

Comoros

Population: 0.58 million

Life expectancy: 60 years

National capital: Moroni

Independence from France: 6 July 1975



Abstract

The Comoros islands have suffered from a secessionist conflict since 1997, when the separation movement emerged on one of them, Anjouan. The conflict stemmed from profound political and economic inequalities between the islands. The main island Grande Comore, the seat of the federal government, receives most foreign aid without distributing resources to other islands of the federation. The perceived injustice in the allocation of political and economic resources, together with an extraordinary instability of government with 17 attempted coup d'états since independence in 1975, all contributed to the eruption of secessionist violence. Subsequently, the Anjouan movement split into rival factions, and unrest spread to the capital, as opposition parties were unsatisfied with the settlement of the conflict. The inter-island conference, held in Tana in April 1999, addressed economic and political grievances behind the secessionist crisis and resulted in the Antananarivo agreement, granting the islands a greater autonomy in the framework of the Union of the Comoros islands. The incapacity of the federal government to deal with anti-anjouanais violence finally led to the coup d'état on April 30, 1999, when the army took power. The OAU and the EU have played the role of mediators. The EU condemned the coup d'état and initiated consultations according to article 366a of the Lomé Convention. Despite international pressure, the Anjouanais have not yet signed the Antananarivo agreement and the situation remains uncertain with regard to the return to the civilian rule.

The Secessionist Crisis on the Comoros Islands

Terhi Lehtinen

The secessionist conflict (1997-) in the Comoros Islands between one of the islands, Anjouan (Nzwani), and the Comoran federal government constitutes a particular case of the secessionist part of an independent nation initially aiming at being re-attached to a former colonial power, namely France, and subsequently demanding independent status. The Comoran crisis constitutes a major challenge for the peace building capacities of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

The Comoros Islands consist of three main islands of Nzwani (Anjouan), Mwali (Moheli), and Njazidja (Grande Comore)¹. The fourth island Mayotte, is an overseas territory of France, even though the Comoros also claims it. A French colony since mid-19th century, the islands obtained political autonomy in 1961 and independence in 1975. However, Mayotte remained under French administration, although the United Nations (UN) recognizes Comoran sovereignty over the entire archipelago. The situation in all four islands is politically and economically very different, and traditional inter-island rivalry gradually became a political problem, paving the way to the Anjouan secessionist crisis. The incapacity of the federal government to contain the crisis finally led to the military coup d'état in April 1999 (see Chronology).

¹ The denominations of Anjouan, Moheli and Grande Comore were in use under French rule, whereas Nzwani, Mwali and Njazidja are official names in the Islamic Republic of the Comoros. In this text, the two denominations will be used, even though the name of Anjouan is currently used when referring to the secessionist island.

Agents

Parties in the Comoran secessionist conflict are illustrated in Table 1:

Name	Established	Represents	Affiliation	Support	Conflict with
<i>Mouvement populaire anjouanais</i> (Rival factions led by a) Abdallah Ibrahim, by b) Chamasse Said Mohamed/ Abdou Madi ²)	1997 following separatist unrest on Anjouan	Population of Anjouan: a) inhabitants of Mutsa-mudu b) poor villages, towns of Mirontsy, Domoni	Initially sought support from France to back its request of being integrated under French sovereignty	Alleged military support from France through Mayotte	The federal government/ internal struggles between Abdallah Ibrahim and Chamasse Said Omar
The Federal government of the Comoros (President Taki/ Interim President Tadjidine) (After April 1999 coup: Colonel Azali)	1975 Independence/ 1978 Islamic Republic of the Comoros/ 1999 Union of Comoros Islands (agreement signed only by Moheli and Grande Comore)	Population of Moroni, integrity of Comoran territory		The OAU principle of territorial integrity UN recognition of Comoran sovereignty over the entire archipelago	<i>Mouvement Populaire Anjouanais</i> / (secessionist movement on Mwali), Discontent in Moroni/ political opposition

The Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros³ is an ethnically and religiously homogenous nation. All Comorians are of mixed African, Southeast Asian, and Arab ancestry, and virtually all (99 per cent) are Muslims. Comorians who live on Mayotte are ethnically like other Comorians although some of them are Roman Catholic and have a greater involvement with French culture⁴ (Levinson 1998). The Comoros islands are also characterized by the prevalence of traditional, quasi-feudal structures of power, the political culture being dominated by an aristocratic class of landowners (“*notables*”)

² Presumably, a third faction of the secessionist movement, led by former Member of Parliament Ahmed Mohamed, appeared in January 1999, following the December 1998 events (Indian Ocean Newsletter January 2, 1999).

