



Situation Report

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Situation Critical: The Anjouan Political Crisis

Introduction

Speaking at the AU Heads of State and Government summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in January 2008, Comoros' President Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi alleged that his government had lost faith in international efforts to mediate a resolution to the Anjouan crisis and vowed to take matters into his own hands (IRIN 2008a; Reuters 2008). He stated that the union government's troops had been massing on the island of Mohéli 'as a last step – because it's closer – in the re-establishment of order by military force; it's going to happen, it's a matter of days' (IRIN 2008b).

What can one expect from the Anjouan political crisis, given that the AU seems to have exhausted its diplomatic arsenal with little result? Is President Sambi correct in arguing against more conferences and sanctions? Is the archipelago heading for another bruising encounter between the union government and the illegal regime on Anjouan?

A simmering turf war between the island of Anjouan and the union government of the Comoros seems to be gathering momentum, with the risk of escalating into a full-blown war as both parties are unprepared to compromise. The political crisis in Anjouan was triggered by a disputed presidential election in June 2007. Anjouan's presidential election forms part of the Comoros' election politics, based on self-determination within the framework of a federation. This electoral system was informed by the need for a power-sharing mechanism to accommodate the various competing political and economic interest groups who were the basic cause of internal strife between the three islands (Anjouan, Grande Comore and Mohéli) that constitute the country.¹ The complex electoral system was the outcome of a 2001 OAU-brokered peace agreement which aimed at halting the secessionist drive of Anjouan and Mohéli by providing for a semi-autonomous government for each of the three islands, headed by a president but also with a rotating presidency for the over-arching union (Union of the Comoros 2001).

Elections for the presidents of two of the three islands, namely Grande Comore and Mohéli, took place on 10 June 2007.² Incidents of violence and intimidation during the run-up precipitated the postponement of the Anjouan election until 17 June 2007 by the AU and the union government.

The unrest stemmed from the refusal of Mohamed Bacar, who had been elected president of Anjouan in 2002, to comply with an order by the Constitution Court³ to step down, on the grounds that he had served his five-year term, in April 2007.

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Mohamed Sambu nominated Kaabi Houmadi as Anjouan's interim president to serve until elections took place in June. Bacar argued that Sambu has filled the courts with his supporters and thus called into question the legitimacy of the court judgment. In response the union government withheld election material from Anjouan and deployed its army in an attempt to prevent the poll from taking place. Bacar not only sent the union army packing, but printed his own ballot papers, went ahead with the election on 10 June 2007, and claimed a landslide victory of 90 per cent.

The AU and union government declared the elections null and void and in October the AU imposed targeted sanctions on the political leadership of the illegal Anjouan regime (AU 2007). Though the smart sanctions have been renewed twice, they have not achieved the desired objective. Now the AU seems to have changed its position, moving from fruitless negotiation efforts to diffuse the conflict to backing the union government's position of using military force. Four AU countries – Libya, Sudan, Senegal and Tanzania – have promised troops and military support (Ghorbal 2008). France has also pledged to transport the troops to Mohéli and not Anjouan. In a last ditch effort to avert a military confrontation, the AU will in the coming days dispatch a mission composed of senior diplomats from South Africa, Tanzania, the United States and France to the Comoros.

The union government, however, appears to be determined to exercise the military option to resolve the political crisis (Amir 2008a). It has gone as far as legitimising such a move by organising a mass rally, at which it seemed to receive overwhelming support for military action. Public radio and television programmes have also been modified to give ample air time to 'awareness campaigns' on a military operation against Anjouan (Moindje 2008). In response, the illegal regime in Anjouan are purging perceived sympathisers of President Sambu (PANA 2007a) and preparing for war. At the same time it is flirting with the idea of internal dialogue (with the AU as an observer) and new elections but on condition that elections take place in all three islands.

Political hostility in Comoros has a compelling sense of familiarity.⁴ However, the situation demands urgent attention because if the crisis is not resolved, the 2003 Beit Salam Agreement that holds the three islands together in a federation might unravel. Moreover, the Comoros' economic revival is contingent on arresting political instability in the country as a condition for access to much needed external finance. Furthermore, continued political instability in the Comoros as against the economic stability and prosperity in Mayotte would seem to legitimise continued French occupation of Mayotte. This would defeat the dream of a united Comoros in which Mayotte forms part of the federation.

