

# Briefing on the situation in The Comoros

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Tomorrow (01 June) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is set to convene the first session of the month to receive. The session will be on the situation in the Comoros.

The session is set to commence with the opening remarks of the PSC Chairperson of the month, Burundi's Permanent Representative to the AU, Joel Nkurbagaya. The AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, is also expected to deliver a remark. The AU High Representative for Silencing the Guns, Ramtana Lamamra, who served as envoy, may also brief the Council. The Representative of Comoros is also expected to make a statement as the country concerned.

This session comes amid heightened political tension in the Union of Comoros (UoC) after opposition groups called for nationwide protests this May. At the heart of the protests is frustrations about the change that the incumbent president, Azali Assoumani, unleashed to reconstitute the political system. Opposition groups reportedly demanded the restoration of the rotating presidential system- a power sharing formula that alternate power every five years among the three islands making the UoC and to that end the resignation of the president. The rotating presidential system, scraped under the 2018 constitution adopted in a referendum boycotted by the opposition, had been in place since 2001.

The UoC has not featured in the agenda of the Council since the last time it considered the situation in the country in September 2015, although it has remained under AU's watch. Since July 2018, the AU Commission Chairperson issued at least

three statements (29 July 2018, 16 October 2018, and 29 March 2019) in light of deteriorating political situations. Based on the report of the PSC on its activities and the state of peace and security in Africa, the AU Assembly also considered the Comoros during its 33rd Ordinary Session held from 9-10 February 2020. At that session, the Assembly expressed the readiness of AU to 'continue its facilitation role in the Comoros, with a view to strengthening and consolidating social cohesion'; and in this respect, the Assembly encouraged the PSC and the AU Commission to 'continue to support the Comoros in its efforts to advance political dialogue'.

As the demand of protesters highlight, the resurgence of the crisis in the Comoros is not an isolated event but recurrence of longstanding institutional crisis and political polarization. At the roots of the crisis is a contestation over centralization and greater autonomy for the islands that make up the UoC. The archipelago consists of three main islands: Grande Comere, Anjouan, and Moheli plus Mayotte, an island that France considers as its oversee territory, although Comoros lays claim over it.

The political instability in the Comoros, which resulted in about 20 coupe or attempted coups since the archipelago's independence from France and the emergence of separatism in the islands of Anjouan and Moheli, has been contained through the 2001 OAU facilitated Fomboni Framework Agreement. The rotational presidential system that the agreement established, entrenched in the 2001 Constitution, helped address the demands for autonomy while preserving the territorial integrity of the Union. This political arrangement is credited for the relative stability that reigned in the Comoros over the years. It is worth noting that the AU Summit in Noukchott in July 2018 attributes the 'peaceful environment enjoyed by the Comorian people' after 2001 to the Fomboni Agreement and the 2001 constitution, hence underscoring the need for upholding them.

For the forces of centralization (particularly political elites from Grande Comore), the rotational system of presidency creates discontinuities in policies and practice. More importantly, the rotational system gives equal opportunity to the three islands to lead the Union despite a significant variation of population size among the islands.

In 2018, President Azali Assoumani, who came to power in 2016, sought to implement changes to the political system. Despite the political tension that this move reignited, President Assoumani unveiled a controversial constitution, removing the single term limit and the rotating presidency, for referendum. Political oppositions boycotted the referendum and tension flared up in Comoros as Assoumani's move was not only viewed as unconstitutional power grab but also considered as a reversal to the political settlements reached in 2001. On 29 July 2018, just a day before the planned referendum, the Chairperson of AU Commission issued a statement expressing his concerns over the 'prevailing tension and differences among political stakeholders' and urged for inclusive dialogue.

The abolition of the rotating presidential system has stocked anger among Anjouan natives who were the next in line to take the helm by 2021. It is against the background of the contested process of the change of the Constitution and the expectation of the Anjouan to hold the Presidency under the 2001 constitution that the recent protests and political tension erupted. It is worth recalling that the PSC, at its 545th session held on 21 September 2015, warned that any attempt to 'call into question the principle of the rotating presidency' is likely to 'raise tension'.

