**Regional Autonomy in Portugal: the Azores and Madeira – Comparison with the Moroccan Initiative for the Sahara Region**

Dr Carlos E. Pacheco Amaral[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **Introduction**

Portugal emerged as a modern sovereign state very early through a process of centralization of political power at the level of the crown. Nevertheless, the country opted for to the concept of autonomy in three major moments and contexts. Firstly, in the second half of the 19th century, following the final extension of the centralization of the Portuguese state to its Atlantic archipelagos and the reunion, there, in a singular agent of the Crown, of power that used to be dispersed among a plurality of agents, including the islands and the municipalities themselves. Secondly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it was proposed as a mechanism to transform the former African colonies into as many autonomous units of the Portuguese state. Thirdly, in the mid-1970s when, following the April Revolution of 1974, Portugal abandoned its authoritarian regime in change for what was, at first, a socialist democracy or, more precisely, a regime in transition to socialism, but has, from the very beginning, been definitively evolving into an outright liberal direction.

1. **Administrative Autonomy in the 19th Century**

 Autonomy first emerged as a demand of the Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira in response to the centralizing measures adopted in the 18th century by the Portuguese Crown under the leadership of its Secretary of State, the Marquis of Pombal.

The archipelago of Madeira encompasses two islands near to each other, Madeira and Porto Santo, the first with 740.7 km2 and the second with 42.5 km2, as well as two groups of islets, the Deserted and the Savage. It is an archipelago, yet the island of Madeira is home to 257,745 inhabitants and Porto Santo to 5,346, whereas the islets are for the most part uninhabited.

On the other hand, the archipelago of the Azores is made up of nine islands, all populated and widely scattered across the North Atlantic, stretching along 500 miles. So much so that the Easternmost Azorean island, Santa Maria, emerges from the African continental platform, whereas the six central islands, São Miguel, Terceira, São Jorge, Graciosa, Pico and Faial are in the Eurasian platform, and the two Westernmost islands, Flores and Corvo, are in the American platform. At present, the Azores is home to 241,763 inhabitants, of which 131,609 reside in the largest island, São Miguel, and 425 in the smallest, Corvo.

Both archipelagos are of volcanic origin and were uninhabited when discovered and settled by the Portuguese at the dawn of modernity within the framework of the country’s epopee of the Discoveries. Upon their finding, the islands became the property of Prince Henry the Navigator, who would then give them to one of his men to settle – in some cases the entire island, in others only part. It would be these men who would be responsible, first, to find settlers for the islands, which they ended up attracting mostly from the Portuguese mainland but also from overseas – mainly from Flanders, Brittany and North Africa –, and secondly, to effectively rule them. Moreover, preferring the national capital over life in the islands scattered across the Atlantic, these lords of the islands would further entrust both their settlement and their government to their captains, who would rule them in their name. This ended up meaning that, from their discovery and settlement in the 15th century until the centralizing reform of Pombal establishing a single political authority named by the Crown over each of them, the General Captain, both archipelagos were pretty much left to themselves, in oceanic isolation, and except for the collection of taxes and the military service, were self-ruling, real authority remaining in the islands themselves, mainly in the municipalities.

As was predictable, centralization by the Crown unclenched the first demands of the insular elites for autonomy in the 19th century: autonomy was demanded, grounded upon three major arguments.

Firstly, that although the archipelagos were settled by the Portuguese and the foreign contingents that came to the islands, because of their small size, were effectively diluted and integrated in the Portuguese majority, the specificities of the insular environments of the Azores and Madeira ended up leading, in a sort of neo-Darwinian fashion, to the emergence in each of the archipelagos, if not in each of the islands, of new peoples, with new identities, interests and cultures. Not radically new and different from the original Portuguese stock so as to raise them to the condition of nations in their own right, yet, sufficiently new and substantial to transform them into individuated entities, sub-nations, or incomplete nations, so to speak: thus the justification for autonomy, as a mid way between unitarian integration in the Portuguese state, on the one hand, and outright independence, on the other.

A second argument for autonomy presented a more ideological character. Isolated in the middle of the Atlantic, over the centuries, the Azores and Madeira are posited to have evolved into very specific social organic entities, which, accordingly, required an equally specific political regime, adequate to their reality. Unitary centralism could very well be an appropriate way to organize and govern the continental part of the country. Given the insular reality of the archipelagos, however, their good administration required a different type of political organization. It required autonomy.

A third and final argument grounded autonomy on the very national identity of the islanders. They were thoroughly Portuguese. Accordingly, they should be autonomous, not because they held, or developed an identity, or interests that differed from those of their mainland countrymen, but, precisely to the contrary, because they remained fully Portuguese. And, in order to remain Portuguese and to have access to the levels of quality of life enjoyed by their mainland countrymen, these new insular Portuguese required positive discrimination capable of counterbalancing and neutralizing the negative discrimination imposed upon them from the specificities of the insular environment on which they lived: the distance and isolation from the mainland, the small dimension of the islands, the lack of natural resources, the high cost of energy, the added difficulties and costs of transportation, health care, education, as well as the higher costs of basic imported goods.

A notion of identity emerged in the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira grounded upon a consciousness of the hardships and difficulties of insular life which were further aggravated by the neglect to which the islanders had been relegated by the central Lisbon government. It was a negative sense of identity, ensuing from neglect and expressing a feeling of inferiority, of being treated as instruments for the gratification of the interests of others, instead of being subjects, ends in themselves, and governed with a view towards the improvement of the quality of island life. Above all it is an identity that is grounded upon a feeling of being different, because of being neglected. It is an identity of resentment of Azoreans and Madeirans *vis-à-vis* their continental countrymen.

Accordingly, when demanding autonomy, the Azoreans and Madeirans were not aiming at less intervention from the state government, but more. They did not present themselves as being different from the inhabitants of the mainland. Neither did they defend that, because of some such difference, the political organization of the islands should be left to the islanders themselves. On the contrary, they demanded autonomy in search for greater, not less, intervention of the state in the islands. The islanders did not demand to be different and to live their difference as they wished, but to be equal to their continental countrymen. An autonomous political regime, different from that devised for the mainland, was required for the archipelagos, not to institutionalize Azorean and Madeiran differences, but, on the contrary, to overcome them.

It was under this kaleidoscope of arguments that on 2 March 1895, the Portuguese government, led by an Azorean, Hintze Ribeiro, adopted a decree granting administrative autonomy to the insular Districts of the Azores and Madeira that requested it by a two-third majority of the respective electors. Madeira, at the time was a single District, named after its capital, Funchal, while the Azores encompassed three Districts, Ponta Delgada, Angra do Heroísmo and Horta. Although staying far behind the proposals of the insular autonomists, the decree was greeted in most of the islands with expressions of joy, as the first step towards the institutionalization of a regime of autonomy for the Portuguese archipelagos in the Atlantic. In Madeira, the District of Funchal rapidly requested to become autonomous. In the Azores, the District of Ponta Delgada, encompassing the islands of São Miguel and Santa Maria, as well as the District of Angra do Heroísmo, gathering the islands of Terceira, São Jorge and Graciosa, also requested to become autonomous. On the other hand, the District of Horta, integrating the islands of Faial, Pico, Flores and Corvo, never requested it – ending up being forced to join the other islands and to become autonomous by a national law of 1938.

