

New approach to peace needed in the Central African Republic

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Sixty years after gaining independence, the Central African Republic is still struggling to consolidate as a state. Despite many attempts to stabilise it, the country remains trapped in the vicious cycle of violence that began in late 2012. Violent rejection of the December 2020 election results threatens the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. A new approach is needed to break the cycle of violence and instability.

Key findings

- ▶ Although some progress has been made towards peace since 2013, the security situation in the CAR remains precarious, as evidenced by recent attacks by armed groups.
- ▶ Key provisions of the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation have not been implemented and the agreement is not tenable under current circumstances.
- ▶ The many violations by armed groups since the signing of the agreement are evidence of their lack of commitment to its provisions, and don't bode well for a return to peace and stability.
- ▶ Armed groups still control the vast majority of the territory, collecting taxes in areas under their control. The balance of military power has largely been in favour of these groups, which have shown no respect for the rule of law.
- ▶ Instability is also fuelled by regional and international factors. While the presence of international peacekeepers, humanitarian workers and NGOs has helped, it has also had adverse effects and caused some resentment among the locals. UN presence has, at times, drawn the ire of certain sections of the population who feel it has lasted too long and has not improved the situation fundamentally.
- ▶ A new approach is needed if the CAR is to attain peace and stability, while rebuilding an autonomous state and society, as well as a sound economy.

Recommendations

All stakeholders:

- ▶ Develop, finance, implement and monitor a holistic plan to deal with internal political, security and socio-economic issues.

National stakeholders:

- ▶ Continue to build strong and independent state institutions that represent all citizens, putting country before self-interest.

African Union and the Central African region:

- ▶ The African Union must play its role as guarantor of the 2019 agreement, deploying the necessary support and holding disruptors accountable through sanctions imposed by its Peace and Security Council.
- ▶ There must be an active and well-coordinated effort to deal with armed groups. The Economic Community of Central African States regional security architecture should play a key role in

this endeavour. This will require reinforcing regional security and development strategies. The CAR and its neighbours must cooperate in developing and implementing strategies to deal with cross-border interactions that feed into instability in the region.

UN and other international partners:

- ▶ A new and more inclusive approach must prioritise development in order to give the people more autonomy in reconstructing their state and its economy.
- ▶ Set clearly targeted and time-bound objectives for the reconstruction of the CAR, geared to encouraging self-reliance, particularly with regard to security of the people.
- ▶ Interventions should focus on rebuilding the economic fabric of the country. More targeted investment is needed in the training, education and agricultural sectors.

Introduction

On 13 January 2021 armed groups under the banner of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (*Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement – CPC*) launched attacks on the outskirts of Bangui, the capital city of the Central African Republic (CAR).¹

The six members of the CPC coalition,² which was formed in mid-December 2020, were signatories to the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR (*Accord Politique pour la Paix et la Réconciliation en RCA*) signed in February of that year under the auspices of the African Union (AU) and other partners. They are also among the so-called ‘Non-State Armed Groups’ that currently control the bulk of the country’s territory outside the capital city.

Prior to the attacks the CPC opposed the forthcoming presidential and legislative elections and sought to increase insecurity in the country in an attempt to have them postponed.³ The coalition conducted attacks, disrupted election campaigns and prevented voting in certain areas.

The 2020 elections tested the 2019 peace agreement and the role of international efforts in CAR

After the elections, which were declared in favour of incumbent president Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who secured 53.16% of the vote in the first round,⁴ the coalition contested the outcome, with dire repercussions for both the process and Touadéra’s legitimacy.

While the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) has warned⁵ of the consequences of the spoiler role of the CPC amid efforts to stabilise the country, the increase in insecurity as a result of the elections raises important questions about the sustainability of gains made in the country and existing efforts to stabilise it.

The December 2020 elections were a litmus test of both the usefulness of the 2019 agreement as a

framework for the stabilisation of the CAR and the extent of progress with its implementation. They also served as a direct assessment of the contribution of all aspects of existing international efforts, including the stabilising role of the presence of 12 800 UN troops in the past six years, as well as the sustainability of existing mechanisms to prevent the resurgence of violence in the country.

Against the backdrop of the surge in attacks this report seeks to define the main stumbling blocks to progress in the CAR since the signing of the 2019 agreement and questions whether the agreement remains a relevant framework for stabilisation and whether the international community should revisit existing engagements in the country.

The report is based on prior research on the CAR and more recent field visits to Bangui, in February 2020, during which various policy makers and international stakeholders were interviewed using key informant interview methodology. The report has four main sections. Section one discusses the origins and dynamics of the CAR crisis. Section two, building on the previous part, which touches on the history of peace agreements in the country, focuses on challenges relating to the 2019 peace agreement and its future.

Section three delves into the persistence of economic challenges and some of the adverse effects of the international assistance provided to the CAR. The last section briefly discusses the role of the United Nations, the AU and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and highlights the necessity, in light of all the preceding analysis, to develop a comprehensive plan that will help deal with the political, security and socio-economic challenges.

The report concludes by highlighting the fact that the lack of accountability for the many violations by armed groups since the signing of the 2019 agreement has partly influenced their lack of commitment to the provisions of the agreement in a way that does not bode well for a return to durable peace and stability. Despite the existence of the agreement, the international community should review the current approach to stabilisation if the country is to experience durable peace and stability.

Origins of the crisis: coups, armed groups and peace agreements

The origins of the CAR conflict lie in the country's tumultuous history after independence, a period during which successive regimes have failed to build a viable post-colonial state. Many observers,⁶ therefore, believe the CAR's dream of building a viable state vanished with the exit, in March 1959, of its first leader, Abbé Barthélemy Boganda.

