

Lessons from Comoros

By Jason Warner

Abstract

The four-island archipelago of Comoros in the Mozambique Channel has been beset by turmoil since its independence from France in 1975. With the immediate loss of the island of Mayotte to France, twenty attempted coup d'états and persistent secessionist sentiment from the islands of Mohéli and Anjouan, the central government in Grande Comore has been inefficient in consolidating power throughout its territory. Although the literature on African state power – notably that of Jeffery Herbst – suggests that Comoros has an ideal geography for the projection state power, history has proven otherwise. Using Comoros as a case study, I argue that archipelago states are confronted with exceptional circumstances not faced by continental states that can serve to hamper their government's ability to project its power.

Particular features of the island – its boundedness and discretion, its microscopicality – render it available to ideal colonial fantasies and extreme colonial realities. Yet within theories of colonial discourse whose continental bias declares itself a focus on nation-states and border politics, islands are regarded merely as metonyms of imperialism, rather than as specific locations generating their own potentially self-reflective colonial metaphors (Edmond and Smith, 2003, pp. 6)

In the analogy of colonialism, islands are the clay of the imperial artist. Often remote, often discovered uninhabited, the island was the colonial dream – a blank canvas of sorts, a neatly parceled piece of land whose territorial limits gave way to its possibility for manipulation. With finite boundaries and clearly delineated resources, islands in European empires often found their identities based on the whims that colonial powers projected upon them. As Edmund writes:

Islands had emerged as a privileged element of the new malleable geography that that could be reconstructed and reshaped to suit the aims of specific political projects. The bounded space of islands also gave free reign to dreams of possession, colonization and domination (Edmond and Smith, 2003, pp. 26).

The Comoros, a four-island archipelago in the Mozambique Channel, serves as an ideal laboratory in which to examine the way that the colonial has attempted to mold islands to their liking, and the dilemmas that post-colonial governments have faced as a result of their island

geography. Soon after its independence from France in 1975, one of Comoros' four islands, Mayotte, seceded from the archipelago in order to effectively "re-colonize" itself as a territory under the French *tricolore*; in March of 2009, an island-wide referendum saw Mayotte overwhelmingly vote to become France's 101st department (Mayotte to Become French Department, 2009). Apart from its inability to retain the entirety of its pre-colonial territory after decolonization, the national government on the island of Grande Comore has been one of the most notoriously unstable on the African continent, having experienced twenty attempted coups, numerous secessionist sentiments, and an economy among the weakest in the world. In attempting to locate the source of its political tenuousness, the question must be asked: why has the Comorian state been so ineffective at consolidating its power?

To answer this question, I use a multi-disciplinary approach that incorporates elements of the history of Comorian decolonization, a framework for understanding how geography affects a state's ability to project power, and an investigation of how Comoros, thanks to its archipelago geography, exhibited non-adherence to the assumed norms of African decolonization and international relations. My underlying argument is that the non-contiguous boundaries of the Comorian archipelago led to the French ability to retain the island of Mayotte, the result of which has been the creation of a competing pole of power that has served to diminish the capacity of the Comorian state to consolidate power and contributed to its tumultuous post-independence history. As I will seek to prove with the case of Comoros, the constraints of power projection faced by the governments of island states vary significantly from those of continental governments. After making the case for Comoros' unique dilemmas, I then make the call for future studies of African state power projection – namely, the most well-known by Jeffery Herbst – to include the archipelago as a new and distinct geographical category.

In the first part of this essay, I give a brief history of the Comoros Union with a specific focus on the politics of the French-held island of Mayotte and the political instability that has characterized politics in post-independence Comoros. Second, utilizing a framework from Jeffery Herbst's *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, I attempt to categorize Comoros in one of three geographical categories depending on the state's ability to project its power. Coming to an impasse, in the third section, I suggest the creation of a fourth category – the archipelago – and enumerate the unique dilemmas faced by the government of Comoros because of its geography as an archipelago state.