In material terms, this first autonomy was rather modest, translating into the adoption by each District of a General Board, entrusted with reduced competences, including the maintenance of roads, the promotion of commerce and of agricultural development, as well as the assurance of basic social services. To that effect, the autonomous General Boards of the Districts were trusted with some specific resources, including a small percentage of some national taxes. At any rate, being strictly administrative bodies, the General Boards needed the permission of the Lisbon national government to go ahead with the implementation of policies – as well, of course, as the transfer of the appropriate financial resources. Except for the most basic expenses, the General Boards depended entirely upon Lisbon. And, if autonomy knew a modest origin it would end up being fully emptied of content by the fascist regime of Salazar and Caetano, which, in the end, came very close to paralyzing the General Boards. The islands remained autonomous, and, as a matter of fact were entrusted with a growing number of competences, yet the national government would ensure the almost inaction of the General Boards by denying them meaningful financial resources and forcing them to depend upon the good will and the capacity of the respective insular populations to gather the resources appropriate to the tasks at hand. So much so that, during the latter part of the first half of the twentieth century, autonomy became a poisoned chalice. The national government would not act, because competences had been transferred to the autonomous General Boards; and these, in turn, were blocked from action in so far as they lacked the appropriate resources.

The end result was that, instead of being an instrument for progress and modernization, autonomy became, instead, an excuse for outright backwardness and underdevelopment of the islands.

1. **Autonomy for the African Colonies**

The idea of political autonomy would be rescued by the Portuguese national government on occasion of the 1971 revision of the Portuguese Constitution which, in its new article 5 read that “the Portuguese state is unitarian, although it may include autonomous regions endowed with a political and administrative organization adequate to their geographic situation as well as to the conditions of their respective social environment”. These “autonomous regions” were not the Azores or Madeira (they did not exist as such, but as Districts, already autonomous, for that effect), but all, or some of the former Portuguese colonies: Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Principe and Timor – the Indian territories had meanwhile been annexed by India.

Portugal’s request to join the United Nations dates from 1946. Originally vetoed by the Soviet Union, accession would only come a decade later, in 1955, as part of a package deal bringing to the UN 14 other countries, including allies of both sides of the Cold War. However, admission would quickly give place to unexpected difficulties to the Portuguese regime, particularly with regard to the principle of national self-determination and to the mechanisms foreseen in Chapter XI of the UN Charter regarding the administration of territories whose peoples had not yet reached self-determination. Portugal’s first response to UN requests on the matter was simply to affirm that it administered no such territories.

As pressured mounted within the UN against Portuguese colonialism, the country, first, insisted in the original response of denial. Afterwards, it changed gear and adopted legislation transforming its colonies into Overseas Provinces, which it then presented as being equal to those in which the mainland country was organized – except for geographic location, of course. Portugal, the regime underlined, was a multiracial unitarian country that extended itself from Minho, in the North of its continental European territory, to Timor, in the South Pacific.

Secondly, and as that did not prove sufficient to ease international pressure, Portugal resorted to the principle of autonomy intended as an alternative for self-determination and decolonization. Having legislatively transformed the colonies into Provinces, the notion was to grant them a regime of political autonomy mirroring the specific characteristics and identity that each of them presented within the overall context of the Portuguese nation-state which they were understood to fully integrate. This would enable Portugal to proclaim that it did not posses colonies or non-self-governing territories. Such a project was never fully implemented, as it ended up being overtaken by the Revolution of 1974, at which time the call for decolonization had become irresistible, both outside and inside the country. Curiously enough, the new Portuguese Constitution, ensuing from the democratization of the country, would take up the idea of Autonomous Regions, not for the former colonies, but for the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira, in exchange for their former organization in Districts with administrative autonomy.

1. **Administrative and Political Autonomy in the 20th Century**

The 1974 Revolution opened the way to the reorganization of the Portuguese state and, in the process, allowed the peoples of the Azores and Madeira to press for a regime of autonomy grounded upon three major innovations. Firstly, instead of merely administrative, it was to be political, inspired particularly in the experiences of the Italian autonomies as well as on those of the Channel Islands and of the Danish Faroe islands and Greenland. Secondly, rather than continuing to pit one island or one group of islands against the rest, the units of autonomy would no longer be the Districts, but each of the archipelagos instead. Finally, in lieu of taking the form of a governmental decree, as before, regional autonomy would be enshrined in the Constitution itself, and be understood as lying outside future revisions of that text.

Political autonomy was foreseen for the Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira, and established in the Constitution under its section VII, apart from the local authorities and the merely administrative regions foreseen for the mainland, and since then never implemented. Heavily contested by the more centralist and Jacobin sectors of Portugal’s political life, particularly by the parties to the left of centre of the political spectrum, it was championed by the centre-right parties, particularly the Social Democrats.

Autonomy ensued, at the start, from a bargain, made possible by the fact that the leadership of the two major national parties at the Assembly of the Republic charged with the drafting of the new Constitution for Portugal, the Socialist party and the Popular Democratic Party, later renamed Social Democratic Party, trusted the definition of the new regime of autonomy for the archipelagos, pretty much to the respective members of the national Parliament elected by the peoples of the Azores and of Madeira. So much so that during the work of the Constituent Assembly, it was an Azorean, Mota Amaral, who, for the most part, assuming the role of spokesman for the Popular Democratic Party, was the major promoter of the autonomous ideals. (He would later become the first president of the Azorean government, a position that he held for two successive decades, until retiring from regional politics). On the other side of the spectrum, the Communist party was its major rival and opponent, along with the other extreme left parties, and the then communist constitutionalist, Vital Moreira, was its leading antagonistic spokesmen. In the Socialist party, another Azorean autonomist, Jaime Gama, emerged on centre stage to play, in the name of his party, the key role of mediation and consensus building.