Since Boganda's sudden death the country has been ruled by regimes whose vision for and governance of the country have centred on the pursuit of personal interests, clinging to power and the preservation of France's economic interests, among other factors, rather than on building a viable state. This was particularly the case during the David Dacko (1960–1966 and 1979–1981), Jean-Bedel Bokassa (1966–1979) and Andre Kolingba (1981–1993) regimes.

The lack of a proper state structures was aggravated by a turbulent socio-economic climate in the 1990s, during the regime of Ange-Félix Patassé. Under Patassé's rule the country grappled with several challenges. Among these were:

- The perpetuation of a rentier economy that depended heavily on external revenue derived from the exploitation of natural resources and characterised by the absence of a domestic productive base
- An overstuffed public service
- Public finances in tatters and unable to bear the running costs of the public service
- An army built along tribal lines under Kolingba's regime
- A state presence largely concentrated in Bangui, while other regions were marginalised⁷

The country has largely remained trapped in these economic and social problems since independence. The system has been fuelled by the struggle for power among the country's elites and the strategies of and direct meddling by France, the 'former' colonial power, in support of or against individuals in the CAR's politico-military elites.⁸ The prize is control of the country's mineral and other resources.⁹

This has given rise to a form of tacit acceptance of the country as doomed to chronic instability, against the backdrop of continued exploitation of its resources. Similar patterns in neighbouring countries have contributed to the development of an ecosystem of regional instability which, in turn, feeds into national instability.

From the 1990s, and unlike his predecessor, Patassé struggled to keep a tight grip on the army. His ten years in power were thus marked by the aggravation of some of the numerous structural issues that continue to plague the country today.

Coups as a path to power

In the midst of the structural and socio-economic challenges cited above the country fell prey to several cycles of military interventions as coups d'état became the preferred route to power.

The ambitions of various Central African political and/or military actors created a cycle of 'government officials turning rebels and rebels becoming government officials'. Former president François Bozizé, who took power in a 2003 coup, is, for instance, believed to have nurtured his desire for power in the bush as early as 1982, after he participated in a failed coup against President André Kolingba.¹⁰

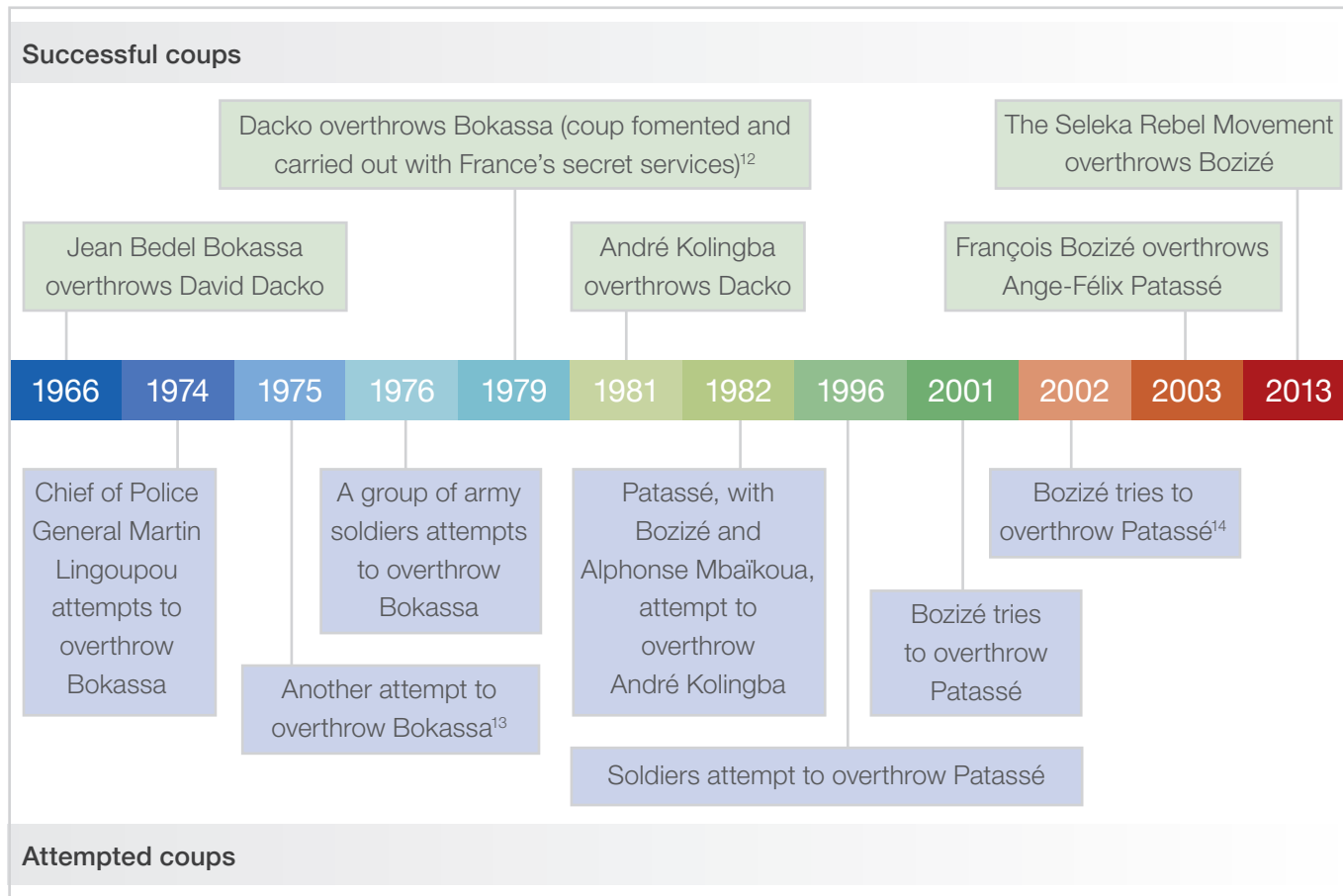
The origins of the CAR conflict lie in the country's tumultuous history after independence

There have been five successful putsches in the country and a reported seven attempted coups (see Figure 1).¹¹ The entrenchment of a coup culture in the country's political landscape went together with the emergence of and increase in the number of armed groups operating in the country and the failure to implement successfully the numerous peace agreements designed to stabilise it.