**France, Mayotte and the Inefficacy of the Comoran State**

Mayotte was the first island of the four Comorian islands to come under French control (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). France annexed the island when the island's sultan, Andraintsouli, who, as the accession treaty put it, made the "call to France to protect the island," in 1841. By 1886, France had acquired via additional "protective treaties" the Comorian archipelago's three other islands of Mohéli, Anjouan and Grand Comore. By 1890, the four islands were supervised from France's Indian Ocean hegemon Madagascar, under whose jurisdiction they remained until being granted TOM (*Territoires d'Outre Mer*) status in 1947 (Caminade, 2003, pp. 46 – 49). In 1958, along with all of francophone Africa (aside from Sékou Touré's Guinea), Comoros voted against independence in favor of inclusion in the Franco-African Community (Meredith, 2005, pp. 67).

Whereas the majority of francophone Africa did finally gain its independence in and around 1960, discussions of independence in Comoros did not begin seriously until 1970. In 1972, a United Nations Special Committee included Comoros on its list of territories to which the "Declaration of Accession to Independence" was applicable. (Caminade, 2003, pp. 58). As the question of independence began to circulate in the archipelago, one of the central points of contention was whether the archipelago should gain its independence collectively or on an island-by-island basis (US Department of the Army, 2008). In close connection with a Parisian colonial lobby desiring the retention of at least some part of the archipelago, a series of *grandes familles* on the otherwise 80% illiterate island formed the Mouvement Populaire Mahoris and began to push for the island-by-island option, advocating for the non-independence of Mayotte (Caminade, 2003, pp. 49).

In 1974, France questioned Comoros whether it wanted to "choose independence or rest at the heart of the French Republic." In an unofficial vote, 95% of the inhabitants archipelago-wide voted for independence from France. Led by the ideology of the Mouvement Populaire Mahorais, the outcome was decidedly different on Mayotte, with 65% of its citizens expressing their desire for continued links with France. Though the vote was not an official archipelago-wide referendum for independence, France, recognizing an opening when it spotted one, declared the three islands of Grand Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan as independent on July 2, 1975; the three islands having voted so decisively for independence, France claimed Mayotte – which did not – as its own. Infuriated at France's usurpation of one its four islands, the National Assembly of Comoros declared the archipelago's official independence three days later on July 6, 1975, making claims of territorial sovereignty over the island of Mayotte.

France's retention of the Comorian island of Mayotte was met with criticism by the international community. Less than a month after the declaration of independence, the Organization of African Unity expressed its disapproval for the French retention of Mayotte, claiming that the vote was "illegally imposed on the inhabitants of Mayotte" and that it constituted "an aggression against all the Comorian people." It consequently called for France's immediate withdraw (Mayotte island (Comoros) deepens French dependence, 2008). On November 12, 1975, the United Nations General Assembly granted Comoros membership to the United Nations, and reaffirmed Comoros' territorial claim over the island of Mayotte, a proposition to which France vehemently objected (US Department of the Army). On February 6, 1976, the United Nations General Assembly declared the French claim to Mayotte invalid. France was little concerned however, and though in its non-compliance in abandoning Mayotte, it was the first time that France had unilaterally ignored a United Nations resolution (Loiseau, 1988). Even throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations General Assembly condemned France's possession of Mayotte. The sole reason that the United Nations Security Council has thus far been unable to pass a resolution demanding Mayotte's return to Comoros is France's permanent veto power therein (Mayotte island (Comoros) deepens French dependence, 2008).

Despite the ire over France's retention of Mayotte, anger over the island became a secondary consideration as Comoros began its rocky road down the path of independence. Only twenty-eight days after its official declaration of independence, Comoros' first president, Ahmed Abdallah was overthrown in a coup on August 3, 1975; Comoros' next President, Ali Solih was also overthrown in 1978 by infamous French mercenary Bob Denard. The Comorian government would be overthrown two more times – in 1989 and in 1995 – by Denard, in addition to being toppled in a 1999 by a military coup (BBC Online, 2010). The political turmoil characterizing Comoros' post-independence history was not to subside. Since its independence in 1975, Comoros has experienced twenty coup d'états, an average of one every 1.5 years, leading it to be referred to as "the coup-coup islands" (Goodspeed, 2008) (Elzas, 2009).