Furthermore, the bargain of autonomy was made possible against the background of dismemberment of the former colonial Portuguese state and the very real threat of secession of the archipelagos. In the process of emancipating its African colonies, Portugal risked losing the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira as well, in particular, given their geostrategic interest in the context of the Cold War. The large immigrant communities in the *new world*, in particular the large communities of Azoreans in the United States, who began to immigrate to that country in the 19th century in search of a better life emerged as key players in this process. In both archipelagos, the mainstream parties were committed to the Portuguese state in a regime of autonomy. Both of them, however, knew important separatist movements, with important international ramifications. In the Azorean case, in particular, the matter was openly discussed at the highest levels of the American political system. Promoted by the Azorean communities, and by members of the House of Representatives as well as of the Senate elected from their areas of residence, particularly in the North East coast and in California, the question of Azorean independence reached all the way to the White House during the summer of 1975. In the end, the cause of Azorean independence did not gather American support, only because of the assessment made by that country that its interests would be better served by a strict policy of neutrality, watchful and attentive. The substantial presence of the Azores, and of the question of its independence, in the archives of the Nixon and Ford Libraries, as well as in the diplomatic correspondence between Washington and its Embassy in Lisbon and Consulate in Ponta Delgada – some of which, the most interesting, one would imagine, remains classified – attests eloquently to the importance attached by the United States to the matter.

The exact relationship between the autonomists and the separatists – whose paths, in some cases, appear to have crisscrossed each other – is yet to be clearly determined. At least in the eyes of the defenders of the unitarian, centralist option, the autonomists risked being no less than a Trojan horse, separatists under disguise. And autonomy, in their eyes, was no more than an antechamber for outright secession. From the perspective of the separatists, on the other extreme, the autonomists ended up appearing as outright traitors to the cause. Regardless of the propriety of these judgments, the facts remains that a major bone of contention during the first part of the implementation of the autonomous regime was tied to identification of the limits of autonomy, i.e. the threshold beyond which the transfer of competences from the central government, in Lisbon, to the autonomous authorities of the Azores and Madeira could not be crossed, at the risk of the integrity of the Portuguese state as a whole.

On the other hand, the idea of regional autonomy harnessed tremendous popular support in both archipelagos, from the very start of the democratization of Portugal. So much so that it immediately became clear that to block it would be the clearest road to lose both archipelagos. They would, then, either become independent states in their own right, following the example of neighbouring Cape Verde, or integrate in some scheme or other another state, most conspicuously, the United States, and following the experience of Puerto Rico, for example. In such a context, autonomy became pretty much an irresistible project. Furthermore, as time went by, it became thoroughly consensual throughout Azorean and Madeiran society, and all political parties now proclaim themselves fully autonomists. Portugal does not have regional parties, which are forbidden by the Constitution, alongside fascist parties. The Azores and Madeira do, however, have more or less autonomous sections of the national parties.

Perceived as a compromise and grounded upon the geographical, economical, social and cultural characteristics and on the island populations’ historic aspirations, regional autonomy translated into, basically, a quadruple phenomenon: firstly, the identification of a specific interest of the archipelagos, separate and distinct from that of the mainland; secondly, the identification of those matters and competences in which that specific interest translated into; thirdly, the separation of those matters from the activity of the central organs of power of the Portuguese state, the Assembly of the Republic and the Government of the Republic; and fourthly, the creation of organs of power specific to each Region, a Legislative Assembly and a Government, which then were charged with the management and caring for those matters and competences understood as being of the regional interest.

Overall integration of the two regions within the Portuguese state was further assured at two levels. Firstly, in so far as they send representatives to the national Assembly of the Republic, for the election of which each region is an electoral circle. Secondly, given that each region integrates a variety of national organs of authority, including the Council of State and the Superior Council for National Defence and, at the European level, Portugal’s Permanent Mission to the EU.

Accordingly, in its title VII, the new Portuguese Constitution draws the general framework governing both the structure of the new autonomous regions and the competences that shall shape them, granting them also the right to draw their own Statutes. These are para-constitutional texts which, grounded upon the appropriate constitutional norms, define and specify the autonomous regions, their political and administrative organization, their competences and modes of operation, while establishing the overall mechanisms through which the future of each region is to be forged, from within – with due respect, of course, for the unity of the state and of its general interest. So much so that while the final approval of these Statutes remains a competence of the national Assembly of the Republic, the initiative, both for their adoption and for their alteration, lies exclusively with the Legislative Assemblies of each autonomous region.

Regional political and administrative autonomy also entails fiscal autonomy. Fiscal resources gathered in the regions are reserved to them, and, as these do not prove to be nearly sufficient to feed the social and economic development process of the islands, each region also has the capacity, within appropriate brackets, to adapt national taxation to its realities, both raising and lowering nationally defined taxes collected in its territory, and adopting new ones. Moreover, as these prove to be insufficient, a national Law of Regional Finances governs the transfer of resources from the national treasury to each of the autonomous regions. Needless to say that the major source of financing of both regions remains, unquestionably, the European Union.

Relations between the regional authorities and their national counterparts were originally meant to be channelled through a Minister of the Republic. Later revisions of the Portuguese Constitution have successively downgraded this position, in terms of both its political dignity and its competences. At present called Representative of the Republic, his major competences lie with the formal representation of the state in the region and with the regional legislative production. Legal norms adopted by the Regional Legislative Assembly require his signature. Upon receiving a diploma, the Representative of the Republic is faced with three basic options. He can sign it and send it for official publication. When in doubt, he can request verification by the Constitutional Court of its constitutionality. Finally, should he disagree with the norm adopted by the Regional Parliament he can veto it, expressing his motivations and requesting the norm be reconsidered. Should the Regional Parliament confirm its original vote by an absolute majority, the norm is sent, again to the Representative of the Republic who must sign it and have it published forthwith.

Accordingly, the regional organs of authority now develop direct relations with their national counterparts. Furthermore, from the very beginning, the Regions have been granted extensive competences, including the right to accede to international relations whenever matters of interest to them are at stake, both indirectly, through the addition of a regional representative to the national negotiation teams, and in certain cases directly, particularly when dealing with other regions and European organism of regional cooperation. This ended up translating, at the European level, into the formal channelling of regional affairs through the official organs of the Portuguese state, without hindering direct contacts between the appropriate regional and European authorities.

Moreover, although there are no regional electoral circles for the European election, as a rule, both major national parties include in their national lists candidates nominated by their respective regional sections in eligible positions. As a result, the Azores and Madeira have usually one, at times two members in the European Parliament within the national quota. And although the delegation to the Committee of the Regions is nationally defined, the Portuguese contingent always includes the Presidents of the Government of both autonomous regions.

In material terms, the Constitution, in its article 227, identifies the competences of the regions – running from alphabet letter a) to the letter x), which are then defined by each region in its statute of autonomy.

A full description of regional competences, as defined in the Statutes of autonomy, would be out of place here. Suffice it to say that they reach just about all sectors of contemporary life – either directly or indirectly. So much so that, with the notable exceptions of security, national defence and justice, one would be hard pressed to find a single sector of contemporary life that is entirely beyond regional reach – if not in terms of final deliberation, at least in terms of discussion and participation.