Growth of armed groups

The prevalence of coups d'état in the country initially gave rise to political exiles, particularly among high-ranking military officers turned rebels, who went on to mobilise armed support to gain power. This cycle of rebellion, especially among mutinous soldiers in the 1990s, fed into

Figure 1: Coups since 1960



Source: Compiled by author

the emergence and subsequent proliferation of armed groups as the CAR army continued to imploding during Patassé's term of office.

After Bozizé overthrew Patassé, with the help of Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries,¹⁵ the north of the country, particularly the 'tri-borders' area, between CAR, Chad and Sudan, fully became a breeding ground for the emergence and entrenchment of rebel groups and other armed militias.

The absence of and/or weak state presence in entire swathes of the territory and the lucrative nature of the rebel enterprise helped foster the emergence of various armed groups, with the phenomenon being ramped up in opposition to Bozizé's regime.



Although the number of armed groups in the country seemed manageable prior to 2009 the situation deteriorated from 2012 onwards and contributed to creating conditions for the emergence of additional armed groups. The number of armed groups increased

from the three that signed the 2008 Libreville Global Peace Accord to 14 signatories to the 2019 accord, clearly indicating the proliferation of such groups in the country (see Figure 2).

After the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Accord (*Accord de Paix Global de Libreville*) was concluded in June 2008 a fourth armed group, the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (*Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix* – CPJP) officially joined in August 2012.

The four groups that initially formed the Seleka coalition and signed the January 2013 Libreville peace agreement with the government were: *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR), CPJP, *Convention Patriotique pour le Salut du Kodro* (CPSK) and *Union des Forces Républicaines de Centrafrique* (UFR-Centrafrique). In July 2014 seven groups signed the Brazzaville Accord for the Cessation of Hostilities in the CAR. Ten groups attended the CAR Forum for national reconciliation in Bangui, in which all CAR stakeholders participated.¹⁶

Figure 2: Signatories to the 2008 and 2019 peace agreements

<p>2008¹⁷</p> 	Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy (<i>Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie – APRD</i>)
	Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (<i>Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement – UFDR</i>)
	Democratic Front for the Central African People (<i>Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain – FDPC</i>)
<p>2019¹⁸</p> 	Anti-Balaka-Mokom Wing (<i>Anti-Balaka- Aile Mokom</i>)
	Anti-Balaka-Ngaïssona Wing (<i>Anti-Balaka-Aile Ngaïssona</i>)
	FDPC
	Popular Front for the Rebirth of the CAR (<i>Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique – FPRC</i>)
	Movement of the Central African Liberators for Justice (<i>Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricains pour la Justice – MLCJ</i>)
	Patriotic Movement for the CAR (<i>Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique – MPC</i>)
	Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the CAR (<i>Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique – RPRC</i>)
	Return, Reclaiming and Rehabilitation-3R (<i>Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation – 3R</i>)
	Revolution and Justice-Belanga Wing (<i>Révolution and Justice-Aile Belanga – RJ</i>)
	Revolution and Justice-Sayo Wing (<i>Révolution and Justice-Aile Sayo</i>)
	Seleka Renovated (<i>Seleka Rénovée</i>)
	Union of Republican Forces (<i>Union des Forces Républicaines</i>)
	Union of Fundamental Republican Forces (<i>Union des Forces Républicaines-Fondamentale</i>)
	Union for Peace in the CAR (<i>Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique</i>)

Source: Compiled by author

Besides the pecuniary rewards that come with power and control over the territory the increase can partly be explained by the total collapse of an already weak state and an upsurge in insecurity, which left the population to fend for itself. As a result, self-defence groups were created along ethnic and/or regional lines. Internal fractures within armed groups are another reason for the increase in numbers, as splinter groups formed.

Apart from the significance of the increase in the number of armed groups despite the presence of MINUSCA, their inclusion in the peace agreement points to the use of co-optation as a means of managing the country's political

and security situations. This strategy has essentially incentivised the rebel 'enterprise' and enabled many of the CAR's politico-military actors to perceive the use of violence as a sure route to power in addition to being a lucrative endeavour.

Being or becoming a rebel ensures players a chance to share the national cake and eventually even to achieve political power. This is also why armed groups have shown a tendency to splinter easily.

For far too long armed groups have occupied the space left vacant by the state. In the past two decades several

attempts have been made to bring lasting peace to the country by dealing with the rebellion and armed groups through co-optation in the form of power-sharing agreements and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), and Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiatives. But as the current situation with the CPC shows, this approach remains problematic and has become unsustainable.

Peace agreements but still no peace

The proliferation of armed groups and the use of co-optation has made CAR a fertile ground for peace accords – 13 major agreements between different groups (see Appendix 3) were signed between 1997 and 2020. Despite these, the CAR has yet to experience durable peace. At the same time, the number of agreements suggests that the focus may have been placed on signing accords rather than regarding them as a framework for a complex peace process. It would also seem that lessons have not been learned from the failure to implement agreements effectively.

Since the 1997 Bangui peace accord, which included clauses providing for a government of national unity, disarmament of mutinous soldiers and armed civilians, the securitisation of Bangui and a national conference of reconciliation, the content of subsequent peace agreements has not changed fundamentally.

