

## Central African Republic: Post-electoral crisis and the prospects for reconciliation

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### Introduction: The CAR diverted from the road to peace

On 6 February 2019, following peace talks that were held in Khartoum, Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR) government and 14 armed groups convened in the capital city, Bangui, and signed an African Union-sponsored accord known as the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. As part of the Peace Agreement, a new government was formed, with several members of armed groups being appointed to senior positions within the government. However, some of the appointees included leaders of armed groups that were implicated, by credible evidence, in committing atrocities during the conflict.<sup>1</sup> The Peace Agreement was the sixth such accord to have been signed since the crisis started in late 2012 and represented, according to a Human Rights Watch report of 2019, the greatest effort by both international and national actors to include all relevant parties that were involved in the crisis.<sup>2</sup> This Policy Brief will provide an analysis of the events leading up to the December 2020 polls and will assess the dynamics behind the crisis that unfolded during the electoral period.

The 2019 Peace Agreement, which can be credited to President Touadéra, was without a

doubt a major step on the road to stability for the CAR. The Peace Agreement brought opposing factions from both the Muslim Séléka groups and the Christian anti-Balaka grouping to the table and concluded a collective way forward. The Agreement managed to moderately stabilise the situation in the country until the lead-up to the elections. In the aftermath of the polls, the opposition groups that were excluded from Touadéra's government have coalesced into a united coalition, led by former President Bozizé. Between December 2020 and January 2021, there was a series of violent pre-election assaults against the authority of Touadéra, and, subsequently, military reinforcements were sent in by Russia and Rwanda.<sup>3</sup> In the post-election landscape, a Bozizé-led coalition is threatening to overthrow the elected government. Whatever the uncertain immediate and medium-term future may bring, it is evident that the elections have opened old wounds or even created new ones. This Policy Brief will also analyse the post-electoral landscape and propose some policy recommendations to stabilise the country and promote the re-engagement with peace and reconciliation processes.

## A peace agreement derailed

In 2018, during some off-the-record conversations with high-ranking officials in Bangui, the author ascertained that there was a significant amount of preparation that went into laying the foundations for the Khartoum Peace Agreement. Specifically, an initial 2016 Bangui Forum laid the foundation for both track-one, high-level, formal mediation processes and track-two, behind-the-scenes talks, which led to the successful signing of the 2019 Khartoum Agreement. In particular, the provisions on Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) as well as a proposed national reconciliation mechanism were developed and agreed upon prior to the final convening in Khartoum. Throughout 2019, the specific legal provisions for these mechanisms were adopted and operationalised.<sup>4</sup> For example, the DDR provisions included a mechanism for community compensation for demobilised troops to ensure that the country experiences a peace dividend. Similarly, the reconciliation provisions were anchored on the convening of community consultations to ensure that citizens' priorities were anchored within a legal and institutional framework. In addition, the Ministry for Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation established Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees (LPRCs), which were tasked with early warning of escalating crisis and early intervention to mitigate against the spread of tension and violence. By the end of 2019, the first training sessions for LPRCs that were close to the capital, were convened in Bangui, with the assistance of a broad range of regional and international partners and actors.

During the LPRC training sessions, it became clear that there was limited knowledge about the content of the Peace Agreement, as well as the official tasks and mandate of the LPRCs. This illustrated the need for continued capacity-building, as well as knowledge transfer on transitional justice and reconciliation issues. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions against travel slowed down the pace of implementation of the provisions of the Peace Agreement, despite the ensuing timetable for the elections. Ultimately, despite this race against time to make suitable progress to stabilise the country further, a significant proportion of the provisions of the Peace Agreement was only implemented to a limited extent. The peace dividend was only partially evident, or tangible, and the reconciliation interventions had not been sufficiently implemented, specifically the proposed

compensation as a form of reparation was not paid to victims and survivors across the Republic.

