
Comoros Short Brief

I. Activity Summary: The AU in the Comoros

Background

The Union of the Comoros, a three-island archipelago nation located in the Indian Ocean off of Madagascar, has been chronically unstable since independence from France in 1975, suffering more than 20 coups. The state has been persistently unable to create a shared sense of national identity amongst its citizens, leaving the three islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli frequently at odds and wary of exploitation at one another's hands.

While conflict in the Comoros is endemic, it has generally been small-scale. With a few exceptions, most clashes have resulted in fewer than five deaths and a slightly larger tally of injuries. However, the security forces have generally been divided and disorganized, with six separate security forces (military and police) reporting to at least four different authorities. This disorganization has been historically encouraged by leaders trying to divide the support base for possible coups, and by the mutual distrust of the separate islands, each of whom would rather control their own forces than be subject to central authority.

Many argue that these problems can be traced back to the conditions of the Comoros' independence – France opted to retain (through a legally contested referendum process) control of the fourth island in Comoros archipelago, Mayotte, in order to maintain a strategic base in the region. Since then, Mayotte, far more prosperous than its neighbors, has drawn investment away and contributed to brain drain from the Comoros. Additionally, several of the military coups of the 80s and 90s were engineered by French mercenary Bob Denard, with, it is widely alleged, at least the tacit approval of the French government, which benefitted from the nation's relative weakness.^[1] Comorian instability was further exacerbated by the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in the country in the 1990s.

Due to this chronic instability, the OAU and later the AU have conducted a long series of different types of missions over many years, including shuttle diplomacy, facilitation and mediation, coercive diplomatic pressure, African states and regional forums, economic sanctions, observer and electoral assistance missions, and military intervention. The composition and approach of these missions have morphed over time, reflecting changes in the regional and local environment, as well as the OAU/AU itself. However, the primary goals of these missions – to maintain the territorial integrity of the Comoros and the authority of the central state – have remained constant.

OMIC I

In 1995, democratically elected President Djohar was overthrown a military coup. The coup leaders were ultimately expelled (and a new president elected under the auspices of) French troops. However, it was the OAU that led a notable diplomatic initiative to refuse to recognize the military regime. Significantly, this was one of a series of OAU decisions to reject coups and the overthrow of democratic governments among member states, a position that was later formalized and generalized into the 1999 Algiers Declaration.

Shortly thereafter, in August of 1997, the islands of Anjouan and Moheli reacted to the newly elected government's post-coup attempts to centralize power in the capitol on Grand Comore by announcing their secession.^[iii] Government troops unsuccessfully attacked Anjouan, which also experienced inter-factional violence. These clashes resulted in a very high (for Comoros) casualty toll of over 50 soldier and civilians. The situation appeared to be escalating rapidly.

In August 1997, the OAU appointed Special Envoy Pierre Yere, with terms of reference that stated that secession was unacceptable – any settlement had to maintain the Comoros' territorial integrity. However, OAU-led dialogue was intended to provide a platform for Anjouan and Moheli to have their grievances seriously addressed and a compromise reached.^[iii]

Following early progress with shuttle diplomacy, the OAU increased its presence, including increased support for on-going mediation and dispatching 20 military observers from Egypt, Senegal, and Tunisia, with a mandate to monitor the situation and try to create a climate of trust, in a mission known as OMIC I.^[iv] These early successes cumulated in an international conference, conveyed by the OAU Secretary General, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 10 to 13 December 1997, that included OAU officials and parties to the conflict, but also representatives from the EU, the Arab League, and the ad hoc OAU Countries of the Region committee. This resulted in the December 13 Addis Ababa Agreement, which essentially resolved upon further consultations to find a new, generally acceptable governance framework.

There were soon setbacks, including minor armed clashes between the militias of factions on Anjouan vying for various outcomes. Anticipating the potentially need for a military intervention supported by the resources of a large state, the OAU appointed South African President Mandela to take over the coordination of OAU efforts in Comoros. However, the situation remained stable enough to convene the first official Inter-Comorian dialogue, with a similarly large array of external stakeholders as previous consultations, in Madagascar's capitol of Antananarivo, from 19 to 23 April 1999. The resulting Antananarivo Agreement, calling for parties to work together to establish new decentralized institutions and governance arrangements (in particular, elected assemblies and chief executives for each island parliaments) to grant each island greater autonomy, was signed by most parties, though later repudiated by Anjouan's separatist leaders.

