

# **The shipwreck of the Central African Republic... “The most serious crisis it has known since it became independent”**

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**The Central African Republic is still not emerging from the most serious crisis it has known since it became independent. France’s policy, from the colonial period until now, partly explains the endemic violence that reigns in the Central African Republic.**

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The Central African Republic (CAR) is a Central African state without access to the sea, with an estimated population of 4,500,000 inhabitants . It is surrounded by Cameroon to the west, Chad to the northwest, Sudan to the northeast, South Sudan to the east, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the southeast and the Republic of the Congo to the south. Agriculture represents 50% of GDP: the CAR also has many natural resources, in particular uranium, gold, diamonds and oil, which are coveted by foreign capital.

## **French interference**

The country has become the playground for armed militias and President Touadera has difficulty in establishing his authority over the capital, Bangui. His contested re-election to the presidency of the Republic last January pushed him towards an authoritarian policy. At the same time, he is forging new diplomatic and military alliances .

Perhaps more than elsewhere, the presence of France has been, until recently, one of the most important. In fact, French military and diplomatic authorities have sometimes directly managed the country, which has been supposed to be independent since 1960. Thus, in the 1980s, it was Colonel Jean-Claude Manton , of the DGSE (French overseas intelligence service) who welcomed African presidents on the tarmac of Bangui airport, in place of the Central African president [1].

The unwavering support of French governments for dictators has never been lacking. The French authorities spent their time installing them and sometimes dismissing them, as they did with Bokassa. As long as the latter remained within the framework circumscribed by French diplomacy, all his escapades were permitted. The Quai d’Orsay closed its eyes to the massacres, imprisonment

and torture of opponents. But when he tried to initiate a rapprochement with Gaddafi by offering him the Bouar military base, he was kicked out (in 1979). [2]

## **Political instability**

Recurrent instability has marked the political life of the CAR. In 2012, a motley alliance made up of Central Africans, Chadians and Sudanese, unofficially supported by the Chadian authorities, formed the Seleka coalition, headed by Michel Djotodia . In March 2013 it seized power after fierce battles.

François Bozizé , President of the Central African Republic, who had himself seized power in a coup in 2003, tried to resist with the help of a detachment of the South African army. Its presence may seem surprising, but it is easily explained. The Central African Republic is a leading diamond producer and South Africa has a significant diamond industry, including in particular the De Beers conglomerate. In exchange for military support, Bozizé reportedly promised then South African leader Jacob Zuma mining concessions. In addition, Zuma was keen to portray South Africa as a regional power. Occupying land traditionally within the remit of France's backyard allowed him to display an anti-imperialist policy at low cost.

But this detachment of the South African army was surprised and quickly overwhelmed by the violence and the relentlessness of the fighters of the Seleka, composed largely of mercenaries with years of war behind them, especially in Sudan.

Bozizé's mistake was to oppose Chadian President Idriss Déby over the management of oil fields in the Vakaga region, on the border between the two countries. By giving a Chinese company the operating license on the Gordil and Boromata sites , he triggered reprisals from the Chadian government.

Once in power, members of the Seleka ransacked the capital. Looting, accompanied by violence, lasted for weeks, relatively sparing the Muslim shopping district of PK5 - most of whose traders were members of the Muslim Seleka .

In response, self-defence groups called the anti-balaka organized themselves in Bangui and then across the country. On both sides, militias attacked populations, identifying Christians with anti-balaka militias, and Muslims with Seleka. The meritorious efforts of religious leaders to try to defuse this outbreak of civil war were in vain.

The French army intervened in December 2013 under a UN mandate with, at the beginning, a most questionable strategy. It consisted of unilateral disarmament of the militias, promoting violence on the other side. The African Union deployed troops from several countries, which came under UN mandate with the establishment of the MINUSCA.

Faced with international pressure, Michel Djotodia resigned in January 2014 and an interim government was set up to organize elections, which were won by Faustin-Archange Touadera , a former Prime Minister under Bozizé. Although the Seleka dissolved itself, its factions dispersed across the country and controlled entire regions.

It was during Touadera's first term that a peace agreement was signed between the authorities and fourteen armed groups. A peace agreement which turned out to be entirely theoretical and in no way prevented violence from raging throughout the Central African Republic.