Comoros political life has been truncated by persistent political instability, with no less than 19 coup d'états since independence. The first coup took place just a month after Ahmed Abdallah unilaterally declared the Comoros independent in 1975. He was overthrown by Prince Saïd Mohamed Jaffar, who was in turn overthrown by Ali Soilih in 1976. Because of Soilih's anti-French stance and nationalist stand – specifically with regard to Mayotte being part of Comoros – Abdallah was able to stage a comeback with the help of Bob Denard, a French mercenary (Othieno 2007). After that, Bob Denard became a permanent player in Comorian politics and took part in virtually all subsequent coups until his arrest in 1996. There is no doubt that Denard had the tacit support of the French and apartheid South African governments (Alwahti 2003; Mukonoweshuro 1990).

Under President Abdallah, the Comoros flirted with federalism, though in reality the central government was very much in control and for example had a monopoly on fiscal matters and redistribution of resources. In the 1982 revision of the constitution, federalism was formally eliminated and in the process power was concentrated in the hands of the president. One of the changes was that governors were no longer elected by popular vote but nominated directly by the president himself; fiscal resources were even more concentrated in the hands of the government in Moroni (the capital of Grande Comore), thus reducing the financial autonomy of the islands (Pahlavi 2003).

In December 1989 Abdallah was assassinated in the presence of Bob Denard. His death provided the country with an opportunity to depart from the dictatorial and patrimonial leadership regime which contributed to the economic ruin in which the country found itself at the dawn of the 1990s. The wind of change blowing over Africa against a backdrop of economic chaos moreover provided an opportunity for liberalisation of the political space and the election of Said Mohamed Djohar from Grande Comore.

Within the framework of an open political contest for electoral politics, the election of President Djohar marked the demise of Anjouan hegemony in Comorian politics. In 1995 Denard again appeared on the Comorian political scene and attempted to overthrow Djohar. However, this time Denard was arrested by French paratroopers. Mohamed Taki Abdulkarim (from Grand Comore), who had opposed Djohar in the first election and who enjoyed French backing, was elected to lead the second multiparty democratic government. President Taki, who had presided over a centralised and corrupt regime, passed away in 1998 and was replaced by the president of the Comorian Supreme Court, Tadjidine Ben Said Massoude. Massoude served as interim president but could not halt the Mohéli and Anjouan secession drive in 1997 to 'rejoin' France. However, faced with the embarrassment of re-colonising a former territory, France found the secession 'unacceptable' (Alwathi 2003). On 30 April 1999 Colonel Azali Assoumani, the army chief of staff, staged a bloodless coup, overthrowing Massoude and restoring order to the streets of Moroni.

In February 2001 the OAU brokered the Antananarivo Agreement, in terms of which each of the three islands had its own president, parliament and local government and a presidency of the Comorian federation was established, which would rotate between the three island presidents on a four-yearly basis, (Constitution 2001). The elections in 2006 for the presidency of the union were won by Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi (Anjouanese). The next presidency will go to Mohéli in 2010.

In terms of the 2001 constitution and the 2003 Beit Salam Agreement, each of the federated islands is semi-autonomous, maintaining some degree of independence in managing its internal affairs. The most important of these is the right to manage their finances as they see fit, although each island is expected to contribute a certain percentage of its income to the federal government (Union of the Comoros 2001). Based on the principle of inviolability of territorial borders, each island administers its own affairs and has its own laws while respecting the union constitution. However, no island can act unilaterally if its actions would have an impact on any of the other islands (Union of the Comoros 2001).

Anjouan is the richest of the federated islands. Its economy is the most vibrant and based on the export of vanilla, ylang-ylang, flowers, perfume oil and cloves. The Comoros, and specifically Anjouan, accounts for about 80 per cent of the world production of ylang-ylang, and the archipelago is the fifth largest producer of vanilla in the world (Othieno 2007). Anjouan also has a thriving tourism industry. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimated that the tourism sector contributed about 3 per cent or \$12,7 million to the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2007 and accounted for 5,5 per cent of total employment (9 000 jobs) (Mpofu 2007). Furthermore, Anjouan has a booming off-shore banking, shipping and gambling sector, though off-shore business it is virtually controlled by the Anjouan president (which increases the value of control of the island) (Othieno 2007).

The islands' only deepwater port is on Anjouan, which gives it control over most of the Comoros' international trade and therefore customs revenue. The port has also boosted local commerce and the manufacturing industry. In addition, Anjouan lies on the strategic trade route leading to the Mozambique Channel. Though the Suez Canal has reduced the importance of the Mozambique Channel as a world trading route, it is still important for trade around the southern tip of Africa.

