

COMOROS

UNION OF THE COMOROS

Head of state: Assoumani Azali

Head of government: Hamada Madi Bolero

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

Political violence during elections reportedly resulted in 12 serious injuries. Following the elections, soldiers were accused of using excessive force when breaking up protests.

Background

After three years of extensive peace talks aimed at national reconciliation and the institutionalization of political life, Comorians went to the polls throughout the first half of 2002. In mid-January the government was dissolved and a transitional government headed by Hamada Madi Bolero was installed. The islands of Mwali (Mohéli), Njazidja (Grande Comore) and Nzwani (Anjouan) held constitutional referendums. Voting for the island presidents of Mwali, Njazidja and Nzwani also took place. Presidential elections for the Union of the Comoros were won by Colonel Assoumani Azali, who was inaugurated on 26 May. Following the elections, the four presidents and island representatives met regularly to discuss power-sharing arrangements between the central and island governments.

Comorian human rights organizations and the independent press criticized the election process as deeply flawed. The National Council of Independent and Sanctioned Elections (CNEIH) twice postponed the first round of Union presidential elections following the threatened boycott by eight of the nine presidential candidates. The opposition's protest focused on fraudulent electoral lists that favoured the government in power. The UN Development Programme, responsible for organizing the elections, substantiated this complaint. The opposition also protested against the violation of the electoral code. Under considerable international pressure to maintain the election timetable, the electoral lists were not corrected.

Political violence

Opposition candidates boycotted the second round of Union presidential elections and the campaigns were marred by violence. On election day, 12 people were reportedly wounded seriously on Njazidja when security forces attempted to reopen polling stations allegedly closed by opposition forces, and eight ballot boxes were destroyed. On Nzwani, four voting stations were damaged and polling officials were threatened. There were several reports of voter intimidation and voting stations that opened late or not at all. CNEIH and international observers concurred that the election was neither fair nor free. CNEIH was dissolved and a newly appointed Election Ratification Commission recognized Colonel Assoumani Azali's election.

There were violent street protests after Assoumani Azali's electoral win and frequently after meetings between the Union and island presidents. On 28 August, two children were wounded in the clashes.

Freedom of expression

The government remained sensitive to political criticism and exercised control over the free flow of information. There were several reported incidents of police violence against journalists who were covering the civil unrest.

✉ Izdine Abdou Salam, manager of the privately owned *Radio Karthala*, remained in prison. He was arrested on 10 November 2001 by the Moroni gendarmerie, accused of "libel" and placed under a committal order. His arrest followed the broadcast of a debate in which several speakers criticized the new draft constitution.