³ The Antananarivo agreement stipulates a new denomination for the Comoros: the Union of Comoros Islands. The agreement does not specify islands, which compose the union, and this has raised concern on Grande Comore, where the government is accused of endangering territorial integrity.

⁴ France colonized Mayotte already in 1841, whereas the other islands were occupied in the 1880s. Mayotte’s continued attachment to France, despite several UN resolutions condemning French policy, has been justified by the island’s claimed Christian and francophone heritage, even though the main reason was the French willingness to keep a strategic base in the Indian Ocean. (Yates 1997; Gaspart 1983)

whose economic and political influence is organized in clientelistic networks. Political parties are organized following the feudal structures, which seriously affects any efforts at democratization through the electoral process. The role of Islam⁵ is crucial in political life. Moreover, there are traditional antagonisms between rural dwellers (usually of African descent) and urban dwellers (mainly Arab or Indian descent), but in the Anjouan conflict, the islanders were initially united in their discontent directed against the Comoran federal government (Kamardine 1998).

Subsequently, the secessionist movement split largely along the traditional dividing lines between urban dwellers in the capital Mutsamudu, supporting self-proclaimed “president” Abdallah Ibrahim, and rural dwellers and inhabitants of secondary cities, who were sensitive to rival secessionist leader Chamasse Said Omar’s radical discourse. The internal division on Anjouan was also “generational”, as Abdallah Ibrahim, age of 72, appeared to be giving up his initial demands to the OAU, while Chamasse’s inflexible stance appealed to the marginalized youth. The secessionist movement has never been unified in its leadership, aims and approaches, and a power struggle between rival leaders intensified after the death of President Taki in November 1998 (AFP December 15, 1998). Chamasse called for the island to return to French rule along the lines of Mayotte, whereas Abdallah, who had also originally demanded re-attachment to France, settled for the independence of Anjouan after Paris refused to resume responsibility. The capital Mutsamudu remains under Abdallah’s control, while Chamasse’s idea of “becoming French” is very popular in poor villages as well as in Mirontsy and Domoni, Anjouan’s second biggest town, because of Mayotte’s higher standards of living. Chamasse’s supporters are mainly teenagers with rifles and machine guns, living in Mirontsy and in its outskirts. (AFP, 7, 13 December, 1999). The Anjouanais leaders participated in the inter-island conference and engaged there in the principles of the Antananarivo agreement, but subsequently, they have refused to sign the agreement, claiming their declaration of independence of Anjouan as irreversible. This improved their domestic

⁵ The socialist rule of Ali Soilih 1975-1978 marked the period of the “Comoran revolution” where Soilih attempted to modernize feudal economic and political structures and minimize the prevalence of traditional, Islamic values in Comoran society. However, the coup d’état in 1978 led to the establishment of the Islamic Federal Republic of the Comoros. The new denomination “Union of Comoros Islands” abandons the explicit reference to Islam (Gaspart 1983).

legitimacy as populist leaders on Anjouan, but also provided a further opportunity for those propagating anti-Anjouanais sentiment to exploit the situation. This led to the victimization of Anjouanais residents on Grande Comore Island. The resultant instability then provided the excuse to stage a coup d'état on 30 April, 1999.

France has actively intervened in the Comoros islands, economically, politically and even militarily as European mercenaries, led by a Frenchman Robert Denard, have been actively involved in Comoran political turmoil (Yates 1997). Nevertheless, France has refused to take a leading role in resolving the current secessionist crisis, not least because Lionel Jospin's socialist government is keen to show that it has broken with the interventionist approach of past decades, thus attempting to redefine the French role in its former colonies. France has, however, discreetly asked Madagascar and Mauritius to find ways of reviving dialogue between opposing parties in the dispute (EIU 1998).