## **A country in the hands of militias**

Although the various militias use terms such as “democratic”, “revolutionary”, “popular front”, etc. in the names of their organizations, it would be quite pointless to try and find any ideology, a political programme, or even a few demands. The sole purpose of these militias is to be able to control portions of the territory of the Central African Republic in order to derive income from them. This war economy is materialized by the racketeering exercised on the main and secondary roads against travellers, as well as by smuggling, for those who control the border regions. Finally, the most profitable activity remains the extraction of diamonds or gold. To this end, the militias enslave the civilian population, making them work in extreme conditions.

Since Touadera’s first term of office, armed groups have fragmented, both on the Seleka side and on the anti-balaka side. In this chaos, other groups were created. Versatile alliances are formed between groups to expel a competing militia from a territory. Alliances are forged with yesterday’s enemies. Thus, Seleka and anti-balaka fighters allied to exercise control over entire regions.

This fragmentation has also been accompanied by the empowerment of groups. Seleka having dissolved, the groups which formed it have very distant relations with the Chadian authorities.

This phenomenon of fragmentation is accompanied by a worrying trend, the ethnicization of militias. This can lead to a widening and accentuation of violence, transforming the conflicts of armed groups into conflicts between communities.

One example among others is the Vakaga region in the north of the country where the International Crisis Group think tank notes: “Rivalries between armed groups take on a community dimension, and the consequences extend beyond the borders of the Vakaga. Faced with the initial superiority of the FPRC, the MLCJ and its allies played the ethnic card, mobilizing the Kara and Goula communities respectively. This transformed the rivalries between these armed groups into strong community tensions; the FPRC itself split into two factions, one Rounga, the other Goula. The repercussions have been felt in other prefectures, such as Bamingui-Bangoran (Ndele) and Haute Kotto (Bria), where clashes between the FPRC and its rivals or between the Rounga and Goula factions of the FPRC total around 100 dead, including civilians, since the start of 2020. [3]

The violence that occurs pushes the civilian populations to flee their villages. According to official figures, the Central African Republic had, at the end of 2020, 659,000 internally displaced people and 623,909 refugees in neighbouring countries. [4]

## **An isolated presidency**

When he was first elected in March 2016, Touadera did not have a party. He had to forge alliances and compose a government comprising a large part of the political leaders. Over time they resigned from the government and went into opposition. One of the central political questions revolved around the peace agreement between the government and the fourteen rebel groups.

This agreement opened up the possibility for representatives of armed groups to enter government. It also provided for the establishment of a mixed army between the Central African Armed Forces and part of the rebels of the different groups, and also a demobilization process with offers of professional retraining.

For part of the opposition, this agreement was seen as an alliance of Touadera with the armed groups. Successive government resignations have weakened the presidency. Touadera reacted by

launching his own political organization, the “United Hearts Movement”.

Domestic policy in the Central African Republic is largely carried out abroad. Two countries traditionally play a major role: Chad, whose authorities consider the Central African Republic to be part of its backyard, and Congo-Brazzaville. Its leader, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, exerts his influence through numerous intermediaries. Thus, during the transitional period he succeeded in placing at the head of the country his candidate, Catherine Samba-Panza, former mayor of the capital, Bangui.

Touadera has gradually distanced himself from these neighbours, considered too intrusive. He has forged other alliances, in Africa but also internationally.

### **A new configuration**

This distancing from Chad and Congo-Brazzaville allows him to have free rein in the management of the country's security problems. He therefore frees himself from diplomatic manoeuvres and peace initiatives taken unilaterally by these countries.

The distance from France is also notable. The subject of contention is linked to the embargo on arms to the Central African Republic, which can be imposed on everyone, including the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). This disagreement continues. Although France argued for and obtained a relaxation of the embargo during the vote in the UN Security Council in July 2020, the Central African authorities want a complete lifting of it. Their position is supported by the Russians: “Although the arms embargo played a positive role at the start of the conflict, it is now undermining the ability to act of the Central African security forces, while during this time the troublemakers arm themselves through smuggling, argued the Russian Federation. Sanctions are not a goal in themselves. [5]

When the embargo was first loosened in 2017, the Russians took the opportunity to establish themselves in the country. At the same time, Touadera has forged alliances with Angola and Rwanda. The latter country is opposed to the military role that France has played in Africa since its complicity in the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994.

The presence of the Russians in the Central African Republic marks a remarkable return to the continent. It is also a means to dispute at a low cost the military hegemony of France in its traditional precinct.