An entrenched war economy and the growth of armed groups who are militarily superior to the CAR army make peace difficult to achieve

Although the agreements have succeeded, at times, in ending or postponing violent clashes and extending the stay in power of a sitting government, they have not been fully implemented. An important reason for this is the inability of the key stakeholders (national, regional and international) to align their political, economic, and material interests effectively or simply to place the peace and stability of the CAR first. At least since 2013 the entrenchment of a war economy, the expansion of armed groups and their superior military power in contrast to a CAR army in shambles, has meant the objective conditions for implementing peace agreements have simply not existed.

What future for the 2019 Political Agreement?

The Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation signed on 6 February 2019 by the government and 14 armed groups initially raised hopes of a permanent return to peace. However, clashes among armed groups and violence against civilians continued.

In December 2020 the political situation, coupled with the security dynamics, culminated in the emergence of the CPC, which carried out

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attacks in various parts of the country that ultimately affected the 2020 elections.¹⁹ The insecurity resulted in a low voter turnout (36%) for the first round of the elections, and thus negatively impacting President Touadéra's legitimacy. If not managed, this might, in turn, further destabilise the country.

What is, therefore, effectively at stake today is the future of the 2019 peace agreement as the actions of the CPC directly violate its terms. This is in addition to previous violations since 2019 for which there have been no sanctions despite those being provided for in the agreement. Apart from the resurgence of armed attacks by some signatories to the agreement, the implementation of the two key components – the creation of the mixed special security units (MSSUs) and the formation of inclusive government – has also wavered.

Creation of mixed special security units

Both these components were meant to reconcile the government and armed groups and restore security in the country. Other important security aspects of the agreement centred on progress in the DRR and SSR process, including continuing to rebuild the CAR army, the *Forces Armées Centrafricaines* (FACA), a process that has been ongoing for several years, with support from various CAR partners, including Russia, France, the European Union (EU), and the UN.

The MSSUs, who were to comprise the CAR armed forces and individuals from armed groups, were initially meant to be deployed in April 2019. For various reasons the constitution and deployment has proved to be a challenge.

Among the problems have been difficulties in disarming armed groups intended to be included; training former militia men alongside soldiers of national armed forces; challenges in securing the requisite resources for training, deployment and maintenance and promoting the acceptance by local populations of MSSUs that include individuals who have unleashed terror on them.

In April 2020, during a pilot training project in Bouar (Nana Mambere) in Western CAR about 400 members of the MSSUs went on strike, demanding that they be paid their general food allowance and that their training – initially intended to last two months and then in its sixth

month – be brought to an end. The soldiers in training blocked a strategic road between Cameroun and Bangui, which serves as a lifeline, supplying Bangui with vital produce.²⁰

For these reasons, the first MSSUs were only deployed and began operations in some parts of Western CAR, in Bouar and Paoua (Ouham-Pende), in November 2020, nearly two years after the peace agreement was signed. According to a January 2021 report by the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR, delays in the DDR process have prevented the training of MSSUs for the centre region, meanwhile the construction of MSSUs camps in the remaining areas of Western CAR as well as in the centre and east were either still ongoing or in planning phases.²¹

The same report also states that AU military observers meant to oversee MSSUs had not yet been deployed, even though Western MSSUs were already in operation. As a guarantor of the CAR peace agreement the AU has not been able to fulfil this essential part of its duties.

CAR cannot provide its own security and relies on MINUSCA and countries like Rwanda and Russia

Overall, MSSUs have demonstrated a lack of discipline and there has been friction between FACA commanders or soldiers and members of former armed groups. On 10–11 November 2020, for the second time, MSSU elements blocked the road serving Bangui. There have also been cases of desertion, with members of the MSSU disappearing with weapons.

During the violent attempts to prevent the elections from taking place it appears that weapons and ammunition were looted from the MSSU camp in Bouar and all members of that unit had vanished.²² Similarly, the FACA chief of staff and the Ministry of Defence issued a communiqué on 25 December 2020 condemning the defections of soldiers and calling on all soldiers to re-join their units.

These events have highlighted the structural weaknesses of both the MSSUs and the FACA, in spite of months of training for the former and years for the latter. The reality is that the CAR remains unable to ensure its own security

and that of the population and will continue to rely on MINUSCA and external help such as from Rwanda and Russia, on whom they called to repel the CPC's attempt to march on Bangui in early January 2021. This raises questions about the efficacy of the rebuilding process, which has been ongoing for the past six years with the help of the international community.

Formation of an inclusive government

The power-sharing clause of the February 2019 peace agreement also did not hold. The formation of an inclusive government as early as March 2019 did not deter armed groups from violating the agreement. Three key rebel leaders – Ali Darassa (Union for Peace in the CAR – UPC), Mahamat Al Katim (Patriotic Movement for the CAR – MPC) and Bi Sidi Souleymane (Return, Reclaiming and Rehabilitation – 3R) – were appointed advisors to the prime minister in charge of MSSUs in areas under the control of their respective armed groups.

Not only did their inclusion in the government give them legitimacy as government officials, the portfolios given to them essentially reinforced the security/insecurity status quo by allowing them to retain control of these areas.

Of the 14 groups that signed the 2019 peace agreement at least half continuously violated it. A report tabled by the UN Secretary-General at the UN Security Council notes that between February and June 2020 there had been 504 violations, while some armed groups, including those that were still represented in government, had attempted to increase the size of the areas under their control.

Violent clashes erupted within armed groups divided along ethnic lines, between armed groups over control of certain areas and between armed groups and some battalions of the national army-FACA (often supported by UN soldiers).²³ These violations were, in great part, rooted in the fact that the balance of power remained with the armed groups that have dominated large swathes of the country.