Anjouan's economic prowess is in sharp contrast to the rest of the group. Comoros is ranked 132nd out of 177 countries on the United Nations Development Programme human development index (UNDP 2007), the economy is growing at a snail's pace of 2,8 per cent per annum, and external debt as a percentage of GDP stands at 75,9 per cent (African Development Bank 2007).

From the above it is clear that Anjouan's contribution to the national budget is of extreme importance to the economy of the whole group of islands. Put succinctly, control of Anjouan equates to enormous influence in Comorian political economy.

Comoros is a mosaic of different ethnic and cultural groups, including Malagasy, Tanzanian, Arab, Persian and even Indian and European elements. There are two official languages (French and Arab) as well as two Comorian dialects. Although each island has unique elements which stem from its peculiar history, the archipelago enjoys a certain ethnic and cultural homogeneity which is strongly reinforced by the unifying presence of Islam (Shafeite rite Sunni) as the main religion (Pahlavi 2002).

Beneath the rhetoric of self-determination and the need to put an end to inter-island fighting and instability, the Comorian crisis is a contest for control over the sources of wealth; a contest for power and resources through control of Anjouan, the island with the most viable economy. To Comorian politicians, control of its sources of wealth – or at least some considerable influence over it – equates to political control. The possibility of Anjouan as a autonomous or semi-autonomous entity, with its considerable economic and military powers, would be a nightmare to any Comorian politician as it would limit his or her ability to manoeuvre or dictate who gets what, when and how. The bottom line is that control of the union government without control over Anjouan's economy will prove a difficult venture.

Control of public finances is at the centre of Comorian political crisis. On the principle that each island can best select local expenditure priorities and monitor their execution, decision-making on public expenditure gradually devolved to the individual island governments, starting with health, education and infrastructure maintenance. The union government is responsible for expenditure in the national interest (defence, diplomacy, major infrastructure projects). In terms of a revenue sharing agreement each island retains some revenue (*recettes propres*) (mostly property taxes and specific excises and fees) and the rest goes into a common account at the central bank. The three islands and the union each receive a fixed percentage (the Union 37,5 per cent, Grande Comore 27,4 per cent, Anjouan 25,7 per cent and Mohéli 9,4 per cent), after deduction for external debt servicing (20,1 per cent), a pension fund and other national charges. Technically, the sharing system involves two parties with significant revenue (union and Anjouan) and two with almost no revenue (Grande Comore and Mohéli) (IMF 2006).

The problem is that the expenditure of the four parties has been increasing at a faster pace than revenue income. For example, while revenue has increased by 4 per cent annually between 2002 and 2005, expenditure has almost doubled. The number of civil servants increased from some 6 000 in 1994 to 10 000 in 2005, with their wage payouts accounting for 54 per cent of revenue. As a result of the disparity between income and expenditure, the governments were unable to pay civil service wages and by 2006 civil service wages were between four and eight months overdue on the different islands. Given that the state is the largest employer and their civil service wages are the only source of income for most Comorians, it is not surprising that political survival is informed by the urgent need to catch up on overdue salaries.

Inter-island cooperation collapsed in the run-up to the 2006 union government presidential elections because of allegations that the revenue sharing mechanism was being circumvented by some island governments (IMF 2006). Collection of custom revenues at the port of Moroni (all designated for revenue sharing) plunged before the transfer of power and the island governments complained

Have sanctions helped?

that the revenue sharing arrangement was not being honoured and they were being deprived of their shares. Anjouan ceased to participate in joint meetings and the revenues it contributed during the first months of the year were well below expectation (IMF 2006).

Those Anjouan nationalists who favoured secession were against the revenue sharing system from the start. They argued that despite the fact that Anjouan was the economic nerve centre of the country; the only Anjouans who were benefiting from its riches were the corrupt political elites residing in the capital on Grand Comore. The Anjouan political and economic elite see a federal framework as a way out of their economic malaise and they regard any attempt to reduce the powers of the federated islands as an economic threat to Anjouan.

With the advent of political liberalisation the need for a federation became increasingly important to the Anjouan political elite. They were willing to accept a centralised government as long as they could play the dominant role, as was the case under the presidency of Ahmed Abdallah. However, they feared that because of Anjouan's inferior demographic strength, the advent of multiparty elections would entail the concentration of power in Moroni and that Anjouan would then also lose out on the distribution of the country's wealth. It is within this context that secession or a loose federation was perceived as a way to ensure Anjouan's political and economic survival.

