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Comoros:

External Involvement in a Small Island State

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Artistic optimism: newly painted mural in Mutsumudu, Nzwani, July 2008

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SUMMARY POINTS

- Comoros, comprised of the three islands Ngazidja, Nzwani and Mwali,
 has been coup-prone and politically chaotic since independence in 1975.
- The African Union launched a successful naval and military intervention into the Comoros in March 2007. Little noticed internationally, this intervention was a highly significant development for the African Union, and contrasted with more controversial AU interventions into Somalia and Sudan.
- The fourth island in the archipelago, Maoré (Mayotte), remains under French control and voted on 29 March 2009 to become a full overseas department of the former colonial power, despite the objections of the Union government, the AU, the Arab League and the United Nations.
- The current constitution, introduced in 2001, was designed to unite the three islands of the Union of the Comoros, but it failed to prevent the authoritarian president of Nzwani, Mohamed Bacar, from refusing to leave office in 2007. This led to his eventual ousting by a joint Comorian–AU military intervention in March 2008. The referendum on 17 May 2009 validated the constitutional amendment to concentrate power in the Union government and extend the presidential term from four to five years.
- While relations with France remain crucial, the government of President Ahmed Sambi has sought to widen Comoros' diplomatic and commercial ties. This has resulted in an exceptionally diverse foreign policy for such a small state, engendering opportunities but also possible risks.

1. INTRODUCTION

The uneasy political climate that currently prevails in Comoros is nothing new to the archipelago's inhabitants, whose post-colonial history has been punctuated by *coups d'état*. There is a sense that, six years after the last coup attempt, the country is once more potentially on the brink of meltdown.

On 17 May 2009, a referendum was held on the three islands that comprise the Union of the Comoros: Ngazidja (often known in the West as Grande Comore), Nzwani (Anjouan) and Mwali (Mohéli). The referendum was an attempt by the current president, Ahmed Abdallah Sambi, to amend the existing constitutional arrangements that were put in place in 2001 in an effort to maintain the integrity of the Comoros in the face of persistent secessionist tendencies in Nzwani and Mwali. To offset calls for independence or even recolonization by France, the constitution grants the islands a degree of autonomy, and each island elects a president and parliament. The Union presidency rotates: Mwali is due to supply the next president in 2011, thus completing the cycle of the three islands. This solution is expensive. Sambi's referendum sought to legitimize plans to trim the powers of the island presidents (who would become governors) and to extend his own period as Union president while the changes were implemented.

There are suspicions however, especially in Mwali, that Sambi intends to scrap the rotation system and entrench himself in power. The campaign was marked by sporadic violence. In Ngazidja, shops in the capital Moroni owned by merchants from Nzwani, Sambi's home island, were firebombed and the pro-Sambi billboards lining the road from the airport were destroyed. In Mwali, the offices of the representative of the Union government were set ablaze. The opposition called for a 'strong active boycott'. Sambi required the commander of the Union armed forces, Brigadier General Salimou Mohammed, to ensure that the referendum proceeded and as an incentive paid his troops two months' salary arrears.

On the day of the poll, the army was a visible presence at polling stations and voting passed without incident in all three islands. The official result was an overwhelming 93.8 per cent in favour of Sambi's reform. The government put the turnout at a low, but respectable 52.7 per cent. Opposition representatives claimed the turnout to be between 10 and 20 per cent of the electorate (an electorate that excluded the large Comorian diaspora).

The situation in the islands remains tense. In particular, the Mwali government refuses to accept the result. Its spokesman, Ahamada Madi Mari,

declared that Sambi 'wants to become the superman of the islands ... he's looking to become a dictator', and that the 'yes' vote would signal 'a sort of civil war'.1 Comoros' independent history has been marked by external involvement, with the best and worst of motives. If Mari's gloomy prediction proves accurate, this trend will most likely continue.

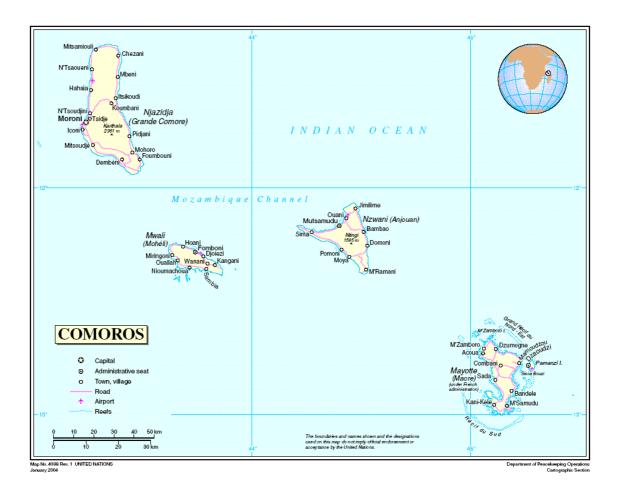
The Union's political woes have also encouraged regional mediation, notably by South Africa and Tanzania. It is this layered external involvement in the politics of the Comorian archipelago that is the subject of this paper.

www.chathamhouse.org.uk 6

¹ Ahmed Ali Amir, 'Comoros votes on controversial presidential referendum', Reuters, 17 May 2009.

2. A DIVIDED UNION

Since the first settlers reached the Comoro archipelago, possibly as early as the first century CE, the history of the islands has been shaped by outsiders. The archipelago lies about 300 km off the northern coast of Mozambique and 350 km northwest of Madagascar and consists of four main volcanic islands: Ngazidja, Nzwani, Mwali and Maoré (Mayotte).²



The total land area of the four islands is only 2,544 sq km but, being located between the African mainland and Madagascar in the Mozambique Channel, they have always been valued by external powers for their strategic position, and outside influences continue to play a role in the country's politics. French foreign policy in particular has limited the scope for independent action of successive Comorian governments since independence. In conducting a controversial referendum in March 2009 to legitimize its raised status to an

² The original settlers were probably Melano-Polynesian, and as well as Arabs and Europeans, others arrived from east Africa, Indonesia, Madagascar and Persia. Together they have contributed to a complex ethnic mix. Although Portuguese explorers visited the islands in 1505, it was the French who established colonial rule over the archipelago. In 1841, Maoré was ceded to France, while Ngazidja, Nzwani and Mwali acquired protectorate status. The Comoros was established as a French colony in 1912.

overseas department, Maoré has chosen to defy the Union government and the international community, anchoring the island in France as its 101st department and, most likely, in time an 'ultra-peripheral region' of the European Union. For now, France's continued political presence ensures a continuation of the instability that has been a constant feature of island politics. With a GDP eight times greater than that of the Union of the Comoros, Maoré is an ever-present attraction to many Comorans wanting to migrate by any means possible in search of a less impoverished existence. In 1997, Maoré's relative affluence and stability encouraged politicians from Nzwani and Mwali, who harbour a historical grievance against perceived bullying by Ngazidja, to unilaterally declare independence from the Union and request recolonization by France, a plea that was rejected. Despite the drafting of a new constitution designed to foster unity between the islands, separatist tendencies persisted, and in 2007 the island president of Nzwani, Mohamed Bacar, refused to leave office after completing his constitutional term limit. A year later Bacar was chased from the island and Union control reasserted by a military force spearheaded by AU-mandated troops.