The UN Panel of Experts report for January 2021 notes that an armed group like Ali Darassa's UPC is well-equipped militarily and imposes and collects taxes from civilians as well as around mining activities through the UPC 'police', even doing so alongside a mayor in the Haut-Mboumou Prefecture.

This contrasts with challenges faced by the FACA, which has not been given the appropriate operational support to carry out its activities. This has led to predatory behaviour towards civilians and further fuelled indiscipline in its ranks and contributed to insecurity. The defection of FACA soldiers and MSSU elements during the CPC's attacks is partially explained by this.

It is also linked to nearly insurmountable challenges in the SSR enterprise, particularly the DDR component, the implementation of which has been problematic. In addition, armed groups have continued to acquire weapons and other military equipment as illegal arms continue to flow into the CAR because the state has been unable to regain an effective hold on the country.

Both the SSR and DDR have been issues in the country since at least 2003, when they were first cited during discussions of plans to restructure a national army that had been built along ethnic lines. They were also explicitly included as important aspects in the 2008 Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the 2013 Peace Accord.²⁴

Although their efforts have been laudable, they are still a work in progress²⁵ and their eventual success will greatly determine the direction of the CAR in the coming years.

The formation of an inclusive government didn't deter armed groups from violating the peace agreement

Currently the conditions necessary to implement the DDR properly and fully have not been met. In order to do so, numerous factors have to come into play almost concurrently. Among them is to instil an adequate level of respect for the peace agreement, while restoring the authority of the state throughout the country, including securing borders and curtailing the illegal inflows of weapons.

The reconstruction of the FACA is an integral part of this process, but its training must be reviewed and adapted, with emphasis placed on civic training, followed by operational support in the field.

Even though it seemed logical to include all armed groups in the peace process in light of the *de facto*

control they exercise over a large part of the country, the idea of placing them in charge of the MSSUs was bound to fail. In addition, the absence of sanctions against peace spoilers has led to violations of the 2019 agreement running rampant, culminating in the creation of the CPC, disruption of the elections and the currently ongoing bout of fighting.

What progress thus far?

Despite the many setbacks there have been some positive developments in the implementation of the 2019 agreement, among them the passage of several laws by the National Assembly in February 2020. The first set concerns political parties in general, including the status of opposition parties, and the establishment of a Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission by legislation promulgated on 7 April 2020.

It seemed logical to include armed groups in the peace process but placing them in charge of the mixed special security units was bound to fail

Other relevant laws concern the status of former presidents, regional authorities and decentralisation. However, simply passing laws and creating institutions is insufficient if they are not used for their intended purpose. Article 35 of the 2019 agreement states:

The parties [signatories to the Agreement] recognize that violation of the Agreement exposes those responsible to repressive measures by the guarantors and facilitators [the AU, the Economic Community of Central African States, the United Nations and other partners of the CAR]. The parties are aware that any violation is likely to expose the authors to international sanctions, in particular within the framework of the relevant provisions of the decisions of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union and of the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, and within the framework of their respective sanction regimes.

Despite this, the wish of the CAR authorities and many within the international community was initially to avoid a confrontation that was likely to bury the peace agreement entirely; a position that has fanned persistent insecurity and instability.

Between December 2020 and January 2021, the international community was vocal and unanimous in condemning peace spoilers, including former president Bozizé, and calling for armed groups, particularly the CPC, to stop their attacks on Bangui, regular armed forces and MINUSCA. It has also been reaffirmed that the 2019 agreement remains the only viable framework for solving the CAR's problems.

However, in view of the challenges the agreement has faced in the past two years and the fact that the CPC coalition has clearly reneged on it, all parties,

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especially the guarantors of the agreement, must take the relevant steps if it is to contribute anything to peace and stability. Simply proclaiming that it is now the only panacea for peace in the country will do little to address the very real hurdles it has encountered.

The fact that the power-sharing and security clauses of the agreement could not be reconciled with the objective material conditions on the ground was perhaps a structural flaw. This cannot be ignored if it is to continue to be the framework for peace in the future.

Other challenges to peace

Regional instability and porous borders feed into the CAR's problems. Tackling the issue of armed groups will require a strong regional response that includes resolving the problem of the conflicts in South Sudan and Sudan's Darfur.

Historically the area has been a breeding ground for armed groups and traffickers. The January 2021 UN Panel of Experts report²⁶ highlights the presence in the CAR of armed groups from Sudan, South Sudan and Chad, some of them with connections to influential people in Sudan and South Sudan.

The groups are engaged in various illegal activities, including drug and arms trafficking and taxation of mining and farming/grazing activities. Some also fight with CAR-based armed groups.²⁷ This regional trend feeds off the CAR's weaknesses, reinforcing both these weaknesses and the phenomenon of rebel enterprise in the country.

Their presence highlights the importance of a regional approach to the problems of the CAR. In other words, attempts to deal with socio-political and economic challenges should not be confined to that country but should be extended to similar issues in neighbouring countries. The focus should be on the border areas between the CAR, Chad, Sudan and South Sudan. Ultimately, the issue of armed groups must be dealt with in all four countries.

Economic woes and international assistance

One of the implications of the state essentially only having a presence in Bangui is that the country does

not have much of a formal economy from which to draw revenue. One government official argues that the state's revenues are effectively drawn from only 20% of the territory, given that the other 80% is controlled by armed groups.²⁸

It is therefore evident that the economic health of the CAR depends largely on its security situation. Added to this is the fact that the foundations of the Central African economy have never been solid. Currently, state revenues are derived from the exploitation and sale of diamonds and timber, as well as from the agriculture and livestock sector (which remain largely at subsistence level). The Central African economy remains predominantly informal and rentier.