From the above it should be clear that the present crisis in Comoros is a contest for political dominance between elitist groups who see their interest being sustained within the framework of centralisation and those who favour a loose federation. Sambu and Bacar are merely point persons in this contest. It should be noted that President Sem Mohamed Abdoulohabu of Grand Comore and Mohamed Ali Said of Mohéli are collaborators of Sambu and favour closer collaboration amongst the islands.

It is against this backdrop that smart sanctions were instituted by the AU, which targeted the economic wealth of the Anjouan political and economic elites as a measure to force them to reach a compromise solution.

After Colonel Mohamed Bacar's disputed election as president of Anjouan, the AU imposed targeted sanctions on the illegal Anjouan political leadership on 10 October 2007, to force them to hold a fresh election on the island. The sanctions included restrictions on their freedom of movement and freezing their financial assets. The onus of implementing the sanctions was placed on a follow-up mechanism, made up of two members of the Peace and Security Council (Angola and Senegal), as well as representatives of the countries of the region, the AU's Electoral and Security Assistance Mission (MAES), troop-contributing countries, the government of the Union of the Comoros, and the AU Commission. The sanctions have been renewed twice; first on 26 November 2007 for a period of 60 days and again on 21 January, for a period of one month.

There is little doubt that the effect of the sanctions has been mild at best, but it does seem to have changed the political sentiment in the Comoros in favour of the AU and the union government. Because the UN has endorsed the sanctions, the AU is firmly entrenched as a power broker in the conflict. Therefore it is imperative that the AU find a solution to the crisis rather than leaving the belligerents to sort it out themselves. Any unilateral decision or attempt by the parties, be it military or diplomatic, to solve the crisis will have a negative impact on the already bruised reputation of the AU.

Moreover, while the illegal Anjouan political leadership has not fragmented, their rhetoric and strategy have changed. For example, they are now arguing that they can only hold fresh elections concurrently with the other two islands (Hull 2007). This marks a significant change from their previous position that Bacar was elected legitimately and that a new election was not even an issue. The mere fact that they now agree to hold elections, albeit conditionally, is evidence that the

sanctions are having an effect and are perceived as a political threat by the illegal Anjouan regime. It has also exposed the extreme tactics that the regime will use to hold onto power, for it has embarked on a campaign to eliminate political opponents perceived to be sympathetic to the union government. While this is evidence that the regime is feeling the heat of the sanctions, only time will tell how long it will be able to hold out against smart sanctions and world opinion.

Though the Anjouan leadership may have changed their position and strategy, this is not reflected in a change in their interests: politicians negotiate interests not positions. As such, the leadership can negotiate every aspect of the crisis except their hold on power and access to economic resources. This to some extent explains why they have repeatedly flaunted smart sanctions, thus rendering them ineffective (Amir 2008). A second reason for the ineffectiveness of the sanctions is the lack of capacity of the AU to monitor and implement them. For example, the MAES has little or no capacity to ensure a sustainable naval blockage of Anjouan.

In view of the stake and interests of the Anjouan regime, it is unrealistic to expect the present regime of targeted sanctions to force the illegal Anjouan authority to hold a free and fair election which they are not sure of winning. The principal strength of the illegal Anjouan authority is to a large extent its military and its economic prowess. Thus the sanctions should not be regarded as a means in themselves, but rather as part of a process to pressurise the regime to come to the negotiation table or hold new elections.

President Mohamed Bacar

Mohamed Bacar, a French-trained policeman who became chief of police, is the illegal president of Anjouan. He was elected in 2002 after participating in the coup on the island to overthrow Colonel Said Abeid in 2001. His principal objective is to hold on to power as long as possible to retain access to the economic resources of Anjouan. Though he is considered to be an Anjouan nationalist who prefers to remain within the union, he is undoubtedly playing the nationalist card as a means of bolstering his eroding support base. His support has waned partly because of economic mismanagement and allegations of patrimonialism, but more importantly because of his inability to pay civil service salaries consistently and his repressive leadership style. However, he commands the total loyalty of the security forces he helped build during his first tenure as president and as the former chief of police in Anjouan he has personal ties with the security forces, which are now headed by his brother Abdou.