Why has France sought to consolidate its control of Maoré? The key motivation is the island's perceived strategic importance in a part of the world where Iran is seeking to extend its influence. Union relations with Iran have flourished under Sambi's presidency, although this canny politician has pursued an open-door foreign policy and the Comoros is one of few countries that maintain cordial ties with both Washington and Tehran.

France's continued control of Maoré contravenes UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (1960) that guarantees the territorial integrity and national unity of newly independent states, and UN General Assembly Resolution 31/4 (1976) that specifically condemns the presence of France in Maoré and calls upon the international community to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Comorian state. However, this begs the question: to what extent does the population of the four islands constitute a nation? There are undoubtedly shared socio-cultural characteristics and practices that have been maintained through inter-island migration and shared kinship. In addition, most Comorians speak a version of Shikomoro and adhere to the Shafi'i Sunni faith. Nevertheless, some argue that a subjective sense of Comorian nationhood is definitely lacking. Cultural distinctions, for example in cooking, dress and marriage rituals, are seemingly exaggerated in order to deny nationhood and negate the dominance of one island over the others.³

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³ See Iain Walker, 'What came first, the nation or the state? Political process in the Comoros Islands', *Africa*, 77 (4), 2007, pp. 582–605.

Economically, both Arab and French traders have profited from fishing, from the spice plantations and from trade in ylang-ylang blossom for perfume, but the Comorians have always been poor. In 2004, 45 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line. According to surveys, the rate had risen to 54.7 per cent by 2005, indicating a continued social deterioration owing to the repeated crises. According to the OECD, Official Development Assistance (ODA), on which the country is heavily dependent, dropped from around US\$60 million a year in 1990 to US\$25 million in 2005. Public external debt at end December 2008 was estimated at US\$295 million. In December 2007 the African Development Bank (ADB) noted:

The chronic instability, as well as the archipelago's structural handicaps and the poor diversification of the economy, have resulted in the marked deterioration of the country's economic situation, as seen in the steady decrease of per capita income and the significant decline in public finances. As a consequence, the country's debt has become unsustainable.⁴

Under its support for post-conflict countries, the ADB provided a US\$30 million debt bailout.

The current population of the four islands is about 948,000, but up to 200,000 live abroad, with estimates ranging between 85,000 and 150,000 for Comorians in metropolitan France. Indeed, it is the remittances of this diaspora that provide the means for survival for many islanders today. The World Bank estimates that they amount to US\$36 million, plus US\$15–20 million in goods transfers. This makes Comorians among the world's biggest recipients of remittances in per capita terms.

Troubled politics

An independence campaign throughout the 1950s led to France granting internal autonomy to the four islands in 1961, with a chamber of deputies and a Comorian governing council, albeit under a French commissioner who retained significant power and influence. France also shifted the administration of the islands from Maoré to Moroni, the capital of Ngazidja, which arguably facilitated the eventual split of the islands into the Union and French-controlled Maoré. In 1974 France agreed to a referendum, which produced a significant majority for independence. However, while the

⁴ African Development Bank, *Union of the Comoros: Proposal for Arrears Clearance Under the Arrears Clearance Programme and Post-Conflict Country Facility*, 2007. Available at: http://www.afdb.org/pls/portal/docs/page/adb_admin_pg/documents/financialinformation/comoros_1.pdf.

combined total of the votes from Ngazidja, Nzwani and Mwali was 96 per cent for independence, in Maoré, which had been under French rule for longer than the other islands, 64 per cent of those who participated voted against it. When the leader of the independence movement, Ahmed Abdallah, declared unilateral independence on 6 July 1975, the French accepted the independence of the three islands but opted to retain control of Maoré as a collectivité territoriale (later in 2001 designating it a collectivité départementale; and in 2003 a French overseas collectivité).

The division and subsequent unequal development has created ongoing tensions. Comoros (with repeated near unanimous support in the UN General Assembly) maintains its claim to Maoré as part of its territory. Understandably Comorians find it hard to accept that travel without a visa to the island where many have relatives is 'clandestine migration' or that food exports from their islands to their neighbour are banned by European food safety regulations. Yet the desire to get access to Maoré's higher standard of living and social care, and perhaps onward to metropolitan France, leads many to risk their lives in making the journey from Comoros in overcrowded makeshift vessels. Each year at least 100 drown in the attempt; local estimates put the figure at nearer 500.

The political life of Comoros has been fraught with conflict since independence. The country has experienced 21 attempted or successful coups, four of which (1975, 1978, 1989 and 1995) were organized by the French mercenary Bob Denard. However, the construction of a functioning state apparatus failed after the fall of the revolutionary socialist President Ali Soilihi in 1978. Under Soilihi, using brutal authoritarian methods, an attempt was made to 'Comorianize' the state to foster a sense of national identity. Public meetings were conducted in Shikomoro and the civic registry was symbolically burnt. Since he had come to power with the help of Denard, Soilihi's radicalism condemned him and he was ousted by the mercenary and replaced by France's puppet Abdallah, who set about 'de-Comorianizing' the state, replacing the governance structures that Soilihi had established such as the regional mudiriya administrative offices with French constructs such as communes and préfectures. Abdallah also resurrected French practice in the Comoros of indirect rule, restoring the state's relationship with customary elders. Under Abdallah and his successors Mohamed Taki and Azali Assoumani, access to the state became seen as a 'privilege of status'.

In 1997, the islands of Nzwani and Mwali declared independence, complaining of marginalization. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) and later the African Union brought all sides together and their proposals were

incorporated into a new decentralized constitution that was approved by the electorate in 2001. The official name of the country was changed to the Union of the Comoros. The constitutional arrangement was successful in part because it deferred decisions on key issues on which agreement could not be reached. It was agreed that each island would have its own president and parliament, and a rotating system was introduced whereby each island in turn had the right to nominate the presidential candidates for the Union election. In 2006, Nzwani-born Sambi was elected as the Union president, replacing President Azali.

