

Comoros Citizenship



The Comoros is a small nation in need of money. The Gulf States have plenty of cash, but also a population of stateless residents they won't give full rights to. So, as **Alastair Sloan** reports, Comoros is trading cash for citizenship papers, but it may be getting more than it bargained for.

The Comoros, unlike its fellow Indian Ocean Small Island nations, the Seychelles and Mauritius, has been unable to capitalise on its natural beauty for tourism or become a hub to manage (and sometimes obscure) capital flows to and from the mainland African continent.

The Comoros has had a troubled history since winning independence from France in 1975. The colonial power did not give up the richest territory in the Comoros islands grouping, Mayotte, which to this day remains a French overseas department, and France has meddled in its former colony's affairs post-independence.

A coup ousted the first Comoros president, Ahmed Abdallah, within a month of independence. It was orchestrated by a French mercenary, Bob Denard, under orders from Jacques Foccart, the French government's chief advisor on Africa and the lynchpin in the French neo-colonial system known as Francafrique. The Comoros has suffered a further 20 coup attempts since then. This turmoil has severely constrained the nation's development.

As a result, the government's revenues are limited and reliant on aid. Against this backdrop, the government has been forced to get creative to raise funds. The Comoros is building on its historical relationship with Gulf Arab states and is selling citizenship to some of those countries' populations that the Gulf States don't want as their own citizens.

The Comoros islands and the Arabian Peninsula have a long shared history. Islam spread early to the islands; according to legend, when word of the prophet Muhammad reached the islands during his own lifetime, two notables were sent as envoys to Mecca. By the time they arrived, Muhammad had passed away, but the diplomats converted to Islam and brought the faith back to the archipelago.

Today, Islam plays a dominant role in the Union of Comoros. Ninety-eight per cent of the population profess the faith and, as with most Muslim countries, the government has a Grand Mufti advising on policy decisions.

Several of the Gulf States have a small number of citizens relative to non-citizen residents. For example, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), less than fifteen per cent of residents have citizenship. The rest – be they European bankers or Indian construction workers or Egyptian doctors – are on rolling work visas. For the UAE, which has built a wealthy economy largely on oil, credit and the expertise and perspiration of foreigners, it is a subtle reminder of who is in charge. Even for expatriates who have lived in the country for decades, only very few ever get an Emirati passport.

But below this migrant population, with their tenuous right to remain, is another stratum – the so-called “Bidoon”. These Bidoon are unrecognised as citizens of any state and number well over one hundred thousand across the Gulf. The Bidoon, who for a variety of reasons didn’t gain citizenship upon independence from Britain, often live a difficult life. They can’t leave the country they live in, have no identity papers, are rarely formally employed and are not entitled to many social services and benefits that Gulf States provide their citizens with.

The Bidoon are numerous enough to present a political problem for the Emirates’ rulers. In other Gulf States, most of which also have Bidoon populations, the stateless have taken part in pro-democracy demonstrations, which have appeared sporadically over the last twenty years but most recently during the Arab Spring.

Back in 2008, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa arranged for 8,000 sets of new citizenship papers to be made available to the Bidoon. But the committee that had been formed to count them had got their sums wrong, either mistakenly or deliberately. Ten times the number applied for papers.

Comoros stepped into the breach, providing the balance of required citizenship papers. Once Bidoon had completed that process, the UAE promised, applicants would be considered as potential candidates for

UAE nationality. According to reports in Al Jazeera and Le Monde at the time, the UAE had purchased these passports for \$200 million – an enormous figure for Comoros. Since then only a handful of Bidoon have managed to get full UAE citizenship.

This process of shifting citizenship to the Comoros instead raises human rights concerns.

Deportation

In 2012, a stateless human rights activist was deported after mounting an online political campaign. The authorities used his Comoros passport to make him leave the country, saying he was not Emirati. Other activists have been threatened with Comoros citizenship – and, therefore, the status of a foreigner – unless they cease their activities.

Despite these concerns, Comoros has already been receiving additional benefits in investment. Dubai-based company HSS Holding has begun implementing a large-scale marine transportation project for the Comoros islands.

Dubai World Africa, a subsidiary of the state-owned investment vehicle Dubai World, announced it would invest \$70 million. The project was slated to include a five-star international luxury hotel, with over a hundred luxury villas and townhouses.

But the deal came unstuck when officials in the Comoros Embassy in Abu Dhabi were caught selling additional papers from the back door for personal profit. The Emirati authorities cancelled what they still owed in fees.

Although this cash-for-citizenship deal was over, the marine transportation project remained. This HSS Holding venture is a joint enterprise with a bespoke Kuwaiti investment group, Comoros Gulf Holdings (CGH). The Kuwaiti group has planned investment encompassing telecommunications, aviation, energy, agriculture and transportation. Comoros would struggle to say no to this scale of investment.

Following this large-scale planned investment, it was announced last year that Kuwait's Bidoon were going to be offered Comoros citizenship. The proposals were met with criticism from the Bidoon community.

Mona Kareem, a Bidoon activist, quipped on Twitter in November – “I went to bed West Asian, & [sic] woke up east [sic] African. These are the miracles of Arab regimes.”

Writer Walid al-Rujaib called it a “barbaric and inhuman operation that resembles the displacement of Palestinians, Armenians and the Falash Mura, among others. This is not only a plan against human rights and humanity, but also a case of human trafficking.”

Although the Kuwait Bidoon-for-investment deal was announced last year, negotiations to complete the agreement are still ongoing, according to sources close to the deal. Sources suggest that conditions to prevent a repeat of the UAE embassy scam are high on the Kuwaiti negotiators' agenda.

But if Comoros can pull off their papers-for-cash deal, it could see the country push off into a brighter – or, at least, better funded – future. However, alongside human rights concerns, the Comorians may find another problem in the agreement. Kuwait-linked Comoros Gulf Holdings already exerts such a strong influence on local politics that a United States CIA cable, leaked from 2009, was worried whether “CGH's growing influence in the Comoros is completely benign”. The US's intentions for the islands may not be benign either, but their concern is telling. On CGH's website, the group's chairman is listed simply as Sheikh Sabah Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah. His description emphasises his management partnerships at thirty corporations in the Middle East and North Africa and his role on the boards of various NGOs.

It does not mention that Sabah is also the PM of Kuwait and a member of the Al-Sabah royal family. Perhaps the cost of Kuwaiti investment isn't just passports – it could be a degree of Comorian sovereignty too.