

World Watch Research

Comoros: Background Information

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OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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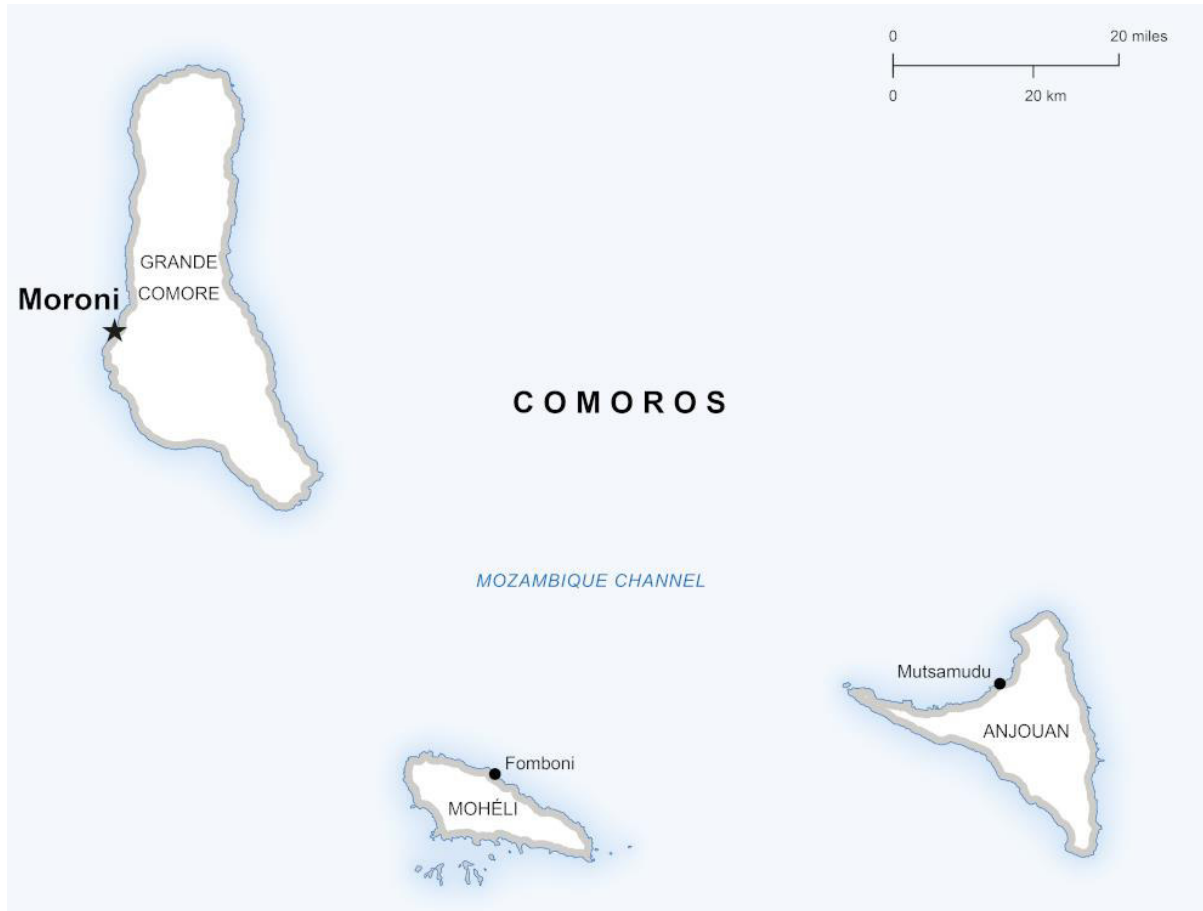
Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

Map of country



Comoros: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
868,000	5,500	0.6

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

After years of political instability following independence from France in 1974/5, the Comoros archipelago underwent a democratic transition in 2006. In that year, Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi became president of the Union of Comoros in an election that international observers described as generally free and fair. This was the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in the country's history. In 2008, the Union Army of National Development launched a successful and bloodless military coup that led to the removal of the former president of Anjouan Island, Mohamed Bacar, who then fled the country. Moussa Toybou was then elected president in a generally free and fair process in 2008. In November and December 2010, elections were held to decide on a new Union president on the Archipelago as well as separate governors for each of the three islands. Again, [in 2016](#), the country passed the test of holding peaceful elections which the former coup leader Azali Assoumani won, having served previously as president from 2002–2006 (Africa News, 16 May 2016). Since then, the country has remained politically stable.