A hastily agreed and brief constitution that postponed decisions on many of the contentious areas surrounding the allocation of responsibilities between levels of government was never going to settle the long-term inter-island tensions. It was only a temporary measure to tackle the almost intractable problem of meeting both the need for cooperation to ensure viability and the need to recognize each island's difference and freedom from domination by any other island. Put another way, the dilemma was one of balancing decentralization, with its advantage of island concerns being addressed by island authorities, against centralization, with its advantage of greater efficiency for a small, resource-poor state. Just as the previous political union had been perceived as problematic, so the new federal solution has created its own difficulties.

That Sambi's election was the first constitutional handover of power in the three islands since independence would seem a testament to the negotiated constitutional arrangements. It is, however, widely recognized by the political and commercial elites that the current constitution was successful as a shortterm corrective, but that the usual impasse between the division of responsibilities between the Union government and the island governments makes it unworkable in the medium term.

Like his predecessor, Sambi proposed revising the constitution. In October 2008, he argued that 'a little country like ours cannot afford the luxury of all these institutions'. In particular, he pointed to the number of elections that the current constitution entails: legislative elections for the Nzwani and Mwali parliaments, which were held in 2008; Union legislative polls, which are planned for 2009; and the presidential election, scheduled for 2010. After rancorous consultations with the president of Mwali, Mohammed Ali Said, Sambi announced his proposals, which included rationalizing the electoral processes, reducing the powers of the island presidents who would be restyled governors, and extending his mandate for one year to oversee the implementation of the amendments. Sambi increased the political pressure on the Mwali government, sacking senior officers in the National Army for Development (AND), directors of state-owned companies and federal administrators on the island in what Ali Said has described as an 'administrative *coup d'état*'.

The referendum to legitimize these amendments took place on 17 May 2009 and resulted in a clear-cut mandate for reform, though the result was contested. The official result was a landslide victory for Sambi and the Yes campaign. That the referendum could proceed at all was a result of a very heavy army presence. Despite an official turnout of just over 50 percent, neutral observers have estimated that the percentage of the electorate that voted at between 15 and 20 per cent throughout the country as a whole and a paltry five per cent on Mwali. Although Sambi has declared that he intends to preserve the rotation system following the year-long extension, unsurprisingly the proposal continues to raise fears in Mwali and among the wider opposition that he is seeking constitutional change to remain in power indefinitely. This suspicion was ostensibly underlined by his other major proposal: to grant the Union president the power to dissolve the National Assembly if it is judged that the members of parliament are acting as a 'brake on the development of the country'. Mindful that it will be Mwali's turn to hold the Union presidency following the next Union election, Ali Said accuses Sambi of wanting to scrap the rotation system. Yet Mwali, with a population of just 38,000 is considerably smaller than the other islands, and hard-headed pragmatism suggests that it could be problematic to find three credible candidates to stand in the 2010 election from such a small reservoir of talent.

Symptomatic of the issues left unresolved by the 2001 constitution was the continued political unrest in Nzwani. The island's president, Mohamed Bacar, appeared intent on personal rule ever since his seizure of power in 2001 and was increasingly un-cooperative with the Union, exploiting the underlying tensions. The Nzwani island elections in 2007 had been postponed by the Union because of serious irregularities and intimidation. However, Bacar proceeded with them, declared himself president and refused to stand down in favour of fresh elections. The AU and others tried to resolve the crisis by dialogue and then by sanctions and a naval blockade, but all to no avail. Finally, a joint Comorian-AU force took the island without bloodshed in March 2008 and Bacar fled to Maoré.

The Nzwani crisis and the AU intervention

On 3 August 1997, prompted by the island's chronic marginalization and perceived discrimination by the central government in Moroni, a crowd of protestors in Mutsumudu, the capital of Nzwani, tore down the flag of the Comorian Republic, raised the French tricolour and declared independence. At the same time they called for the island's 'reattachment' to France and issued a declaration calling upon France 'to hear the Anjouan people's cries of distress'. Two days after the declaration in Mutsumudu, the scene was repeated in Fomboni, the capital of Mwali, where young separatists erected barricades and raised the tricolour over the Palais de Justice.

Far from being flattering, the separatists' demands for France to recolonize Nzwani and Mwani were acutely embarrassing for France, focusing international attention on the anomalous status of Maoré in international law. That France's stock had risen since independence, at least amongst the populations of Nzwani and Mwali, took the government of President Jacques Chirac by surprise, but there was never any suggestion that France was willing to reassert its authority throughout the islands. The OAU mediator was assured that France condemned secession and wanted the crisis to be settled by inter-island dialogue based on adherence to the principle of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Comoros.

The OAU encouraged representatives from the three islands to meet in Madagascar in April 1999 to settle on a compromise. The Antananarivo Agreement was accepted by Ngazidja and Mwali but resisted by Nzwani. The provisions of the agreement sought to defuse separatist sentiment by granting partial autonomy to the islands and rotating the presidency of a renamed Union of the Comoros (Constitution 2001). Union presidents would serve terms of four years. It was accepted that Ngazidja would provide the first Union president, followed by Nzwani and Mwali.

Nzwani's refusal to accept the agreement sparked rioting in Moroni; after three days of fighting president Abbas Djoussouf was ousted by army commander Colonel Azali Assoumane, who declared himself president, prime minister and minister of defence. Meanwhile Nzwani separatists won an election to the island assembly, albeit on a turnout of just 15 per cent. As the new administration refused to move from its separatist position, the OAU began preparations for a military intervention. The economic and political ramifications of the isolation of Nzwani since the declaration of independence persuaded the separatists to negotiate with Azali. Against the odds he forged an agreement with the separatists and a further accord was signed in Fomboni in August 2000. The new accord explicitly recognizes that neither

independence nor a renewed relationship with France was an option. The Fomboni Accord established a communauté comorienne with accepted borders and the confederal structure negotiated in Antananarivo. Despite continued unrest, elections were conducted in April 2002 and on a turnout of 25 per cent, Azali was elected Union president.

The election was followed by a period of stalemate during which Azali and the presidents of the islands argued over their respective share of revenue. In December 2003, under the auspices of the newly established AU, the Beit-Salam Agreement was concluded. This allowed for assembly elections on the three islands in March and April 2004 and Union assembly elections the following month. Surprisingly the elections were conducted on time and deemed free and fair. They resulted in anti-Azali parties dominating all three island assemblies and the National Assembly. The remainder of Azali's term of office was marked by continued disputes over the division of revenue and responsibilities.