Direct competences of the regions include such sectors as agriculture; fisheries and marine resources; trade, industry and energy; tourism; infrastructures; transports and communications; the environment and regional planning; solidarity and social security; health, family and migration; labour and professional training; education and youth; culture and the media; research and technological innovation; sports; public safety and civil protection; as well as other matters including the regional symbols, hymn and flag, regional holydays, the creation of the regional ombudsmen, the adoption of supplementary payment for regional civil servants and agents, the holding of regional referenda, citizens legislative and referenda initiatives as well as foreign investment and the adoption of incentives to investment.

Indirect competences are even broader, as the Statutes open the way for the participation of the regional authorities in the national decision making bodies dealing with matters that may be of interest to them, both domestically and internationally. They include the right of the regions to participate in the drafting of national plans; the definition and implementation of fiscal, monetary, financial and currency exchange policies; the definition of policies regarding inland waters, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf adjacent to the archipelagos; the definition of the positions of the Portuguese state within the European Union in matters of interest to the regions; in the negotiation of international treaties and agreements that have directly to do with the region and to administer the benefits forthcoming from such treaties and agreements; in the European construction process, through representation in the respective regional bodies and in the delegations involved in community decision making whenever matters of regional interest are at stake.

With such a broad spectrum of competences, regional autonomy in both the Azores and Madeira does, however, suffer a double Achilles’ heel. Firstly, in the fact that, although proclaiming and adopting such principles as subsidiarity and political autonomy, Portugal continues to present itself as a thoroughly unitarian sovereign state, which has historically lead to the blocking of regional legislative by the Constitutional Court, even when dealing with matters identified by the Constitution and the Statute of autonomy as falling within regional competence. Secondly, the reduced economic productivity and the correlatively scanty fiscal resources generated in each of the regions leads to a marked dependence of both regions on outside, national and European solidarity. In these times of crisis this has lead to the adoption of memoranda of understanding signed between the national and the regional governments regulating levels of expenditure – far more onerous to the autonomous region of Madeira than to the Azores, it should be noted, given the historical levels of borrowing and expenditure of the two regions.

1. **Autonomy: Evolution and Social and Economic Development**

Regional autonomy of the Azores and Madeira translates a political vision, a Portuguese vision of Azoreans and Madeirans, while carrying an important social, cultural and economic dimension.

On the one hand, the demand for autonomy ensues from a strong notion among the peoples of the two archipelagos of a solid identity which, within the framework of national Portuguese identity, is specific to them. That identity lies at the roots of a specific Azorean and Madeiran culture and literature – particularly in the case of the Azores – which autonomy is expected, not only to protect, but also to foster. Just as in the Aaland Islands, the Swedish language and culture of the population justified autonomy within the context of the Finish state, so too the specific identity and culture of Azoreans and Madeirans is understood as grounds for the regional autonomy of both archipelagos.

On the other hand, autonomy emerges as an instrument for the social and economic development of the islands which, under the previous Portuguese authoritarian regime, had been thoroughly neglected. So much so that the Portuguese Constitution clearly includes the social and economic development of the Azores and Madeira among the major grounds justifying the adoption of a regime of political and administrative autonomy for the two archipelagos, starting in its article 225, which opens the chapter on regional autonomy. Moreover, its article 227, number 1, paragraph p) goes on to endow each region with the capacity to adopt its own economic and social development plans, as well as a regional budget and accounts. And finally, it is to that effect that each region is endowed with its own proper fiscal resources – as discussed earlier.

These constitutional principles are further developed in the autonomous Statute of each region. In true parliamentarian fashion, both in the Azores and in Madeira, the regional executive is charged with the drafting of a plan for economic development, which is then submitted to the regional parliament for approval. Cf. articles 34 and 88 of the Azorean Statute and articles 36 and 69 of that of Madeira.

Accordingly, the Azores and Madeira, each have annual and multiannual development plans, and budgets. And whereas the political evaluation of these plans takes place at the regional assembly of each region, the evaluation of the respective account is a responsibility of the regional section of the national audit office installed in each region.

The political responsibility for these plans falls entirely upon each region which, within the basic values that shape the Portuguese state (democracy, human rights, rule of law…) freely adopts its plan, conditioned only by the results of the regional elections and the relative strength of the political parties represented in the regional assembly. And, it is common to have different political majorities in the three Portuguese parliaments, national, Azorean and Madeiran, each with its own democratic legitimacy ensuing from the appropriate legislative elections, and, therefore, neither is it uncommon to find equally different executives.

This however, does not translate into a disinvestment of the Portuguese state regarding the social and economic development of each region. Regional social and economic development in the very terms of the Statutes of Autonomy of the Azores and Madeira remains a specific responsibility of each Region. So much so that article 229, nº 1, of the Portuguese Constitution entrusts the national, central, organs of power with the task of ensuring the economic and social development of the regions, particularly within the context of the correction of the inequalities derived from their insular condition and from the backwardness they presented due to the oblivion to which they were devoted in the past.

It becomes therefore clear that although with the new democratic Portuguese Constitution and the Statutes of Autonomy of the Azores and Madeira social and economic development of both archipelagos becomes an autonomous responsibility of each of them, it does not, in any way, stop being a responsibility of the state – and of the European Union, for that matter. To the contrary, it remains, very much, a subsidiary responsibility of both. Just as national development is also a responsibility of the regions. That is why, the same constitutional norm that grants the autonomous regions the right to adopt their own development plans, also assures them the right to take part in drawing the national plans.

Insofar as the regions are not capable of gathering the appropriate resources to feed their social and economic development, the central organs of power have the obligation intervene and assure them – and, in subsidiary fashion, so does the European Union. In parallel, when the regions are unable to assume their own social and economic development plans, the national, in final instance, the European, authorities assume the subsidiary obligation to step in. A prime example is the Joint Declaration attached to the Treaty of Accession of Portugal to the then European Communities, where the parties to the Treaty call upon the European Commission to pay particular attention to the socio­‑economic development of the Azores and Madeira as well as to develop specific programs designed to address the developmental requirements of both regions.

Both the drafting, by the regional governments, and the final adoption, by the regional legislative assemblies, of each region’s annual and multiannual development plans is preceded by ample consultations of the relevant regional social partners, including the labour unions, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the professional, social and cultural associations, the Municipalities and the University installed in each of them. In each region, consultation is restricted to its territory and agents, without prejudice, of course, to auscultation by the region of the personalities, associations and institutions, national or otherwise, it chooses to hear.

The choice of a development model is the free responsibility of each region. Furthermore, to feed its development planning each region counts with its own fiscal resources, which include taxes levied in the region, as well as the resources received under the national law of regional finances which annually channels to each region important funding with which each region can proceed with its development plan – not to mention the resources channelled to them from the European Union, starting even before accession itself.

