

Self-Determining Greenland: A Primer

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In 2019, President Donald Trump of the United States first floated the idea to acquire the island nation of Greenland.¹ On January 7, 2025, then President-elect Trump once again insisted that the United States needs to annex Greenland, either through purchase or military force.² The voices and perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples of Greenland, as well as information about their political, cultural, and economic situation, are critical to understanding the topic.

Indigenous Peoples of Kalaallit Nunaat

Greenland, or Kalaallit Nunaat, has been as a self-governing country within the Kingdom of Denmark since 1979. As of 2022, roughly 88.9% of the population is Greenlandic Inuit, with the majority referring to themselves as Kalaallit (Kalaaleq in singular). The Kalaallit consist of three major groups: the Kalaallit of West Greenland, who speak Kalaallisut (west Greenlandic); the Iivit of Kangia (East Greenland), who speak Iivi oraasia (east Greenlandic) and the Inughuit in Avanersuaq near Thule who speak Inuktun (north Greenlandic). Kalaallisut is the official language, which the majority of people speak, while the second official language of the country is Danish. The economy includes subsistence hunting, commercial fisheries, tourism, and emerging efforts to develop the mining industry.³

Kalaallit Nunaat voted in favor of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007 and Danish governments have committed to its implementation. The Kingdom of Denmark ratified ILO Convention 169 in 1996 and is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Land Rights and Sovereignty

There is no privately-owned land in Kalaallit Nunaat. Land is collectively owned to ensure traditional subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering. The right to participate in the utilization of resources is rooted in the membership of a local community. There are two types of rights: 1) the general territorial right, which is collectively utilized by a settlement, and 2) the individual preferential right or right of use to e.g. a special fishing spot or similar that could be acquired through inheritance from the family who had had the right to use the place for several generations.⁴

In 2009, the Act on Self-Government was inaugurated, which recognized further self-determination within the Kingdom of Denmark. Together with the Danish Constitution, the Self-Government Act articulates Greenland's constitutional position in the Kingdom of Denmark. The Self-Government Act recognizes the Greenlandic people as a "people" under international law with the right to self-determination.⁵ On March 31, 2023, after six years of work, the Constitutional Commission handed over

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-eyes-a-new-real-estate-purchase-greenland-11565904223>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/asia/greenland-trump-denmark.html>

³ <https://www.iwgia.org/en/kalaallit-nunaat-greenland/5393-iw-2024-kalaallit-nunaat.html>

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

its draft constitution for an independent Kalaallit Nunaat to Inatsisartut (Parliament) and Naalakkersuisut (Government).⁶

Human Rights Violations

In 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNSRIP), Francisco Calí-Tzay, conducted country visits to Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat. Following his visits, the Special Rapporteur detailed many concerning human rights violations:

- Homelessness among Kalaallit is 5 times that of the general population and Kalaallit face significant administrative and institutional obstacles which prevent them from enjoying their rights. Access to justice is a concern for Kalaallit both in Denmark and in Kalaallit Nunaat, with lack of translators and legal personnel knowledgeable about Kalaallit Indigenous rights. Some Kalaallit in Denmark have described themselves as “invisible ghosts” who have nowhere to go for advice and assistance.⁷
- Kalaallit children in Denmark face significant threat of being placed outside of their homes. Kalaallit children are seven times higher than any other children to be placed in foster care in Denmark. Further, it is estimated that up to one-third of the children in Kalaallit Nunaat are disadvantaged in one way or another.
- From 1966 to the 1970s, almost half of the 9,000 women and girls of childbearing age in Kalaallit Nunaat had an IUD inserted by Danish doctors, often without their and their parent’s knowledge or consent. 143 Greenlandic women affected by the IUD campaign have sued the Danish state for DKK 20 million.
- As a country in the Arctic region, Kalaallit Nunaat is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This issue has been exacerbated by hazardous waste leftover from abandoned American military bases further threatening the subsistence and traditional lifeways of Kalaallit Nunaat.

For More Information on Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat)

- *An Act on Greenland Self-Government* (June 12, 2009), <https://english.stm.dk/media/10522/gl-selvstyrellov-uk.pdf>
- Statement of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, *A Peaceful Arctic Through Mutually Respectful Cooperation*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/press-releases/a-peaceful-arctic-through-mutually-respectful-cooperation>.
- EMPOWERING ARCTIC INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF INDIGENOUS DIPLOMACY (Jens Dahl, Áslat Holmberg, Sara Olsvig and Kathrin Wessendorf eds.) (2023) <https://iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/5547-empowering-arctic-indigenous-peoples-50-years-diplomacy.html>.
- Sara Olsvig & Miriam Cullen, *Arctic Indigenous Peoples and International Law*, 93 NORDIC J. INT’L L. 152 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718107-bja10079>.

⁶ Id.

⁷ A/HRC/54/31/Add.1, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5431add1-visit-denmark-and-greenland-report-special-rapporteur-rights>