On 22 October 2019, a Special Criminal Court for the Central African Republic was formally inaugurated, which marked the official launch of the court's judicial activities. As early as July 2019, observers and partners were concerned about the progress being made with the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Specifically, engagements with victims and human rights defenders revealed a strong concern that 'vague provisions on justice in a peace accord signed in February could limit the government's cooperation and support to the Special Criminal Court'.<sup>5</sup> Victims also criticised the integration, into the government as a result of the Peace Agreement, of people implicated in crimes. Specifically, a leader of a women's survivor group stated that 'we are seeing at this moment that our persecutors rule over us ... they have entered the government'.<sup>6</sup>

## Betraying the justice and peace dividend

The situation in the CAR remained fragile while transitional justice, reconciliation and demobilisation processes were still in the early stages. The inclusive approach of integrating those perceived as former perpetrators into the government fuelled continuing suspicion. The elections also generated an additional dynamic to the peace process. David van Reybrouck, the Belgian author of *Congo*, has effectively debunked myths about democratic elections when he states that '*democracy is not about consensus, it is about conflict*'.<sup>7</sup> Africa has endured its share of election-related violence over the last two years, including in Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi and Burundi. The legacy of violent extremism in the CAR meant that the situation was even more tense, and re-escalation of the crisis was inevitable in the absence of transformative processes relating to demobilisation and reconciliation.

The leaders of armed militia groups in the CAR, who were potentially facing prosecution and who had no public support base other than their own troops, whom they incentivised with looted money, needed to regain their positions in government, or secure guarantees from the incoming elected government. In April 2020, the Brussels-based think tank, the Egmont Institute, released a policy analysis report which foretold of the post-electoral crisis situation which emerged in the CAR.<sup>8</sup> In fact,

none of the 14 militias that signed the Peace Agreement bothered to register to contest the elections because they did not believe that the process would be free and fair. Alternatively, some of these militias may have had an agenda to avoid participating in the elections as part of a carefully calibrated strategy to reject the outcome and pursue power by force of arms.

## Electoral dynamics and the return of history

The former CAR President François Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, the erstwhile leader of the Séléka movement which overthrew Bozizé in 2013, both returned to the CAR in the run-up to the 2020 elections. Bozizé, who was born in Gabon, has infamously acquired a reputation for leading revolts and pursuing violent conflict, despite his own past as a former victim of exile, imprisonment and torture when he was in Cotonou, Benin. Historically, Bozizé served the late Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa and became notorious for utilising military personnel to attack young, unarmed demonstrators who were protesting for unpaid salaries that were due to their parents.<sup>9</sup> Bozizé served as Minister of Defence and as Minister of Information in the early 1980s and eventually ascended to the CAR presidency after orchestrating a coup d'état against the sitting president, Ange-Félix Patassé, in 2003. Bozizé is seen as the main protagonist of the crisis and conflict that have beset the CAR since 2013, and, when he returned to the CAR at the end of 2019 to take part in the 2020 elections, all the alarm bells went off. On 3 December 2020, the CAR's Constitutional Court effectively excluded Bozizé from participating in the elections because, it argued, he did not meet the requirements of a candidate with 'good morality' owing to the existence of an international warrant against him and the imposition of United Nations (UN) sanctions against him for alleged assassinations, torture and other crimes.

Bozizé's presence proved to be a moral and political dilemma for Touadéra's government because the national narrative towards building bridges should have granted all former militia leaders the right to participate in elections. Legally, the international sanctions against Bozizé's meant that, if Touadéra permitted him to contest the elections, Touadéra would have had to endure the international criticisms that would follow. The different scenarios did not offer any guarantees of peace and security in the aftermath of the elections.

