

The Comoros Crisis Pits China Against France Off the Coast of East Africa

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Two of Africa's most influential extra-regional Great Powers are competing for influence in this East African archipelago, and the resolution of its current crisis will determine which of them comes out on top.

The Comoros is probably one of the most geopolitically curious countries in the world by virtue of its location, history, and international relationships. This former French colony off the coast of East Africa is nowadays very close to China and also counts itself as the southernmost member of the Arab League. It's experienced [over 20 coup attempts](#) in its slightly more than 40 years of independence, some of which were carried out by the infamous French mercenary [Robert Denard](#), and was recently in the news for a [shady citizenship scheme](#) where it sold \$100 million worth of passports to people from the Mideast. Although being regarded in the past as [one of Iran's few international partners](#), it decisively shifted its allegiance to Saudi Arabia after [breaking ties](#) with the Islamic Republic in January 2016 over Tehran's contemporaneous tensions with the Wahhabi Kingdom. Taken together, this makes Comoros uniquely positioned at the intersection of French, Chinese, and Saudi geopolitical interests.

Constitutional Context



The three-island archipelago was once again thrown into a [sudden crisis](#) earlier this week after protesters from the island of Anjouan blocked off some of the roads in the eastern regional capital in response to a controversial referendum that passed earlier this summer. President Azali Assoumani, who came to power in a 1999 coup and previously served two terms in office, was reelected in 2016 and succeeded in pushing forward his proposal to [radically reform the constitution](#) in July after 92% of voters out of a 62% turnout agreed to it. As an oversimplified backgrounder into the complicated domestic politics of this tiny, impoverished, but densely populated country, the capital-hosting northwestern island of

Grande Comore currently holds the Comoros' rotating presidency that was agreed upon in the [2001 constitution](#) that followed the [Fomboni Agreement](#) which resolved Anjouan's 1997-2001 separatist crisis.

The origins of that conflict are extraordinarily complex, but they mostly have to do with local political rivalries that emerged during the Comoros' chaotic and unquestionably imperfect so-called "democratic transition" in the 1990s. The constitutional compromise that was reached was that each of the country's three main islands of Grande Comore, Ajouan, and Mohéli would receive broad autonomy along the lines of Bosnia's two constituent entities, and like that war-torn Balkan country, they'd have their own regional presidents but also participate in a [rotating nationwide presidency](#), too. This arrangement has proven to be exorbitantly expensive and government salaries were previously estimated to account for a [whopping 80%](#) of the country's budget. Assoumani wanted to streamline governance in order to cut down on costs and enable the government to reinvest its resources in one of the world's most impoverished populations.

Assoumani vs. Abdou

The problem is that his successful motion to change presidential term limits and remove the rotational presidency deprived the Anjouan leader of assuming control of the country in 2021 like he and his people had assumed would happen per the Fomboni Agreement. Furthermore, the country's second-most populous island had previously fallen back into the throes of separatism for a brief period from 2007-2008 that was only resolved through an [African Union-backed military intervention](#), and Assoumani risks triggering a revival of those sentiments after making moves to implement the results of this summer's referendum. Of note, the opposition called for a boycott of the vote and claimed that the president's [suspension of the Constitutional Court](#) earlier this year before the poll was held therefore made it illegal. The latest reports coming in from the archipelago show that the country might be on the verge of another separatist crisis.

The government [alleges](#) that Anjouan governor Salami Abdou is responsible for orchestrating an "operation of destabilization", which has [included](#) "boats with armed men" sailing from the nearby French overseas department of Mayotte to fan the flames of violence on the island. Importantly, the Comoros [officially lays claim](#) to Mayotte on the grounds that the French illegally separated the once-unified colony after the easternmost island still under its control overwhelmingly voted to remain with Paris instead of choose the path of independence like the rest of its ethno-religious compatriots in the archipelago did back in 1975. This was reaffirmed in 2009 when 95% of the 61% of participating locals [voted to upgrade their status](#) from an overseas collectivity to overseas department, which observers explained by their desire to retain access to France's much better welfare system and economy that has made Mayotte the destination of many illegal Comorian immigrants.

Satellite-Tracking Stations & Offshore Energy Extraction

Another interesting wrinkle in all of this is that Anjouan previously [requested to rejoin France](#) during the initial days of its de-facto independence in 1997 for what can be presumed are these very same reasons but was politely rebuffed by Paris probably because it didn't take on what it may have considered to be an economically unproductive burden, even though there was speculation that the Comoros' former colonizer was tacitly supporting the island during its second 2007-2008 separatist crisis with the central government. Mixed in with all

of this neo-colonial intrigue is the China factor, which has increasingly become just as – if not more – significant than the French one. The People’s Republic is now [considered](#) to be the Comoros’ top [strategic partner](#) after being the first country to recognize its independence and correspondingly invest in its capabilities over the decades. This has since seen China construct state-of-the-art and much-needed infrastructure as well as help eradicate diseases there.