In addition to the threats it in the form of coup d'états, for the past decade, the Comorian government in Moroni (on the island of Grande Comore) has been forced to deal with the constant threat of secession from the two smaller islands, Mohéli and Anjouan. In August 1997, after a tumultuous twenty-two years of independence, the islands of Anjouan and Mohéli claimed independence from Grande Comore in hopes of being re-annexed by France à la Mayotte. In September 1997, the government in Grand

Comore sent in troops to quash the secession on the island of Anjouan, but local militias repelled them. Leadership of the Anjouan secessionist movement switched between Major Combo Ayouba, Major Ahmed Bacar and Colonel Said Abeid, until a December 2001 referendum reunited the islands of Anjouan and Mohéli (with greater individual autonomy) with Grand Comore under the title of the Union of Comoros. Reconciliation was not to be attained however, as the African Union was forced to send in troops as recently as March 2008 when secessionist-minded Colonel Bacar refused to relinquish the presidency of Anjouan (BBC Online, 2008). Given its inability to deter coup d'états and to stop secessionist movements across three island archipelago, the Comorian state may be said to have been ineffective at projecting its power since independence. In trying to theorize the underlying causes for the impotence of the Comorian state, our discussions now turns to the question of geography – specifically, how Comoros' island geography affects the state's ability to project power across its territory.

### State Geography and Power Projection

In his book *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Jeffery Herbst suggests that an analysis of the borders of African nations can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of their domestic politics, particularly in a state's ability to broadcast power over its territory. Herbst conducts a study that examines the ways in which the size, shape and population distribution of African countries contribute to or impede the ability of the state to project power. He divides African countries into three types - unfavorable, hinterland or favorable - depending on how their geographies affect the state's ability to project power.

In Herbst's nomenclature, states with *unfavorable geography* are generally the largest African states, whose pockets of high-density populations scattered throughout the territory make the state's maintenance of control over the territory difficult. In Africa, examples of these include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Namibia and Mozambique. Though also among Africa's largest states, *hinterland states* differ in Herbst's categorization because despite their large size, their populations are concentrated near to the capital city, thus allowing for effective state control. Examples of these include Mali, Niger and Chad. In contrast to these two, states with *favorable geography* are typically smaller territories, whose size allows for a strong consolidation of power in comparison to territorial area. These states also tend to have their populations concentrated in the capital city with population density gradually diminishing in correlation with distance from the capital.

States with favorable geography include the majority of Africa's smallest countries, including Benin, Togo, Ghana and Lesotho, Gabon and Eritrea (Herbst, 2000).

In his work, Herbst categorizes each of the forty mainland Sub-Saharan African countries within each of these three categories. For reasons of their cultural and political differences, he excludes the Maghreb North African countries, as well as the outlying island-nation states of Africa, including Cape Verde, Seychelles, Madagascar, and, importantly for this analysis, Comoros. In this section, I use the criteria put forth by Herbst in an attempt to categorize Comoros into one of his three aforementioned categories in hopes of determining if Comoros' geography is one factor that has led to its government's inability to project power (Herbst, 2000).

In order to classify Comoros within Herbst's three-class paradigm, one must first examine the nature of its population distribution. As an archipelago, the population centers of Comoros are dispersed amongst the three islands: Grand Comore, Mohéli, Anjouan, and formerly, Mayotte. As shown by Figure 2, the Comorian capital of Moroni is located on the far western point of the westernmost island, Grand Comore. In this way, the geographical distance between the capital and the other two islands over which the state seeks to project its power is hindered by the relative isolation of the capital of Moroni. Additionally, though the island of Grand Comore is home to the capital, the most densely populated island of the Comoros Union, Anjouan, is actually the furthest from the capital, serving as another deterrent towards state power consolidation. Thus, thanks to the relative distance of the capital from the rest of the population, particularly the comparatively more densely populated island of Anjouan, the initial assumption is that Herbst would classify Comoros as having an *unfavorable* geography for state power projection (Population Density Map of Comoros, 2008).