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has played an active role in the establishment of inter-Comoran dialogue (Kamardine 1998). South Africa has organized the OAU fact-finding mission as a coordinator of the regional contact group on the Comoros. The OAU has attempted to find a negotiated solution, despite calls for the deployment of regional peace keeping troops. The OAU considered that the process of negotiating a new political dispensation for the Comoros reached a milestone with the Antananarivo agreement. The OAU, the countries of the region and South Africa have agreed that the Anjouanais leadership is under an obligation to honor the commitment it made to sign the Antananarivo agreement and to address the reservations it may have within the framework of constitutional negotiations.

The European Union (EU) has issued several statements on the situation in the Comoros. In October 1998, the EU issued a report considering that "excessive centralization and poverty appear to be the real foundation of the crisis" and urging conflicting parties to seek a negotiated outcome. After the coup d'état of 30 April 1999, the EU issued a statement condemning "the intervention of the Comoros Army, which has overthrown the legal Government and has announced the dissolution of the constitution and of

democratic institutions”. The statement also appealed to “the leaders on Anjouan to sign the agreement of Antananarivo of 23 April 1999 and to cooperate in a constructive fashion with the constitutional Government on its implementation” (CFSP: 47/99). The EU also initiated the consultations under article 366a of the Lomé Convention. Following the consultations, the EU decided to support the preparations for the electoral process, the decentralised cooperation and provide humanitarian aid. The EU is particularly concerned over the respect for the electoral calendar⁶ and for the constitutional process as well as the separation of military and civilian powers.

The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), grouping Mauritius, Madagascar, the Seychelles, Comoros and Réunion, issued a statement in December 1998 calling for a cessation of hostilities and the resumption of dialogue and national reconciliation (AFP, 9 December, 1998). The IOC has attempted to settle the situation after the coup d’état. On the island of Anjouan, local notables have attempted to mediate the conflict between rival leaders.

Motivation

The Comoros is one of the very poor countries⁷ in the world, with per capita GDP estimated around \$700 (Yates 1997). Most of foreign aid goes to structural adjustment and debt relief. The remainder is spent principally in the capital Moroni, on Grand Comore. Very little has tricked down to the other two islands of the federation. Most international donors have recently withheld funds, charging inefficiency and corruption. The geographic isolation and the small size of the Comoros islands have contributed to their political dependence⁸ and vulnerability vis-à-vis foreign interventions, as well as to great political instability leading to successive coup d’états. (Gaspart 1983.) The

⁶ The elections were initially scheduled for April 2000, but they will be postponed due to the lack of capacities and resources.

⁷ There are no primary materials, and export products are limited to the sale of vanilla, cloves and *ylang-ylang*, a plant used for perfume, all of which are subject to low prices on the world market. Also, the population density, with an estimated 1,045 inhabitants per square mile in 1999, contrasts with the lack of arable land. The monoculture of perfume plants has created a serious dependence on food imports. This is particularly significant in the country where 80 per cent of the population are employed in the agricultural sector. (Gaspart 1983.)

⁸ Islands are also highly dependent on each other, as one island has the international airport for three islands and a deep sea port on two different islands (BBC, 28 January, 1999).

weakness of successive leaderships, the lack of political continuity, and traditional inter-insular rivalries constitute the background to the Anjouan secessionist crisis.

The seeds of secessionist conflict can be traced back to the mid-1980s when the usually prosperous Anjouan economy was rocked by a sharp slump in the international price of perfume plants, the mainstay of the economy. Stirring up the economic and political discontent by local politicians was not difficult, given the poor conditions of life on the island, and the incredible instability of Comoran federal governments, having experienced 17 coup d'états and mercenary interventions since independence in 1975 (Yates 1997). In particular, the Anjouanais were deeply resentful of constitutional changes that reduced previous provisions for the island's autonomy. (EIU 1998; Kamardine 1998). The inter-island conference, held in Tana in April 1999 resulted in the Antananarivo agreement, stipulating a greater autonomy of the islands. The agreement articulates three principles: the unity of Comoran territory, the political transition within one year and good governance in the management of public affairs.

The situation on Anjouan contrasts with neighboring Mayotte, enjoying the privileges of French territorial status, and with neighboring Grand Comore, enjoying the privileges of the capital city, where most bilateral aid is concentrated. Moreover, even outside Anjouan, there was profound discontent due to salary arrears, which contrasted with President Taki's ostentatious spending sprees. On Anjouan, the pay dispute bit particularly hard (Kamardine 1998). The overall crisis reinforced the discontent vis-à-vis the Anjouan crisis and gave an excuse for the army to desert the interim president Tadjidine, who was said to have abused its powers by postponing the elections over his interim period, which expired in February 1999.

