be a step towards over-governance?

Along with such an Assembly, an Executive would need to be set up, in order to execute the Assembly's decisions, including any policies and strategies. To be fair, certain functions are already delegated for execution to Gozo-based bodies, such as the design and implementation of a Regional Development Strategy for Gozo (by the GRDA) and the promotion of various local cultural and artistic initiatives (by the Gozo Regional Council), under the purview of their respective ministries (the Ministry for Gozo and the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, respectively).

Setting up such an GRA could instigate a restructuring of the Ministry for Gozo. This move would possibly eliminate “... the personal grievance role, and designate it [that is, The Ministry for Gozo] as the vehicle that will implement the Regional Assembly policies and vision” (GTA, 2017).

At the crux of the discussion, is what should be the relationship between the Minister/Ministry for Gozo and a democratically elected Gozo regional body, other than the one that exists *de facto* and *de iure* today, and within the context of the small scale society that is Gozo.<sup>33</sup> And, if this relationship is to change, this transition can be made in steps, with the transfer of specific portfolios of competence handled progressively over time. This approach would give time to all parties concerned to learn how to deal with each other effectively.

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<sup>33</sup> The current Minister for Gozo, Perit Clint Camilleri, and the current President of the Gozo Regional Council, Dr Samuel Azzopardi, are first cousins. Their (common) grandfather was the former Gozitan Labour MP Anġlu Camilleri, known as *il-Bedeq*, who served in Parliament between 1971 and 1981.

## 20. Conclusion

The conclusion to this study is being presented as a series of questions and answers. Because, after all, various questions do arise. For example:

*Q1: Can Gozo be considered as a separate region (from Malta), given its small size, and the small size of the Maltese Islands themselves?*

Yes. Absolutely. There are three, Pacific sovereign island *states* that have a population smaller than Gozo's: Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu. Two of these – Nauru and Tuvalu – also have a land area smaller than Gozo's. San Marino, a small European landlocked state, has both a population and a land area smaller than Gozo's. There are various subnational jurisdictions that are also smaller in size and/or land area than Gozo. The island jurisdiction database held by the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, identifies 114 territories (and including Gozo); and many of these jurisdictions have populations that are smaller than Gozo's. They include: Åland, Anguilla, Ascension, Cook Islands, Falklands, Hiiumaa, Lofoten, Montserrat, Nevis, Niue, Norfolk Island, Orkney, Pitcairn, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Rotuma, Saba, Sark, Saint Martin, Shetland, St Eustatius (Statia), St Helena, St Pierre and Miquelon, Svalbard, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuna (IIS, 2024).

What needs to be discussed and clarified is whether references to 'Gozo' will continue to refer to 'Gozo and Comino, and the minor islands and islets thereof'. Comino, in particular, has a detailed protection status, which would need to be safeguarded and assured also by and from Gozitan initiatives, should Gozo gain regional autonomy.<sup>34</sup>

*Q2: What has been the story of Gozo's autonomy so far?*

From a critical reading of history, it appears that Gozo has had a long history of (varying degrees of) autonomy, going back centuries. That was also at a time when the population ratio between Gozo and Malta was much less skewed than today, thus strengthening Gozo's claims and rationale for having its own separate, jurisdictional powers. But the arrival of British colonial rule, and its overarching military mandate, suppressed all expressions of autonomy and solidified central control from Valletta. And yet, the Gozo Civic Council experience would not have happened if the Constitution had not been suspended in 1958 and had the British authorities not then assumed full political control, crating a narrow window for creative political opportunism in the face of grassroots Gozitan activism. Meanwhile, 'Malta' became independent as a unitary state in 1964, unlike, say, certain other British multi-island colonies (St Kitts-Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago). This decision was possibly grounded in a reflection of Malta's millenary role as a fortress colony, and therefore where central command and control was deemed vital. It was a decision with which both the MLP and the NP were in favour at that time.

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<sup>34</sup> Comino, and its islets, is a Rural Conservation Area, a Nature Reserve, a Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area within the Natura2000 network, an Important Bird Area (IBA) of International and EU Importance, a Bird Sanctuary, and a Dark Sky Heritage site. (ERA, 2019).

“A unitary state may devolve certain functions and responsibilities to a sub-national region, but the national government retains the capacity to alter or evoke any delegated authority unilaterally” (Hobbs & Rothwell, 2024, p. 630).

A Ministry for Gozo is a coordinating ministry; not an institution of regional autonomy. It is also an institution that can be revoked by central government, as happened between 1996 and 1998. And yet:

“As the historical and economic records show, there is a case for enhanced decision making in Gozo over local affairs to ensure that such decisions are more responsive to the expectations of the local population” (Government of Malta, 1997, p. 21).

The EU requirement for regional governance in the Maltese Islands has brought back the question of Gozo’s autonomy ‘through the back door’. The Gozo Civic Council (GCC2) experience cannot be discounted, and the representative structure (although not the functions) of the Gozo Regional Council bears a close affinity to the structure of the GCC2.