Though an investigation of Comoros' population density would confirm its distinction as a nation with *unfavorable* geography, we must investigate another factor that Herbst argues plays a significant role in a state's ability to project power: size. Whereas the vast majority of states with *unfavorable geography* are, as Herbst says, "large, among the top fifteen in size," Comoros is decidedly not (Herbst, 2000, pp. 149). Indeed, at with a total area of 2,170 km<sup>2</sup> Comoros is nearly one-sixth the size of continental Africa's smallest state, Gambia (11,300 km<sup>2</sup>) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). Herbst makes clear that although questions of population distribution, population density and capital location are contributing factors, size is the most important factor to examine when determining states' power projection nomenclature:

There is also a set of countries so small that their

population distributions are almost irrelevant because the geographic mass of the state is so limited that it does not pose any obstacle to the extension of authority. Roughly, these are the countries that are in the last fifth of the size distribution with landmasses no larger than fifty-five thousand miles... From the largest to the smallest, this includes Togo (thirty-third), Lesotho, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Rwanda, Swaziland and Gambia. Given their small size, their population densities are quite favorable to political consolidation (Herbst, 2000, pp. 155).

Because Herbst did not consider island states in his book, Comoros was not included on this list. However, were he to have included island nations, as the third-smallest state in Sub-Saharan Africa based on territory, Comoros would have undoubtedly been included in the preceding list. Thus, despite exhibiting a population distribution typical of countries with *unfavorable* geographies, Comoros' size alone would lead Herbst to classify it as a country with geography *favorable* to the projection of state power. Moreover, in accordance with his assessment that "African conditions privilege nations that are relatively small," as one of the smallest of all African nations, Comoros might then, according to Herbst's assumptions, be a state with one of the geography *most* favorable for the state's projection of power. However, with twenty attempted coups d'états and an unending current of secessionist movements, it is apparent that such is far from the case. What then makes Comoros, apparently the epitome of a state with favorable geography, so ineffective at projecting its power across its meager territory?

### State Power and the Dilemma of Archipelagoes

It is my thesis that despite its assumed ideal size, the inability of the Comorian state to project power stems at least partly from the unique challenges that it faces thanks to its geography as an archipelago state. I argue that as a state with non-contiguous borders, many of the norms of decolonization and sovereignty in African international relations did not hold for Comoros. Primary amongst these anomalies was the notion that decolonization must be complete; that is, that the colonial power should be unable to retain any territorial presence in the formerly colonized space. Because of Comoros' archipelago geography, it was possible for France not to completely decolonize the territory, but rather to retain one finite section of the former colony in the form of the island of Mayotte. The result of this incomplete decolonization has been the existence of an extant pole of power that has led to persistent secessionist movements from the islands of Anjouan and Mohéli in

attempts to "re-colonize" themselves under France after having witnessed the inefficacy of the central government in Grand Comore. Indeed, though the weakness of the Comorian state cannot be attributed entirely to the French retention of Mayotte, I argue that this reality has not abetted the Comorian state in consolidating power.

To understand why Comoros' archipelago geography contributed to its current problems of power consolidation, a brief look back at the "rules" of decolonization in Africa is necessary. When the prospect of independence was recognized as the inexorable reality in Africa, a set of de facto rules were established both between colonial powers and African leaders as to how territory would transition from colony to state. In decolonizing the largest part of its African empire in West Africa, France simply granted independence to each individual colonial territory as demarcated by the borders that had been established during the colonial period. During this process, which saw eleven French colonies gain independence between August and November 1960, France had no hand in restructuring the size and shape of what the resultant states would look like (Meredith, 2005, pp. 69). It was not just France that left colonial borders untouched; as Christopher Clapham (1996) describes, as the process of decolonization swept the continent at large, all former colonial powers "invariably had a commitment to the preservation of the state's integrity against secession or dismemberment." Indeed, although accepted knowledge says that throughout the entire decolonization process a colonial power has never altered the inherited boundaries of an African state, Comoros turns this dictum on its head (Clapham, 1996, pp. 109).

