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The Politics of Comoros

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Introduction

The Union of the Comoros stands as a unique and complex archipelago in the Indian Ocean, defined as much by its turquoise coastlines as by the vibrancy and turbulence of its political life. Despite its modest size and population, the politics of Comoros have long drawn significant attention, both regionally and internationally, due to a persistent legacy of instability and transformation. This book, *The Politics of Comoros: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Comoros*, aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the nation's political evolution, structures, and ongoing challenges, giving readers an informed understanding of where Comorian politics has come from—and where it might yet go.

After centuries under colonial influence and subsequent decades of contested independence, the Comoros has become synonymous with frequent political upheaval. The archipelago's recent history is marked by a succession of coups and assassinations, as well as bold attempts to forge a stable and representative governmental system. These patterns of conflict and reform have forged a hybrid political culture that reflects both indigenous traditions and the legacies of French rule. As such, the Comorian state remains a fascinating study of the tensions between island autonomy, central authority, and the unresolved status of Mayotte, a source of both internal and international contention.

The purpose of this book is to move beyond anecdote and headline, offering instead a systematic analysis of the institutions, actors, and issues that shape political life in Comoros. Readers will find detailed chapters covering the constitutional arrangements and governmental frameworks that have come and gone, explanations of key political events, and assessments of how democracy—often fragile—has fared in the face of military, economic, and social pressures. The text will highlight both the advances, such as the gradual emergence of a multi-party system and public dialogue, and the setbacks, including electoral irregularities, political exclusion, and the consolidation of executive power.

In understanding the politics of Comoros, one must also grapple with the broader challenges that underlie political developments in the country. These include persistent economic hardship, issues of corruption and accountability, and the complex relationship with France centering on the island of Mayotte. Comorian politics are also influenced by international organizations, regional dynamics in the western Indian Ocean, and the internal migration flows that link the islands with their diaspora. The interplay between these domestic and international factors forms a backdrop to every major political turn.

Throughout the book, attention is paid to the lived experience of Comorians, whether as voters, activists, public servants, or migrants. We explore how ordinary citizens navigate the pressures of tradition and modernity, how gender and generational divides impact political participation, and how local and island identities inform national expression. The chapters ahead are designed to make the complexities of Comorian politics accessible and meaningful, with analysis rooted in historical context and sensitive to contemporary realities.

By the conclusion, readers will not only have a thorough grounding in Comorian political structures and recent history, but also the tools to evaluate its present trajectories and future prospects. The hope is that, whether for students, scholars, diplomats, or interested laypersons, this book will serve as an indispensable guide to one of Africa's most enigmatic yet instructive political systems.

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CHAPTER ONE: Colonial Legacies and the Path to Independence

The story of Comorian politics cannot begin without acknowledging the long shadow cast by colonialism. For centuries, the islands that now form the Union of the Comoros were at the crossroads of trade routes, attracting a diverse mix of peoples and influences, from Arab traders to African migrants. This historical tapestry laid the groundwork for the unique cultural and social fabric of the archipelago, but it was the arrival of European powers, specifically the French, that fundamentally reshaped the political destiny of the islands. The colonial era wasn't just a temporary interruption; it was a period of profound transformation, leaving behind institutions, boundaries, and unresolved questions that continue to define the Comorian state today.

The French presence in the Comoros began incrementally in the 19th century. Initially, it involved treaties with local sultans, particularly on Mayotte, which sought French protection against rivals. This foothold gradually expanded, driven by strategic interests and the burgeoning colonial ambitions of France in the Indian Ocean. By the late 19th century, the islands were effectively under French control, though the process wasn't entirely uniform across the archipelago. Each island had its own history and relationship with the French, contributing to the distinct identities that persist today. This piecemeal approach to colonization would have lasting implications for the unity of the islands.

The formal annexation of the islands came later, solidifying French authority. The Comoros were initially attached administratively to Madagascar, a larger French colony in the region. This administrative link, while seemingly practical from a colonial perspective, further emphasized the subordinate status of the islands and integrated them into a broader colonial structure. It also meant that administrative and legal frameworks developed in Madagascar were often applied to the Comoros, even if they weren't always perfectly suited to the local context. This period saw the introduction of French legal concepts and administrative structures that would influence the post-independence state.

Colonial rule brought significant changes to the traditional social and political structures of the islands. The authority of local sultans and customary law were gradually eroded as French administrators imposed their own system of governance. Economic policies were geared towards serving the interests of the metropole, with an emphasis on cash crops like vanilla, cloves, and ylang-ylang. This economic reorientation created new dependencies and altered traditional land ownership patterns, issues that would continue to resonate after independence. The focus on

export-oriented agriculture meant that the islands' economies became vulnerable to global market fluctuations.

The Second World War marked a turning point in colonial history globally, and the Comoros was no exception. The war weakened the European colonial powers and fueled nationalist movements in their territories. Although the Comoros did not experience the same level of organized resistance as some other colonies, the post-war period saw the emergence of nascent political awareness and a growing desire for self-determination. Comorians who had served in the French military or been exposed to ideas from other parts of the world began to question colonial rule and advocate for greater autonomy.