In March 2019, the country held presidential elections and, as reported by [Reuters](#) on 27 March 2019: "The Comoros election body declared President Azali Assoumani re-elected on Tuesday in a single round after an election the opposition rejected as fraudulent." In the [January 2020](#) general election boycotted by the opposition, the president's party won 17 out of 24 legislative seats (Al-Jazeera, 21 January 2020). [The second round](#) of elections was held in February 2020 and the ruling party won 4 of the remaining five seats (Election guide, 23 February 2020). Azali Assoumani was again re-elected in January 2024 in an election that was disputed by the opposition as being marred with fraud.

In the past, some observers thought that the government might not be able to cope with the rise of Islamic militancy in the country which has been encouraged partly by the economic influence of some Middle Eastern countries. However, at present, it seems that the government is navigating this area of concern without creating unnecessary tension.

On 29 December 2023, the US government again placed Comoros on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom ([US State Department IRFR 2023 Comoros](#)).

Political and legal landscape

The 2001 [Constitution of Comoros](#) (amended 2009) requires a "rotating" presidency of the Union of Comoros in which each of the three islands takes turns at holding a primary round of elections for presidential candidates every four years. Power is vested in the government by the people and switches from island to island. However, new amendments to the constitution approved in 2018 allow the president to run for two consecutive five-year terms and abolished the system of rotating power among the islands.

President Azali Assoumani, from the Convention for the Renewal of the Comoros (CRC) party, took advantage of the referendum's changes and won the March 2019 presidential election, also boycotted by the opposition. Despite opposition rejection and observations of irregularities by the African Union (AU) and other observers, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) and the Supreme Court confirmed Azali's victory in the first round. He was sworn in for a second term in May 2021. Assoumani was again re-elected in January 2024, which was disputed and resulted in [post-election violence](#). Assoumani won a fourth five-year term after the country's electoral body declared him the winner with 62.97% of the vote (France24, 18 January 2024).

As reported in Freedom House's [Freedom in the World Index 2024 Comoros](#):

- Comoros scored a total of 42 points out of 100 in terms of political freedoms and civil liberties, making it "partly free," which is unchanged from the preceding year.
- "Comoros's volatile political history includes coups and attempted coups, though some recent presidential and legislative elections were reasonably well administered. A controversial 2018 referendum introduced major systemic changes, and opponents of the referendum were severely persecuted. Since winning the referendum and securing reelection in 2019, President Azali Assoumani has consolidated power by cracking down on the opposition and limiting press freedom. Systemic corruption and poverty remain problems."

As reported by the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Comoros](#)):

- The Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and citizens draw principles and rules to regulate worship and social life from the Shafi school of Sunni Islam. However, the Constitution also declares the equality of rights and obligations for all individuals regardless of their religion or belief.
- Except for Sunni Islam, proselytizing is prohibited and is punishable with imprisonment of 3 months to 1 year and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs. The law also provides for the deportation of foreigners who do so.
- No official registration process is required for religious groups.
- "Societal abuse and discrimination against non-Muslim citizens persisted, particularly against Christians or converts from Islam. In some cases, local communities intervened to try and convince those changing their religious beliefs or practices to remain committed to Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners reported little to no discrimination. Catholic churches on each island engaged in social work throughout the country."

