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Prevention of Secessionist Movements in a Micro-State: The International Mediation in the Comoro Islands

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Several events that shaped the future of many countries around the world occurred in 1975. In South-East Asia, for example, Indonesia led a military occupation of an island that later became the independent nation of East-Timor. In Europe, Spain decided to withdraw from Western Sahara, a move that started one of the longest conflicts in Africa. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning wave of independence that characterized Africa in the 1960-1970 period, the Comoro Islands unilaterally declared its independence from France on July 6, 1975.

The 1970s were also, for Africa, the years of growing political and ideological struggles against the backdrop of the Cold War, and the collapse of the European colonial empires. From East to West Africa, the United States and the Soviet Union exercised their influence toward African nations such as Somalia and Liberia to demonstrate their power and protect their interests. European empires, for their part, consolidated their postindependence influence over their former colonies. While Great Britain designed political and economic frameworks in its former colonial territories, for example in Sierra Leone, France initiated a post-colonial framework that became the seeds for protracted conflicts in some of its former colonies. The “incomplete” independence of the Comoros is a good illustration. Consequent to the referendum on independence held in 1974 in the Comoros, France decided to “keep” Mayotte, the fourth island that composes the Comoros. This was an unprecedented political move against the international principle of “uti possidetis” that guides the United Nations’ decolonization process. This process guarantees the new nation states the territorial sovereignty inherited from colonizers. After 25 years of economic decline and political failures by the Comorian leadership, France’s decision represented the central argument for the secessionist movement that erupted in 1997 in the Comorian island of Anjouan.

Several external actors got involved in the emerging conflict as mediators. As a member state of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the government of the Comoros requested the continental body to take a leading role in the mediation. As a French -speaking country, the Comoros is a member of the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF). Under the strong influence of the former colonial power, the OIF became involved in the mediation. As the sole economic partner of the Comoros, France played a key and, sometimes controversial, role in the overall mediation.

Scholars in the field of peace and conflict resolution have identified a multitude of complex variables characteristic to protracted conflicts. Without pretending to tackle all of the issues in the secessionist movement in Anjouan, and against the backdrop of a multi-layered mediation, this paper analyzes the ongoing crisis in the Comoro Islands. The first section provides the background and examines the events that led to the conflict. The second part assesses the external actors’ involvement in the mediation and their efforts toward ending the conflict. The third segment of the paper discusses some of the outcomes of the international mediation. Finally, the last section describes a few of the problems in the implementation of the negotiated framework and their implications.

Background

The Comoros archipelago is made up of the islands of Anjouan, Mayotte, Grande-Comore and Moheli. With an approximate total population of 600,000 scattered over some 1,900 square kilometers, and a Gross National per capita Income (GNI) of \$370,¹ the Comoros is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the

world.² The islands are located in the Mozambique Channel in East Africa, a crossroad of several cultures and a strategic trade route in earlier centuries. Thus, the population, culture and religion of the Comoros reflect an amazing ethnic diversity that combines elements from Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as from Asia and the Arab peninsula. The majority of the population is Muslim and practices a Sunni-based faith of Islam. In July 1975, Ahmed Abdallah, one of the country's political leaders, unilaterally declared the independence of the Comoros amid intense political struggle within a split national leadership and the influence of a colonial power. The tensions focused around the turnout of the December 1974 referendum when the Comorian people of all four islands were asked whether to remain under French administration or ascend to political

sovereignty. The voters overwhelmingly chose independence.³ However, there were internal divisions among the Comorian political parties prior to the referendum because some of them thought the country was politically and economically not ready for such a move. Aided by this disagreement, the French government through a constitutional strategy managed to influence the political leadership on the island of Mayotte and succeeded in maintaining the island under French rule.⁴ Using the argument that the majority of voters on that island voted against independence, the French government decided to express the overall result of the referendum on an island-by-island basis rather than following the rule of "uti possidetis."⁵ Despite this unprecedented colonial ruling, the United Nations (UN) formally welcomed and recognized the new nation based on its colonial territorial borders. The UN resolution admitting the membership of the Comoros "reaffirmed the necessity of respecting the unity and territorial integrity of the Comoro Archipelago, composed of the islands of Anjouan, Grande-Comore, Mayotte and Moheli."⁶ Entangled in the political and institutional imbroglio created by the ambiguous decision on Mayotte, the newborn nation was soon to experience its first post-independence challenge.