The crisis played out in 2008 stemmed from a power struggle between two Nzwani politicians, Union president Sambi and island president Bacar. Trained as a gendarme in France and a former Nzwani chief of police, Bacar came to power in a military coup in August 2001 and was elected island president in flawed elections following constitutional reform in 2002. His personalized rule led to condemnation from, among others, the US State Department, which documented numerous serious human rights violations during his period in office. Under his rule, a squadron of 'gendarmes' from Nzwani under his personal control, together with his own and his brother's bodyguards, assumed responsibility for security on the island. In 2007, Bacar refused to stand down as island president at the end of his five-year term, as required by the constitution.

Following a decision by the Constitutional Court, Sambi nominated Kaabi Houmadi as interim President to serve until elections could be held in June. Objecting on the grounds that the court was packed with Sambi supporters, Bacar ignored the ruling. In response the Union government withheld election material from Nzwani and deployed government forces to prevent Bacar from holding his own poll. Bacar's 'gendarmes', better armed and trained than the Union troops, expelled Sambi's forces. Bacar printed his own ballot papers, held the election and declared a landslide victory.

With the support of the AU, Sambi and the Union government declared the elections null and void. In October the AU imposed targeted sanctions on the political leadership of the Bacar regime. Unable to effectively enforce the sanctions, the AU switched tactics and agreed to requests from the Union government to prepare an intervention force. Four AU countries - Libya, Sudan, Senegal and Tanzania - promised troops and military support. However, Bacar gambled that the lukewarm support given to the proposed intervention by key external actors France and South Africa meant that the plan was doomed from its inception. As an alternative way forward Bacar proposed the establishment of an 'internal dialogue', with the AU as an observer and new elections on all three islands.

Despite a last-minute attempt by South African President Thabo Mbeki to stall the intervention and continue the mediation process, on 25 March 2008 AU and Comorian forces landed on Nzwani to prosecute 'Operation Democracy in the Comoros'. There were already 230 Tanzanian troops bivouacked on Mwali as part of the AU Electoral and Security Assistance Mission (MAES). This mission had been authorized by the AU Peace and Security Council with a fourfold mandate: to facilitate and create a secure environment for free and fair elections in Nzwani; to disarm Bacar's 'gendarmerie' and integrate its members into the Union army, known as the National Army for Development (AND); to establish a new security force for the island; and to restore the authority of the Union in Nzwani. The MAES troops were refused permission to deploy by Bacar and remained camped on Mwali. Prior to Operation Democracy, MAES was reinforced by troops from Tanzania and Sudan. Senegal and Libya ultimately decided not to send ground troops, although Libya transported the Sudanese contingent, and supplied equipment to the AND. Despite Bacar's hunch that France would not become directly involved, Paris agreed to transport the Tanzanian troops to Mwali but chose not to provide support for the landings on Nzwani. Final AU troop numbers camped on Mwali amounted to 450 Tanzanians and 350 Sudanese. The sea-borne landings on 25 March 2008 were undertaken by a mixed AU-AND force of 450 troops under the operational command of the Comorian army commander Lt Col. Mohamed Salimou.

The operation went relatively smoothly with amphibious landings made by five zodiac boats supplied by Libya and Morocco – four in the capital, Mutsumudu, and the fifth in Domoni, on the east coast.⁵ Two Tanzanian soldiers were drowned during the landings. The two main towns were captured with only minimal resistance. Troops from the AND secured the airport. Fleeing the presidential palace in Ouani, Bacar originally sought shelter in the mountainous interior, but the military superiority of the intervention force compelled him to flee by boat to Maoré where he was taken into custody

⁵ Morocco, not a member of the AU, donated its boats to the Comorian government.

alongside 23 supporters charged with 'unlawful entry while carrying weapons'. Up to 100 people were arrested in Nzwani for suspected criminal offences and human rights abuses; 30 of the most serious cases were taken to Moroni.

Bacar claimed asylum in France and was taken to Réunion where his case was fast-tracked but in the end dismissed. His arrival in Maoré and subsequent transfer to Réunion sparked rioting in the former's main town, Mamoutzou, by the Nzwani community enraged at France's alleged 'hypocrisy'. White residents were indiscriminately attacked. A widely held belief across the archipelago is that France had been playing a double game, officially supporting the Union position while tacitly accepting Bacar's idiosyncratic rule. According to the AND regional commander in Nzwani, Col. Daoud Mataba, French forces were involved in covert activities prior to the intervention. He was sceptical about the official explanation that a French helicopter that crashed on 19 March 2008 was a police aircraft carrying immigration agents, assuming that the personnel involved were in fact 'special forces'. Likewise, his understanding was that the French navy intercepted Bacar midway between Nzwani and Maoré, rather than Bacar making landfall. The unrest in Mamoutzou subsided following the arrival of 100 French gendarmes from Réunion.

Comorian government requests for Bacar's extradition were turned down by the French courts on the grounds that he faced a genuine risk of persecution, given that Comoros retains the death penalty (and has four persons awaiting execution). A Comorian request that he should face charges at the International Criminal Court was also rejected by France, and to date has not been pursued by the Union government. On 19 July 2008, Bacar was deported from Réunion to Cotonou in Bénin where he has been granted conditional leave to stay. On the same day, five former Nzwani ministers being held under guard in Moroni, including Bacar's former spokesman Mohamed Abdo Madi, escaped, apparently with the collusion of sections of the army.

In the wake of the joint intervention the president of Nzwani's Court of Appeal, Lailizamane Abdou Cheikh, was sworn in as interim leader. Elections were planned for 29 June 2008, to be organized by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) with financial support from the AU and logistical support from MAES. In the opinion of the UN envoy to the Comoros, Opia Kumah, the elections were well organized. With a turnout of 49 per cent out of an electorate of 128,000, the victor was Moussa Toybou (52.37 per cent). His rival Mohamed Djaanfari (47.63 per cent) had previously been defeated by Sambi in the 2006 Union election. Personal observation in Mutsumudu

indicated fatigue with political in-fighting, among the commercial sector at least, with many businesses displaying the posters of both the main candidates. Toybou received the backing of Sambi during the campaign, although given the parlous state of the economy and the controversy surrounding Sambi's ambiguous relationship with Shi'ism, this was not necessarily an advantage. The conduct of the election was endorsed by a positive report from an Independent Election Observer Commission comprising the AU, the League of Arab States and the International Organization of the Francophonie.

