Rented sovereignty.

What the cloud vendors mean, and why it cannot work

Sovereignty that arrives on a monthly invoice is a contradiction politely dressed. This page says why, and what the alternative actually is.

Digital sovereignty is now a product. It is worth understanding exactly what is being sold, because the offer is sincere and the problem is structural rather than a matter of anybody's bad faith.

What is on sale

Sovereign cloud, as offered by Microsoft, Amazon, Google, IBM, SAP, Red Hat and others, is a bundle of assurances: that your data will be stored in a particular jurisdiction, that access will be restricted to particular staff, that certain keys will be held in certain places, and that certain legal regimes will or will not apply.

These are real commitments, and for an organisation with regulatory obligations they can be genuinely valuable. Nothing here is a fraud.

But look at the shape of it. Every one of those assurances is a promise made by a supplier about its own future conduct. It is enforceable only insofar as contracts and regulators are willing and able to enforce it, it is revisable when terms are revised, and it evaporates entirely if the supplier is acquired, restructured, or subjected to a legal order in another jurisdiction.

The word has been replaced, not extended

Sovereignty, in the ordinary sense, means not requiring anyone's permission. That is the whole content of the word. A sovereign does not hold their authority at another party's discretion, because if they did, the other party would be the sovereign.

So "sovereignty as a service" is not a stronger version of sovereignty. It is a different thing entirely, wearing the word. What is delivered is permission with good terms attached: reliable permission, well-drafted permission, permission with a service level agreement, but permission.

This is not our observation alone. In 2026 Rafael Grohmann and Alexandre Costa Barbosa published "Sovereignty-as-a-service: How big tech companies co-opt and redefine digital sovereignty" in *Media, Culture & Society*, examining exactly this manoeuvre: the capture of a political vocabulary by the firms the vocabulary was developed to constrain.

The test

There is a simple question that separates the two cases, and it does not require any technical knowledge to apply.

If the supplier ceased to exist tomorrow, what would you still have?

With rented sovereignty the answer is a legal claim against an estate, which is a thing lawyers can pursue and you cannot use. With ownership the answer is: exactly what you had yesterday, working exactly as it did.

Apply the same question to the softer promises. If the terms change, does your position change? If the company is acquired, does the new owner inherit the discretion? If a court orders disclosure, is there anything to disclose? Under rented sovereignty the answers are yes, yes and yes. Under ownership they are no, no and no, and not because we are trustworthy, but because there is nothing in our hands to be compelled out of them.

What we do instead

Everything in this workshop is a single HTML file that makes no network calls. There is no account to suspend, no server to subpoena, no telemetry to leak or sell, and no subscription whose lapse could take the tool away from you.

That arrangement has costs, and we would rather name them than pretend otherwise. There is no sync between your devices, because sync requires a middle. There is no password recovery, because recovery requires somebody holding a copy. There is no server-side backup, so the discipline of keeping your own copies falls to you, exactly as it does with any other file you value.

Those are the honest prices of not having a landlord, and for a personal tool we think they are worth paying. It is the same bargain as a paper notebook, which also does not sync, cannot be recovered if lost, and has never once been sold in a bankruptcy.

The same reasoning produced Elba at our other studio: an encrypted vault in one HTML file, with no servers anywhere. Nothing to subpoena, nothing to breach, nothing hosted.

Where to read more

- Sovereignty as a Service: the argument this page belongs to.
- Enrolled without asking: consent you never gave, from Hume to the lookalike audience.
- The cost of refusal: what saying no actually costs, measured in clicks.

- The Digital Heirloom: what ownership makes possible that access never could.

Frequently asked

What is sovereign cloud?

A category of cloud offering in which the provider gives assurances about data residency, access controls, key custody and applicable legal regimes. Microsoft, Amazon, Google, IBM, SAP and Red Hat all offer versions of it.

Is sovereign cloud real sovereignty?

It is a set of contractual assurances from a supplier about that supplier's own conduct. They can be valuable, but they are revisable, enforceable only through contracts and regulators, and dependent on the supplier continuing to exist. Sovereignty in the ordinary sense means not requiring anyone's permission.

What is the difference between owning and licensing software?

Ownership means the thing works without anyone's continued agreement. Licensing means it works while permission lasts. The practical test is what you still have if the supplier disappears: with ownership, everything you had yesterday; with a licence, a claim.

What are the downsides of software with no server?

No synchronisation between devices, no password recovery, and no server-side backup, since all three require a third party holding a copy. Those are the real costs of having no landlord, and they are the same costs a paper notebook has always had.

From Offline.Ltd, Amsterdam. The web version of this page lives at https://offline.ltd/sovereignty-as-a-service/rented-sovereignty and is kept current there.