

Different experts have explained the meaning of Autonomy differently based on their personal study and opinion. It is therefore impossible to find a succinct, conclusive legal definition of autonomy. The main reason for this is that autonomy is not so much a legal concept, as a description of certain types of political structure and arrangements. In fact, autonomy is a label used to describe an enormous range of political structures, which comprise different degrees of self-rule and shared rule. Take the "TAR" for example – is it autonomous? The "TAR" is clearly an acronym for the "Tibet Autonomous Region". But just because something is labelled "autonomous" for political reasons, does it mean it is in fact autonomous? The "TAR" example highlights the need for caution when using this term.

During the course of the 20th century, many conflicts between peoples and states have been successfully resolved through negotiated arrangements for autonomy. The word "autonomy", according to the Random House Dictionary, is defined as independence, freedom and as the right to self-government. When we speak of "academic autonomy", for example, we generally refer to the ability of universities to teach and conduct research, free from government interference and corporate influence. "Individual autonomy" usually refers to an individual's right to make her or his own decisions. Autonomy of a people (such as the Tibetans) refers to a form of self-government within the framework of a larger state, usually, but not always, short of complete independence.

"Autonomy" may therefore be referred to a system in which a sub-state entity has control over its own cultural, economic, and even domestic political affairs in recognition of some ethnic, national or historical distinctions. The dictionary definition of autonomy usually cites as synonyms: "self-rule," "self-governance" or even "independence." Minimum requirements for an autonomous status are generally considered to be a locally-elected legislative body with some independent authority over local concerns, whose exercise of power is generally not subject to veto by the central government; a locally-elected chief executive; an independent judicial authority with full responsibility for interpreting local laws; and, joint or sole authority over matters such as foreign trade regulations, police, and exploitation of natural resources. Also, where a society had a previously existing government structure, those structures should be immune to unilateral change by the central government. [1](#)

In their 1980 study on "The concept of Autonomy in International Law", Hurst Hannum and Richard Lillich express the opinion that "autonomy and self-government are determined primarily by the degree of actual as well as formal independence enjoyed by the autonomous entity in its political decision making process. Generally, autonomy is understood to refer to independence of action on the internal or domestic level, as

foreign affairs and defense normally are in the hands of the central or national government, but occasionally power to conclude international agreements concerning cultural or economic matters also may reside with the autonomous entity". [2](#)

Writing in 1990, Hannum gives a more object-oriented definition, emphasizing the purpose of autonomy: "personal and political autonomy is in some real sense the right to be different and to be left alone; to preserve, protect, and promote values which are beyond the legitimate reach of the rest of society." [3](#)