*Q3: Is there any interest in granting more autonomy to Gozo?*

Is there any impetus for changing the status quo?

The answer depends on two factors: (1) any appetite for change from above (PL, PN); and (2) any appetite for change from below, that is from Gozitans at large, possibly inspired and enthused by their leaders/ elites/ champions.

As far as (1) goes, the main political parties tend to develop proposals to nudge Gozo’s autonomy forward somehow during national election campaigns: unless this government’s mandate is truncated, we can expect the next election in 2027. As for (2), individual Gozitans as well as certain constituted bodies, like the GBC and the GTA, have position papers that canvas for enhanced autonomy.

In any case, the political establishment would be keen to maintain control / oversight / power over the allocation of spoils and other benefits in Gozo as much as in Malta; that is the clientelist nature of our democracy, and especially in Gozo.

*Q4: Are there any ‘red lines’ that cannot be crossed in the granting of any autonomy to Gozo?*

Again, judging from local history, including Parliamentary debates, most recently with the setting up of the GRDA and the six Regional Councils, there may be two ‘no go’ areas.

The first is the granting of taxation rights and the availability of autonomous financial resources to a Gozo-based entity. This topic has been described a political ‘non-starter’, no matter which political party is in power. Additionally, *new*, region-based tax powers may be unsavoury, unpopular and politically toxic.

The second is the real possibility, in the febrile local political context, that a regional power base in Gozo would be used simply or mainly as a tool to browbeat, badger, harass, disrupt and/or torpedo the Central Government in Valletta, for partisan political gain. Such actions would be

construed as simply anathema to any party in government, and reduce that party's appetite for (more) Gozitan autonomy.

*Q5: Does Gozo actually need more self-governance?*

The challenges facing Gozo reflect the predicament of a rapidly developing, labour-importing, island economy, following the same economic model that mainland Malta has embraced in the last decade. And, similar to Malta, practically full employment has been secured. But: the quality of life has suffered at the hands of the frenetic pace of construction. The almost doubling of Gozo's population within living memory has also exacerbated bottlenecks in infrastructure, ranging from the traffic flow in Rabat<sup>35</sup> to pressure on the electricity supply.<sup>36</sup>

Self-governance for Gozo does not necessarily address this (possibly widespread) frustration. Indeed, it could make it worse: with Gozitans 'in control of' Gozo, the few checks and balances that exist in the political and administrative system because of the 'Malta oversight' variable may be diluted or compromised.

In all fairness, however, these are issues that other countries have faced and addressed. Which is why it would be instructive to study further the political dynamics of Mauritius-Rodrigues and Trinidad-Tobago as well as the steady, *à la carte* devolution of power underway between Copenhagen on one hand and Greenland and the Faroes on the other. Through the Gozo Civic Council (1961-73), the constitutional amendment of 2007 and more recently through the GRDA and the GRC, the Malta-Gozo (and Comino) relationship is clearly not similar to that of Grenada-Carriacou (and Petite Martinique). Certain clear steps have been taken towards establishing broader and deeper regional credentials for Gozo.

It is and remains worthwhile to explore additional measures in Gozo's self-governance.

## 21. A Note on Methodology

This study was carried out by following two main routes of information gathering. The first consisted in *secondary sources*: published information about the history of governance in Gozo, complemented by a trawl of suitable academic material and policy papers about the experience of autonomy arrangements in various subnational jurisdictions (and mainly islands) around the world. This material included books, book chapters, journal articles, university dissertations, parliamentary debates and other archival (including some unpublished) material and notes brought to my attention by my various interlocutors.

The second set consisted of *primary sources*: a wide net of 15 individuals who have some interest or experience in the governance of Gozo. These include current and former politicians, concerned citizens, community leaders and civil society representatives. Between July and November 2024, I contacted 22 individuals, explaining what I was doing, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality,

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<sup>35</sup> [https://gozo.news/110949/initiatives-underway-to-ease-traffic-from-centre-of-victoria/#google\\_vignette](https://gozo.news/110949/initiatives-underway-to-ease-traffic-from-centre-of-victoria/#google_vignette).

<sup>36</sup> <https://gozo.news/111424/gbc-extremely-concerned-about-current-situation-in-electricity-supply/>.

and inviting them to reply via email and/or to schedule a chat via a suitable online platform. In many cases, this has led to an engaging to-and-from, over Zoom or face-to-face meetings, with various interesting details and suggestions being brought forward. In some cases, I was invited to and welcomed in people's homes.

It needs to be made clear that the opinions and comments provided to me by these respondents reflect their own views and are not necessarily those of the organisation, corporation or political party to which they may belong. Indeed, I have mulled over and reflected over these views and opinions in the course of writing this report, without explicitly identifying who said or suggested what.

These varied efforts to communicate with me are greatly appreciated. I remain deeply grateful to these informants and respondents for their willingness to make time to speak with me and for their candid commentaries on a topic about which most could not help but also be passionate.

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