President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi

Sambi is known to favour a re-structured federal framework to govern the Comoros. He is of the opinion that it is 'absurd' that a small country like the Comoros be run by 'four presidents, four parliaments and has four separate armies'. Sambi argues that such a framework is expensive. He also criticises the organic law that competency be split between the union and the islands, which in his opinion 'generates a paralysis of the state and weighs heavily on the initiatives of the government of the union'. It is well known that the presidents of Grande Comore and Mohéli support Sambi, which means that Bacar is the only remaining stumbling block in the way of restructuring the government along federal lines.

Any restructuring of the federal framework would benefit the central government – and by extension Sambi until such time as he is obliged to step down in favour of a candidate from Mohéli in 2010. Even if Sambi's proposed military intervention into Anjouan is successful, it will have to be followed by presidential elections in Anjouan. Sambi will have to negotiate with such a president and the Anjouan legislature in order to bring about a constitutionally sanctioned restructuring process.⁵

Sambi seems to have the support of the international community, and specifically African states and members of the Arab League (particularly Iran). This support gives him leverage with regard to any internationally mediated settlement.

However, at the moment he seems to be bent on using the military option to solve the crisis once and for all. Although he does seemingly command public support for his intervention, the question is whether the union government has the capacity to unleash legitimate violence on the illegal Anjouan regime? Other questions are: why is the union government so set on a military option, particularly as Anjouan has twice bested the union government? Are they so confident of victory because they have been promised military support by allies? Is talk of war merely a ploy to increase pressure on the international community, and specifically the AU, to adopt a more robust approach to resolving the crisis?

On the face of it the union government seems to be confident and militarily prepared to invade Anjouan, and it would seem that only South African diplomacy stands in the way of a military collision in the archipelago.

South Africa

Pretoria's involvement in the Comoros dates back to the days of apartheid and international isolation.⁶ During this period the Comoros, together with Bob Denard, provided military assistance to South Africa in its fight against anti-apartheid movements in Southern Africa (Alwathi 2003). Also, the Comoros occupies a geostrategic position with regard to sea and air transport as it lies along a vital sea route (the Mozambique Channel between the African mainland and Madagascar) through which goods pass on their way to and from the Cape of Good Hope (Mukonoweshuro 1990). Apart from its strategic position, Comoros provides a market for South African investments; South African construction and tourism companies have made inroads into the Comorian economy and South African exports to Comoros totalled about R57,3 million in 2006 and R65 million in 2007 while imports amounted to some R889 000 in 2006 and R879 000 in 2007 (Mpofu 2007).

South Africa thus has a keen interest in Comoros, and is the main African player in the Comorian crisis. It is the AU co-ordinator of the regional sub-committee on the Comoros, and seems to favour a diplomatic approach to resolving the crisis rather than the military option. Pretoria's position is understandable if one considers that military intervention might in the short term have a detrimental effect on its economic interests in Comoros and such an intervention could require South African military assistance. In view of its own economic situation at present, South Africa would be unwilling to make a military commitment, however.

France

French manipulated the 1974 referendum to hold on to Mayotte and it would like to retain some influence on the country and region as a whole. When the 1974 referendum was held to decide whether the Comoros would accede to independence or remain under France, the initial arrangement was that the results of all four islands would be totalled. The total votes were 95 per cent in favour of independence while 5 per cent wanted to remain with France. France then suggested that a new round of voting be held, with the results shown separately by island to determine the wishes of each island's population. The 5 per cent represented a large proportion of the inhabitants of Mayotte. The Mahoran Popular Movement, which is based in Mayotte, and France based their decision that Mayotte remain under French rule on article 53, paragraph 3, of the French constitution of 1958, which stipulates that 'no cessation, no exchange, no addition of territory shall be valid without the consent of the population concerned' (Pahlavi 2002). Today, Mayotte is still under French rule despite international condemnation and the recognition by some French policymakers such as Michel Rocard⁷ as far back as 2000 that continued French rule was 'illegal' in terms of international law (Alwathi 2003).

As the former colonial master, France wields considerable influence in Comorian politics. During the secession crisis in 1997 France tacitly backed the separatist movement, as is evident from the fact that Anjouan separatists used Mayotte for

logistical support (Alwathi 2003). Moreover, in view of the historical and cultural ties between France and Comoros, it would be logical to speculate that some of the financial assets of the Anjouan regime are in France. Anjouan is situated very close to Mayotte, which means that AU sanctions can only have their desired effect if France plays a positive role in implementing the sanctions.