A few figures will suffice to illustrate this reality. In 1989, financial transfers from the outside – from both the central government and Europe, represented no less than 27% of the Azorean budget. By 2012, that figure reached 34%. Furthermore, during this period, transfers oscillated between 18%, in 1993, and 37%, in 2011, of the total “proper resources” of the Region. The Autonomous Region of Madeira, knew smaller figures – due to the different “costs of insularity” given the archipelagic nature of the Azores as well as the added requirements of its islands. In 1989, transfers represented 15% of the regional budget, whereas in 2012 they represented 16%, oscillating, throughout that period, between 9%, in 1990, and 35%, in 2004.

Major regional options lie with grounding the regional development plans on the respective specific characteristics and potentials of each region among which stand out tourism and, in the case of the Azores, dairy production, whereas in the case of Madeira, the Free Zone has been a major bet in developmental terms. Under these programmes, both the Azores and Madeira have taken important strides in approaching the national and European averages.

The Gross Domestic Product of both the Azores and Madeira has remained has remained pretty much stable. In the case of the Azores, regional GDP represented 2.92% of the national product, whereas in 2012 it had dropped to 2.16%. In the case of Madeira, it grew from 1.74%, in 1989 to 2.91, in 2012. Envisaged in relation the respective population, the Azorean product, in 1995, stood at 81% of the national average and at 62% of the European average. In the case of Madeira, the figures are higher. In that same year, the regional product was 85% of the national average and 66% of the European average. By 2012, the last year there are statistics available, these figures had changed significantly rising, in the case of the Azores, to 94% of the national average and to 71% of the European average, and, even more impressively, in the case of Madeira, to 125% of the national average and to 95% of the European average.

In the mid-20th century, the proposal of autonomy for the former colonies originated at the national government, and represented a final attempt of the Portuguese authoritarian regime to overcome the pressures put upon it in the United Nations and to assure the integrity of the country, as it was then perceived. The former colonies did not request autonomy: instead, they were fighting for independence. On the contrary, in the case of the Azores and Madeira, regional political autonomy was both a demand and a conquest of the two regions, a conquest that would ensue from a conjugation of factors.

Firstly, the need to completely reshape the state structure, replacing the former corporative authoritarian state with a democratic one provided the opportunity for autonomy.

Secondly, the conjugated effect of a weak central authority (weak, unstable and in ebullition, in those “hot days” that followed the 1974 Revolution), of strong and organized regional elites with substantial power within the context of the major national political parties culminated in a circumstance where the islanders ended up playing a determinant role in the definition, at the Constituent Assembly charged with the drafting of the new Constitution for Portugal, of the regime of regional political and administrative autonomy to be enjoyed by the Azores and Madeira.

Autonomy itself has been understood, from the very start as an evolving concept. Throughout the years, it has been the subject of a plurality of adjectives. Both the original discussions and the historical record, however, underline that autonomy was never understood as a static response. Instead, the regime adopted at the 1976 national Constitution and the ensuing regional Statutes of autonomy, has been subject to systematic evolution. So much so that just about each of the 7 revisions of the 1976 Constitution have translated in the consolidation of regional political autonomy and in the enlargement of its scope, including the regional competences. The end result is that, at present, with the exception of national security, defence, and justice, one would be hard pressed to find a single sector of life where the autonomous regions are barred to intervene.

In both the Azores and Madeira the option for regional political and administrative autonomy rapidly won broad support among the insular populations in the immediate aftermath of the 1974 Revolution, particularly given the Portuguese identity of the islanders themselves. As a matter of fact, one could even argue that a major fuel for the separatist movements that emerged at the time in both archipelagos, was precisely the thorough Portuguese identity of both Azoreans and Madeirans, in so far as a major source for separatism was the anti-communism of the populations. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, Portugal risked becoming a communist country – the Cuba of Europe – as some would call it. In this context, separatism meant that should the Portuguese mainland be lost to communism, the Azores and Madeira would not. Portugal would survive in its Atlantic archipelagos. This Portuguese identity of the insular populations, is paradigmatically identified in the Azores a region that is so thoroughly Portuguese that, in the country modern history it has produced no less than two Presidents of the Republic, including the very first, two Presidents of the Assembly of the Republic, in the post-revolution period alone, two of the major Portuguese cultural and literary figures of the 20th century, the major Portuguese philosopher of all times, the leading Portuguese symbolist poet, as well as highly distinguished personalities in just about all sectors of life, from the military, to science, the arts and religion.

In a nutshell, it could be argued that separatism, in the mid-1970s, was no less than an affirmation of Portuguese nationality. Accordingly, as soon as the communist threat was neutralized, and an effective political autonomy was assured, it was only natural that the separatist movements pretty much withered away.

Portuguese political elites have been thoroughly divided between a centralist “Jacobinism”, predating the French Revolution itself, and, continuing with the same categories, a “Girondist” faction attentive and respectful of regional and, in the mainland, particularly, municipalist freedoms and autonomy. This is a cleavage that cuts across the major political parties. Moreover, although Portugal does not have a Christian Democratic party *per se*, the autonomist, personalist and universalist dimensions of Christian democracy found their way into, basically the three parties of the “government arch”, as they are commonly called, the Socialist party, the Social Democratic party and the Social Democratic Centre, Popular party. Welcome by some, exorcized by others, regional political autonomy was adopted in 1976 amidst major demand from the insular populations, and fears from the national political elites, particularly regarding its limits. Fears, particularly verbalized by the left parties, that autonomy was no more than a Trojan horse, a first step towards outright secession.

Autonomy first translated, into the separation of those competences relative to matters of direct interest to the regions from the national, central, authorities; separation and transference to the regional counterparts. In such a paradigm, the Constitution and the Statutes adopted lists of competences: of those competences transferred to the regions and of those in which the regions could share competence with the central authorities, whereas they would be barred from acting on the rest. With time, however, and particularly under the impact of European integration, this cleavage began to erode, and fast, being replaced by the emerging requirement of an outright partnership between regional, national and European authorities in just about all domains of contemporary life, and including those that had been transferred to the regions: from agriculture and fisheries to health, education and the economy.

This new reality, on the one hand contributed to the overcoming of former secessionist ghosts, while, on the other hand, requires renewed attention to the fundamental principle of subsidiarity for the assessment of the role of each tier of power in the definition and implementation of political life: from the European Union, at the top, to the regions and municipalities, at the bottom.

One of the innovations of the 1976 Portuguese Constitution regarding regional political autonomy has to do with the assignment to each region of the right to accede to international relations – firstly only indirectly, through the national Portuguese delegations, afterwards also directly.