However, immediately following the agreement, then-President Massoude was overthrown in yet another (bloodless) military coup in the night of April 29th, 1999 by Army Chief of Staff Colonel Azali Assoumani, leading to the withdrawal of OAU military observers and all but three civilian staff members. The stalemate of the next couple of years was marked in particular by OAU (then transforming into the AU) tension with the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), under whose auspices Azali attempted to negotiate a new agreement. This tension was aggravated by France's refusal to implement the "smart sanctions" the OAU had imposed upon Azali and his immediate circle in 2000, a refusal that rendered them far less effective. The AU, however, remained diplomatically engaged with various parties through its Special Envoy, Francisco Madeira.

OMIC II, III, MIOC (OMIC IV), & AMISEC

This engagement allowed for the Second Inter-Comorian dialogue in February 2001, where the OAU, leading combined efforts with the OIF and Arab League, managed to coax the parties back to the table. This cumulated in the Fomboni Framework Agreement, which reformulated the Antananarivo Agreement (allowing, for example, a rotating national presidency between islands) so as to allow for acceptance by Anjouan separatist leaders, and thus, national reunification.^[v] A draft constitution was approved by referendum in December 2001, coinciding with the mandating of OAU mission OMIC II^[vi], which ran from the end of 2001 to 2002 and involved only 14 military observers from South Africa, tasked to verify weapons collections from Anjouanese rebels. With both regional and national elections looming, OMIC II

transitioned into the slightly larger (39) OMIC III^[vii] from March-May 2002, which was also mandated to supervise elections.

The political situation remained shaky and the new institutions disputed, cumbersome, and only semi-functional, though some outstanding issues were resolved in the Beit Salam Accords, the product of the 2003 Third Inter-Comorian Dialogue. MIOC (Military Observer Mission in the Comoros, sometimes called OMIC IV)^[viii], consisting of 41 observers who were tasked with election supervision and security duties, was mandated from March-May of 2004 to cover a further round of elections.

Anticipating further complications around the election of a new president for the Comoros as a whole, in April-May 2006 the AU mandated a larger AU Mission for support to the Elections in Comoros, or AMISEC, which consisted of 462 military and police observers, roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of them South African^[ix], as well as a civilian component drawn from Rwanda, Egypt, Congo, Mozambique and Nigeria. The elections were largely successful, though the AU took steps to address some shortcomings registered during the first round of elections in the second round, notably strengthening AMISEC with an additional contribution of 763 troops supplied by South Africa and 62 international observers from the AU, the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), the League of Arab States (LAS), France, the United States and the Netherlands.

MAES & Operation Democracy

Another round of elections, for the chief executives of each island, was to take place in May 2007. However, President Bacar of Anjouan refused to step down at the end of his term, amidst a legal dispute about which state institution was authorized to appoint his temporary successor (the gap between the end of his term and elections resulted from the Comoros' rapidly shifting electoral laws and institutions). Having staffed the Anjouan gendarme entirely with troops loyal to him, he was able to both quell internal dissent and cut off the central government's ability, short of full-scale invasion, to access the island.

In response to these developments, in May 2007 the AU mandated the deployment of the AU Electoral and Security Assistance Mission to the Comoros (MAES)^[x] to monitor elections. Comprised of roughly 350 peacekeepers, MAES size reflected the AU's fears about the seriousness of the situation, fears shared by France, which handled mission transport, and the Arab League, which partially funded the effort. MAES personnel successfully monitored elections on Grande Comore and Moheli, but were denied access to Anjouan by Bacar, who held his own elections unrecognized by any of the other parties.

At this point, the AU began to discuss the possibility of a military intervention to displace Bacar. However, both AU Special Envoy Madeira and South Africa (the most powerful of the neighboring states and then chairing the Ministerial Committee of the Region and the AU Troika in Comoros), believed a diplomatic solution was still possible. After various rebuffs, the AU imposed targeted sanctions on Bacar and his immediate associates.^[xi] Following more than a year of continued stalemate, and counter-sanctions from Bacar (Anjouan being in a position to impede the other islands' shipping), Comorian President Sambi began threatening to take unilateral military action to regain control of Anjouan. This spurred the AU to once again consider military intervention. South Africa opposed the effort, on the grounds that a diplomatic solution was still possible, but chose not to block it, leaving Senegal, Sudan, Tanzania, & Libya in favor and willing to contribute troops and resources.