The state's budget for 2021 is projected to be approximately US\$533 million, of which more than half – US\$280 million, will be funded from external assistance from international financial institutions and other multilateral and bilateral donors in the form of budget and project support.²⁹ The country's internal budget resources are precarious, given the problems of collecting money through customs and other taxes.

Tackling the armed groups requires a regional response that covers South Sudan and Darfur

The CAR's dependence on external aid would not be a problem if the proceeds were devoted to reconstruction, which would also require curbing the threat of armed groups and regaining control of the national territory. At this point, however, the external assistance has served mainly to provide much-needed relief; a situation that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

International financial aid³⁰ and humanitarian assistance have made it possible to relieve the state of its obligations and deal with the most pressing needs of the people, but it has had adverse effects on the rebuilding of a capable state and a viable economy. In its attempts to respond to a situation of almost permanent emergency facing the CAR, the international presence has essentially assumed duties that should have been the responsibility of the state.

With more than half the population (2.8 million) in need of humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021, and more than one-third (1.9 million) being food insecure, the provision of basic necessities has relied heavily, if not almost exclusively, on the benevolence of international benefactors.

All things considered, this appears to have contributed to removing the sense of responsibility or some incentive for it from the government, setting it on a perpetual quest for external assistance and aid. In addition, other actors, such as armed groups who have joined the government, habitually commandeer funds intended for peace and the reconstruction of the country.

The UN, in spite of its 12 800 troops, was unable to ensure security for the 2020 elections

Another corollary has been the emergence and entrenchment, in Bangui, of an economy centred on the international presence, where goods and services of a certain standard are provided to well-off international civil servants. This has contributed to price hikes for certain products that have become unaffordable for the vast majority of locals and has created and/or exacerbated feelings of resentment towards the United Nations and other foreign entities.

Bangui's formal economy revolves around construction and the service industry, while the rest of the country's economy is in the hands of armed groups that control different parts of the territory. In essence, these are some of the characteristics of what amounts to a war economy. An international analyst based in Bangui believes that

the crisis also persists because a war economy has developed which benefits key actors of the crisis, including some government officials who are deriving pecuniary benefits both in the form of international aid but also proceeds from the illicit exploitation of raw materials in complicity with certain armed groups, especially those that joined the government following the signing of the February 2019 peace agreement and some

probably well before ... It appears that almost no actor – apart from the Central African people – has an interest in seeing the crisis end.³¹

Similarly, an investigative report in October 2020 not only points to the implication of individuals close to the presidency, but to the existence of a well-organised system and network of predation in the CAR, contrasting that with the blindness of external partners.³²

These economic woes, now made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, and structural entrenchments linked to the overall disintegration of the state in the CAR, are compounded by a breakdown of the social fabric, which has, in turn, undermined national cohesion. The well-intentioned and much-needed international assistance has had perverse effects that must be remedied as part of a long-term strategy if the CAR is to regain sustainable peace and stability and an acceptable level of autonomy in the running of its own affairs.

Role of the UN, the AU and ECCAS

The history of UN interventions in the CAR dates back officially to the beginning of the 21st century. The Central African region first became involved through the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), followed by ECCAS.

The AU, through the predecessor to its Peace and Security Council, the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, has been making decisions about the CAR since 2003, when it suspended the country after the 17 March coup d'état perpetrated by François Bozizé.³³

When the crisis worsened in 2012 ECCAS was the first to take up the issue and lead the negotiations between the Seleka coalition and the Bozizé government between late 2012 and early 2013.

Eventually the torch would be passed from ECCAS's *Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique* (MICOPAX), which had been present in the CAR since 2008, to the AU's African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA) in December 2013, to the UN's MINUSCA in September 2014. Despite the disagreements among the three organisations and some delays during the passing of the

baton, the relay from ECCAS to the UN, via the AU, was, all in all, a necessary progression to curb the escalating crisis in the CAR.

While the situation has largely stabilised over the years since ECCAS, the AU and the UN became involved, the country's security and stability are still gravely imperilled, as demonstrated by the events of December 2020 and January 2021 around the elections.

Armed groups managed effectively to derail the elections by preventing voting in large parts of the country, leading to the low voter turnout. The CPC coalition would have captured Bangui had it not been for the intervention of Russian and Rwandese troops, who were called to the rescue by the CAR government on the basis of bilateral military agreements.

This means that the UN, in spite of its 12 800 troops, was unable to ensure security for the elections. At the same time, the fact that the terms of the 2019 peace agreement had clearly been breached negates the hard work done by the AU between late 2016 and 2019, when the accord was signed.

ECCAS, given its experience in the CAR, would have known of the impending escalation of the situation around the elections but the regional organisation seems to have taken a back seat since the end of the 'transition period' (2014–2016), which it had overseen. The UN, the AU and ECCAS each has a role to play, individually and collectively. A comprehensive plan for the CAR must be developed, financed, implemented and monitored to deal with the country's internal political, security and socio-economic issues.

A comprehensive plan could also temper the zeal or voracious appetites for natural resources of some of the CAR's partners such as Russia and France. Regional challenges must also be addressed together with the CAR's neighbours. Lessons must be learnt from the history of the CAR, including the coups, rebel and armed groups, international peace missions and peace agreements that have failed to extract the country from

this vicious cycle. A piecemeal approach to tackling the issues will not yield sustainable results.

Conclusion

The events of December 2020 and January 2021 suggest that after eight years of protracted instability the CAR still faces almost the same challenges that plunged the country into chaos and horror in 2013.

Despite the international efforts to fill the abysmal void left by an absentee state, the CAR continues to experience serious challenges in its recovery process. Although there has been a notable diminution in violence since the early years of the crisis, between 2013 and 2016, the proliferation of armed groups across the country and their hold on much of the territory has been worrying, posing as it does serious questions about the ability of the state to regain control. Armed groups have, in most places, taken up the space and role left vacant by a weak or non-existent state.