Almost a month after the declaration of independence, Ali Soilih took power in a coup d'état led by the infamous French mercenary Bob Denard. Soilih's revolutionary and anti-colonial position characterized his three-year regime which only resulted in alienating the Comorian traditional and political leadership, as well as the French government, and consequent to the pull-out of colonial development assistance, leading the country through a stringent economic decline. Denard, under the orders of Ahmed Abdallah, staged another coup in May 1978 and put Abdallah back in power. Since 1978 the Comoros endorsed a decentralized system of government and became the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros with a constitution that included all four islands in spite of the de facto administration of the island of Mayotte by the French government. Throughout the following decade the country struggled for development, which revolved around the production of vanilla and ylang-ylang oil, the only cash crops on the islands. At the same time, the issue of the loss of sovereignty over Mayotte got the support of the UN. Since 1975, the "Question of the Comorian island of Mayotte," has become part of the UN agenda during each session of General Assembly annual meetings, whose resolutions encouraged the governments of Comoros and France to continue talks aimed at settling their dispute over Mayotte.⁷

During the Cold War, it seemed France's interests in Mayotte was to maintain a military base to support its military operations in the Indian Ocean.⁸ On Mayotte, France also maintained a "surveillance and interception" satellite complex fundamental to its international operations.⁹

Until his assassination in 1989, President Abdallah ruled the country with a heavily centralized, personalized and corrupt administration while Denard provided the essential tools for political repression.¹⁰ Together, they controlled most sectors of the economy and monopolized the meager resources of the country,¹¹ while they funneled some benefits to a small group of people close to the president. Additionally, political freedom was curtailed and human rights abuses were frequently reported.¹² The pair could not have consolidated their political and economic powers without the tacit support of France, Comoros' main bilateral partner, and the South African apartheid regime. Indeed, it is reported that Denard, who had introduced the South African regime to the Comoros, provided military support to the South African army in its fight against anti-apartheid movements in Southern Africa.¹³ African leaders and the rest of the world frequently condemned the presence of Denard and his group of mercenaries in the Comoros' affairs.¹⁴ Between 1978 and 1990, the Comoros' economic decline resulted in an unparalleled impoverishment of a large portion of the population especially on the densely populated island of Anjouan.¹⁵ Global events by the end of 1989 were a turning point for Abdallah's reign.

The end of the Cold War, the persistent calls from Western donors for democratization, and the striking turn of events in South Africa following the release of Nelson Mandela were the harbingers for a new political era in

the Comoros. A shift in foreign policy in France and South Africa resulted in the two countries combining their leverage and set the ground for ousting Denard from the Comoros in December 1989, against the backdrop of President Abdallah's assassination.¹⁶

After a short transition period during which Comoros' bilateral and multi-lateral partners provided financial and logistical support for the 1990 presidential elections, Said Mohamed Djohar was elected president for a five-year term. Although his election represented a new era for the advent of democracy in the country, several financial scandals and rampant corruption tarnished his tenure.¹⁷

To the surprise of many observers, Denard reappeared and staged a coup d'état in 1995, aimed at removing Djohar from power. However, unlike his previous coups, which France had tacitly endorsed¹⁸, this time France decided to activate a defense agreement that it had secured with the Comoros since 1978. Indeed, France conducted an impressive military operation to confront Denard and his group of foreign mercenaries who managed to hold the country's political and military leadership hostage for several weeks. After heavy exposure in international media that lasted several days, France's troops took Denard into custody, thus opening another political vacuum in the country.

The outcome of the March 1996 elections, which the international community monitored, brought Mohamed Taki as the new president. This veteran politician, who spent most of his time in exile in France during the Abdallah regime, installed a more centralized and corrupt system of government than his predecessor. Moreover, the economy continued to stagnate as government expenditures reached critically high levels and foreign aid declined. In 1997, social movements began to rise, against which Taki's regime usually responded violently.¹⁹ By July, ingredients were in place that encouraged the island of Anjouan to declare its secession from the central government. Indeed, as the French celebrated July 14, the political leadership in Anjouan decided to raise the French flag in Mutsamudu, the capital of Anjouan, the same day, and proclaimed its "independence" accompanied by a special request to be "re-attached" to France.²⁰

It is important to note that this notion of "re-attachment" used by the separatist leaders demonstrated the economic motivations behind the political movement. Indeed, Anjouan is geographically closer to Mayotte, thus has historically had closer links and frequent social and economic exchanges with the French administered island more than the remaining islands. As such, Anjouan, since independence, has been directly exposed to the relative economic prosperity of Mayotte, which France has subsidized since 1975. In fact, thousands of people from Anjouan have lost their lives in attempts to reach Mayotte through frail fishing boats, as they searched for an income.²¹ The promise of a better life was the best propaganda the secessionist leaders of Anjouan found to gain the support of an impoverished population.²²

Faced with this embarrassment of re-colonizing a former territory, France joined the international community to condemn the secession of Anjouan. In addition, France decided to support the mediation efforts led by the OAU whose representative in Moroni had found the secession "unacceptable."²³ The regional organization thus began to experience one of its most challenging conflict resolution efforts since its experience in Chad in the 1970s.