Gender perspective

In 2013, Comoros was described as the "best country for Arab women" according to a Thomson Reuter poll of gender experts ([Thomson Reuters, 12 November 2013](#)). It topped the list for several reasons, which included: i) Ratifying the CEDAW treaty without making any reservations; ii) higher rates of convictions for sexual crimes; and iii) a high female representation in parliament compared to the region. Women are by no means on an equal legal footing to men, however, particularly in respect to marriage. Among other privileges, men have the right to polygamy and to divorce their wife unilaterally. Women can only enter marriage with the permission of their male guardian (*wali*) (Family Code, Art. 21). Whilst the minimum age for marriage is 18, a judge can authorize marriage at a younger age. The rate of child marriage remains high in Comoros; according to [Girls Not Brides Comoros](#) (accessed 23 August 2024), 32% of girls and 10% of boys are married by 18 (making Comoros the country with the sixth highest prevalent rate of child marriage among boys globally).

Religious landscape

Comoros: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	5,500	0.6
Muslim	850,000	97.9
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	9,800	1.1
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	770	0.1
Atheist	100	0.0
Agnostic	1,200	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Comoros is a majority Muslim country, predominantly Sunni. According to World Christian Database (WCD 2024), only around 0.6% of the population is Christian. The Constitution specifies that Islam is the state religion and defines the national identity as being based on a single religion – Sunni Islam.

The government itself observes the Islamic religious holidays as national holidays, such as the Birth of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Kabir and the Islamic New Year. Although classes in Islam are not compulsory in state schools, it is combined with Arabic teaching in state education at the middle school level. Due to the poor quality of state education and the fact that private schools are unaffordable for many, Islamic madrassas often fill the educational gap. Indeed, almost all children between the ages of four and seven attend Islamic schools where they learn to read and recite the Quran. Converts to Christianity face serious discrimination in society and are forced by strict Muslim relatives to send their children to the Islamic madrassas.

The government favors Islam; in civil society, education and governance there is a strong presence of conservative Islam. This is reflected in Comoros’ stance towards NGOs where Christian NGOs face a certain amount of discrimination. Despite Comoros’ democratization of society, it appears that Islamic developments in the region - for example, the Islamic revivals in Madagascar, Mauritius and the Maldives - will become stronger, taking into consideration that Western countries are far less active on the archipelago than Muslim majority countries.

Roman Catholics, Protestants, Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims together make up the very small minority of the population.

Economic landscape

According to World Bank's [Comoros Country Economic Memorandum](#) (17 October 2023):

- “Comoros has been stuck in a low-growth trap for over 40 years, with growth averaging about 2.6% in 1980–2022, and a poverty rate estimated at 39.8% in 2022. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows averaged 0.6% of GDP in 2011–2020. In terms of wealth per capita, the country’s produced physical capital declined by 27.7% between 1995 and 2018. This limited growth can be partially explained by structural factors, such as Comoros’ weak institutions, small population, limited human and physical capital, and geographic remoteness, which weigh on private sector development.”

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), on the other hand, projects that things are getting better. In its [Staff Country Report Comoros, 8 January 2024](#):

- “Economic recovery is underway, supported by the resumption of social activities, tourism, and ongoing public investment projects. Inflation has decelerated, in line with normalizations in international oil and food prices thus far in 2023. However, risks are elevated due to the fragile context and global uncertainty; dependence on imports, remittances, and foreign aid means the economy remains highly vulnerable to external shocks”.

According to the [African Development Bank's](#) Comoros Economic Outlook (accessed 23 August 2024):

- **Economic recovery:** In 2023, real GDP growth increased to 3.1%, up from 2.6% in 2022. This growth was driven by the services sector (up 3.6%) and agriculture (up 3.3%) on the supply side, and by household final consumption (up 5.1%), bolstered by strong remittances from the diaspora.
- **Inflation:** Inflation fell from 12.4% in 2022 to 9.1% in 2023 due to stable world prices. The central bank continued its liquidity recovery operations but reduced the reserve requirement rate from 15% to 12.5% in October 2023 to encourage bank lending.
- **Budget deficit:** The budget deficit worsened from 3.8% of GDP in 2022 to 4.3% in 2023, driven by higher civil servant salaries, reduced grants, and expenditures on the African Union presidency, despite a 12% increase in tax revenue.
- **Debt and Current Account:** The debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 38.2% in 2023, with a high risk of debt distress due to limited repayment capacity for non-concessional loans. The current account deficit expanded from 0.6% of GDP in 2022 to 6.1% in 2023, due to increased imports for public infrastructure projects, reduced clove exports, and declining external financing.
- **Foreign exchange reserves and banking:** Foreign exchange reserves were estimated at 6.9 months of import cover in 2023, up from 6.6 months in 2022. The banking system’s bad debt ratio increased from 13.9% in 2022 to 15% in September 2023.
- **Poverty and unemployment:** The poverty rate was estimated at 38.4% in 2023, a slight decrease from 39% in 2022. The unemployment rate stabilized at 6.5%, but underemployment remains high.