The intervention was named "Operation Democracy in Comoros" and its objectives were to restore the authority of the central government, organize and provide security for Anjouanese elections, supervise the disarmament and reintegration into the National Army of Anjouanese armed forces, and to assist with the establishment of an internal security force. With invasion eminent, Bacar offered concessions and new elections, but the AU doubted his sincerity and proceeded anyway. Operation Democracy forces of 1,800 AU troops, along with 1,500 soldiers of the Comorian National Army, invaded Anjouan on March

25, 2008. Tanzania and Sudan contributed troops, Senegal military and tactical advice, Libya and France logistics and funding, and the EU also funding. The mission of removing Bacar and restoring central government authority was quickly achieved, with no casualties on either side. Most troops were quickly withdrawn, with elections taking place under the auspices of MAES (re-mandated for the purpose).^[xii] All AU contingents withdrew by the end of 2008, despite requests by the central government to stay as a stabilizing presence.

However, in March of 2009 the AU did facilitate the successful 4th Inter-Comorian dialogue with the goal of clarifying the division of power between the central and island governments, as well as streamlining institutions – the cost of multiple institutions and frequent elections had been a strain on the extremely poor nation, and a source of resentment, since the signing of the Fomboni Agreement. Over the past several years, the AU has continued to play a more limited post-conflict role, providing technical expertise for legal and institutional reforms and helping to mobilize and organize other donors.

Since Operation Democracy, the Comoros has remained reasonably stable, holding several rounds of successful elections, though with some minor fights and property destruction between factions. Many commentators remain concerned that the underlying conditions that led to conflict, in particular very poor economic prospects and poor capitol-periphery relations, have not been adequately addressed. However, overall, the AU has held up its efforts in Comoros as a qualified success story.

II. Key Issues, Dilemmas, and Lessons From Comoros

1. Preventing escalation through prolonged engagement

The OAU/AU had active missions running the Comoros for over a decade before the cycle of frequent political crises could be broken (if the past 6 years of stability represents a lasting condition). However, within that extended timeframe, total casualties from various clashes were very low^[xiii], and most OAU/AU missions were small and comparatively cheap. Significantly, though never high to begin with, casualties from clashes in the Comoros decreased over time – in the late 90s, disputes would claim a dozen or so casualties, while in the aughts, the tally was typically one or two.^[xiv]

Further, some expert observers have argued that the prolonged process itself, with its incremental gains and AU observer missions reducing fears that agreements would be violated, gave the Comorian population time to become convinced that unity and a peaceful settlement was possible. This belief was key to the success of the Operation Democracy intervention, which went smoothly in large part because Anjouan's separatist leader had only tepid support from his population. More evidence is needed to generalize, but it may be that by investing in very long-term, sustained, but small-scale engagement in certain chronically fragile situations, the AU can avert both the casualties and the expense of larger operations, as well as encouraging the long-term political and attitude changes often needed for lasting stability.

2. Mediation preparation & architecture

Several observers commented on the lack of briefing that OAU/AU officials received before they became involved in Comoros, and the lack of systematic support – research, technical expertise, etc. – for their mediation efforts. Experience in Comoros suggests that the AU's investments expanding and professionalizing in this area in recent years is effort well spent.

3. The dangers of agreement at any cost

Despite the fact that the Fomboni Framework Agreement ended the Comorian institutional crisis of 1997 and enabled the establishment of the State and institutional architecture still in force in Comoros, the

agreement is generally considered to be a poor one, in that it left many critical details regarding central and local government institutions and their various responsibilities and powers undefined. Disputes about these divisions led directly to further clashes. Since serious violence was not imminent at the time it was negotiated, it may have been better for the AU to pressure parties to stay at the table until more of crucial details had been worked out. Additionally, several commentators have noted the usefulness of AU political, legal, and constitutional experts once they were brought into the process, suggesting that problems could have been avoided had they been available from the outset of negotiations.

4. Dangers of unsustainable agreements

Federal arrangements and decentralization are a very popular way of settling secessionist disputes, as they usually best represent a compromise between parties' goals. However, in the case of the Comoros, setting up institutions on each island that mirrored those of the central government was both confusing (leading to tension) and extremely costly. President Sambu's later attempts to streamline these arrangements led to more tension, as various islands feared their promised autonomy was being revoked. This example should lead the AU to consider very carefully in negotiations whether the agreements it brokers are realistically implementable and economically sustainable. Otherwise, future, possibly heightened tension is almost a given.