The External Actors

The multitude of external mediators since the inception of the crisis has complicated the conflict and the few successes achieved along the way. At the forefront of the mediation, the OAU, armed with its sacrosanct right of sovereignty²⁴ was prompt to give the issue a priority. It activated its conflict prevention mechanism and dispatched an assessment team to Moroni, the capital of Comoros, immediately after the declaration of the secession in Anjouan.²⁵ It seems the initial OAU efforts were to identify the main conflicting party in Anjouan with which to initiate negotiations. This proved challenging because the secessionist movement had also started to split along provincial lines within the island. Indeed, there were those who favored a dialogue with the central government in Moroni and self-declared "President" Foundi Abdallah Ibrahim, while others took a hard line stance and still called for the "re-attachment" to France. Nonetheless, the series of succeeding events, including the decision of France to get involved in the mediation, would further hamper the OAU's efforts in the following years.

Given France's historical role in shaping the Comorian political framework after 1978, evidenced by its support provided to maintain the corrupt regime of Abdallah and his mercenaries,²⁶ it may seem odd that France took a

role in the mediation. In fact, the conflict, in some ways, was a direct consequence of French foreign policy in that region of the world.²⁷

However, several factors seem to have influenced the French government's inclination toward such a decision. Such factors include the backers of the separatist movement using Mayotte for logistical support; the calls from the European Union (EU) requesting France to clarify the political status of Mayotte; and the important position of France as the Comoros' sole economic partner.²⁸ France, therefore, took a significant and controversial role in the mediation that seemed, at some point, to overpower the OAU's responsibility. Yet, by refraining from taking a direct role, France seemingly managed to impose a third external actor who implicitly channeled the views of the French government.²⁹

The OIF, under the supervision of its former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, became very active in the crisis in the Comoros. Its expertise proved essential in the crafting of the institutional framework of the future state of the Comoros in the aftermath of the peacemaking phase of the conflict. For sure, the OIF, through the backing of France and other western donors, brought in the financial resources needed to prepare the transition. As such, the OIF, since the constitutional referendum of December 2001, has been the key player in shaping the Union of the Comoros. Regardless of the role each of these external actors was to play, they all faced multiple setbacks in the mediation.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU)

The OAU's efforts were first hindered in December 1997 when the central government in Moroni launched a military invasion to quell the Anjouanese rebellion. The attack turned out to be a disaster for the loyalist army because the Anjouanese secessionists had consolidated their military power under former French army officers.³⁰ In fact, one of them, Colonel Abeid, would later become the second self-declared "president" of Anjouan. This event represented the first "slap" at the OAU, whose representative in the Comoros at that time did not hesitate to call the intervention a "debacle."³¹ This resulted in reinforcing the hard-line stance of the secessionist leaders in Anjouan, who had created and heavily armed several militias that controlled the divided provinces of the island. Despite these hitches, the OAU continued its mediation, which the Anjouanese viewed as biased.³² The OAU experienced several blockades, even when its delegates tried to physically meet the secessionist leaders.

A second element that hampered the OAU from gaining the Anjouanese party's confidence, was the involvement in the mediation of Michel Rocard, a former French socialist prime minister under President Francois Mitterrand. His involvement seems to have encouraged the secessionist leadership to reinforce its claim of independence. At the peak of the crisis, in April 1998, Rocard under the auspices of the European Union, of which he was a member of parliament, traveled to Anjouan with the goal of bridging the gap between its divided leaders and the central government. Although the separatist leaders welcomed his action, nothing concrete came out of this effort as the divisions among the Anjouan leadership continued to grow.³³ Nonetheless, Rocard continued to play a significant, although behind-the-scenes, role in the mediation. In fact, he was instrumental in crafting the first OAU-brokered agreement, as he acted as an advisor to the regional body.³⁴

A third element that further complicated the crisis was the sudden death of President Taki in November 1998. A few days after returning from a trip abroad, the president died of natural causes. To avoid a political vacuum that could have been detrimental to international community efforts since the outset of the crisis, an interim government was put in place. Headed by Tadjidine Ben Said Masonde, a moderate politician, it included the majority of the opposition parties with the aim of strengthening the dialogue with the separatist leaders in Anjouan.

In the meantime, the disintegration of the separatist movement in Anjouan continued. Rivalry between the self-proclaimed president Foundi Abdallah Ibrahim and his chief minister Chamasse Said Omar reached a peak when their militias clashed in December 1998. The fighting claimed about 60 victims³⁵ with some 10,000 people fleeing the capital of Anjouan.³⁶ To some observers and scholars, such as I. William Zartman, this might have been the "mutually hurting stalemate"³⁷ of the crisis and could have called for the presence of a buffer force. Yet, the interim government in Moroni, fearing an escalation in the fighting, demanded that the OAU take full responsibility in the crisis. As the interim president said, "the role of mediator lies with the OAU, not with France, which has sometimes been accused of interference. But France can also help with mediation."³⁸ In

the statement, the interim president was referring to various humanitarian movements of people and supplies³⁹ between Mayotte and Anjouan, and also the tacit logistical support the separatist leaders received through backers of their movement based in Mayotte.⁴⁰ The OAU had already dispatched an assessment team, composed of military officials from nearby countries including Madagascar, Mauritius, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and South Africa, to “evaluate the situation in Anjouan.”⁴¹