Toybou, a civil engineer, and his fledgling cabinet recognize that while the island's long-term stability relies on establishing a sustainable constitutional provision, in the short term economic survival is the priority. At the time of our research (July 2008), the island had effectively run out of petrol and diesel, and rice supplies were dangerously low. A ship loaded with grain lay off the harbour awaiting the release of funds in Moroni before it could unload its cargo. Toybou stresses the need for Nzawi to redevelop its cash crop sector, under-developed fishing industry and deep-water harbour, currently in need of dredging. In April 2009, the UN Peacebuilding Commission granted the Union government US\$9m from the Peacebuilding Fund aimed at funding projects to demobilize, disarm and reintegrate former members of Bacar's militia.

The operation was hailed as 'exemplary' by the AU's envoy in the Comoros, Mozambican José Francisco Madeira. Does this signify a growing willingness on the part of the AU to intervene in African conflicts?⁶ That it was successful in its primary aim of ousting Bacar and restoring Union control contrasts with the limited accomplishments of AU missions in Darfur and Somalia. In large part, this reflects the disparity in the complexity of these operations. In Operation Democracy, the intervention force faced, at the most, 400 pro-Bacar militia including his bodyguards and 'gendarmes'. While this well-armed militia had expelled Union forces from the island in 2007, it crumbled in the face of an offensive from two points of disembarkation by professional Tanzanian and Sudanese troops. It has been argued that the decision to intervene was taken in order to 'clinch an easy success' and mitigate the performance of the AU elsewhere. South Africa, which opposed the military assault, doubted that the situation in Nzwani warranted full-scale intervention, given that the there was no substantive threat to the region or neighbouring countries.⁷ Foreign Minister Nkosasana Dlamini-Zuma remarked at the time

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⁶ Mozambique has a long-standing interest in Comoros, having led mediation efforts by the OAU. During the Mozambican civil war, South Africa was alleged to have supplied the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) rebels through depots in Comoros.

Aaron Maasho, 'African Union hails success of Comoros operation', Mail and Guardian, 28 March 2008.

that 'there is no violence, no loss of life, no social unrest' and that it was 'unusual to go militarily into Comoros'.8

The AU's willingness to undertake complex peace-enforcement operations and to shoulder considerable responsibility for policing the continent stands in contrast to the timorous posture of its predecessor. The OAU had abstained from organizing peacekeeping operations following the failure of its mission in Chad in 1981–82, restricting itself to small-scale monitoring and observer missions (including three missions in the Comoros). The primary rationale for intervention would seem to be fulfilment of the provision in the AU Constitutive Act rejecting unconstitutional changes of government. Moreover, while the Constitutive Act sought to place constraints on what governments could do within their borders, the tenets of national unity, state sovereignty and territorial integrity that underpinned relations between African states since the independence era remain potent points of principle to many AU members.

Both the states that contributed troops to the force face their own separatist resistance to central rule: in the case of Tanzania from the island of Zanzibar, and in the case of Sudan in Darfur, southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, Abyei and Blue Nile. Likewise Senegal, which participated in the planning of the operation, is confronting Africa's longest secessionist rebellion, in Casamance. There are also other specific factors impelling participation by Tanzania, Sudan and Libya. In Tanzania's case there are historical and kinship factors, as well as issues of regional security. Since 2004, African troops have been deployed to Darfur as part of two humanitarian missions, first the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and, since December 2007, the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). For Sudan, a successful intervention by the AU potentially bolsters the reputation of African troops and lends weight to its argument that African crises such as that in Darfur are best handled by African organizations. The Libyan government, under Muammar Ghadafi, has long sought to increase its influence in sub-Saharan Africa through support for AU initiatives. There is a history of rivalry between Ghadafi and the South African government over AU leadership. Almost a year after the intervention in Nzwani, Ghadafi was appointed chairperson of the AU.

Predictions that the intervention would have a high diplomatic, human and financial cost have proved only partially correct. Fortunately, few fatalities and casualties were incurred during the operation. For the AU the overall

⁸ Tom Nevin, 'The strangest intervention in history?', African Business, 1 May 2008.

⁹ See Chrysatantus Ayangafac, 'Situation Critical: The Anjouan Political Crisis', ISS Situation Report, 5 March 2008.

expenditure on the operation was moderate since the costs were borne by troop contributors, states offering logistical support and other donors. The Tanzanian minister of defence estimated the cost to his country of participation in the operation, excluding Tanzanian participation in MAES, at US\$6m, of which nearly US\$5m came from foreign donations, including funding and assistance in kind for transport and logistics from Libya and France. In terms of diplomacy, the most serious rift has been between the Comoros and AU, which saw no alternative to intervention, and South Africa, which encouraged continued mediation.

Even if the long-term stability of Nzwani and the Union remains uncertain, the fundamental objectives of Operation Democracy were achieved, i.e. to remove Bacar from power and reassert the juridical authority of the Union. Could this success be replicated elsewhere? At present, the AU's criteria for intervention appear to be threefold: bridging operations to fill a gap before a larger force can deploy; operations that no other body is willing to undertake; and operations to reverse unconstitutional changes of power. The key constraints are financial and logistic. The size of the force required for Nzwani, the scope of the mandate and the timeframe were achievable. The operations in Darfur and Somalia have proved much more challenging. Although there are currently no demands for the AU to revert to the OAU's policy of authorizing only a limited observer mission, the Commission, the Peace and Security Council and the wider membership are seemingly adopting a pragmatic position. Despite condemnation and the suspension from the AU of Guinea, Mauritania and Madagascar, where instances of unconstitutional regime change have occurred recently, there have been only muted calls for military intervention.

French influence

French policy towards Comoros, and notably its intention to definitively incorporate Maoré as part of its sovereign territory, continues to have a negative impact on the Union's political, security and economic development. The decision in 1976 to retain Maoré and only grant independence to the remaining islands partly reflects France's susceptibility to perceived historical and cultural linkages with its past and present overseas territories and the way it perceives its 'responsibilities' to these territories. In Maoré, in comparison with the other three islands, there was also a higher proportion of the population with direct family connections, through birth or marriage, to metropolitan France and a greater number of French-owned commercial enterprises.