5. Ad hoc arrangements

As the situation in Comoros began before the AU's REC-led peace and security architecture had been formulated, in order to gather political support and resources the OAU Secretary General first organized a "Countries of the Region on Comoros Committee" in 1998. This was followed in 1999 by the smaller "Troika" consisting of the previous, current, and incoming OAU chairs, in the hope that it would complement and focus the work of the Committee. This suggests, not surprisingly, that a few powerful and committed states may be better able coordinate efforts than larger coalitions.

6. Virtues of extensive external engagement

Some have suggested that the "forum-shopping" that Comorian secessionist leaders attempted semi-successfully between the AU and OIF (and to a lesser extent the Arab League) could have been averted if the OAU/AU had more proactively reached out to these actors to inform them of its plans and possibly trying to harmonize strategies and goals.

7. Virtues of wide-ranging internal engagement

Many of those involved have praised OAU/AU Special Envoy Madeira for his extensive and continuous "Track II" outreach to Comorian civil-society and community leaders. This outreach allowed him to build trust and buy-in for mediation in the nation generally, and also to understand the fears and needs that would need to be addressed for a sustainable agreement.

8. Small-scale DDR and SSR

The Comoros example demonstrates that, despite the frustrations encountered pursuing these activities in many other missions, these efforts can be effective on a smaller, cheaper, and shorter scale in smaller area and less complex situations.

9. Sanctions

“Smart Sanctions” should only be imposed alongside the necessary manpower and resources to track their impact. Otherwise, as in Comoros, failure to adjust them as necessary may end up hurting the population while having little impact on targeted elites. Additionally, implementing them without buy-in from the major economic actors in region (in this case France) will render them toothless and thus undermine the AU’s authority.

10. Military intervention can be both limited (in resources and time) and still be effective

Operation Democracy demonstrated that, in situations where it is possible to make a mandate clear and limited, a small, short-term military intervention can achieve the mandate (in this case, restoring central government control and removing a spoiler) without necessarily needing to call on the resources of usual PSO leaders – neither South Africa, Kenya, nor Nigeria contributed to Operation Democracy.

III. Comoros Literature Review

Reports/Scholarly Works:

Ayangafac, Chris. “Situation Critical: The Anjouan Political Crisis.” Institute for Security Studies Situation Report 5, March (2008)

Written just before AU military intervention, Ayangafac’s piece is notable for arguing cogently that such intervention would not be viable due largely to AU members’ unwillingness to commit the necessary resources. It is worth reviewing to examine how his incorrect assumptions reveal the changing, increasingly active nature of the AU during this period, and how the Comoros intervention challenged prevailing wisdom that previously held that very limited armed interventions weren’t possible.

Baker, Bruce. "Comoros: The Search for Viability." *Civil Wars* 11, no. 3 (2009): 215-233.

This piece, written after AU military intervention, analyses the various underlying structural causes of the Comoros’ persistent instability. Baker warns that without major changes to these underlying factors, future conflict and instability is very likely. He questions whether the full western integrated state model is achievable in Comoros, and examines the viability of various alternative arrangements, particularly in the justice sector.

Centre For Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) “The AU and the search for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi and Comoros.” (2011)

The Conflict Management Division of the AU and the HD Centre commissioned this report as part of a program to document, examine, and institutionalize lessons from previous AU experiences in mediation and peacemaking. It covers OAU (later AU) activities in Comoros between 1995 and March 2009. It is particularly useful for relying heavily on primary sources and interviews (a number of relevant AU Communiqués appear as an appendix), and covering the evolution of the AU’s approach and goals in response to conditions on the ground and it’s own organizational changes. It makes a number of specific suggestions for AU structural and procedural reforms.

Hussien, Mohammud A. "From AMIB to AMISOM: The need for institutional and mandate clarity in APSA." *Institute for Security Studies Papers* 239 (2012): 16.

The section of this piece addressing the Comoros focuses on the ways in which various missions AU, in particular the military intervention “Operation Democracy” were not planned or authorized through the Peace & Security Council, nor executed through one of the RECs, but rather pursued through a series of

tacitly approved ad-hoc arrangements. Hussein highlights the ways in which such arrangements may threaten and weaken the AU's evolving institutions.