Another aspect of the situation in Comoros expected to attract tomorrow's session relate to the elections held in 2019 and 2020. Based on the 2018 constitution, whose legitimacy is contested on the part of the opposition, Comoros held presidential and legislative elections in March 2019 and January 2020, respectively. Against the background of

simmering tension and wide-ranging crackdown following the 2018 referendum, the first round of presidential election was held on 24 March 2019. Although electoral officials announced a provisional result declaring Assoumani a winner with 60% vote on 26 March, the result was immediately rejected by 12 opposition candidates on the ground of widespread irregularity and fraud, and violent protest erupted. International election observers from the AU, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the East Africa Standby Force (EASF) reported irregularities that marred the credibility of the elections. The post-election violence prompted the Chairperson of the Commission to issue a statement on 29 March of the same year, calling for restraint as well as urging all political actors to quickly engage in an inclusive dialogue.

Assoumani's party, Convention for the Renewal of the Comoros (CRC), also achieved a landslide victory in the legislative and municipal elections, which took place in January 2020 under intense political climate. The AU Observer Mission, in its preliminary statement on 21 January 2020, indicated that the election was marked by lack of excitement among voters because of the opposition boycott.

The constitutional referendum as well as the general elections, instead of leading the Comoros to a durable peace, raised the spectre of instability in that country. As power is consolidating in the hands of the incumbent President who is from the Grande Comore, it is also feared that this may revive the separatist sentiment in the Islands of Anjouan and Moheli.

The socioeconomic conditions prevailing in the Comoros may also interest members of the Council. The low economic performance over the past few years, mainly due to the 2019 Tropical Cyclone (TC) Kenneth and COVID-19 outbreak, are likely to compound the political situation. In April 2019, Tropical Cyclone struck the archipelago, which left the country devastated. According to one report, more than 345,000 out of its total population of 800,000 were affected by the

passage of the cyclone, also resulting in the contraction of the economy from 3.2% in 2018 to 2.0% in 2019. In tomorrow's session, the statement from the representative of the Comorian government is likely to touch upon the government's initiative to address economic challenges, notably the 2030 Emerging Comoros Plan—a national strategy that aspires to move the archipelago into the ranks of upper middle-income countries by 2030.

With these worrying developments in the background, the PSC is expected to deliberate on ways and means that would prevent further escalation and bring political actors back to the negotiating table. In this respect, one avenue worth considering for the Council is the reactivation of an inclusive Inter-Comorian dialogue with the view to help Comorians resolve all pending issues peacefully. It is to be recalled that AU sent its High Representative Ramtane Lamamra in 2018 to facilitate the inter-Comorian dialogue, which came to a halt in October of that year after few weeks of talk.

The expected outcome is a communique. The Council is expected to express its concern over the deteriorating political situation, recalling concerns that it expressed previously about the risks of tampering with the power sharing system of governance that helped Comoros achieve relative stability. The Council is likely to urge both the government and political stakeholders to refrain from acts that may escalate tension, and further call for the immediate resumption of the inter-Comorian dialogue to find a negotiated solution to their differences and preserve the hard-won gains achieved over the years. Beyond expressing its readiness to facilitate the dialogue, the Council may request the Chairperson of the AU Commission to use all the available tools to help Comorian return back to the negotiating table, building on the earlier intervention of High Representative Lamamra. As part of revamping its escalation prevention and conflict resolution efforts as a follow up to the AU Assembly decision of February

2020, the PSC may request the AU Commission to establish an AU Support political mission for the Comoros. On the socio-economic developments, the Council is expected to take note and welcome the government's 2030 Emerging Comoros Plan which intends to address the economic challenges, as well as the convening of the 2019 Paris Conference of Partners for the Development of the Comoros with the view to supporting government's economic plan. In this regard, the Council may further call on donors and partners to honour their pledges made at the conference.