Military seize power in Comoros Islands

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On the night of April 29, the military seized power on the Comoros Islands, which lie between Madagascar and mainland Africa. In response to violent demonstrations against the plans of one of the islands to secede, the military launched a take-over for the eighteenth time in 24 years of independence.

In a desperate bid to escape from poverty, the small island of Anjouan voted to secede from the federation in August 1997. The government, based in the capital of Moroni, was blamed for neglecting the island. Anjouan is the island nearest Mayotte, which has remained a French colony, and which has a higher standard of living. But France refused to accept responsibility for another part of its former colony.

When troops arrived from Grande Comore, the largest island, to prevent secession, they were quickly repelled. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) tried to mediate between the two sides. Later, talks were co-organised by the OAU and Madagascar. The result of the latest round of negotiations, which took place in April, was a proposal for greater autonomy for Anjouan and the other island of the Comoros, Moheli. The islands were to be renamed from the "Federal Islamic Republic" to the Union of the Comoran Islands, and to have a rotating presidency. However, the delegation from Anjouan did not sign up immediately, saying they needed time for consultation. This became the trigger for the whipping up of anti-Anjouanese rioting. It is likely that this was also a means of distracting attention from the failure of then President Tadjidine Ben Said Massounde to hold elections.

At first, soldiers stood by as groups of unemployed youths attacked people of Anjouanese origin. Later, the army, which itself is mainly of Anjouanese origin, responded by seizing power, suspending the constitution and disbanding all the republic's institutions, "after observing an impasse in the leadership". They added that this was to prevent the islands "from plunging into chaos and anarchy". All gatherings were banned, and telephone communications were temporarily cut off. After hours of broadcasting military music, Captain Rachad Abdullah, the junta's spokesman, read an official statement. He declared that the islands' new leader was Colonel Azala Hassounani.

In related events in Paris, a leading figure in at least four of the Comoros Islands' military coups, French mercenary Bob Denard, has gone on trial for the murder of Comoros President Ahmed Abdallah 10 years ago. After a coup that toppled Abdallah, Denard organised a countercoup, which restored him to power. Denard profited handsomely from his exploits over the next 10 years, heading the 500-strong presidential guard, and using his position to build up a business empire. The prosecution alleges that Denard organised the assassination of Abdallah when the president was about to remove him from leadership of the presidential guard. While denying the specific charges laid against him, Denard's defence lawyers do not deny that he has been involved in many military coups--in the Congo, Nigeria, Angola, and what was then white-ruled Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), as well as in the Comoros. Denard claims to have friends in high places in France, but it appears that the court case is being held to distance France from the turmoil in its former colony.

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