Officially it is not the Russian army which intervenes, but a private company named Wagner, which dispatched its mercenaries in exchange for mining concessions for diamonds and gold. This company, very close to the Kremlin, supervises the presidential security forces and takes care of the close protection of Faustin-Archange Touadera. These mercenaries, for the most part former veterans of the Russian army, do not hesitate to fight against the rebels. The operations are opaque and three Russian journalists mandated by the opposition were assassinated during their investigation into the actions of the company.

### **A chaotic second term**

Exiled in Cameroon during the seizure of power by the Seleka, ousted President Bozizé returned to the country with the firm intention of competing in the presidential election of December 2020. The Constitutional Council invalidated his candidacy on two grounds. He is the subject of UN sanctions and of an international mandate for “assassinations, arbitrary detentions and torture”.

At the start of the presidential campaign, the main armed factions observed neutrality and let the campaign take place. Then things suddenly changed.

Under Bozizé's impetus, armed groups from the Seleka and the anti-balaka began a process of unification. This new organization, the Coalition of Patriots for Change, marched on Bangui to seize power. The rebels were stopped in extremis on the outskirts of Bangui by presidential troops, Rwandans, Russian mercenaries and the MINUSCA.

Having suffered a defeat, the rebel troops employed a new strategy, the asphyxiation of the capital, with the blocking of the RN1 a main road. This axis is strategic for the movement of goods between Bangui and the port of Douala in Cameroon. On January 21 of this year, the Central African army and the MINUSCA, along with the Russians and Rwandans, loosened their grip by seizing the town of Boda.

But these victories remain fleeting. The rebels avoid frontal battles, take refuge in the bush and wait for the departure of government troops to recapture the towns lost. The armed groups know full well that the Central African armed forces, even with their allies, cannot control a country as large as France. A tactic that plunges the already very poor populations into a food crisis due to the drastic increase in prices.

With his military aid, Touadera is pursuing an increasingly authoritarian policy. He is trying to muzzle the political opposition as well as civil society organizations. Protests are mostly banned and opponents are arrested.

In the Central African Republic, there is a continuity of the political violence initiated during the colonial period. These abuses resulted in the reduction of the population by half during the first twenty years of colonization. [6] The fictitious independence allowed France to put in place presidents who all carried out policies of repression and predation, leaving the country drained. The population continues to pay a heavy price for it.

**Paul Martial**

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### **Some chronological markers**

- 1889: start of colonization, which became one of the most violent in French colonial history
- 1960: independence and a succession of dictators, all supported by France, causing coups d'état, civil war and ethnicist policies
- 1979: intervention of France with Operation Barracuda: Bokassa dismissed
- 1996: French operation Furet/Almandin 1 then Almandin 2
- 1997: Operation Almandin 3 in retaliation against Central African fighters, following the death of two French soldiers
- 2003: Operation Boali to support President Bozizé
- 2006: French army intervention against UFDR rebels in the town of Birao
- 2007: new intervention against the UFDR
- 2013: the Seleka coalition, supported by Chad, overthrows Bozizé and takes power, sacking the capital; self-defence militias are created, the anti-balaka
- 2013: in December, intervention of France with Operation Sangaris

- 2014: Michel Djotodia , at the head of the Seleka, resigns, a temporary government is ensured by Catherine Samba-Panza , former mayor of Bangui
  - 2016: election of Faustin-Archange Touadera
  - 2019: peace agreements between the government and 14 armed groups
  - 2020: re-election of Faustin-Archange Touadera, contested by the opposition
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## **P.S.**

- IVP. Monday 15 March 2021:  
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7069>
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## **Footnotes**

[1] Denis Sassou - Nguesso , “Africa is attacked because it is weak”, interview in *Paris-Match*, December 17, 2013.

[2] Paul Martial, “Central African Republic: France’s hidden responsibility”, *afriquesenlutte.org*, 7 October 2014.

[3] International Crisis Group (ICG), “Reducing electoral tensions in the Central African Republic”, *Africa Report* n ° 296, December 10, 2020.

[4] MINUSCA, Report of the Secretary General on the Central African Republic, S / 2020/994, October 12, 2020.

[5] UN, “RCA: Security Council renews arms embargo for one year while creating an exemption for rocket launchers”, July 28, 2020, *news.un.org*.

[6] Marc Lavergne, “Resolving a conflict without looking for its causes? The CAR between sham and amnesia ”, 2014.