According to the [2024 Index of Economic Freedom](#):

- Comoros has an economic freedom score of 52, ranking it as the 132th freest economy in the 2024 Index. "Its rating has decreased by 1.5 points from last year, and Comoros is ranked 27th out of 47 countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. The country's economic freedom score is lower than the world and regional averages."

Gender perspective

Women are on balance more economically vulnerable than men due to a gender gap in relation to education and employment access ([UNDP Human Development Report Comoros](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). In some regions, such as the Island of Grand Comoros, land and property are passed down the maternal line. In other regions ruled by Islamic law women typically receive half the inheritance of men.

Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Comoros](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Comoros](#) (accessed 23 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Antalote, Cafre, Makoa, Oimatsaha, Sakalava
- **Main languages:** Arabic (official), French (official), Shikomoro (official; a blend of Swahili and Arabic) (Comorian)
- **Urban population:** 29.9% of the total population (2022)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 2.97% annual rate of change (2020-25 est.)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 11.2 years (11 years according to the CIA Factbook 2022)
- **Literacy:** 58.8% (2022)
- **Population growth rate:** 1.37% (2022 estimate)
- **Median age:** 20.9 years
- **Unemployment, total (% of the labor force):** 4.3%
- **Unemployment, youth (ages 15-24):** 19.5%
- **Human Development Index:** 0.554, ranking 156 out of 189 countries
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 64 years (from World Bank data)
- **Gender Development Index (GDI):** 0.891

According to [World Bank Comoros overview](#) (last updated: 1 April 2024):

- Rising global food and fuel prices negatively impacted Comoros' economy, highlighting vulnerability to external shocks.
- Growth remains below potential for the fourth consecutive year.
- Expected strong recovery in 2022 was hindered by sluggish consumption.
- Inflation levels in 2022 reached a record 12.5% for the year.
- By December 2022, headline inflation surged to 20.6% year-on-year, driven by high food prices.
- Poor households, allocating a larger share of expenditure to food, are expected to bear the brunt of the shock.

- Tax measures aimed at cushioning households from rising prices and underperformance of state-owned enterprises led to a decline in government revenues and widened the fiscal deficit from 2.7% in 2021 to 3.9% in 2022.
- Current account deficit more than doubled to 6.1% of GDP in 2022 (from 2.9% in 2021) due to a higher import bill.

The University of Comoros is the only national university serving the Comoros Islands with a main campus located in the capital, Moroni. It opened in 2003.

Gender perspective

Comorians hold to the matriarchal family system with the women tasked with the role of initiating marriage and building the home for the family. The men still hold religious leadership but culturally, women have a strong influence within the family - which is not common in other parts of Africa, and arguably the world.

Technological landscape

Comoros is not a well-developed country. Its roads and other public infrastructure are basic. There are no large-scale modern industries. The country has a 4G Internet connection with 2 service providers - Comoros Telecom (Societe Nationale des Telecommunications) and Huri.

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Comoros](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** There were 235.1 thousand internet users in Comoros at the start of 2024, with an Internet penetration rate of 27.3%. Internet users increased by 4,250 (+1.8%) between January 2023 and January 2024. 624.8 thousand people in Comoros did not use the Internet at the start of 2024, indicating that 72.7% of the population remained offline.
- **Social media usage:** Comoros had 237.2 thousand social media users in January 2024, equating to 27.6% of the total population. Social media users increased by 61 thousand (+34.9%) between early 2023 and the beginning of 2024. 40.8% of social media users were female, and 59.2% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** There were 643.8 thousand cellular mobile connections in Comoros at the start of 2024, equivalent to 74.9% of the total population. Mobile connections increased by 23 thousand (+3.7%) between the start of 2023 and the start of 2024.