## An unholy alliance and the return of Bozizé

According to a UN report dating back to December 2013,

*Christians, but more so members of the Muslim minority, risk their lives each time they venture out of their now segregated neighbourhoods—a troubling sign of a deepening religious divide. Killings happen daily. On occasion, cheering crowds have participated in chilling acts of lynching, only to return to normal life thereafter, as if nothing had happened.<sup>10</sup>*

To an external observer, the conflict in the CAR could be perceived as the outcome of a religious divide, with the Christian, or anti-Balaka, factions on one side of the equation, and the Séléka, or Muslim, factions on the other. From the perspective of the victims and the general population, this may very well be a big part of the reality. But the warring factions were in it for a wider range of interests and agendas, which were underpinned by the quest for power. This is why it was relatively easy, as the elections approached and as the scramble for power escalated, for these groups to set aside their differences and come together as one. As a result of the prospective loss of power and positions, something the armed militias had gained through the Peace Agreement, six out of 14 of the largest armed groups decided 'to combine all of our movements into a single entity, called the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), under a unified command'.<sup>11</sup> This coalition for change was led by former President Bozizé. The internationally sanctioned former refugee and exile now led an unlikely coalition of former enemies.

In the aftermath of the elections, the CPC continued to destabilise the CAR and has terrorised the population. The source of support for the CPC remains unclear. However, there have been suggestions that Chad is providing the coalition with nominal support.<sup>12</sup> On the other side, both Rwanda and Russia are supporting Touadéra with extra troops to stop the CPC armed militias from reaching and laying siege to Bangui. One of the rebel leaders has been arrested and handed over to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.<sup>13</sup> There are conflicting reports about the military dynamics on the ground, and the immediate future of the political process is equally uncertain. As this Policy Brief went to print, either the CPC under

Bozizé could get the upper hand and take over the capital, or, alternatively, Touadéra's own support base, including the United Nations mission, MINUSCA, and the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), could hold their position and effectively prevent the onslaught by the armed militias and retain control of Bangui and its outskirts. The common factor uniting these two scenarios is that the CAR peace process has suffered a severe setback, and peacemaking efforts have to revert back to the drawing board and be relaunched anew.

### **In search of a unified CAR ...**

Although President Touadéra may have been declared the 'winner' of the national elections, and the Bozizé-led CPC may be claiming territorial gains, what is clear is that the country itself still is far from unified, or united, behind a common leader. On the contrary, there are multiple variations of the CAR. If the anticipated outcome of these elections was to cement unification and nation-building, then the polls have dramatically failed to do so. Touadéra won with a small majority (53%). Furthermore, an estimated 40% of the voters could not cast their votes due to insecurity or other obstacles. In reality, the CAR is a country under construction. In particular, the efficacy and reach of the government in terms of delivering social, health and educational services outside the capital are dramatically low. Some improvements resulting from the Peace Agreement were under way between 2019 and 2020. However, the electoral process has created an alternate dynamic and undermined the peace dividends that were achieved. In addition, re-escalation of the political crisis has aggravated the already dire humanitarian situation.

### **Global predatory extraction: The CAR's resource dilemma**

In 2017, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) published a report entitled *Central African Republic: A Conflict Misunderstood*, which argued that, 'rather than develop local administrations during the French colonial period, officials leased territory to private companies to exploit the country's rich resources'.<sup>14</sup> This system has effectively persisted since independence, with new international actors buying mineral concessions, including timber, gold and diamonds concessions, in return for the provision of basic services and infrastructure. The CAR's natural wealth has for years flowed out of the country rather than being used for local development, and the situation appears to be worsening. The IJR report identifies the interests and

interventions of regional players like Chad, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, the scope of external intervention has broadened even further. In 2018, *The Atlantic* described in detail how the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)<sup>15</sup> had infiltrated the African scene. In the CAR, it is no longer a secret that the Russian security advisor, Valery Zakharov, plays an important role in influencing the course of events in Bangui.<sup>16</sup> As the Russians supported Touadéra, there were indications that France was indirectly supporting the CPC. In effect, the CAR is a global and regional battleground for resources and influence. Regrettably, upholding the interests of citizens and the local population is the task that falls to the UN system and other humanitarian actors from Africa as well as around the world.