As underlined earlier, each region has the right to participate in the negotiations – and in the benefits – of the international treaties signed by Portugal on matters that are of their interest. A few examples of this can be briefly identified. The Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship signed by Portugal with the United States, from which ensued the establishment of US forces in a military base in the Azorean island of Terceira is one of them. The region not only participates in the negotiation and management of the Treaty, when it produced direct transfers to Portugal, namely in terms of military and economic assistance, a part of these transfers was directly earmarked for the Azores, in terms of compensation and assistance to its development process, 40 billion US dollars annually – which terminated in 1995. The Portuguese-French Agreement regarding the base in another Azorean island, Flores, is another example. The Azores not only participated actively in the definition and management of the Portuguese-French Agreement, the region also received important compensations, namely in monetary terms, but mostly in terms of French financing of initiatives with evident impact in the economic development of the island including energy production and distribution, road construction and maintenance and health care. As a third example, one could point to the participation of an Azorean representative in the latter phase of the UN negotiations on the Law of the Sea integrated in the national Portuguese delegation.

A final example is the very process of European integration, which was an objective choice of the regions. Whereas, in the past, other regions chose to remain outside Europe, namely the English and Danish islands following the first enlargement, the Portuguese archipelagos opted for full integration. With time, regional autonomy ended up entailing the right to participate in the process of European integration, namely at two levels: first, through the accession and effective participation in the various organisms of regional cooperation, as well as in the Committee of the Regions; secondly, through the recognition of the right of each region to develop relations and to enter into agreements with other regions, from the EU and from third countries – including the States of the United States and the Canadian and Brazilian Provinces.

Among other foreign policy prerogatives, stand out the right of each region to send a representative to the national Portuguese Permanent Representation to the EU. At another level, the Treaty of Lisbon opened to the autonomous regions two additional important prerogatives. On the one hand the right of the Regional Assemblies to participate in the European legislative process alongside the national Parliament within the context of the verification of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. And, on the other hand, the prerogative, dully adopted nationally, of each region to assure autonomously the transposition, within its territory, of European Directives.

In the relations between the regional and central organs of authority the Representative of the Republic plays a scanty role – contrary to his predecessor, the Minister of the Republic. The Representative of the Republic is mostly a protocol figure – with the notable exception of his veto prerogative, which the regional parliament can overturn, as well as his competence to evoke the verification, by the Constitutional Court, of the constitutionality of the norms adopted by the region.

Both the Azores and Madeira invested in the Council of Europe and its Conference, now Congress, of Regional and Local Authorities, from the very start, and even before accession to the then European Communities. As a matter of fact, the work developed by them there, would prove precious when transposed to the European Union, particularly within the context of the adoption, by the Communities, of specific measures, policies and financing schemes for them – as well as other regions sharing their characteristics and requirements: the Outermost Regions of Europe, as they would be known following the Maastricht Treaty. This goes to say that both at the general level of the Council of Europe, and at the specific level of its Venice Commission, regional autonomy for the Azores and Madeira cannot be understood except as an outright success story.

**6. The Portuguese Experience with Regional Autonomy and the Moroccan Proposal for the Sahara Region: a Draft Comparison**

In broad strokes, a confrontation of the Portuguese experience with regional and administrative autonomy, outlined above, with the present Moroccan initiative regarding the adoption of a statute of autonomy for the Sahara Region leads to the following appreciations, organized in two parts: the first, offering a few general considerations, and the second, a specific appreciation of concrete aspects of the proposal.

**6.1 A General Overview**

**6.1.1 Autonomy vs. Sovereignty**

In a world strictly of sovereign states, autonomy translates clearly into less than self-determination, expressing instead a partial sovereignty, i.e. a share of political power in a few strictly delimitated domains which are detached from the central authorities in order to be consigned to the new autonomous counterparts. That is what happened in the Aaland islands following the World War I, and that is also what we encounter at the origin of the generality of European autonomous experience including the Italian and Danish regionalization following World War II, and the Portuguese experience following that country’s transition to democracy.

The world we live in, however, has meanwhile changed significantly. And State sovereignty, as proposed by Jean Bodin at the dawn of modernity, has meanwhile become unrecognizable. Particularly under the consolidated and parallel effects, on the one hand, of globalization and European political integration and, on the other hand, of the erosion of sovereignty, dictated by these phenomena, autonomy has also acquired new meaning and substance. In a nutshell, particularly since the mid-1980s and early 1990s, regional autonomy, instead of an instrument of separation became an instrument of integration, and good organization of the state, opening the way for the consolidation of the regional interests with the national and European units which the autonomous regions integrate. Accordingly, autonomy further allows the regions, often alongside states, effective access and participation in the national, European and international political entities they integrate. In a world where decision making over just about every sector of life, instead of being assured at the state level, transcends it, taking place, instead, at the European and international levels, autonomy becomes a precious added value in so far as it allows the regions effective access, through their respective states, to European and international forums *–* as well as to financial resources –to which they would otherwise hardly have access to.

In the Portuguese case, the Azorean and Madeiran experience can be compared with regional political and administrative autonomy with the option for independence of Cape Verde, São Tomé and Principe and, finally, East Timor. Both in terms of social and economic development and in terms of *de facto* political self-determination, notwithstanding the fact that the latter are sovereign states and the former are “mere” regions of Portugal, it would appear, judging from the historical record, that “autonomy” has been clearly more helpful for the construction of modern and free societies as well as to their social and economic development than “independence”. The experience, for example, of the Azores, on the one hand, and of Cape Verde, on the other, assumes, in this context, a particularly interesting relevance. In 1975, the two archipelagos shared similar characteristics within the Portuguese state, including similar levels of socio-economic development. At that time, each took its separate road, the former opting for autonomy within the Portuguese state, the latter choosing sovereign independence. Today, the two archipelagos present markedly different realities, even if autonomy is not the single explanation for Azorean progress – which has clearly been substantially catapulted by European integration.

Similar considerations remain, no doubt, at the heart of the continued integration in a plurality of European states, notably France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, of a series of more or less autonomous territories scattered across the entire planet. It might be worthy to look at the Moroccan initiative against such a background.

**6.1.2 Taking Subsidiarity Seriously**

In substance, autonomy presents a willingness to share a common life, and subsidiarity is a technique for the distribution of tasks and responsibilities. Accordingly, subsidiarity presents a double dimension: negative and positive. Whereas in its negative dimension it entails the right of a community to lead its life according to its free will, in its positive dimension, it points to the joint responsibility of all parts of overall political community over the quality of life of all of its members. This means that while, in its negative dimension, subsidiarity points to the autonomy of the region which, therefore, must be free to choose its ways, in its positive dimension it entails a double responsibility. Firstly, the responsibility of the central authorities to intervene in the autonomous region, assuring it instruments with which to implement the policies it chooses – should they not posses sufficient resources of their own. Secondly, the equal responsibility of the autonomous regions to share in the burdens of the whole and, whenever appropriate, to contribute to the general effort of the central authorities. The study of the Portuguese and European experiences, leads to the conclusion that whenever this double dimension of subsidiarity is not both understood and assumed, then autonomy is seriously at risk. In one extreme, when the region requires assistance from the centre and that assistance is not forthcoming, than autonomy becomes little more than a sham, as the Portuguese experience in the first half of the 20th century clearly demonstrates. In this context, instead of being an instrument for progress, autonomy becomes a guarantee of underdevelopment. At the other extreme, however, the absence, from the part of the autonomous region, of a willingness to share its resources and to express solidarity with the rest of the country, entails a correlative peril to autonomy, insofar as it leads directly to its denial, as recent Flanders, Scotland and Catalonia demands seem to threaten

**6.2. Specific Considerations and Comparisons**

In the light of the Portuguese and European experiences regarding regional political autonomy, an analysis of the proposal forwarded by the Moroccan government leads to the following considerations.