Beyond issues of colonial responsibility and commercial interests, and given the timing of the original referendum at the height of the Cold War, there was a perceived strategic imperative for France to retain a sovereign base in the Mozambique Channel. At the time, the Suez Canal was shut and shipping was forced to take the Cape of Good Hope route, enhancing Maoré's strategic importance. Also several states in the region (Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania and Comoros) had Marxist governments. The French navy proposed the construction of a deep-water harbour in Maoré. This was never built, though France has since constructed a satellite listening station on the island that came into service in 2000. France's core motivation for retaining control of Maoré remains its strategic position, and it preserves a military garrison including a detachment of foreign legionnaires. The maintenance of France's global military reach has been a preoccupation of successive governments. Under President Nicolas Sarkozy, France has strengthened its links with its Western allies, for example rejoining the military command structure of NATO. As during the Cold War, Maoré provides an opportunity for France to prove its worth, acting as the alliance's sentinel in the southern Indian Ocean. A subsidiary rationale is the potential commercial opportunities in terms of fishing, mineral and oil exploitation in a claimed exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles.

France did not win any friends in Comoros through its connection with the Denard-led coups. For Pierre Caminade, a member of Survie, an organization that is critical of French African policy, France has sought to 'sabotage' the three islands of the current Union while 'protecting' its interests in Maoré. 10 He points to French covert involvement in the numerous coups and attempted coups, as well as to the repeated condemnation of France by the UN General Assembly. Caminade argues that 'in international law, Mayotte, Comorian territory, is under French occupation'.

Since 1995, with the introduction of the Balladur-Pasqua visa regime (named after the then French prime minister and interior minister) that prevents free movement between the islands, an effective 'iron curtain' has existed. Transit regulations make it very difficult for ordinary Comorians to obtain a visa to enter France/Maoré. As a result there is large-scale, perilous, illegal migration from the Union to Maoré on makeshift vessels. The chief pull factor is economic. The Union is designated 'low income' by the World Bank, whereas Maoré is designated 'upper middle income'. In 2007, the Comorian GDP per capita was \$1,143; in Maoré it was \$4,900 in 2005. Maoré's GDP has certainly risen since and is currently estimated to be eight times as high as in

¹⁰ Pierre Caminade, 'La France et l'Union des Comores: saboteur et protéger', *Multitudes*, no. 17, 2004.

the Union. Maoré's significantly higher standard of living is sustained by the provision by France's central government of health care and free education, although the minimum wage is not applicable and Mahorais do not receive unemployment, sickness and other welfare benefits. The access to health care and free education extends to residents and non-residents alike and as a result hospitals and schools are under severe pressure. The maternity wing of the main hospital is busier than any other in metropolitan France or the overseas territories, yet 77 per cent of the patients are non-residents. Nonetheless, illegal migrants face a vulnerable and uncertain future, their status rendering them susceptible to exploitative employers who pay barely a third of the wages of legal citizens.

The number of illegal migrants is put by the French authorities at 45,000 but according to the Red Cross could be as high as 60,000, out of a population of between 165,000 and 200,000. In interviews, the Nzwani authorities recognize and understand the rationale of the illegal migrants while accepting that neither Union security forces nor the successor to Bacar's militia were able to prevent the traffic. The Sudanese contingent of the AU force in Nzwani has used zodiac boats to turn back migrants, but many more reach deep water. The immediate French response has been twofold: increased patrols to deter 'irregular' migration and increased repatriation of 'illegal' migrants from Maoré. A new radar station has been built to detect illegal vessels and naval patrols have been stepped up. France deported 13,000 illegal migrants in 2008, compared with 29,000 from metropolitan France. In November 2008, the Nzwani authorities refused to accept a number of undocumented migrants being returned from Maoré on the grounds that their names had not been forwarded by the French authorities as required and that they 'were dressed in rags'. The Nzwani transport minister, Fadul Ahamed, notified the three companies involved in transporting the illegal migrants, Comores Aviation and the owners of the vessels Tratringa III and Maria Galanta, that they would henceforth be held responsible for ensuring the humane treatment of the migrants.

France has also mooted a controversial reform of the *jus soli*, or birthright citizenship. France's constitution allows French citizenship, albeit with conditions, to those born on French territory, including Maoré. A child born in Maoré is French from birth.¹¹ The proposal to amend this provision in the case of Maoré is controversial since it would reverse the tradition that citizenship in France is through territorial birthright and not through blood. Legal opinion

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¹¹ But only if born since 2 August 1975 with a parent born in Maoré or another French territory, or born in a former French colony before independence. Otherwise, the child would have to apply for citizenship through residence and only after the age of thirteen.

appears to argue that the constitution cannot be partial, applying to some parts of France and not to others. It is questionable whether this measure would stem the flow of migrants since that is, in large part, driven by immediate economic factors rather than a long-term desire to become French (or indeed effectively 'European' since France is a signatory to the Schengen Agreement). The argument that having a child born in Maoré ensures that the migrant will not be deported is apparently belied by the fact that of an estimated 16,000 deportations in 2007, two or three thousand were minors.

Maoré's status is beyond a mutually agreeable settlement, a fact acknowledged by President Sarkozy in a letter to the Comorian vice-president ldi Nadhoim following the announcement of the referendum on departmental status. Although the economic cost of retaining Maoré as a part of France is significant, in political terms it would be almost impossible for a future French government to abandon it, since France chose in 1974 to retain control of the island for strategic reasons and subsequently 'legitimized' the decision through a series of referenda. Likewise, any government in Moroni would be unlikely to drop its claim, regularly supported by the UN and AU, to Maoré as intrinsic to the territorial integrity of the archipelago.

A High-Level Working Group was established in June 2007 to discuss issues of mutual concern between the Union and France, including the status of Maoré. This has been used by France as a distraction and stalling tactic. In hindsight, France's policy was already set when in March 2007 it unilaterally switched the international telephone code applicable to Maoré (269), which had been the same as the code used by the other three islands, to that of Réunion (262). That the position of the two parties was irreconcilable was clear at the Working Group's meeting in July 2008: the Union representatives talked of facilitating the 'circulation' of Comorian citizens between the four islands without recourse to 'illegal' and/or dangerous methods, whereas for France the core issue was the curtailment of 'clandestine' migration into French territory. In September 2008, the French government announced that it would hold a single alternative referendum in Maoré, but not in metropolitan France, to offer the electorate the opportunity to vote for full integration with France as a département d'outre-mer (DOM). This decision finally made explicit France's future intended relationship with Maoré and the Union. In announcing the referendum France has seemingly closed the door on a united Comoros of the four islands.