Despite these setbacks and in the absence of a key authority in Anjouan with whom dialogue could take place, the OAU continued to meet with the central government as well as with political parties and members of civil society from all three islands. It initiated a multi-track diplomacy with Comoros’ multi- and bilateral partners including the European Union, the Arab League, the Indian Ocean Commission, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, most of whom had backed the OAU’s mediation efforts. These efforts resulted in several meetings in Addis Ababa during which representatives from each island, including the separatist leaders from Anjouan, agreed on several discussion points that would enable the OAU to organize a reconciliation conference in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, in April 1999.

The conference resulted in the “Antananarivo Accord,” a political framework under which the Comoros would be a “Union” of islands, each enjoying a broad autonomy while the union maintained responsibility for matters regarding sovereignty, defense, currency and foreign affairs.⁴² In addition, the agreement provided for an interim government, through consensus, to lead the transition period until general elections were held. For many observers inside and outside of the Comoros, this agreement represented a significant step toward ending the conflict. Some noted, however, that no one could guarantee that the institutional framework would help quell secessionist attitudes of the Comorian people.⁴³ Indeed, all delegates in Antananarivo signed the agreement except the delegation from Anjouan on the ground that they “first wanted to consult with their people.”⁴⁴ The Anjouanese leaders’ refusal immediately sparked violent demonstrations against Anjouanese in Moroni where a frustrated population expected an end to the crisis.⁴⁵

It is against the backdrop of these demonstrations that Colonel Azali Assoumani, the army chief of staff of the loyalist army, took power in a bloodless coup d’état on April 30. His argument was that the civilian government failed to intervene to stop the protests and that the national army had “to prevent the country sliding into chaos and anarchy.”⁴⁶ This was the 18th coup or attempted coup since independence in 1975. This last development represented a serious setback in the OAU’s mediation efforts as the South African government, which immediately condemned the coup noted, “We hope this is not a retrogressive step and that it will not affect the progress made.”⁴⁷ The OAU was firm in its condemnation as it was confronted with a two-faceted crisis of secessionist and institutional dimensions.⁴⁸ Interestingly, France was also firm in condemning the coup as a foreign ministry spokeswoman noted: “[France] condemns the interruption of the normal workings of legitimate institutions of the country.”⁴⁹ Yet, the new military junta vowed to assume the executive powers until the Antananarivo Accords are implemented within the intended one-year period and to “shorten” his term “as much as possible.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, at this point, the OAU decided to withdraw its Observer Mission in the Comoros (OMIC) at a time when the Comoros crucially needed it.⁵¹ Before elaborating on the roles of the other external actors, it is important briefly to evaluate the OAU’s efforts up to the coup d’état.

In terms of political accomplishments, the Antananarivo Accords can be seen as a success for the OAU because the organization dealt with several authorities in Anjouan that were internally divided. In addition, the OAU faced strong frustrations from residents of the other two islands, where some leaders took advantage of the stalemate and started to display secessionist attitudes too.⁵² Yet, the OAU managed to shift these growing political frustrations, thus preventing a splitting of the islands that could have led to an uncontrollable mediation. In addition, the general population saw the hard-line positions of the Anjouanese leaders as the real obstacle to reaching peace.⁵³ The failure of preventing the deadly clashes in Anjouan in December 1998, the first time the Comoros has ever experienced such bloody events, traumatized most of the Comorian people and made international observers aware of the urgency of the situation in that country. Yet, the OMIC, despite its mandate and the financial support provided for the mission, seemed to have lacked some of the prerequisites, such as securing a ceasefire, impartiality, and an assurance of its peacekeepers’ safety, that experts identify as essential for a successful peacekeeping.⁵⁴

Securing a ceasefire in Anjouan at the height of the December 1998 clashes seemed like a hazardous and dangerous task for the OMIC. Indeed, the physical location of Mutsamudu, the capital of Anjouan, where a faction of the secessionist movement (Abdallah’s who accepted OAU’s mediation) was headquartered, complicated the OAU’s tasks. Indeed, the capital was located a few miles from Ouani airport but its main

entrance was through the town of Mirontsi, which was controlled by rival militias supporting Chamasse, who favored “re-attachment” with France. In this situation, even a face-to-face meeting with stakeholders in Anjouan was a serious challenge, which sometimes put the OAU in a humiliating position. For example, an OAU delegation was forced to ride in a vehicle that displayed the French flag.⁵⁵

Since its involvement in the crisis in August 1997, the OAU’s neutrality was constantly questioned by the separatist leaders, and later by the military junta in Moroni. The Anjouanese leaders could not tolerate the OAU’s insistence of guaranteeing Comoros’ sovereignty, which they interpreted as biased. Moreover, confidence and trust between the separatist leaders and officials from the Comorian government on the one hand, and the international community on the other, had suffered significantly from the failed military intervention of President Taki in December 1997. Under these circumstances, had the OAU chosen to deploy any peacekeepers to separate the warring factions in Anjouan, securing their safety would have been a challenging task.