1. An analysis of territorial autonomies highlights similarities and differences across concrete cases, depending upon a variety of dimensions including geography, history, language, culture, political context, social and economic development, etc. And that is obviously the case of the Portuguese insular autonomies and the Sahara region.
2. The political organization of a territory is never a simple matter. So too with regimes of autonomy, which evidence a wide range of possibilities, sometimes even within the same country, as in the case of Portugal, as we attempted to present. The interest of autonomy lies in the essential fact that it allows for the conciliation of freedom with integration, of self-rule with shared government. In the case at hand, the Moroccan proposal of autonomy does emerge as an interesting formula with regard to the guarantee of that basic *desideratum* – as is the Portuguese regime of political and administrative autonomy for the Azores and Madeira. In both cases, we encounter a will of both states to adopt an asymmetric organization, recognizing that the specific cultural, economic and social characteristics of parcels of their territory, as well as the historical aspirations of the respective populations – to resort to the very vocabulary with which, since the 19th century, autonomy is justified in Portugal and inscribed in the Constitution itself – require differentiated treatment and a political regime that is equally specific.
3. The political autonomy of the Azores and Madeira is not grounded upon a different ethnicity. The Azoreans and Madeirans are fully Portuguese – even if of a specific type, and with specificities that are geographical, but are also cultural as well. It is, precisely because they are Portuguese that autonomy was adopted as an alternative to independence. Adopting a similar approach, if given a chance, the present proposal for autonomy could be prove to be an instrument, without prejudice to national identity and within the framework of the Moroccan Constitution, to allow for the preservation and care of the Saharawi identity, and interests.
4. In Portugal, as in the present proposal, far from being a threat to the integrity of the state, autonomy is an instrument for its guarantee. In the Portuguese case, it may be important to underline that autonomy has also played a fundamental role in the strengthening of the bonds of solidarity among all Portuguese – both mainlanders and islanders. This is achieved through the conditioning of all political power, both of the central and the autonomous authorities to a single Constitution – as well as to the consolidation of the interests and resources of all partners: regions and mainland.
5. The capacity of the Regional Parliament to adopt policy for the region regarding those matters that are entrusted to its competence and to frame it as law, without hierarchical subordination to that adopted by the national Parliament appears to be an aspect deserving attention. The legislative capacity of Parliament , subject only to the national Constitution is a major aspect of both the Portuguese and the European experience with regional autonomy, and a key aspect for the identification of the region as a political entity in its own right. The Portuguese Constitution assigns a broad range of legislative and executive competences to the regions. In Portugal, however, the general legislative competence remains with the Assembly of the Republic. Establishing legislative and executive autonomy, granting general legislative competence to the Sahara Region and foreseeing an autonomous regional judiciary, the Moroccan proposal goes beyond the Portuguese regime of insular regional political and administrative autonomy.
6. Historically, in Portugal, the financial autonomy of the regions – as well, previously, as of the Districts – appears to be another aspect deserving close consideration. In Portugal, it was a major bone of contention requiring an exact definition of the fiscal resources of the regions, including those raised within them as well as those to be transferred to them. In this contexts, the text of the proposal, paragraph 13, appears exceedingly broad and to require a more precise identification. Throughout the 20th century, the assignment of competences to the Districts by the central authorities, without the correlative transfer of the resources appropriate to implement them, led, as a matter of fact, to the impoverishment of the Portuguese islands and to the degradation of autonomy. It would appear advisable to foresee a mechanism assuring that that is not the case in the Moroccan proposal. A fundamental aspect, in this context, is the double dimension of subsidiarity referred to above and its transposition to concrete reality at the level of the financial resources allocated to the region as well as to the contribution of the region to the overall financing of the central authorities of the state.
7. Both the Portuguese experience and the Moroccan proposal rely on the fundamental principle of subsidiarity and it is important that it be given concrete expression, particularly in the drafting of the Statute where the material competences of the regions will be defined.
8. Particularly in the light of the Portuguese experience, the distribution of competences between the central authorities and the region requires careful attention. A close look at paragraphs 12 and 14, identifying, first, the competences proposed for the region and, second, those proposed to the central authorities of the state highlights this preoccupation. In the Portuguese experience, this has been a major source of conflict, in concrete insofar as the Portuguese Constitution insists in describing Portugal as a unitary state. Paragraph 16, it is true, stipulates that all matters not identified in either paragraph 12 and 14 will be a joint responsibility of both tiers and exercised by common agreement according to the principle of subsidiarity. That however would appear to require refinement, as well as the identification of basic mechanisms through which regional and central authorities may handle them together. In the Portuguese experience, particularly under the conjoined impact of globalization and European integration, the sharing of competences has increasingly become the norm.
9. In the Portuguese experience, the matter of regional symbols – flag and anthem – proved to be rather contentious. The solution adopted was the right of the regions to adopt their own flags, and to use them publicly, alongside their national counterparts; flags and the various other symbols, like anthem, the Day of the Region and regional commendations. The recognition of these symbols at the state level, although very sensitive, at times, assumed, in the Portuguese case, high political relevance in the Azores and in Madeira – a point that may be useful for the Moroccan proposal to take into account.
10. External relations, in paragraph 15, constitutes another important domain worthy of attention. Increasingly, European autonomous regions, including the Portuguese ones, have gained access to external relations to the point where some, like the Belgian Regions and the Spanish autonomous communities, for example, are close to developing a foreign policy of their own and to scatter representations across the major capitals. In this context, and taking in particular the Portuguese experience, it would appear useful to establish a cleavage between relations with, on the one hand, sovereign states and international organizations and, on the other hand, relations with non-state entities such as other regions, in particular. Broadly presented, the Portuguese experience is to foresee the right of the regions to accede to the former through a double means: firstly, by consecrating the right of the region to be heard and to participate in the negotiations integrating the national negotiation delegations. It was under such a scheme, for example, that the autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira participated in the negotiations of the accession of Portugal to the then European Communities, or that the Azores participates in the negotiations with the United States regarding the base at Lajes. With regard to the second category – relations with other regions – the Portuguese experience is to allow for direct negotiations by the Azores and Madeira, including the signing of agreements.
11. Throughout the Portuguese experience, and particularly in the early years, relations between the central and regional authorities constituted another important and contentious aspect. In this context, it appears important to clarify the role and competences of the Representative of the Government, identified in paragraph 16, particularly as paragraph 20 identifies the head of the regional government as the representative of the Moroccan state in the region. The original notion was for, in the Portuguese case, the Minister of the Republic, to be the vehicle for relations between the two tiers of government, regional and central. Yet, with time, these ended up unfolding directly, with no need for any intermediary. Correlatively, the competences of the Portuguese Ministries regarding those matters that had not been transferred to the regions ended up being handled directly by the respective ministries in Lisbon – particularly for Justice and National Defence. It would not be an overstatement to say that in the Portuguese experience this has been one of the more sensitive problems of regional autonomy, yet to be settled satisfactorily. The trend has been the downgrading of the post, both in competences and in dignity. And there are growing calls for its elimination altogether.
12. In face of the Portuguese experience, it would appear to be very important to foresee a mechanism for the settlement of disputes between central and regional tiers of government, including the conformity of regional action to the Constitution and the statute of autonomy. In the Portuguese experience, that task is entrusted to the Constitutional Court. In other cases, it is the responsibility of a joint committee nominated by the central and regional authorities.
13. A fundamental aspect of the Portuguese experience has to do with the protection awarded to regional autonomy. Firstly, the structural framework of regional autonomy is included in the national Constitution, and is expressly protected from future Constitutional revisions. Secondly, the Statute of autonomy of each region is approved by the Assembly of the Republic, but only upon proposal by the respective Regional Legislative Assembly. Moreover, revisions of the regional Statutes of autonomy are too approved by the Assembly of the Republic, yet the initiative regarding a process of revision remains exclusively with the Legislative Assembly of the region concerned. So much so that until the Regional Legislative Assembly presents a proposal to change the Statute of the respective region, the Assembly of the Republic cannot take up the matter. Although the very first protection is foreseen in the Moroccan proposal, the others are not.
14. In Portugal, an important aspect of the success of regional autonomy has to do with the feeling that it was not bestowed upon the regions, but conquered by them. The exact constitutional framework of autonomy was framed in the Assembly of the Republic at the time of the drafting of the Portuguese Constitution. Yet, that exercise not only counted on the involvement of the insular political leaders, it was, for the most part, led by them. Afterwards, the initiative for the presentation of the Statute of Autonomy of each region was left to its Parliament. This turned out to be fundamental for the development of a feeling among the insular populations of both regions that autonomy was something that was theirs, that belonged to them. Looking at the Portuguese and European experience, one can say that autonomy functions when there is a will for it to function. When both the central leadership and the regional leadership want it to function. So much so that, in the absence of such a will – as evidenced by the recent Flemish, Scottish, and Catalan problems – autonomy may have little or no chance to succeed.
15. In Portugal, Azorean and Madeiran regional autonomy was never subject to a referendum. And, oddly enough, when a referendum was held at the national level, regarding the regionalization of the Portuguese mainland it was marked by a very low popular turnout, under 50% and those who took part voted consistently against the establishment of regions. In the Moroccan case, a consultation could be a precious instrument for the development of a will to autonomy.
16. The Portuguese Constitution identifies the social and economic development of the Azores and Madeira as one of the fundamental objectives of autonomy – alongside with the democratic participation of citizens in political life, the promotion and defence of regional interests, as well as the strengthening of national unity and of the bonds of solidarity between all Portuguese (article 225, nº 2). These fundamental goals appear to be shared by the Moroccan proposal.
17. A final aspect that deserves to be underlined refers to the participation of the regional authorities in the central organs of power of the state. In Portugal, the fact that besides sending members to the national Parliament, the regions participate, as such, in a variety of central organisms has been very important in underlining the Portuguese identity and nationality of both Azoreans and Madeirans. In this context, the participation of the Regions in such organs as the Council of State, the Superior Council of National Defence and the Permanent Mission of Portugal to the European Union can be highlighted, for example. Knowing but two autonomous regions, Portugal did not proceed to the creation of organs for the regular meeting and cooperation of central and regional authorities. Those contacts, however, do indeed occur among central and regional departments, for sharing of information and consultation. These are aspects that, following a comparative exercise, the Moroccan proposal may perhaps consider.
18. **Conclusions**