The territorial distribution of resources, and especially foreign aid, in the Comoran federation is at the heart of Anjouan dispute. (Yates 1997) Underlying much of the unrest were President Taki's attempts to centralize administration of the archipelago, which was

seen on Anjouan and Moheli⁹ as a bid for political and administrative supremacy of Grande Comore (Manley 1999). Even though the fundamental dispute concerned the distribution of economic resources, in practice, the fragility of political leadership and the lack of legitimacy of the federal government contributed to the violent expression of discontent in the form of the secessionist movement on Anjouan. The Antananarivo agreement attempts to respond to this fundamental problem of resource distribution and political autonomy, but its provisions remain ineffective as far as the Anjouanais leadership refuse to sign the agreement and participate in the constitutional debate.

Gradually, the secessionist conflict between the Comoran federal government and Anjouan, changed nature, as during 1998-99, major clashes occurred between rival secessionist factions, identifying with the personal leaderships of Abdallah Ibrahim and Chamasse Said Omar, both striving for political power. Similarly, the federal government in Moroni faces a serious challenge from opposition parties, criticizing the settlement of the Anjouan conflict. These divergent views on the fundamental nature of the conflict have limited the success of the negotiation process, as an effective dialogue would require more internally coherent positions of the conflicting parties.

France¹⁰ has always played an active role in the Comoros. From the French point of view, the economic importance of the Comoros has been insignificant, however, the Comoran archipelago offers an excellent strategic position for the control of oil tankers coming from the Persian Gulf and Indonesia on their way to Europe and United States (Gaspart 1983). Also, French policy towards the Comoros has been influenced by the presence of an important Comoran community in France¹¹ and by the strategic need to contain the involvement of any other foreign nation in the Comoros. The leading role of South Africa

⁹ The third island Moheli, went ahead with less determined secession, but Grande Comore reimposed control there through diplomatic means and consequently, Moheli returned to federal rule in 1998.

¹⁰ French interventions were justified by the defense agreement between the two countries, signed in 1975. However, these defense agreements allow France to intervene in the case of an external intervention, whereas the Anjouan problem is considered as being an internal affair of the Comoros (BBC, 9 December, 1998).

¹¹ One out of ten Comorans live in France (Gaspart 1983).

in the mediation and an eventual military intervention, reflects its re-established position as a post-apartheid regional power in Southern Africa.

Instruments

As a result of an abortive military campaign in Mutsamudu in September 1997, the federal government realized that there was no possibility for an armed settlement of the dispute. Therefore, the federal government imposed economic sanctions on Anjouan. The suspension of transport links with the outside world led to food and medicine shortages. The economic blockade was clearly hurting, but did not undermine the resolve of most Anjouan people (Kamardine 1998). Finally, as sanctions bit harder, rival secessionist leaders had less room for maneuver, and were forced to open up a dialogue with the authorities of Moroni.

Initially, the secessionist leader Ibrahim Abdallah declared that the only concession he was prepared to make was the creation of a confederation of independent Comoran states, but the proposal did not meet with the federal government's approval. Subsequently, President Tadjidine proposed setting up a confederation and a "Council of the Republic", including members from all three islands (AFP, 27 January, 1999). Thus, President Tadjidine took a consensual stance towards the opposition and secessionist movement. He promised an economic reform to tackle with economic grievances, which are at the core of Anjouan discontent. However, some senior government figures were opposed to concessions to the opposition, qualified as "enemies of the Comoran nation-state" (AFP, 11 November, 1998). The Antananarivo agreement has also been harshly criticized by the opposition as it is considered endangering the territorial integrity of the Comoros.

Following the clashes between different factions on Anjouan, Abdallah Ibrahim asked the federal government to intervene, but President Tadjidine refused to support any secessionist faction. Abdallah also invited the mediation role of France and the OAU, excluding military intervention, but stressed that the declaration of independence was "irreversible" (AFP, December 1998). The OAU opted for a political solution, but has not

excluded the possibility of military intervention in the event of a deteriorating security situation.

France has been accused of providing arms to secessionist militias through Mayotte, but it has denied any involvement in the current crisis¹². France was particularly concerned over the OAU's eventual military intervention, and African regional leaders feared that the secession would create a precedent.