The result of the referendum was predictable, with 95 per cent in favour of departmental status, a decision that will officially come into force in 2011. That one island out of four will remain – in fact if not in international law –

under foreign rule and a constant temptation to would-be migrants is intrinsically destabilizing to the Union government. However, relations with France are multi-dimensional and remain vital to Comorian foreign and economic policies. The Comorian franc is guaranteed by the French Treasury making Comoros effectively a member of the CFA Franc Zone. France also provides considerable ODA to the Union (\$19.7m in 2005–06), although it is only a tenth of what it provides to Maoré. In 2006, France agreed to provide €88m over five years to help Comoros reach the UN Millennium Development Goals. French technical assistance to the Union has also increased since 2007. France is the principal destination for Comorian exports (18.3 per cent in 2006) and the principal country of origin for imports (24.8 per cent in 2006).

Regardless of the Union's economic dependency on France, the referendum has provoked fury in Moroni, with Nadhoim calling it 'a declaration of war'. Despite the economic and cultural ties, since his election Sambi has been willing to look beyond the former colonial power for trading and diplomatic partners, notably to governments and companies from the Middle East, Iran and east Africa. In response to this snub, the then French secretary of state for cooperation, Brigitte Girardin, stated that 'the interests of France are not the preserve of the Comoros'. In turn, Sambi declared that 'France is a friendly country, not a fraternal one ... she defends her interests, we'll defend ours'. In practical terms this has meant transferring the contracts to run state enterprises from French firms. The contract with the French firm Comaco to operate the archipelago's ports and harbours was not renewed, but awarded to Al Marwan and Gulftainer, companies based in the United Arab Emirates. The shift is intended to raise the capacity of the Port of Moroni from 600 tonnes to 2,000 tonnes per day. Likewise, the contract to manage the country's oil supplies, formerly managed by Total, was also not renewed. The contract was given to the nationalized Société Comorienne des Hydrocarbures, amid signs that Sambi was looking to Iran to secure supplies of diesel and petrol. To date, however, supplies remain sporadic and the lack of fuel has crippled the economy of the islands.

3. WIDENING FOREIGN RELATIONS

President Sambi has operated an open-door policy regarding Comoros' foreign relations. Questioned during the election as to which foreign country he would visit first should he be elected, his response was 'the first that offers me engineering and construction material'. The new president, true to his word, paid his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia where he obtained donated building material and technical support for a brick-making project. Another profitable trip to Libya resulted in the donation of bitumen, but also won the support of Libya's Ghadafi for intervention in Nzwani. Such backing proved invaluable in convincing Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir to deploy troops as part of the operation.

South Africa

The links between post-independence Comoros and the apartheid government in Pretoria were forged during the Denard years when the Abdallah government offered moral and practical support to South Africa as it battled the African National Congress and the frontline states. South African interest in Comoros today is based on the islands' strategic position straddling the increasingly insecure sea lanes through the Mozambique Channel. Also, as the regional power, South Africa takes upon itself the responsibility to mediate disputes such as the Nzwani crisis. Although South African companies are no longer involved in tourism, there remains interest in the construction and commercial air sectors. Exports from South African totalled R65m (US\$9.3m) in 2007.

South Africa regarded itself as the key external actor during the Nzwani crisis, during which it strongly supported a negotiated solution. The stated South African position was that intervention would not provide a lasting solution to the fundamental constitutional morass. This could best be achieved through diplomacy and mediation. In pursuit of this policy, South African diplomats obstructed AU efforts to construct a common continental position in support of military intervention if Bacar did not surrender. Motivation is unclear but for cultural and pragmatic reasons, South Africa under Mandela and Mbeki showed an aversion to the use of force, being unwilling to use or sanction military action against 'fraternal' African leaders. Moreover, there are questions over the South African National Defence Force's current structure, fitness and preparedness for battle, as well as internal political developments, which may have constrained an overseas operation in March 2008. On the eve of the intervention, Mbeki explicitly demanded that the operation should be delayed, citing a written promise from Bacar to re-run elections by May. That the intervention proceeded as planned and was, at least superficially, successful in its stated aims has undermined Pretoria's leverage with Moroni, although South Africa's scepticism regarding the effect of the intervention on the Union's constitutional problems remains largely justified.

Tanzania

There are historical, ethnic and cultural links between Tanzania and the Comoros. The Comorian independence movement has its roots in Tanzania: the National Liberation Movement of Comoros was founded in Dar es Salaam in 1962. At the time of the intervention, Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete was AU chairman and a member of the AU Ministerial Committee on Comoros. Tanzania has made a major commitment to supporting AU and Comorian policy in Nzwani. In July 2008, the Tanzanian troops could have undertaken a law enforcement role as the Sudanese contingent withdrew, although in the absence of public disorder they were largely confined to their billets.

The United States

American interest in the Comoros has increased of late and is for the most part predicated on the country's strategic position and the Sambi government's deepening links with Iran. That the wanted terrorist Fazul Abdullah Mohammed is a Comorian citizen is another point of interest to Washington. The United States provided no direct material or financial assistance for the intervention but offered valuable moral support to the Sambi government and the AU, describing the operation as 'timely and appropriate'. In this the Bush administration seemingly differed from the cautious position adopted by South Africa: the then Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer, offered US support for a South African-led intervention during a visit to Moroni in January 2008 - an invitation that Pretoria ultimately declined. The United States provides some training to the Comorian armed forces, and during July 2008 a multi-service training team visited Moroni. At the end of June 2008, Comoros was declared eligible to benefit from liberal trade terms with the United States as part of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). Eligibility is based on an understanding that designate countries are establishing market-based economies; the rule of law and political pluralism; elimination of barriers to US trade and investment; protection of intellectual property; efforts to combat corruption; policies to reduce poverty and increase the availability of health care and educational opportunities; protection of human rights and worker rights; and elimination of certain child labour practices.

Iran

Sambi visited the United States twice in 2008 and shared the podium with then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice on the occasion of Comoros becoming eligible for AGOA trade benefits. As such he is one of very few heads of state who has friendly diplomatic relations with both the United States and Iran. Sambi received religious instruction in Iran, as well as Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and was clearly influenced by his time there. He is known locally as the 'Ayatollah' mainly because his apparel and beard are distinctively Iranian in appearance, but also as a result of his open affection for Shi'ism. Claims that he has secretly converted to Shi'ism are denied, but still circulate in a country in which 98 per cent of the population practise the Shafi'i Sunni faith. Despite the supposed popular disquiet, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received a warm welcome when he paid a short visit in February 2009. A number of charitable enterprises have been established by Iran including a clinic run in Moroni by the Iranian Red Crescent and a branch of the Khomenei Foundation which distributes food and clothing to orphans and the handicapped. Iran also provides 50 scholarships for young Comorians to study in Tehran. More controversially, Iran provides security consultants to Sambi, and Iranian military personnel comprise the heart of his personal bodyguard.

