The Matignon Process and Insular Autonomy as a Response to Self-Determination Claims in Corsica

I. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of ethnic conflicts with a self-determination dimension over the past decade in Europe has highlighted a gap in current theoretical writings and led to an intensified search by practitioners and mediators for positive instances of conflict settlement. Research is now focusing on innovative arrangements for the diffusion of power in order to better understand how various theoretical approaches to conflict resolution can be successfully combined in practice.1 "Overlapping cantonisation and federalism there exists a grey area of territorial management of ethnic differences which is often found in conjunction with external arbitration."2 It is this 'grey area' - autonomy - that we will seek to clarify through an analysis of the attempts of the French Government to respond to Corsican claims for self-determination through the establishment of an adapted form of territorial autonomy. We shall call this particular form of autonomy 'insular autonomy', involving comprehensive institutional, cultural, economic and social measures. Autonomy as such is not a novel concept and can be used to describe a broad variety of arrangements. Still, much research needs to be done on what the ideal conditions for establishing autonomy are and which elements may contribute to a successful autonomy regime.

In the case of France, where the sole holder of national sovereignty are the French people, and where there is still a great reluctance to grant any form of collective rights which, it is believed, contravene the founding principles of the French Republic, there is no question of power-sharing in the traditional sense of the term as originally

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1 According to John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation (London, 1993). conflict regulation methods may be divided into two broad categories: those aimed at eliminating differences, and those aimed at managing differences; combinations of these two methods may also be found. The latter category is further divided into four sub-categories: (a) hegemonic control; (b) arbitration or third-party intervention; (c) cantonization and/or federalization; and (d) consociationalism or power-sharing.

2 McGarry and O'Leary, The Politics of Ethnic Conflict ..., 32.
defined by Lijphart,\(^3\) i.e. 'consociational democracy'. In fact, one could argue that the French unitary centralized system of government (prior to decentralization) represented the ultimate form of power-sharing, if one accepts the 'integrative approach' to power-sharing developed by Horowitz.\(^4\) In any case, no matter how multicultural and multiethnic, one cannot describe traditional French society as 'deeply divided' along ethnic lines. Even the concept of ethnicity is controversial when used to refer to French citizens. Rather, France is a mosaic of more or less strong regional identities with overlapping social cleavages. There are, however, some notable exceptions, e.g. in the French Basque Country, Brittany and Corsica, where many individuals have a sense of belonging to a distinct people and where demands for external or greater internal self-determination have been formulated.

The French Government's changing conflict regulation policies in Corsica reflect its ambivalent attitudes towards the 'Corsican Question'. Neither institutional reform nor alternating tactics of repression and negotiation with nationalist movements have been successful until now and the Corsican crisis has become increasingly entrenched. Despite decentralization in 1982 and the establishment of administrative autonomy in 1991, this small island of 260,000 inhabitants has been plagued by underdevelopment and political instability and, since the mid-1970s, by political violence. The assassination of the French Prefect in Corsica in February 1998 and the fiasco of the government's subsequent strong-handed policy of 're-establishing the rule of law' led to the realization that a durable solution had to be found. In December 1999, in response to increased calls for autonomy in Corsica, Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin initiated a process of dialogue with elected representatives of Corsica. The so-called Matignon Process (Processus de Matignon, named after the Prime Minister's office in Paris) resulted in a set of compromise proposals by the French Government on 20 July 2000. These were then approved by a majority of the local Corsican Assembly on 28 July.

This article will focus on the novel elements of the Matignon Proposals which, if fully implemented, will significantly expand Corsica's autonomy, though stopping short of full political autonomy. We shall place these recent developments within the context of the French system of multilayered governance and the constraints imposed by French legal and political traditions. This article will also show that, although the particular form of autonomy proposed for Corsica is unprecedented in the context of 'Metropolitan France' (France métropolitaine), it is in fact a timid attempt to draw on the statutes of the French overseas territories. Finally, the potential of the Matignon Process to durably resolve the Corsican conflict will be addressed.

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