A few days after the coup, Azali promulgated a new constitution and consolidated his power. In a swearing-in ceremony that France and the OAU refused to attend, he was declared president of the Comoros on May 6, and pledged to implement the Antananarivo Accords and lead the country “up to the end of transition.”⁵⁶ Almost at the same time, militia leaders in Anjouan appointed former French Army Lieutenant Colonel Said Abeid, an adviser of Foundi Abdallah, as mediator to settle their differences.⁵⁷ However, the divisions among the Anjouanese factions grew stronger and illustrated the three opinions that prevailed in Anjouan by September 1999. One group called for independence, another favored the return to the central government rule, and the last one encouraged their leaders to sign the Antananarivo agreement.⁵⁸

The period from May to December 1999 was rich in events both in Anjouan and on Grande Comore. In Moroni, fueled by a growing nationalistic sentiment and channeled through some political groups on Grande-Comore, demonstrations against the people of Anjouan continued. At the same time, Azali’s regime launched a repressive campaign against many opposition parties and attempted to curtail freedom of information. A prominent Comorian correspondent of Agence France Presse was arrested and jailed for a few days in October.⁵⁹ Meanwhile in Anjouan, clashes between Abeid’s militias and his opponents resurfaced forcing refugee flights toward Grande Comore and Mayotte. At the end of one particularly violent clash in September, for example, Abeid forced the leader of a rival militia, Ahmed Mohamed Kokignon, a former member of the national assembly under the federal republic, to leave Anjouan for Mayotte. ⁶⁰By the end of 1999 the OAU was facing a serious deadlock. On the one hand, in line with its charter, it refused to recognize a military regime that took power through a coup,⁶¹ and on the other, it had secured an inconclusive peace agreement that one of the conflicting parties refused to sign. The OAU’s mediation effort had reached a complete stalemate and the separatist leaders took advantage of this weakness to further consolidate their position.

In a move that surprised many observers, Abeid, in January 2000, organized a hastily prepared referendum during which voters were asked whether they wanted to remain independent or to return to the federation. The decision was aimed, according to one separatist leader, at the OAU to “refute the argument that the Anjouanese people want to sign the Antananarivo accord and that it’s their leaders who are opposed.”⁶² Not surprisingly, the OAU considered the referendum as another provocation by the separatists and was quick to condemn it, calling it “null and void.” To the satisfaction of the separatists, and not surprising since many voters were intimidated during the campaign, the majority of the voters said “no” to the Antananarivo agreement.⁶³ At this point, it seemed like the OAU decided to take a harder stance and gave an ultimatum to the Anjouanese leaders to sign the Antananarivo agreement or face a series of targeted sanctions. On February 1, the organization imposed travel and financial restrictions on the separatist leaders. At the same moment, it initiated discussions at the OAU ministerial level for the possibility to stage an OAU military intervention on Anjouan to prevent a split of the Comoros federation.⁶⁴ The increased antagonism foreshadowed serious challenges for the mediation. Abeid warned that his supporters would oppose any OAU military operation. “The people of Anjouan will not stand idly by if the OAU interferes further in Anjouan’s internal affairs,” he said.⁶⁵ Few other developments in the crisis after the OAU-imposed “smart” sanctions against Anjouan are of crucial importance.

A year after his self-proclamation as president, Azali amended the constitution in order to remain in power. On July 6, 2000, during a low-key Independence Day celebration, he announced plans to amend the constitution. The move, according to him, was to give the state council that he had presided over since his military takeover more power, and to open it to opposition parties and civil society organizations that were involved in the

national consultation under the OAU leadership.⁶⁶ In fact, the move seemed to be addressed to the OAU as it still refused to recognize the legitimacy of the military regime. For some analysts, Azali was looking forward to his participation in the 36th summit of the OAU to legitimize his regime in the international arena. But, like Côte d'Ivoire, which had experienced a coup d'état in the same year, Azali was excluded from participating in the summit.⁶⁷

By now, relations between the military regime in Moroni and the OAU created the “mutually hurting stalemate” between the conflicting parties. Both Azali and Abeid reached the point where they needed to find a common ground for serious talks, since both regimes lacked the legitimacy and economic tools that they desperately needed to face stringent and mounting internal problems. In Moroni, Azali's constitutional amendments created political confusion. In Anjouan, the OAU sanctions started to affect the secessionist leadership, since France announced its backing of the sanctions and seemed to take steps in reinforcing the OAU travel ban as the authorities in Mayotte closely monitored travel movements between Anjouan and Mayotte.⁶⁸

