



Mayotte Islands Protest Inequality, But France Says Progress Takes Time

Karina Piser | Wednesday, April 20, 2016

Denunciations of French President Francois Hollande's government know no geographic boundaries these days. In Paris, students are protesting a labor reform bill

(<http://www.dw.com/en/french-nuit-debout-protest-movement-shows-no-sign-of-losing-steam/a-19198957>); in Mali, demonstrators ransacked an airport (<http://www.france24.com/en/20160418-mali-kidal-deadly-protests-against-french-forces>), decrying arrests made by French forces there. And since March 30, strikes and protests have paralyzed the French department and former colony of Mayotte, as residents demand “real equality” with the rest of France.

Mayotte, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean situated between Madagascar and Mozambique, is one of France's overseas departments; its residents are French citizens with parliamentary representation. But in many ways, Mayotte is far behind other overseas departments and “metropolitan” France—the part of France that's located in Europe, including Corsica.

Mayotte was offered independence from France in 1975 but refused, and instead became an overseas territory. Legally and administratively, French territories enjoy less autonomy than overseas departments, which can adapt French laws and regulations to their local needs.* In turn, departments—as fully integrated parts of France—pay higher taxes, have all French public institutions and are part of the European Union.

Mayotte only became a French department in 2011, after a referendum in 2009. Accordingly, it is less developed than France's other four overseas departments—Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guinea and Reunion, which earned that status in 1946.

“Technically, Mayotte has only been part of France since 2011,” says Francois Taglioni, a professor at the University of Reunion, “and protesters are expecting changes to come too quickly.” Demands for equality, then, aren't unreasonable, but they are premature. Furthermore, not all of those protesters mobilizing are doing so for the same reason, Taglioni says. “While some are demonstrating and going on strike with genuine demands, others are exploiting the situation to wreak havoc, block roads and



View of Mamoudzou, Mayotte, Sep. 15, 2003 (photo by David Stanley, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license).

burn cars.”

As protesters denounce discrimination from the central government, their grievances seem to be more of a function of dashed hopes than government negligence.

Indeed, Mayotte suffers from a host of economic and social problems—from poor infrastructure and education to rampant unemployment—that mirror or are worse than the challenges facing metropolitan France. French unemployment hovers at 10 percent; in Mayotte, the rate is nearly double. Considering Mayotte’s recent integration into the France’s national political scene, that disparity, both compared to metropolitan France and other overseas departments, should come as no surprise.

But Mayotte’s nascent status as a French department isn’t the only factor behind its mounting problems. Official estimates place Mayotte’s population around 220,000, with nearly 80,000 migrants (http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/valls-mayotte-c-est-pleinement-la-france-13-06-2015-1936145_20.php) from Comoros. “Mayotte’s demography is an extremely important factor making the current problems more acute,” says Olivier Kempf, a researcher at the Institute for International and Strategic Relations and a professor at Sciences Po in Paris. “It’s an extremely populated island that’s situated in an even more populated archipelago, the Comoros,” he adds. “And if Mayotte is poor compared to its fellow overseas departments, it is rich compared to neighboring Comoros.”

That drives large-scale illegal immigration, straining Mayotte’s already-insufficient public services, and compounds demands for expedited development. In many cases, illegal immigrants have clashed with French security forces. They insist that Mayotte is a Comoro island, and that should take precedence over being a part of France—but legally, that’s not the case.

Recent protests took a turn when a man was killed during riots, prompting some residents to organize a march against the island’s declining security environment. Protesters denounced Mayotte’s status as being “beneath France.” Some held banners blaming Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls for allowing the situation to deteriorate (<http://www.20minutes.fr/societe/1829663-20160419-milliers-personnes-defilent-mayotte-denoncer-violences>).

On Saturday, Valls visited the island, stressing that Mayotte is an “integral part of the French Republic” and citing the measures the central government had taken to curb illegal migration and bolster security.

But as protesters in Mayotte denounce alleged discrimination from the central government, their grievances seem to be more of a function of dashed hopes than government negligence. While it's true that Mayotte's economic and social situation is far from ideal, and certain laws—such as the labor code, which reduces the workweek from 39 to 35 hours—have yet to be applied, the need to invest in Mayotte's development is not lost among officials in Paris. In 2014, Hollande released the “Mayotte 2025” (<http://www.mayotte.pref.gouv.fr/content/download/5164/43644/file/Mayotte%202025%20Une%20ambition%20pour%20la%20R%C3%A9publique%20-%20document%20strat%C3%A9gique.pdf>) strategy, which set out steps to improve the island's economy and social services and bring the country fully in line with French legislation.

“The demands are feasible, but it will take time to bring Mayotte up to speed with the rest of France, developmentally,” says Taglioni, noting that Reunion, which became a department in 1946, has made tremendous progress but still faces challenges.

Taglioni also brings up another issue hindering Mayotte's full integration into French politics: Until Mayotte, which is 95 percent Muslim, became a department in 2011, its judicial system was governed by qadis, or Islamic judges.* That legal framework, along with other religious aspects of society, had to be abandoned or tweaked to comply with French secularism. As a result, many qadis lost their jobs, angering an entire sector of society that felt sidelined by the need to assimilate into French society. For that reason, Taglioni explains, Mayotte's development process is in many ways starting from scratch, and is not only an economic challenge, but a cultural one. Much of the legal system remains in limbo, with the population struggling to adapt as French property and land taxes are lobbed onto a system previously monitored by religious leaders.

As is the case in other overseas departments, Taglioni adds, the cost of living in Mayotte is extremely high. “Certain importers have a monopoly on the distribution of goods, and they sell items ranging from groceries to cars at a high cost. The cost of living in the territories is 40 percent higher than in metropolitan France,” he notes. Accordingly, many public sector workers in Mayotte are demanding a commensurate salary increase, which the French economy—with debt reaching 95 percent of national GDP as of 2015—simply cannot meet. Furthermore, Mayotte's extremely young population, 50 percent of which is under the age of 18, puts disproportionate demands on an education system that is still being built.

“There are clear challenges,” says Taglioni, “but Mayotte will take time to develop.” However, France, and Hollande's government in particular, is in a poor position to expedite that process. “Mayotte needs to recognize that, as a French department, there are new rights, but also new costs, like paying taxes,” Taglioni argues. “The island remains in a transitional period.”

**Editor's Note: The original version of this article neglected to specify that only overseas departments, and not those of mainland France, enjoy limited autonomy in applying laws. It also stated that Mayotte's population was 85 percent*

Muslim. While estimates vary, the number is closer to 95 percent. WPR regrets the error.

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