### **The CAR crisis and the prospects for stabilisation**

The timing and dynamic of the electoral process interfered with, and dramatically damaged, the unfolding peace process. To restore the political process, the international community needs to provide continued support to the elected government, where possible working through the UN and FACA to secure the country and establish stability. The armed militias by their actions are losing any residual political legitimacy, which, paradoxically, might entice them towards utilising violence to pursue power.

The most urgent follow-up action is the need to establish a consultative process, involving representatives of political parties and civil society, on the position and role of armed militia groups in the future political process. This political consultative process initiated by the current government must be as inclusive as possible in order to re-establish its legitimacy. The Khartoum Peace Agreement does not have any reference to the CPC, and, consequently, there needs to be a renewed peace process to secure a much more broad-based agreement. In addition, any efforts to establish peace must include a strong emphasis on forging wide cooperation on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of all the armed militias. A fresh political process should lead to a renewed peace plan that can include the elements of transitional justice already outlined in the Khartoum 2019 Peace Agreement. The UN and international partners can play their role in contributing towards mobilising the resources for these interventions.

The CAR government should start to extend service delivery to all regions and all communities

across the country, working in tandem with the United Nations system. This can only be done if the income that is generated through the exploitation of natural resources is used for the benefit of the population and not exclusively channelled to foreign investors or the political elite. Therefore, challenging corruption and state capture of the government by business elites is essential. If corruption can be curtailed, then the outsourcing of service delivery should end, since the resources in the CAR are sufficient to maintain a good level of government services.

## Policy recommendations

In the light of the analysis above, this Policy Brief makes the following policy recommendations:

### To the government of the CAR and national stakeholders:

- The government of the CAR must start a process of consultations with a selection of actors, including a broad spectrum of civil society representatives, to develop a new road map for peace and reconciliation. Early warning, local reconciliation mechanisms, and reintegration should be part of the road map to peace.
- The establishment and operationalisation of LPRCs need to be accelerated because they can contribute towards de-escalating tension and towards delivering on a tangible peace dividend.
- The government of the CAR should invest in anti-corruption measures and adequate taxation mechanisms to develop a proper social contract that allows for nationwide service-delivery mechanisms in all domains, including security and social services.

### To the African Union (AU) and AU member states:

- The AU and the regional economic community grouping, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), need to lead a process of establishing a ceasefire with the CPC as a matter of priority.

- The Rwandan example of sending more troops deserves to be emulated by other African governments.
- The AU, UN and donors should hold the President accountable and indicate that support structures and funds are conditional on upholding the rule of law and entrenching constitutionalism and development.

### To the United Nations system and international partners:

- MINUSCA-contributing nations should ensure that they undertake proactive interventions in order to prevent violent conflict and disarm armed militias. The international community, led by the AU, and with the support of the UN and European Union (EU), should guarantee that financial and other conditions are in place to broker and sustain a new peace.
- International partners and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), under the coordination of the Office of the Presidency, should take responsibility for the implementation of this road map to peace.

## Conclusion

This Policy Brief has analysed the post-electoral crisis that engulfed the CAR between 2020 and 2021. In particular, it assessed the fraught pathway that the CAR has had to endure on its journey towards more sustainable peace. The Brief also criticised the premature convening of the CAR elections, which infused a dynamic of contestation when the initial 14 groups that signed the 2019 Khartoum Peace Agreement declined to participate in such elections. In the aftermath of the elections, the ensuing conflict escalation fuelled by the Bozizé-led CPC armed groups has revealed the urgency for Touadéra's government to pursue a renewed peace process with the regrouped armed militias. However, it is equally important to continue to operationalise some of the provisions of the previous accord, specifically the LPRCs, which can contribute towards stabilising the country and preventing the escalation of violent conflict. In this regard, the Brief concludes that it is vital for the international community to re-engage, rather than abandon, the crisis in the CAR.

## Endnotes

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