Comoros is of little economic interest to France but of some strategic importance. During the Cold War France maintained a military base on Mayotte to support its military operations in the Indian Ocean. France also maintained a 'surveillance and interception' satellite complex fundamental to its international operations on Mayotte (Alwathi 2003). While France does not seem to be directly involved in the Comorian crisis, continuation of the crisis definitely reduces pressure on France to hand over Mayotte to Comoros. Ironically, though, the present crisis in Comoros has increased migration to Mayotte and subsequently to France, which as in turn put increased pressure on the French social security system, an issue that has proved divisive in France itself.

So far France has not been directly involved in the crisis. Rather, its strategy has been to use La Francophonie (an international organisation of French-speaking countries and governments) to accommodate its interests. For example, La Francophonie, through the backing of France and other Western donors, provided the financial resources to help the transition to peace after the secessionist attempts in 1997 (Alwathi 2003).

Tanzania

Tanzanians form part of the ethnic make-up of Comoros. Furthermore, the Comorian independence movement started not in Comoros but among Comorian expatriates in Tanzania who founded the National Liberation Movement of Comoros (*Mouvement de la libération nationale des Comores*) in 1962. The election of President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete as the new AU chairman and the fact that Tanzania is a member of the Ministerial Committee on Comoros, further increase Tanzania's interests in the Comorian crisis. Against this background it is understandable that Tanzania feels it has an obligation to contribute to peace and security in the archipelago. Success in solving the crisis would also bolster the diplomatic credentials of Kikwete as chairman of the AU.

The United States

The US's involvement in the Comoros is relatively new. It is, however, understandable in view of the Comoros' strategic position in the Indian Ocean and in relation to the Middle East. It may also be informed by the US 'war on terror' as Fazul Abdullah Mohammed (who is still wanted by the US for his role in the bombings of American embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi on 7 August 1998) is a Comorian citizen.

On the eve of a ministerial meeting of countries of the region to review the situation and submit recommendations on the way forward, there can be no doubt every move by the union government and the illegal Anjouan regime would be geared towards influencing these recommendations. The following are possible scenarios.

Inter-Comorian dialogue

The Anjouan regime is calling for internal dialogue, observed by the AU, but the union government does not seem keen on the idea. To stand any chance of success, an internal dialogue must proceed from the premise that there are common grounds, but the positions of the Anjouan regime and union government are diametrically opposed to each other. The union government is in urgent need of economic resources while the Anjouan regime needs some form of legitimacy. These two positions could hardly be reconciled, given that any attempt at controlling Anjouan would require some form of popular legitimacy and a friendly government. The illegal Anjouan regime cannot deliver on this. Likewise it would be political suicide for the union government to legitimise the present Anjouan regime in any form.

Considering its international support, the union government is aware that any negotiation within a multilateral framework would strengthen its hand at the negotiation table. Moreover, any attempt at negotiation would lend the Anjouan regime a measure of legitimacy. For the time being, the union government feels it has the upper hand, so why negotiate with a regime that is on the back foot?

However, the union government may be prepared to participate if the Anjouan regime drops its condition that elections be held on Mohéli and Grande Comore at the same time. By this condition the Anjouan regime are casting doubt on the legitimacy of the other presidents, and it is also a strategy to put a strain on the relations between the presidents of Mohéli and Grande Comore and the union government. The union government is also likely to agree to a dialogue if it is assured of reaching its goal of a friendly government on Anjouan, by means of such negotiations. The third condition for a dialogue to a large extent depends on how willing the union government is to back down from its militaristic stance. Having favoured war for some time now and with popular support for war, if might be a costly political gesture for Sambani if the union government abandons this stance in favour of internal dialogue without saving face in some way.

All-out war

During the months leading up to the tenth AU summit, the union government threatened to go to war. This could signal its intent to implement a military option or an attempt at playing up the stakes of the crisis. Talk of war by the union government is a striking example of brinkmanship diplomacy aimed at increasing the seriousness of the crisis in order to force a speedy solution. If one assumes that the union government is bent on exercising the military option, intent does not necessarily equate to the capacity to carry through the threat of war. As Bacar has pointed out, the union government has tried this before and received a beating from the renegade island. However, while it would on the face of it seem as if the union is using the threat of war as a diplomatic tool or that it is unlikely to win such a war, this does not mean that the union government is not serious about it. Its organisation of a mass rally indicates that the union government was soliciting consent for war and at the same time were preparing the population for such an eventuality.

In addition, it seems likely that, within the AU and the international community, there are some states that would be prepared to provide military support for the union government. This could explain why, despite being militarily weaker than Anjouan, the union government seems to be confident of a military success.