It is against this backdrop that Azali and Abeid announced the signature of a joint agreement, known as the Moheli Agreement in mid-August. The agreement was strongly rejected by the OAU and other political actors in the islands. The framework agreement provided for a more decentralized state, giving each island a broad autonomy. Highlighting the potential for a rise in tension that prevailed in the islands and the instability that could follow, the OAU urged the international community “to refrain from lending any support to the ongoing process and the Fomboni joint declaration, which would have the effect of undermining the unity and territorial integrity of the Comoros.”⁶⁹ Nonetheless, both Azali and Abeid were confident about the benefits their regimes would gain from making the deal. Azali needed a deal that would legitimize him in the eyes of a growing political discontent on the island of Grande Comore, where he could be viewed as the one who ended the conflict. In addition, he also needed to prove to the international community the inability of the OAU to bring the conflict to an end. In doing so, he dealt a serious blow to the mediation efforts. As he said, “The Antananarivo agreement led to an impasse. To get around it we favored the inter-Comorian dialogue.”⁷⁰

Yet, many political parties and factions in Anjouan rejected the deal. Likewise, Comorian civil society organizations also rejected the deal on the ground that the Comorian political and civil societies were not included in the Fomboni discussions. Some of the organizations initiated a petition against the agreement at the international level.⁷¹

As for Abeid, the Moheli agreement would force the OAU to remove sanctions that have constrained the Anjouanese leadership from benefiting from the meager financial resources obtained mainly through taxation of the islands' only deep-sea port. In addition, lifting the travel ban on the secessionist leadership would enable its leaders access to the valuable logistical and political support they had been enjoying from their mentors in Mayotte.⁷² However, for many observers, lifting the sanctions would also help to alleviate the social condition of the population of Anjouan, which had become the hostage of the separatists.⁷³

In the aftermath of a mounting opposition to this agreement, the Comoros was the backdrop of sustained and violent repression and human rights violations against political and social demonstrations. On Grande Comore, for example, the military violently repressed a peaceful demonstration the youth had organized to protest against the sudden rise in price of basic commodities such as gasoline.⁷⁴ Similarly, journalists were the targets of human rights abuses, as was the case in the arrest of a private radio owner, also a former member of Parliament during the now defunct federal republic, who was accused of preparing a coup d'état against the Azali regime.⁷⁵ On Anjouan, militants who opposed the Moheli agreement were arbitrarily arrested, tortured and raped.⁷⁶ A case in point is the arrest of Chamasse Said Omar, the militia leader who was in the forefront of the “reattachment” movement.⁷⁷ As political and social conditions deteriorated in the following months, a new external actor joined in the mediation.

The International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF)

Although Azali initially argued that the OIF was not to play a leading role in the mediation, to avoid overshadowing the OAU's action,⁷⁸ the OIF had spearheaded the mediation since the first visit in late 2000 to the Comoros of its special envoy André Salifou. Its initiatives, however, sometimes seemed controversial in the eyes of many observers. Some analysts saw the influence of France over this organization as a bias that could

undermine many of the OAU's fundamental clauses, such as the one guaranteeing the territorial integrity of the Comoros. The involvement of the OIF appeared to be the result of Michel Rocard's earlier role in the mediation. Further developments in the mediation were to be of high interest since the OIF would have to reconcile fundamental opposing views pertaining to the island of Mayotte in any framework for peace. Rocard, who in 2000 recognized that the occupation of Mayotte by France was "illegal" according to international law,⁷⁹ had harsh words about the OAU's position on the Moheli agreement. As he said, "The OAU acted very awkwardly in condemning the Moheli agreement."⁸⁰ Nonetheless, after several months of intensive talks that involved most of the political actors, civil society groups and religious leaders, the OIF and the OAU finally brokered the February 2001 Framework Agreement for Reconciliation. To the international community, this agreement represented a success in the mediation efforts. As many scholars agree, however, the implementation of negotiated agreements is the crucial and most challenging phase in conflict resolution.⁸¹ The post-conflict landscape in the Comoros illustrates the truth of this statement.

The Problem of Implementation

The February 2001 framework agreement, intended to remove the secessionist and constitutional deadlock, provided assurances to the Anjouanese leaders as they were promised a greater autonomy to administer their islands. It also reassured political actors and social activists who, at one point, feared the new Comorian entity would be a confederation of states, which, they argued, would only help to dismember the Comoros federation. Yet, they were promised that respect of the territorial integrity of the country was part of the agreement.⁸² The framework outlined important issues: the formation of a transitional union government; the drafting of a new constitution; the establishment of an independent national electoral commission; the holding of general elections; and the respect of territorial integrity by the conflicting parties.⁸³ A tripartite commission composed of representatives of Anjouan, the central government and opposition parties was set. Its task was to implement the objectives of the framework with assistance from the OAU and OIF.

