

Comoros

The 2006 elections in the Union of the Comoros marked an important milestone in the peace process on the troubled archipelago. New union president Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi won 58 percent of the vote in elections, described by the African Union as free and fair, and took over on 27 May 2006, in the islands' first peaceful leadership transition since 1975. The AU Mission for Support to the Elections in the Comoros (AMISEC), a short-term mission devoted to the peaceful conduct of the elections, withdrew from Comoros at the end of May, having been declared a success by the AU and the Comorian government.

The Comoros comprises three islands: Grande Comore (including the capital, Moroni), Anjouan, and Moheli. Following independence from France in 1975, the country experienced some twenty coups in its first twenty-five years; meanwhile, Comoros slid ever deeper into poverty, and efforts at administrative centralization met with hostility, fueling calls for secession and/or a return to French rule in Anjouan and Moheli. When both islands declared independence from Comoros in 1997, state security forces sent to restore order clashed with separatists, leaving forty dead and causing consternation among the archipelago's regional neighbors.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) became involved in resolving the conflict on the islands in the mid-1990s. As part of its engagement, the Central Organ of the OAU authorized the deployment of a small military mission, the Observer Mission to Comoros (OMIC), in 1998 to monitor the situation and to build confidence. The OAU also facilitated multiple rounds of negotiations, while emphasizing its

support for a solution that preserves the country's unity. After Anjouan separatists rejected an initial deal in 1999, the OAU, under South African leadership, threatened sanctions and military action if the island continued to pursue secession. All parties eventually acceded to the 2001 Fomboni Accords, which provided for a referendum on a new constitution in advance of national elections.

The core of the current deal is a federated structure, giving each island substantial autonomy and a turn at the presidency of the union, which rotates every four years. Presidential



An African Union peacekeeper checks voter identification cards at a polling center in Mutsamudu, Comoros, 14 May 2006.

AP Photo/Xinhua, Wang Hongda

AU Mission for Support to the Elections in the Comoros (AMISEC)

• Authorization and start date	21 March 2006 (Communiqué of the African Union Peace and Security Council)
• Head of mission	Francisco Madeira (Mozambique)
• Force commander	Colonel G. K. Sibanyoni (South Africa)
• Police commissioner	E. Razafindrazaka (Madagascar)
• Budget	\$19 million (estimate, excluding the boost to numbers around election time)
• Strength as of 30 September 2006	Troops: 401 (boosted by 700 troops) Military observers: 31 (boosted to 63) Civilian police: 30

elections in 2002 returned the incumbent president, Colonel Azali Assoumani; however, there were widespread allegations of fraud. Many feared the 2006 elections would be more contentious, with the departure of Assoumani and the transfer of the presidency from Grand Comore to Anjouan. The relationship between the three islands' individual security forces and the national military also remained contentious.

In an effort to keep peace implementation on track, the AU's Peace and Security Council authorized the deployment of AMISEC on 21 March 2006, at the request of the president of Comoros. South Africa, which had acted as the coordinator of regional efforts in the past, was chosen as the lead nation. The mission had a mandate to monitor the elections, create a stable environment, and verify that the Comorian security forces were not involved in the electoral process. AMISEC was also authorized to "take all measures necessary to protect its personnel, as well as civilians within the proximity of the polling stations."

Troops were deployed almost immediately, with South Africa initially providing 361,

Rwanda 30, Nigeria 11, Mozambique 10, Congo-Brazzaville 5, and Egypt 5. Madagascar and Mauritius provided 15 police officers each. The primaries in Anjouan on 16 April 2006 ran smoothly, although with long delays in some areas. However, more support was needed to ensure security for the nationwide poll on 14 May. A last-minute request by the African Union, supported by all the Comorian parties, resulted in the deployment of an additional 700 South African troops for the presidential election. A total of 63 observers monitored the polls, which were declared free and fair.

Voting on 14 May generally went smoothly, with polls open at 624 sites. Comorian security forces reportedly remained in their barracks. AMISEC troops arrested several people for fraud, including a prominent member of the National Electoral Commission who was later handed over to the Comorian authorities. Counting proceeded without incident, with a decisive victory declared for moderate Islamist, "Ayatollah" Sambu, who was inaugurated in a cordial ceremony in Moroni on 27 May. AMISEC, whose mandate concluded on 9 June, demonstrated the AU's ability to undertake effective short-term peace operations, especially with a strong lead nation, as was the case with South Africa.

The chairman of the Commission of the African Union expressed his satisfaction with the smooth conduct of the polls. President Sambu has many challenges ahead, including delivering on his election promises of a fresh start for Comoros, persuading international donors to deliver on their pledges of aid, and reconciling his Anjouan supporters with mistrustful compatriots in Grand Comore. But for now, AMISEC's timely intervention seems to have given this small nation a decent chance at peace.