In January 2024, measures were taken to curb post-election violence: Internet services were severely disrupted and some sites were made inaccessible. WhatsApp calls were blocked and mobile messaging restricted through lowered connection speeds ([BBC News, 19 January 2024](#)).

Security situation

General crime

Comoros is generally characterized by low levels of crime, providing a relatively safe environment for its residents and visitors. The absence of significant threats from organized crime or large-scale violence contributes to this overall sense of security.

Threats from extremism

While Comoros does not face an imminent threat from Islamic militancy, there are underlying tensions related to religious extremism. The presence of radical Muslim groups, known locally as *djaulas*, has created pockets of intolerance, particularly towards Christians. These groups, though not openly violent, exert social pressure on individuals who have converted from Islam to Christianity and other practicing Christians. This pressure can manifest in various forms, including social ostracism, verbal harassment, and subtle forms of intimidation.

Religious intolerance

The *djaulas* and their followers actively discourage Christian activities in Comoros. This includes attempts to dissuade Christians from practicing their faith openly. Converts from Islam often face significant social pressure, which can lead to a sense of isolation and fear. The lack of tolerance for religious diversity by these groups creates an environment where Christians may feel compelled to conceal their religious identity to avoid conflict.

Christian origins

The Portuguese take the credit for introducing Christianity to the island in 1517. However, this had no lasting effect and the Christian faith was reintroduced by the French when the Island of Mayotte became a French colony in 1843. Following independence in 1975, the evangelical missionary organization, Africa Inland Mission, began to expand its missionary work, but when the government started aligning itself with Muslim countries the missionaries were expelled in 1978. Similarly, the work started by other Christian groups, e.g. the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was also terminated by the government.

Church spectrum today

Comoros: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	3,000	54.5
Protestant	1,400	25.5
Independent	360	6.5
Unaffiliated	810	14.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total <i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>	5,570	101.3
Evangelical movement	480	8.7
Pentecostal-Charismatic	380	6.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Christian population in Comoros is concentrated in the main cities, especially in the capital, Moroni, and in Mutsamudu, the main city on the island of Anjouan. The majority of Christians are Roman Catholic.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Comoros>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: in 2016 - <https://www.africanews.com/2016/05/16/assoumani-officially-declared-president-elect-of-comoros/>
- Recent history: Reuters - <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1R80JP-OZATP>
- Recent history: January 2020 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/comoros-president-party-wins-poll-boycotted-opposition-200121081053507.html>
- Recent history: The second round - <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3505/>
- Recent history: US State Department IRFR 2023 Comoros - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/comoros/>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitution of Comoros - https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Comoros_2009.pdf
- Political and legal landscape: post-election violence - <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240118-comoros-street-protests-over-president-s-disputed-re-election-turn-deadly>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World Index 2024 Comoros - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/comoros/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Comoros - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/comoros/>
- Political and legal landscape: Thomson Reuters, 12 November 2013 - <https://news.trust.org/item/20131111123247-fry3c/>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Comoros - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/comoros/>
- Economic landscape: Comoros Country Economic Memorandum - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/comoros/publication/comoros-afe-country-economic-memorandum-boosting-growth-for-greater-opportunities>
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- Economic landscape: African Development Bank's - <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/comoros/comoros-economic-outlook>

- Economic landscape: 2024 Index of Economic Freedom - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/comoros>
- Economic landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Comoros - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/COM>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Comoros - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/COM>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Comoros - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/comoros/>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank Comoros overview - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/comoros/overview>
- Technological landscape: DataReportal Digital 2024: Comoros - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-comoros>
- Technological landscape: BBC News, 19 January 2024 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-68027892>