The EU has suggested that the perspective of a confederation of the islands might be a solution to the conflict, whereas the OAU, according to its basic principles, fundamentally supports the territorial integrity of the Comoros islands (Africa News, 29 January, 1999). Separate, and even competing mediation efforts, notably between the EU and the OAU, raises the question of a coordinated international approach to the Comoros conflict. The OAU has taken the challenging task to explore the possibility of an efficient African peace building system, involving both negotiations and an eventual intervention of peace keeping forces. On the other hand, the EU has a strong incentive to promote security and peace on the Comoros, which belongs to the group of ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries, enjoying a privileged position in the EU development cooperation. On the internal level, the main challenges remain the disarmament of the rival militia and the resolution of prevailing socio-economic problems, which are the underlying cause of the secessionist discontent. Different mediation efforts have had little success as yet, despite economic sanctions imposed on Anjouanais officials. The OAU continues to assess the military and security situation in view of an eventual intervention.

¹² Following the accusations, the federal government of the Comoros has requested the suspension of traffic between Mayotte and Anjouan. France has refused to suspend the traffic, referring to the presence of an important community of Franco-Comorian citizens on Anjouan, entitled to enter French territory (Indian Ocean Newsletter, 24 October, 1998).

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Chronology

- **July 1997:** The unrest in the Anjouan capital Mutsamudu escalated into a full-scale movement for secession on Anjouan and Moheli, which was aggravated by the government's unsuccessful attempts to subdue separatists on Anjouan, declaring their intention to seek a return to French sovereignty.
- **August, 1997:** Declaration of Anjouan's secession from the Comoros; election of Ibrahim Abdallah as president. Separatist activity on Moheli intensified, opting for independence and own government.
- **September 1997:** The OAU proposed inter-Comoran dialogue. Dispatch of government forces to invade Anjouan. The invasion failed to suppress the insurrection.
- **October-November 1997:** The OAU and the UN urged parties to work towards a negotiated solution. Referendum on Anjouan's secession with reported results of 99.9 per cent in favor of independence. France rejected demands for Anjouan to be incorporated into France. Opposition parties called for President Taki's removal on Grande Comore, amid administrative paralysis and economic decline. Their refusal to participate in the government of national unity unless separatists from Anjouan and Moheli were involved.
- **December 1997:** The Inter-Comoran Reconciliation Conference. Peace agreement signed between Anjouan and Moroni government under OAU auspices, but its provisions were never fully implemented.
- **January-February 1998:** Referendum on the separatist constitution was carried by a reported 99.5% of votes cast on Anjouan.
- **May-August 1998:** With civil servants' salaries unpaid, political unrest spread to Moroni. Suspension of sea and air links between the Comoran capital Moroni and Anjouan.
- **November 1998:** The death of President Mohamed Taki. Tadjidine Ben Said Massonde became the interim president.
- **December 1998:** Clashes among rival separatist groups on Anjouan. Federal government appealed for outside military intervention on Anjouan. The OAU fact-finding mission on the Comoros. Evacuation of foreigners. The cease-fire signed.
- **January-March 1999:** Presidential elections postponed. Resumption of fighting on Anjouan. Discontent of opposition parties in Moroni demanding Tadjidine's resignation following the failure to resolve the Anjouanais problem. Demonstrations and army intervention in the capital in March 1999.
- **April 1999:** The inter-island conference, held in Tana on 23 April 1999 resulted in the Antananarivo agreement, stipulating a greater autonomy of the islands. The agreement articulates three principles: the unity of Comoran territory, the political transition and the good governance. April 30, a military coup led by the army's chief of staff, Colonel Azali, deposed the government of interim president Tadjidine and took over state control.
- **May-July 1999:** The draft Constitutional Chart, based on the Antananarivo agreement was presented. The EU condemned the coup and decided to engage in consultations in July 1999 with the Comoros according to article 366a of the Lomé Convention. The EU demanded a return to civilian rule as well as the schedule for the electoral process and constitutional reform.
- **August-November 1999:** The Anjouanais refuse to sign the Antananarivo agreement despite international pressure. This reinforces anti-anjouanais feeling and critics of the agreement, considered as endangering territorial unity, on Moroni.
- **December 1999-:** The OAU continues to monitor the security and military situation. International community imposed economic sanctions on Anjouan.