Bacar has argued that the sanctions have radicalised the illegal Anjouan regime, which begs the question: Is it possible that war could lead to secession?

Secession

Bacar is known to be a nationalist who favours a loose union with the other islands. Nonetheless, Anjouan has attempted to secede previously, and it may possibly try to do so again. Any attempts at secession will definitely infuriate the international community, and especially the AU, which has as one its basic principles the inviolability of international borders. Secession would certainly force most moderate states within the AU to take a more radical stance. Moreover, secession would strengthen the hand of the union government since the union constitution clearly forbids any unilateral change of internationally recognised borders. Against this backdrop it seems unlikely that the illegal Anjouan regime would choose to secede from the union. However, a military confrontation could result in some pronouncement on the issue by the Anjouan leadership.

Military sanctions by the African Union

The question now is whether the AU, whose economic sanctions have so far failed to achieve the desired results, should impose military sanctions. South Africa, which is the only African country with the capacity and means to sustain

a military intervention, prefers a diplomatic resolution to the crisis, however. A military solution will also depend on the support of troop-contributing countries like Senegal and members of the Ministerial Committee⁸ like Tanzania, but most importantly support from the Arab league.

For the time being, the AU seems not to have the means and political will to impose a military solution on the crisis. The AU military capacity is stretched as it is, nor does it have the financial means to implement such an option.

Continuation of the status quo

The most likely option at present is that the status quo of no war, no peace, will continue until the Ministerial Committee makes its recommendations. Certainly, both the illegal regime in Anjouan and the union government would wait for these recommendations before they make any moves. The recommendations will therefore be a critical juncture in the conflict. The only problem is that the union government cannot afford to wait too long, because a recently negotiated US\$30 million bail-out that would lead to substantial debt cancellation is contingent on political stability in the Comores.

Coup in Anjouan

While the illegal Anjouan regime is firmly entrenched at present, the possibility of a coup should never be discounted. The regime is not a homogenous entity devoid of rivalry, and infighting on Anjouan is not unheard of. In 1998 there was enmity between the self-proclaimed president, Foundi Abdallah Ibrahim, and his chief minister, Chamasse Said Omar, and also between Colonel Said Abeid and Ahmed Mohamed Kokignon. The 2001 coup on Anjouan points to the fact that various competing interested parties on the island have capitalised on chaos and uncertainty about the future to further their own interests. Although Bacar commands the loyalty of the security forces now, this situation could change. In fact, the recent spate of human rights abuses amongst the middle class and political elite on Anjouan could be interpreted as a measure by Bacar to eliminate his political opponents and in so doing avert the possibility of a coup. While a coup and eventual disintegration of the illegal regime might complicate the crisis, it might also provide an opportunity for resolving it, but only if the moderates within Anjouan are the victors.

The African Union

Expand and intensify sanctions

The AU should expand sanctions to include sales of military hardware. This would greatly diminish the military might of Anjouan, on which its leadership have so often relied. It is important that the AU identify local and international businesses that are supporting the regime and sanction them, too. However, if the sanctions are to be effective, it is imperative that the capacity of MAES be enhanced to sustain its implementation and monitoring role. It will also serve to increase the AU's presence and visibility in the country and send an unequivocal signal that the AU is running out of patience with the Anjouan regime.

However, the sanctions will only be effective if states like France, which have strong economic and historical ties with the archipelago, come on board.

The AU should implement a robust campaign to ensure that the Anjouan and Comorian population realise that the sanctions are aimed against the regime and not the population.

Military intervention

For the time being, military intervention is not a viable option as all diplomatic options have not yet been exploited. Furthermore, military intervention will have high diplomatic, human and financial cost implications for the AU, which it can ill afford. Military sanctions could play into the hands of Bacar, by serving to mobilise

the people to his nationalist rhetoric. Besides, any sustained military intervention in the country will have to be followed by a robust reconstruction effort, which neither the AU nor the union government can afford. Nonetheless, it is an option that will remain, depending on the trajectory of the conflict and the results of diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

The union and Anjouan governments

It is important that the union government tone down its war rhetoric. But most importantly, it should avoid military confrontation and try to work within a multilateral framework. The regime in Anjouan should unconditionally accept a rerun of the elections and stop its human rights abuses.