A June deadline for a referendum on the new constitution was not met due to several roadblocks in the tripartite commission's work agenda. It appears that the Anjouanese leaders had set as a pre-condition to their participation in the tripartite commission the total lifting of the embargo. Although a few sanctions had been removed, for example inter-islands communications and travel, the remaining sanctions were still in effect.⁸⁴ In addition, issues pertaining to the financing of the reconciliation process, including the funding for the tripartite commission, needed to be addressed, and the international community, which had endorsed the framework, was slow in responding to these key issues. Most importantly, the drafting of the constitution proved to be a protracted enterprise. The question of territorial sovereignty was the fundamental variable that divided many of the actors in the mediation. Was Mayotte to be part of the "Union of the Comoros," the new entity that was being shaped? That was the challenging question in the background of the reconciliation. The direct involvement of the French ambassador in Moroni, who had requested and insisted that Mayotte should not be mentioned in the new constitution while drafting of the document was in progress, fueled an already bitter feeling against France. ⁸⁵ As an important act or in the mediation, France had the necessary leverage to induce a successful outcome, but as the neutrality of this mediator was challenged, it is important to analyze briefly the "Question of the Comorian island of Mayotte."⁸⁶

The United Nations has challenged the French administration over Mayotte since independence of the Comoros. Annual UN resolutions since 1975 have reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Comoros over that island.⁸⁷ Likewise, in 1975 the OAU, which has been at the forefront of pushing these UN resolutions, set up an ad-hoc committee to monitor this issue.⁸⁸ Despite these UN condemnations, France has administered Mayotte and organized several referendums that consolidated that administration with the goal to have Mayotte fully integrated in the French constitutional framework.⁸⁹ For example, in 1994, the French government imposed upon Comorian citizens from the three islands a visa requirement for those who desired to visit Mayotte. According to human rights monitoring groups and many observers familiar with Franco -Comorian relations, that decision contributed to the deterioration of these relations. Moreover, it foreshadowed a humanitarian catastrophe as thousands of Comorian people, mainly from Anjouan, in quest for a better life, lost their lives as they tried to reach Mayotte by sea.⁹⁰ In April 2001, while the framework was underway in Moroni, the French government organized another referendum in Mayotte aimed at further integrating the island into the French republic. ⁹¹

Observers also point to the positions that some French civil servants in Mayotte and the French ambassador in

Moroni had taken about the secession of Anjouan by the end of 1999.⁹² According to these observers, public statements from these officials bore the seeds of an “ethnic conflict” in the Comoros, where the notion of “ethnic” divisions does not exist because the islanders share a common language and come from the same cultural and religious background.⁹³ Advocating such divisions would have proven dangerous to the islands’ stability.

In her seminal analysis of the forces that drive self-determination, Alicia Levine identifies key conditions that foster secessionist movements and the potential violence that accompany them, among which a demographic factor is noteworthy. ⁹⁴ She notes:

Ethnic geography is an obvious but extremely important factor: ethnic groups that are concentrated in specific regions are more prone to secessionist impulses than those scattered throughout a country. When groups are regionally concentrated, ethnic identities are strong, the costs of organizing politically are comparatively low, and secession is more likely to be seen as feasible. Not all regionally concentrated groups seek states of their own, however.⁹⁵

It appears that Comorian actors, since the onset of the crisis, were particularly aware of the potential political and social dangers if the secession in Anjouan, which had economic motivations, resulted in shifting these motivations to ethnic considerations. Indeed, pointing to these elements, political parties and civil society groups, in a letter to the French president in September 1999, referred to statements French officials had made in this regard. The letter referred to a quote by former OAU special envoy in the Comoros, Pierre Yéré, who had reported the French ambassador in Moroni to have “differentiated the people of Grande-Comore, who originated from East Africa, and those of Anjouan, who were of Arab and Persian origin.” ⁹⁶ Similarly, the letter referred to Boissadam, the Prefect of Mayotte at that time, quoted in a local newspaper asserting, “the unity of the Comoros is an artificial creation of colonial history. There is no such thing as a Comorian race. It’s a concoction of people’s mind.”⁹⁷ This state of affairs, not surprisingly, resulted in further procrastination in the reconciliation process and created more obstacles in the drafting of the constitution.

After several months of debate between the conflicting parties and various donor-funded conferences aimed at identifying post-conflict economic frameworks for the Comoros, a referendum was held in December 2001 for the adoption of the new constitutional framework of the “Union of the Comoros.” This framework is a complex one. The three islands form a union, with a constitution for the entire union, as well as a specific constitution for each island. Under these frameworks, the legislative body of the union oversees the prerogatives of the union, specifically those pertaining to nationality, religion, currency, foreign affairs, defense and national symbols, while giving autonomy to each island’s constitution to undertake other prerogatives besides those stated in the constitution of the union.⁹⁸

In the meantime, as part of the implementation of the framework agreement of February 2001, the OMIC returned to the Comoros to supervise the collection of weapons on Anjouan between December 2001 and February 2002. Of the list of 415 weapons given to the OAU observers, OMIC accounted and inspected only 83 percent, and noted that the remaining were “retained by gendarmerie and defense force personnel or could not be located.”⁹⁹ In April 2002, after surviving several setbacks, especially another failed bloody coup attempt in December 2001,¹⁰⁰ the first phase of the electoral calendar was completed. Azali became president of the union in an election that his opponents dubbed as rigged,¹⁰¹ and national and international monitors reported some incidents and irregularities in the conduct of the election.¹⁰² A few weeks later in a less contested election, voters from each island elected their respective president.