In conclusion, regional political and administrative autonomy of the Azores and Madeira became a reality out of a double act of will: of the Azoreans and Madeirans, and of the Portuguese national leadership. Just as it was made not viable in the former colonies, because it was not wanted there, and the respective peoples wanted independence, not autonomy, so too, its viability in the case of the Atlantic archipelagos ensued from the fact that it was a free choice and corresponded to the will of Azoreans and Madeirans. In this context, and as the Constitution aptly underlines, more than accepted by the insular populations, autonomy corresponds to their historic aspirations.

In broad strokes, it would hardly be an overstatement to say that regional political and administrative autonomy has translated into an outright success story for the Azores and Madeira. During the last three decades the regional autonomous authorities of both regions have been able to transfigure the faces of the respective islands as well as the lives of the islanders. Up to the middle of the 20th century, isolated and pretty much left to their own resources, both archipelagos were victims of levels of underdevelopment outright appalling to contemporary eyes: in their economic activities, their transportation networks, the education, health and life expectancy of their citizens and in overall quality of life. Today, the islands are unrecognizable. Under autonomy it has been possible to catapult them to modernity and to fully integrate them in the European Union, as equal partners.

On the other hand, the struggle for autonomy to which both regions remain committed, has reached such levels of success as to command a universal consensus, both upon the insular populations and upon their political leaderships. So much so that the secessionist movements of the mid-1970s have pretty much disappeared and most, if not all, of the original suspicions of autonomy have withered away. Instead, whereas it originated as a mechanism to assure the separation of competences from the national authorities in order to transfer them to the respective regional counterparts, autonomy has quickly evolved in a double direction.

Firstly, autonomy has become synonymous of democratization and of democratic participation of the citizens in the definition of their own destinies.

Secondly, and in the apt wording of the Constitution, it has proved fundamental in the strengthening of national unity and of the bonds of solidarity between all Portuguese. Instead of separating the interests of the Azores and of Madeira from those of the remaining Portuguese – as, by the way, the administrative autonomy of the 19th century appears to have done –, the new political autonomy of the 20th century has been instrumental, instead, to the consolidation of the national with the regional interests and to the cooptation of both regional and national authorities to work together with their European counterparts in the promotion of the quality of life for all Portuguese citizens.

1. Holder of the Jean-Monnet Chair, University of the Azores, Portugal. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)