Declaring the 2019 accord the only viable peace framework will not magically make it effective

The inclusion of the leaders of armed groups in the government in 2019, without holding them accountable for the several violations of the agreement, does not bode well for a return to durable peace and stability or for the future viability of the latest peace agreement.

Declaring the February 2019 accord the only viable framework for the restoration of peace in the country will not magically make it effective. The inherent and implementation weaknesses must be addressed. Overall, the international community, including the UN, must review fundamentally its approach to the CAR, the 2019 peace agreement and perhaps the *conditio sine qua non* if the plan is to succeed and flourish. Much of the work will relate to rebuilding the economic, social and societal fabric of the country.

Appendix 1

Political map of the Central African Republic



Source: United Nations, under Wikimedia Commons

Appendix 2

Major international peace missions in the CAR since 1997*

Name	Year
<i>Mission Internationale de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui (MISAB)</i>	1997–1998
United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA)	1998–2000
UN Peacebuilding Support Office in the CAR (BONUCA) in 2000–2009	2000–2009
<i>Force de maintien de la paix et de sécurité de la CEN-SAD en Centrafrique</i>	2001–2002
CEMAC's (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) <i>Force Multinationale en Centrafrique (FOMUC)</i>	2002–2008
UN Mission in CAR and Chad (MINURCAT)	2007–2010
EUFOR-Tchad-RCA: <i>Opération de l'Union européenne en République du Tchad et en République centrafricaine</i>	2007–2009
ECCAS' (Economic Community of Central African States) <i>Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique (MICOPAX)</i>	2008–2013
UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the CAR (BINUCA)	2010–2014
<i>Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique sous conduite africaine (MISCA)</i>	2013–2014
UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)	2014–present

Source: Compiled by author

* Various international/regional organisations have maintained a presence in the CAR, alongside MINUSCA and other UN agencies. They include: ECCAS, AU, EU, *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* and a plethora of non-governmental organisations

Appendix 3

Peace agreements, 1997–2020

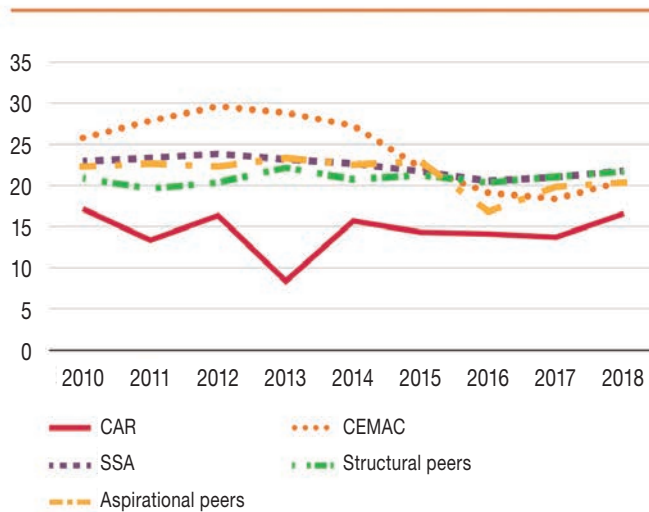
Year	Peace agreement
Jan 1997	<i>Bangui Agreements (Accord de Bangui)</i>
Oct 2002	<i>Libreville Agreement (Accord de Libreville)</i>
Feb 2007	<i>Sirte Agreement (Accord de Syrte)</i>
Apr 2007	<i>Birao Peace Agreement (Accord de Paix de Birao)</i>
May 2008	<i>Libreville Peace Agreement (Accord de Paix de Libreville)</i>
Jun 2008	<i>Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Accord de Paix Global de Libreville)</i>
Jan 2013	<i>Libreville Accord for the Cessation of Hostilities in the CAR (Accord de Cessation des Hostilités)</i>
Jan 2013	<i>Libreville Political Agreement on the Resolution of the Political-Security Crisis in the Central African Republic (Accord Politique de Libreville sur la Résolution de la Crise Politico-Sécuritaire en République Centrafricaine)</i>
July 2014	<i>Brazzaville Accord of Cessation of hostilities in CAR (Accord de Cessation des Hostilités)</i>
May 2015	<i>Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation et Reconstruction in the CAR (Pacte Républicain pour la Paix, la Réconciliation nationale et la reconstruction en RCA)</i>
May 2015	Agreement on the Principles of Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Repatriation and of Integration into the Uniformed State Forces of the CAR
Jun 2017	<i>Sant'Egidio Entente- Political Accord for Peace in the CAR (Entente de Sant'Egidio-Accord Politique pour la Paix en RCA)</i>
Feb 2019	<i>Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR (Accord Politique pour la Paix et la Réconciliation en RCA)</i>