In the decades following the war, France introduced reforms aimed at gradually increasing the participation of local populations in the administration of their territories. The Comoros became an overseas territory of France in 1946, granting them a degree of administrative autonomy from Madagascar. This was a significant step, allowing the islands to develop their own political institutions, albeit under French oversight. A territorial assembly was established, providing a platform for Comorian political figures to voice their concerns and aspirations.

The political landscape in the Comoros began to evolve with the formation of the first political parties and movements. These early groups were often organized around prominent individuals and reflected the distinct identities and interests of the different islands. The question of the future status of the islands – whether to seek full independence, remain closely associated with France, or pursue a different path – became a central topic of political debate. Divisions emerged between those who favored immediate independence and those who preferred a more gradual transition or continued links with France.

The push for independence gained momentum in the 1960s, as many other African nations achieved sovereignty. Comorian political leaders engaged in negotiations with the French government regarding the terms of decolonization. These discussions were complex, involving not only the transfer of power but also issues of economic ties, defense agreements, and the future of French citizens residing in the Comoros. The differing views among the islands on the desirability and timing of independence added another layer of complexity to the negotiations.

A pivotal moment arrived in 1974 with the holding of a referendum on independence. The results of this referendum highlighted the existing divisions within the archipelago. While majorities on Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Mohéli voted decisively in favor of independence, the island of Mayotte voted to remain a part of France. This outcome created a fundamental challenge to the unity of the archipelago and set the stage for a long-standing dispute over Mayotte's status. The differing votes reflected a complex mix of factors, including economic considerations, historical ties, and political

allegiances.

Despite the clear vote for independence on three of the four islands, France initially sought a solution that would respect the wishes of each island. However, Comorian leaders, led by Ahmed Abdallah, declared unilateral independence in July 1975, encompassing all four islands, including Mayotte. This declaration was not recognized by France, which maintained its administration over Mayotte. The unilateral declaration of independence, while celebrated by many, immediately created an international dispute and complicated the new nation's early years.

The decision by Mayotte to remain French was influenced by several factors. There were historical differences in the nature of French involvement in Mayotte compared to the other islands. Some Mahorais feared being marginalized in a new Comorian state dominated by the more populous Grande Comore. Economic considerations also played a role, with some believing that remaining with France offered better economic prospects. The presence of a significant French military base on Mayotte also factored into the equation.

The immediate aftermath of the unilateral declaration of independence was chaotic. Ahmed Abdallah became the first President of the independent state. However, his government was short-lived, overthrown in a coup just weeks later. This marked the beginning of a period of significant political instability that would plague the Comoros for decades, with numerous coups and attempted coups following in quick succession. The fragility of the new state's institutions and the lack of a strong, unifying political force contributed to this turbulence.

The legacy of colonialism extended beyond political boundaries and institutions. The French language remained the language of government and education, creating a linguistic divide within the population. The legal system continued to be heavily influenced by the French Napoleonic Code, operating alongside Islamic law and customary practices. The economic structures established during the colonial era, focused on a few cash crops, left the new nation vulnerable to external economic shocks.

The unresolved status of Mayotte became a persistent source of tension between the newly independent Comoros and France. Comoros consistently claimed sovereignty over Mayotte, viewing it as an integral part of their territory. France, on the other hand, based its position on the results of the 1974 referendum and subsequently held further referendums in Mayotte, where majorities continued to vote to remain French. This disagreement impacted diplomatic relations, trade, and movement between the islands.

The early political history of independent Comoros is a complex narrative of nation-building efforts, internal power struggles, and external pressures. The leaders of the

new nation faced the daunting task of forging a unified state out of islands with distinct identities and histories, while also navigating the challenges posed by economic underdevelopment and the unresolved issue of Mayotte. The legacy of colonial administrative structures and economic dependencies continued to shape the choices available to the new government.

The period immediately after independence saw a series of political experiments and shifts in governance. Different leaders came to power through various means, including coups and contested elections. The search for a stable and effective political system was ongoing, with various constitutional arrangements being attempted to balance central authority with the desire for island autonomy. The political landscape was characterized by shifting alliances and rivalries among key political figures and factions.

The role of external actors, particularly France, remained significant in the post-independence period. France maintained economic ties, provided development assistance, and retained a military presence. Its position on Mayotte also continued to influence the political dynamics in the region. Other countries and international organizations also engaged with the Comoros, seeking to promote stability and development, though their impact was often limited by the internal political volatility.

The experience of colonialism left an indelible mark on the Comoros, shaping its political institutions, economic structures, and social dynamics. The path to independence was not a clean break but a complex transition that left unresolved issues and created new challenges. The legacy of distinct island identities, the enduring influence of French culture and institutions, and the contentious issue of Mayotte all stem, in part, from the colonial era. Understanding this history is crucial to comprehending the political landscape of the Comoros today. The political struggles of the post-independence period can be seen as a continuation of the efforts to define and consolidate the Comorian state in the context of these historical legacies.

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