Other countries

Sambi's open-door policy has also seen increased diplomatic and commercial activity between Comoros and Dubai, Kuwait, Qatar and China. The state-owned firm Dubai World is investing US\$70m in the formerly South African-owned Le Galawa beach resort. Given the country's coup-prone history and the potential for a natural disaster should the nearby Karthala volcano erupt, the enterprise is risky. However, site has been entirely cleared ready for construction. According to recent reports in the state newspaper *El Watwan*, the project is stalled while a company capable of completing the construction requirements is found. Kuwait has already agreed to invest US\$56m in a variety of projects and in February 2009, the son of the Kuwaiti minister of defence paid a visit to Comoros to arrange a further investment package

through the Central Bank of the Comoros (BCC). Qatar too has become involved; following the conclusion of the Arab league summit in March, it announced it was allocating US\$2m per month over one year to the Comoros to 'fill the food gap'. Finally, China has recently signalled increased interest in bolstering bilateral relations, offering ODA of US\$3.3m for 2008 which, though modest, is unlikely to be encumbered by conditionalities. Chinese medical researchers also have been working in Mwali on a project to address malaria infection rates and the Beijing government has offered to build a new hospital – though this offer is currently mired in inter-island squabbling as to where it should be built. China's approach contrasts with the apparent lack of interest shown by India; with the exception of Somalia, Comoros is the only Indian Ocean state in which Delhi does not maintain a full diplomatic mission.

4. CONCLUSION

The Union of Comoros faces a dilemma. Vital foreign direct investment stimulated by President Sambi's open-door policy will remain in jeopardy while the constitutional basis of the Union is so fragile. Given the intrinsic wariness between the islands, a rise in living standards would lubricate the process finding an arrangement that resolves centralization/decentralization conundrum. At the time of writing it is not clear what the eventual fallout from the constitutional referendum held in May 2009 will be. However, the decision by France to anchor one of the archipelago's four islands as sovereign territory ensures that Maoré will remain a magnet for sizeable numbers of individual Comorians and a potential political alternative for future Comorian politicians, notably from Nzwani and Mwali. This makes the task of finding a workable solution very much harder. Without an injection of ODA and FDI the economy is liable to remain highly vulnerable. Not only rice, the staple food, but also petrol and diesel (used not only for transportation but also for electricity generation), are still in extremely short supply. Given the predisposition of Comorians to take to the streets at times of economic hardship, there is every chance of further violent street demonstrations in the major towns. This can only weaken the government of President Sambi and undermine his chances of pushing through constitutional amendments. Given the limited number of public order police available, it is not inconceivable that the remaining Tanzanian troops from MAES could find themselves deployed in the invidious position of riot control.

Nonetheless, Sambi has declared that he intends to realize his constitutional proposals. This has divided external actors. The referendum and its result have been commended by the AU's envoy in the Comoros, Francisco Madeira, who has called for the presidents of Nzwani and Mwali to comply with the constitutional amendment. This is also the position of China and the Arab League. However, the current South African ambassador, Masilo Mabeta, reiterated the line his country took at the time of the intervention on Nzwani that the underlying tension between the islands can be solved only by authentic and inclusive negotiations and not by military force or flawed referenda. Comments made at a meeting between the government and the island president of Ngazidja, attended by members of the diplomatic corps, indicate that relations between the Comorian government and South Africa are currently strained. He stated 'that the referendum is very controversial, that the referendum poll is stained with serious irregularities, that the voters have strongly snubbed the polling stations and that this initiative is of a nature

to endanger the national reconciliation process and generate a new separatist crisis'. 12 The ambassador subsequently walked out of the meeting. France and the United States have to date remained silent on the subject of the referendum.

The majority of the political and commercial classes, certainly in Ngazidja but also currently in Nzwani and Mwali, are scathing about French policy towards the archipelago and unambiguously place the blame for the Union's continued constitutional fragility on the shoulders of the former colonial power. In particular, they point to the human tragedy of divided families and the constant toll of migrants who drown while seeking to reach Maoré. Yet, talking to ordinary Comorians, the visitor finds a more nuanced perspective. Without an overarching sense of nationhood, there remains an attachment to France that goes beyond the aspiration to share in the better life to be had in Maoré. Given the parlous state of the economy, it is far from certain that if the 1974 referendum were held again today across the Union, the result would be the same. Yet it is Maoré alone that will become an integral part of France in 2011, and at the same time of the European Union. Despite the fact that a majority of EU member states have voted in support of the Union's claim to the island when the issue has been debated at the UN, it is likely that EU foreign ministries will consent to the same status being conferred on Maoré as on other French overseas departments. Even so, there must be some disquiet at the import of a further territorial dispute for EU diplomats and politicians to handle.

Faced with French intransigence, other elements of the international community have mobilized to mitigate the frequent crises, most recently in the shape of the AU intervention to remove Bacar from power in Nzwani. The contributors to the operation had their distinct reasons for participation. The operation was achievable and self-contained, yet there are no solid grounds to suppose that it amounts to a new model for AU intervention.

Other external actors engage with Comoros for strategic reasons and for potential, if risky, investment opportunities. The United States is keen to keep a watching brief on a strategically located country whose current government maintains increasingly warm relations with Iran. The same open-door policy that has fostered relations with the government in Tehran has also encouraged tentative commercial investment from the Middle East, although there are questions as to whether these links would outlast Sambi's presidency. And as elsewhere in Africa, China is seeking to bolster relations

¹² 'Strongly contested results of referendum in Comoros', Indian Ocean Newsletter, 23 May 2009.

with the Union government through ODA and medical assistance, and an increasing interest in the Union's energy sector.

It is worth noting that all these economic and political crises might be rendered immaterial by the anticipated major eruption of the volcano Mount Karthala, which overlooks Moroni. Scientists have mooted the possibility of harnessing the geo-thermal power of the volcano to cure the Comoros' electricity generating problems. More soberly, vulcanologists predict a further major eruption within the next ten years, which Comoros currently appears illequipped to handle.

It would be ironic if, were these political, economic and natural disasters to befall Comoros, the most likely source of rescue would come from the French garrison in Maoré. Could it be that having definitively closed the door on a four-island Comoros, and having exacerbated the country's economic and political woes, the former colonial power could be its saviour?