The international community

With an external debt estimated at 72 per cent of its GDP official development assistance, on which the country is heavily dependent, plunged from around US\$60 million per year in 1990 to US\$25 million in 2005 (IRIN 2008c). This dire financial situation has put the country in a very precarious position and threatens the stability of the union government which is now unable to deliver the necessary services to enhance human security. The US debt bail-out has gone a long way towards easing the Comoros' payment arrears and has also opened the door to re-engagement with the international community, and the bigger potential prize of debt cancellation. However, it is imperative that this process be fast-tracked to improve the human security situation in the country and reduce the political pressure on the union government for an urgent solution to the crisis.

The international community should condemn the human rights abuses of the illegal Anjouan leadership and express concern about the human rights situation in the country. Such a condemnation will put them in the defensive, increase pressure to find a solution and most probably give the AU the moral high ground for further punitive action.

Within the context of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UN, too, should express its concern about the continuation of the crisis and human rights abuses in Anjouan. This will provide political cover for AU action and put pressure on the Anjouan regime.

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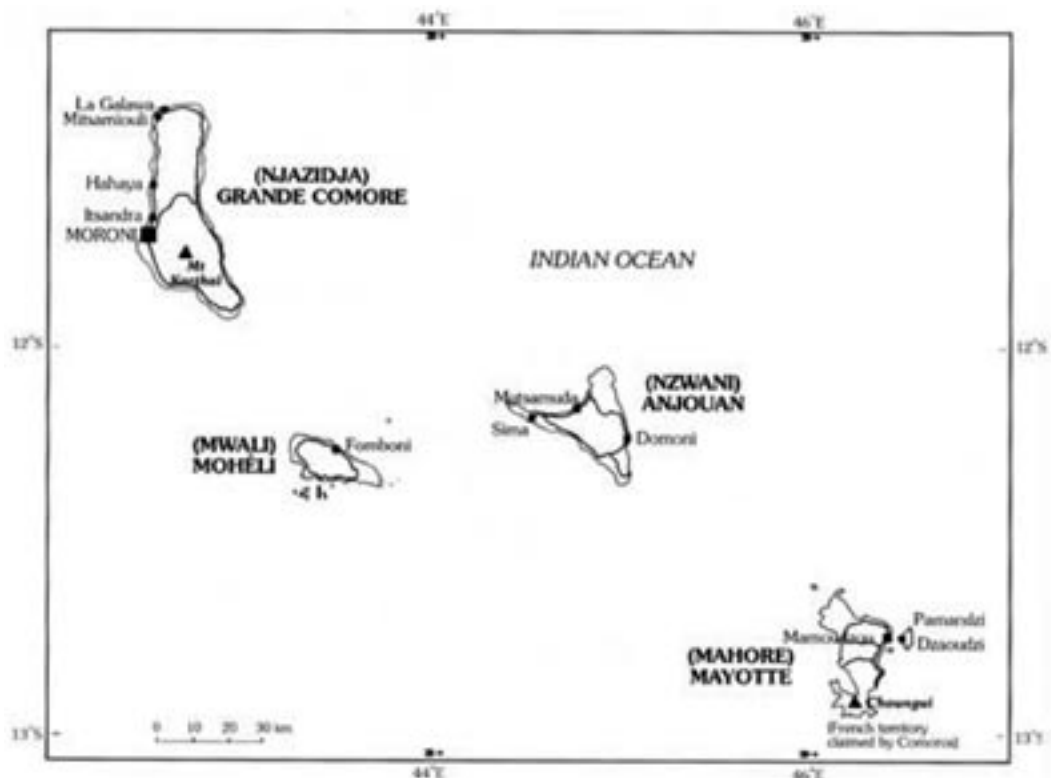
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- 1 Comoros still considers Mayotte to be part of its territory. Article 1 of the Comoros constitution states that Comoros is a republic composed of four autonomous islands: Anjouan, Grande Comore, Mohéli and Mayotte.
 - 2 Mohame Abdouloihebi won the elections in Grand Comore, while Mohamed Ali Said won in Mohéli.
 - 3 In terms of article 31 of the constitution, the constitutional court is the highest judge on the constitutionality of the union government and islands. Election issues fall within its competence.
 - 4 For a history of political instability in Comoros, see Cornwell 1998.
 - 5 See article 37 of the constitution, which deals with constitutional change.
 - 6 For a succinct analysis of apartheid and South Africa's interest in the Comoros see Mukonoweshuro 1990.
 - 7 Michel Rocard was a former French socialist prime minister under President François Mitterrand.
 - 8 The Ministerial Committee is made up of the foreign ministers of South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and the Seychelles.