Source: Compiled by author

* Excluding agreements signed locally between armed groups or communities

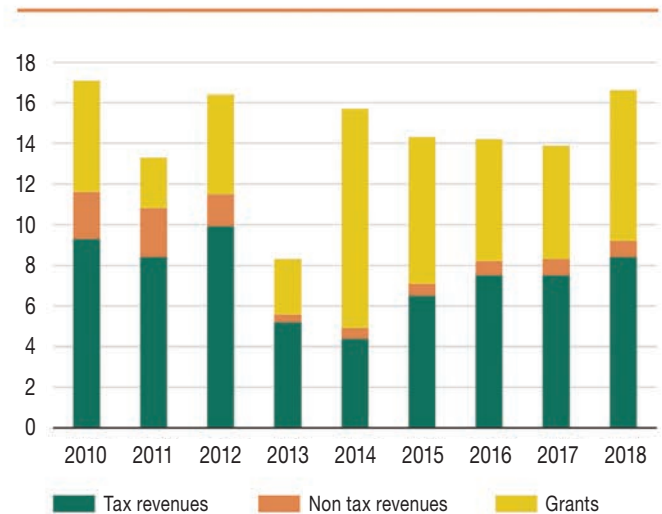
Appendix 4

FIGURE 1.7 Government revenue in CAR, 2010–18



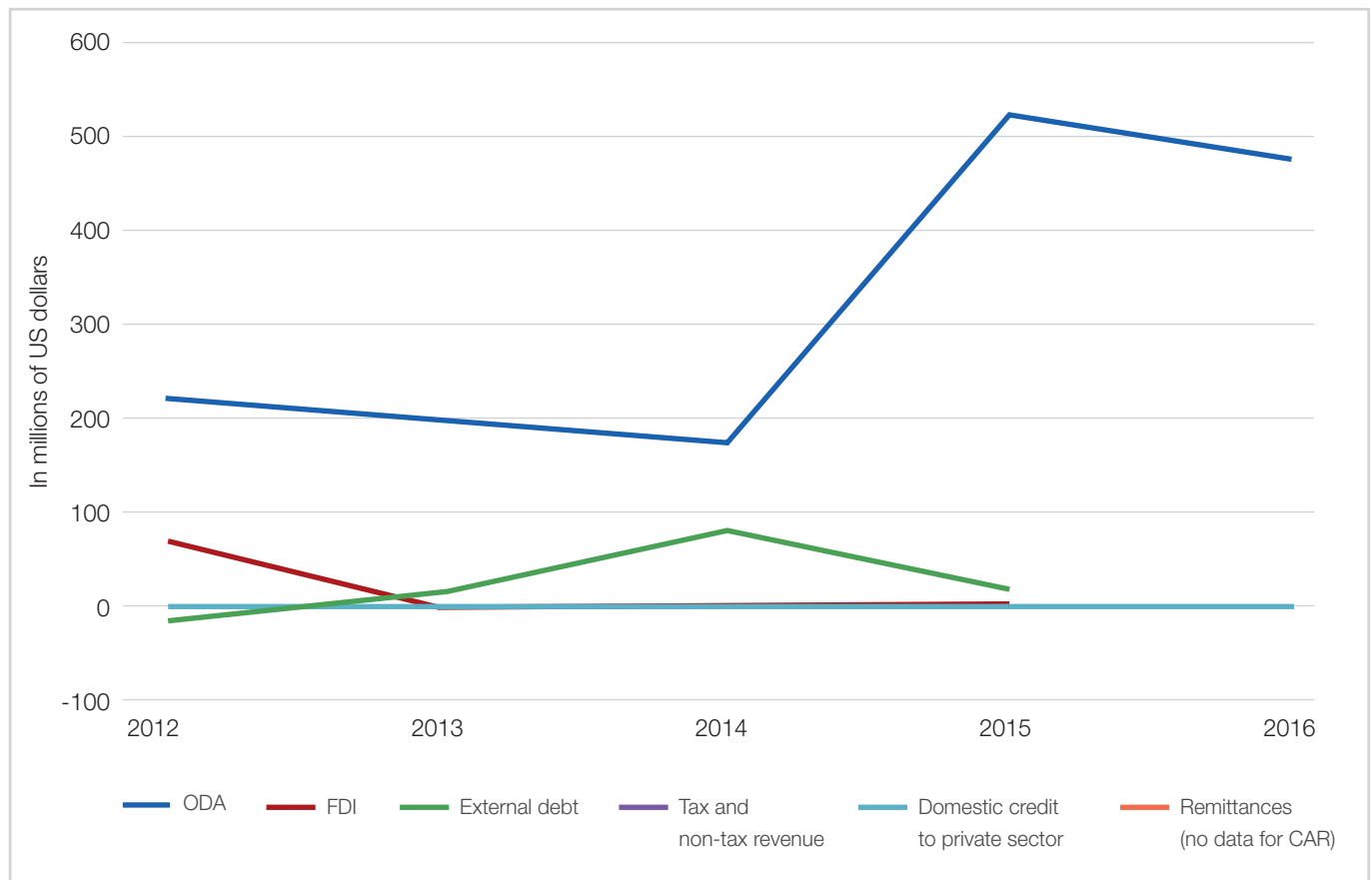
Source: World Bank staff calculations using WEO and World Bank data.

FIGURE 1.8 Revenue composition in CAR, (% GDP), 2010–2019



Source: World Bank staff calculations based on CAR authorities, IMF and World Bank data.

Figure 1: Sources of world financing in CAR



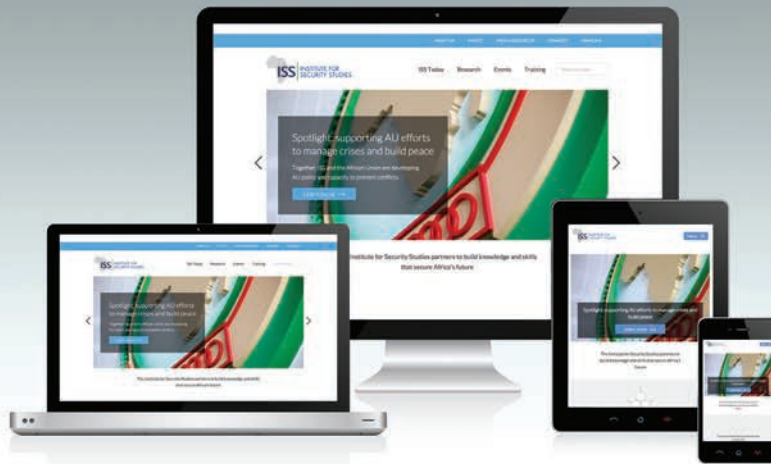
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Notes

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