For their part, African leaders also accepted the territorial demarcations that they had inherited from the colonial powers. The most expedient reason for doing so were the benefits of juridical (or legal) sovereignty that they were afforded from these established boundaries. By virtue of the fact that newly emergent African states both had land (demarcated by borders) and were independent, they were considered by the international community to be sovereign entities. Thus, despite not having de facto control over all territory within the borders of their new states, the dictates of juridical sovereignty as determined by the international community meant that African leaders had de jure recognition. To the extent that territoriality provided leaders with the benefits of state sovereignty, any loss of land or alteration of borders was unanimously deemed to be out of the question lest sovereignty be revoked. To this end, when the intra-African state system began to take shape in the early 1960s, it was one that was intended to "protect, not threaten the sovereignty of its individual member states" (Clapham, 1996, pp. 110). The relationships between African states were consequently founded upon the dictates

of respect for sovereignty, non-intervention and non-encroachment into the affairs of other states. Thus, at the moment of independence, both colonizers and colonized made a tacit agreement to maintain the colonial boundaries for the new African states. In short, new African states were simply territorial replicas of their former colonial selves. However, because of the non-contiguous nature of its borders, the government of Comoros was confronted with challenges to its territorial integrity that states with contiguous borders in mainland Africa did not. Parceled into four distinct territories that were collectively assumed to be a state, a "complete" decolonization of Comoros - if it had followed the norms of previous African decolonization - would have seen France leave the Comorian archipelago entirely, granting statehood to all four colonially-held islands as a union. However, because of the non-contiguity of Comoros' borders, France was able, unlike in any other decolonization circumstance, to retain a part of its former colony. Consequently, we can cite at least two ways in which the French retention of Mayotte has hampered the ability of the Comorian state to consolidate power.

First, immediate loss of territory to France signaled to Comorian civil society the comparative impotence of the Comorian state. That France granted independence to Comoros *not* because the would-be Comorian state demanded it (but only after France recognized its ability to retain Mayotte) meant that statehood was thrust upon the archipelago not on its own terms, but rather on those dictated by France. Thereafter, that the Comorian state was unable to influence the French decision to Mayotte in any way - despite the international community's demands - further weakened the state's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. With the loss of Mayotte, the Comorian populace recognized that the new state apparatus now overseeing them was not ultimately able to exert control over all of its presumed territory. This early recognition of the state's vulnerability has no doubt contributed to the willingness of citizens to attempt its overthrow in the twenty coup d'états that Comoros has experienced in its thirty years of independence. Though Comorian civil society's recognition of the state's weakness is not surprising, the immediate loss of Mayotte to France nevertheless put a damper on the project of state building in the post-independence period.

Second, the French retention of Mayotte created an alternative state of allegiance in the region that has inspired continuous secessionist movements from the other two islands. The immediate secession of Mayotte to France showed citizens on the islands of Mohéli and Anjouan that they need not necessarily be allied with the weak central government on Grande Comore. Rather, an alternative (and much wealthier) state existed in the region to which they could turn for citizenship should they so chose. In contrast

to other "breakaway" African regions at independence - such as the southern Katanga province in the Congo or Biafra in Nigeria - the case of Mayotte was unique because it did not seek secession from Comoros to become its own state, but to be "re-colonized" by France. In no mainland territory in Africa would a similar situation have been possible. Together, these realities have served to weaken the central government's hold on territory that would, according to Herbst's assessment, otherwise be easily consolidated.

To conclude, the territorial (and by proxy, ideological) threat imposed by French presence in the region - enabled by Comoros' archipelago geography - is one of the contributing sources of the inability of the Comorian government to project its power. In retaining Mayotte, France effectively dismantled the norms of "complete decolonization" that had previously typified African international relations. By examining the unique territoriality of Comoros, we recognize that only in the non-contiguous territory possessed by an archipelago could a colonial power to create a post-colonial power arrangement like the one that France created with Mayotte.

And so, in returning to Herbst, the inability to categorize Comoros in one of his three existing categories leads to a call for the creation of a fourth. After this explanation of the unique dilemmas that the governments of archipelago states can potentially face in projecting power, we implore Herbst, in recognizing "the extreme colonial realities" that can be presented by island states, to expand his nomenclature for their inclusion.

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