Since April 2002, the electoral calendar seems to have stalled. After the four presidents took office, fundamental issues came about as the union and islands’ assemblies were not yet in place, creating a legislative vacuum. In addition, in the absence of these governing bodies, the institutional capacity of the various governments was restrained and the situation has led to a protracted and, at times, a violent power struggle between the government of the union and those of the islands.¹⁰³ A World Bank assessment team’s conclusion illustrates the ambiguous and complex constitutional framework of the Comoros’ union. The report expresses the international donors’ “helplessness in confronting the institutional crisis” in the Comoros, while they “deplore” the absence of “real willingness to apply the constitution and the persistence of institutional disorder,” and concludes that the “country swung to a situation of institutional instability and of a constitutional void.”¹⁰⁴ Subsequent meetings through the combined efforts of the African Union (AU), France,

and South Africa, as head of the AU's committee overseeing the Comoros' crisis, resulted in the union's authorities and the islands' presidents, reaching a preliminary agreement in mid-August 2003 whose implementation proved shaky. Indeed, South African President Thabo Mbeki had planned to visit the Comoros on September 4 for the official signature of the agreement but the visit never took place.¹⁰⁵ In assessing the role of the international community in the mediation of the Comoros, one must appreciate the roadblocks the various actors faced throughout the process.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to identify the root causes that sparked the secessionist movement on the island of Anjouan, which resulted in the protracted conflict in the Comoro Islands. The analysis described both a colonial legacy that has constrained the Comoros from achieving political independence, paired with a combination of economic motivations, as the factors that ignited the impulses of self-determination. At the same time, the paper also identified the centralization of political power and the corruption of the leadership that governed the Comoros' federation since independence in 1975 as the additional elements that strengthened the secessionist movement in Anjouan.

The paper also identified the main actors, both at the national and international levels, who have been involved in the mediation since the onset of the crisis. Under the umbrella of a multi-layered mediation, the OAU, the OIF and the government of France were the actors at the heart of the mediation effort. The analysis showed that each of these actors had its specific, but at times differing, interests in joining the efforts to resolve the conflict. The issue of national sovereignty, specifically under the notion of "uti possidetis" seems to be the one that most divided the mediators.

The paper then discussed the outcomes from the mediation and described many events that disrupted the implementation of the political agreement the OAU brokered in the early stage of the conflict, as well as subsequent agreements the regional organization attempted to negotiate with the conflicting parties. The analysis showed that the mediators faced serious challenges, at times questioning their impartiality, both from the leadership in Anjouan and the central government in Moroni. The analysis specifically illustrated how the illegitimacy of the military regime in Moroni managed to harm the OAU's mediation capabilities.

Finally, the paper analyzed the problems in the implementation of the negotiated framework and their implications in the overall peace process. The analysis suggested that a majority of the Comorian people saw in the new constitutional framework the harbinger conducive to the political stabilization of the Union of the Comoros, and endorsed it overwhelmingly. However, this framework prevented the reconciliation from reaching a successful and peaceful end of the conflict.

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NOTES

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- 4 Ibid, 18.
- 5 Ibid, 17-18.
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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Aidan Hartley, "Paradise Lost," *Africa Report*, March -April 1990. 37-40, see also Francois-Xavier Verschave, *Noir Silence: Qui arrêtera la Françafrique?* (Paris: Editions des Arènes, 2000), 132-148.
- 11 Ibid; see also Verschave, *supra* note 10.
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- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid; see also Samantha Weinberg, *Last of the Pirates, The Search for Bob Denard* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).
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28 To some observers, the recent rounds of referendums on Mayotte were geared at ensuring the recognition by the EU of that island as a French territory. The issue of the French overseas territories in the future constitutional framework of the EU seems to be questioned. See comments by French Minister of Overseas territories in “Le point de vue de: L’ambition européenne de l’outre-mer,” *Les Echos*, May 9, 2003; *available from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe*, http://web.lexisnexis.com/universe/document?_m=2c5006d5ae0d335da91118127932934f&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlb-lSlAl&_md5=9fbb315b2534ae8c2049f9e9637c1dc4; Internet, accessed 24 June 2003.

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33 Ghorbal, *supra* note 20.

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- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *FBIS PARIS*, Agence France Presse (World Service) in English 0859 GMT, 3 February 2000.
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Novembre 2001.”

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