Massey, Simon, and Bruce Baker. "Comoros: External involvement in a small island state." Chatham House Programme Paper, AFP (2009): 17-18.

This piece primarily analyzes the ways in which external involvement in the Comoros and its immediate neighborhood, primarily the French occupation of neighboring island of Mayotte, threatens the nation's ability to create a national identity, effectively build state institutions, and engage in much-needed economic development – all vital activities for preventing future instability. Baker and Massey also provide a brief examination of political challenges immediately following the AU military intervention.

Mays, Terry M. His torical dictionary of multinational peacekeeping. Vol. 29. Scarecrow Press, 2010.

A good source for precise dates and cost figures.

Othieno, Timothy, 'Unpacking the crisis in Anjouan: A thin line between independence and the struggle for power', Global Insight 74, (November 2007).

Writing before the AU's military intervention to restore central government control over the island of Anjouan and depose its semi-secessionist leader, Othieno attempted to discern whether the dispute was "a genuine case of the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination...or just a simple case of self-aggrandizement" by a power-hungry leader, and thus the likely difficulty of reintegrating the island with the rest of the nation. In an analysis largely born out by subsequent events, he concluded that though historical and structural factors encouraged tendencies toward secession, a sustainable center-periphery agreement could likely be reached.

Richardson, Paul. "Observers Declare Comoros Legislative Election Free, Transparent." Bloomberg News, (February 25, 2015). <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-25/observers-declare-comoros-legislative-election-free-transparent>

This piece, a short news article, is included as a limited update on the current situation in Comoros, as little scholarly analysis of the last few years exists.

Svensson, Emma. "The African Union's operations in the Comoros: MAES and Operation Democracy." FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency, (2008).

One of a series of studies collectively called "Project Africa", of peacekeeping missions undertaken by the AU, aimed at analyzing the current capabilities and needs of the emerging AU Peace and Security Architecture. It focuses in detail on the AU's progressive strategies in Comoros to achieve the Union's commitment to opposing non-democratic power transitions and upholding central government authority – from election monitoring, to military observers, to sanctions, to armed intervention, followed by various post-conflict stabilization tasks. The report particularly useful for its use of primary sources and interviews, its clear explication of changing mandates,

Official Documents, Agreements

AU

MOIC (OMIC IV) Mandate - PSC/PR/3(VI), 29 April 2004

AMISEC Mandate: PSC/PR/2(XLVII) – March 21, 2006

MAES Mandate: PSC/MIN/Comm.1 (LXXVII) - May 9, 2007

MAES Revised/Extended Mandates: PSC/PR/Comm (XCV) - October 10, 2007 & PSC/PR/Comm(CXXIV) - April 30, 2008

Operation Democracy Mandate: PSC/PR/2 (CXXIV) – April 30, 2008

Agreements

Addis Ababa Agreement – December 17, 1997

Fomboni Agreement – February 2001

Beit Salam Accords - 2003

4th Inter-Comorian Dialogue - 2009

[i] The Independent. 'Bob Denard- mercenary operating in Africa'. 16 October 2007.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/bob-denard-396988.html>

[ii] The islands initially sought to rejoin France, which rejected the proposal, before opting for independence.

[iii] A detailed account of various mediation activities can be found in Centre For Humanitarian Dialogue's "The AU and the search for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi and Comoros." (2011)

[iv] Total mission cost estimated at \$1,414,253. (Mays, Terry M., *Historical Dictionary of Multinational Peacekeeping*, Routledge 2011)

[v] Peace and Security Council. 'Report of the chairperson of the commission on the Situation in the Comoros'. PSC/PR/3(VI), 29 April 2004

[vi] Total estimated cost \$105,000. (Terry M. Mays *Historical dictionary of multinational peacekeeping*. Vol. 29. Scarecrow Press, 2010. 206)

[vii] Mays 207

[viii] Total estimated cost \$305,000. (Mays), LEADS- MIOC mandate PSC/PR/3(VI), 29 April 2004

[ix] Mays 44

[x] Mays 42

[xi] Peace and Security Council. 'Communiqué', PSC/PR/Comm (XCV), 10 October 2007

[xii] Peace and Security Council. 'Communiqué'. PSC/PR/Comm (XCV), 10 October 2007

[\[xiii\]](#) Under 1,000 cumulative from 1995-2015. (Uppsala Conflict Database)

[\[xiv\]](#) U.S. State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices in the Comoros, 1995-2013