

Comoros authorities detain journalist, censor newspapers amid political crisis

Authorities in the Comoros should stop detaining journalists and censoring the press in the wake of the disputed March 24 presidential election, the Committee to Protect Journalists said this week.



Soldiers stand guard on April 2, 2019, in Moroni, the capital of the Comoros. Journalists have been detained and newspapers have been disrupted surrounding the country's recent presidential election. Credit: CPJ/AFP/Yousseuf Ibrahim

Toufé Maecha, editor-in-chief of the privately owned daily *Masiwa Komor*, was detained by authorities and interrogated, and three newspapers have had their print runs seized following the election, according to [news reports](#).

On March 24, incumbent President Azali Assoumani was re-elected in the Indian Ocean nation, in an election that opposition political figures have decried as illegitimate, according to [news reports](#).

"Not only do these blatant attacks infringe on press freedom, they rob the public of important information they need during a time of crisis," said CPJ's Sub-Saharan Africa representative, Muthoki Mumo. "Comorian authorities should stop censoring the media and harassing or detaining journalists who cover political events."

On March 30, gendarmes in the capital, Moroni, detained Toufé for six hours and accused him of espionage after he went to the gendarmes' station to inquire about arrests made since the election, according to [media reports](#) and [a statement](#) posted on the newspaper's Facebook page.

Toufé is at least the third journalist detained in the last two months, after Abdallah Abdou Hassane and Oubeidillah Mchangama were arrested in February and remain in custody, as [CPJ reported](#) at the time.

Toufé was interrogated about why he was at the gendarmes' station and forced to undress, according to an April 5 [statement](#) by the International Union of the Francophone Press, of which Toufé is the Comorian chapter president. Toufé was released without charge but was warned against talking about his experience in custody, according to the statement.

In an emailed statement to CPJ, the Comoros Ministry of Foreign Affairs disputed the characterisation that Toufé was detained, saying that the journalist entered the gendarmes' station without following proper procedures and was questioned and released.

Since the election, Comorian authorities have disrupted the distribution of three private newspapers, according to [news reports](#) and the International Union of the Francophone Press statement.

Copies of the March 28 edition of *La Gazette des Comores* were seized by authorities before they could reach newsstands in response to an article covering opposition leaders disputing the election results, according to [news reports](#).

The March 29 edition of *Al-Fajr* was also confiscated by authorities in response to a front-page piece headlined "La Guerre Commence" ("The War Begins") in reference to the post-election turmoil, according to [an article](#) on the paper's website.

On April 1, authorities raided the printer that produces *La Gazette des Comores*, *Al-Fajr*, and *Masiwa Komor* and prevented the day's editions from being distributed, according to [news reports](#). Each paper's April 1 front page featured accounts of Toufé's detention, according to those reports.

On April 2, private media outlets throughout the country declared a two-week boycott of government press conferences and other events to protest the recent attacks on the press, according to French news agency [RFI](#).

In its statement to CPJ, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the government had not banned critical or free reporting in the country

However, when questioned about Toufé's detention and the seizure of newspapers in [an interview](#) with RFI published on April 4, President Azali admitted that the headline "La Guerre Commence" had been banned by authorities, saying "we cannot allow that".

"[Journalists] are first Comorians, they must think of the interest of the country," Azali said.

CPJ called Mohamed Daoudou, minister for the interior and government spokesperson, but was unable to reach him. He did not respond to CPJ's text messages.

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