[Somewhat conspiratorially but still reasonably](#), it’s been claimed that China is only paying attention to such an economically insignificant and politically unstable country as the Comoros because of the strategic interests that it has in possibly building a satellite-monitoring station along the equator and prospecting in the LNG-rich waters off the [Tanzanian](#) and [Mozambican](#) coasts where plenty of offshore gas deposits have already been found. In the worst-case scenario, China’s preeminent position in the Comoros could allow it to exert influence over those neighboring deposits and keep an eye of nearby naval activity there, thereby justifying its comparatively paltry but nevertheless locally impactful investments there. All of this could be offset, however, if Assoumani is successfully framed by the West as a “power-hungry pro-Chinese dictator irresponsibly putting the country’s territorial integrity at risk” through his “provocative” and “illegal referendum” that might lead to sanctions against him or worse.

“Patriot”, “Dictator”, Or “Patriotic Dictator”?

It’s at this point where it’s worthwhile explaining what Assoumani had in mind with his referendum and antecedent suspension of the Constitutional Court. In his view, the Fomboni Agreement – like the Dayton Accords before it in Bosnia – made the Comoros functionally ungovernable and incapable of long-term planning, which is why he felt that reforms had to inevitably be carried out even if he had to go directly to the people through a referendum by undermining the judicial branch of the “deep state” that might have had self-interested reasons for impeding him. It should be remembered that, for better or for worse, the country doesn’t have a Western democratic tradition and heavy-handed authoritarian tactics are the norm, though he should have foreseen that his brazen attempt to change the law in as dramatic of a fashion as he did and irrespective of the overall support of the electorate that he achieved would have consequences.

It’s difficult to imagine that he thought that the people of Anjouan would take this political “affront” against their island’s autonomy laying down, so the resultant [Color Revolution](#) unrest and speculative support thereof from the nearby French overseas department of Mayotte (whether coordinated by the French government or carried out independently by the huge population of illegal Comorian immigrants there) shouldn’t have been unexpected. There’s no telling what Paris’ true intentions would be in clandestinely provoking or passively exploiting this naturally occurring unrest when it previously refused to re-annex Anjouan when it had the chance two decades ago, though one possibility might be that it wants to encourage a rapidly escalating [Hybrid War](#) that could in turn be used to trigger Western condemnation of the government prior to sanctioning it and subsequently advancing a regime change scenario to remove its Chinese-friendly leadership for the aforementioned speculative reasons.

Concluding Thoughts

The Comorian Crisis has only just begun, but it’s already looking to be more geostrategically significant than any of the other ones that the country has experienced in its over forty of

years of independence because of the [New Cold War](#) stakes that are involved vis-à-vis China and France. If the rumor mill is even partially correct and China does indeed have some degree of satellite-tracking and/or energy extraction interests in the Comoros, then this would make its latest destabilization (however unsurprising in hindsight as it may be) part of the larger trend of attempting to “roll back” the country’s influence, although it must objectively be said that the current crisis was avoidable despite there being convincing arguments in favor of the president’s controversial referendum. The Comoros’ ignoble history of more than 20 coup attempts points to the possibility of the situation rapidly moving in that direction once again with unpredictable consequences for its lasting stability.

The four most important developments for international observers to keep an eye on are:

- whether Anjouan attempts to secede once more;
- whether the West attempts to pressure Assoumani through sanctions and other coercive means to cancel the results of his successful referendum and/or step down
- the level of support (including military) that the African Union provides to or against Assoumani (the former in potentially repeating the 2008 anti-separatist operation if Anjouan secedes again and the latter in relation to a French-backed “[Lead From Behind](#)” regime change operation against him);
- and the level of support that China and Saudi Arabia extend to Assoumani to assist him in surviving potentially forthcoming Western-imposed sanctions and/or restoring the Comoros’ sovereignty over Anjouan if the island decides to secede again.

There’s of course also the possibility that Assoumani might be deposed by a military coup and the situation will be resolved in the West’s presumed favor sooner than later, though that can’t be taken for granted in spite of the country’s history. From what it looks like, he seems to be genuinely popular among some of the people (at least those from his home island of Grande Comore, which is also the country’s most populous and importantly the seat of the national capital) and isn’t known to employ mercenaries who could [suddenly stab him in the back](#) for the right (foreign-/French-paid) price. Another scenario is that the national government reasserts control over Anjouan and the Color Revolution fails to evolve into a Hybrid War that could then be used to trigger sanctions and everything else that might follow. Nevertheless, this curious country and its ongoing crisis still deserve to be monitored because of its New Cold War relevance.

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