



## AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

# Going the Extra Mile for the 2020 Elections in the Central African Republic

*Peter Knoop, Stephen Buchanan-Clarke and Valerie Arnould*

The upcoming 2020 presidential election in the Central African Republic (CAR) has the potential to derail the implementation of the 2019 Khartoum Peace Agreement and bring about a return to widespread conflict. This calls for immediate and collaborative action to be taken by those national, regional, and international actors working for peace in the country. This policy brief aims to outline some of the key risks posed by the upcoming elections and provide recommendations to mitigate their potential to negatively impact on ongoing peace and reconciliation efforts.

### INTRODUCTION

Since independence, the CAR has been plagued by politico-military crises that have weakened state institutions, undermined basic social and economic structures and created tensions between the country's social and religious communities. The latest crisis, which erupted in December 2012 in the north-eastern region of the country and led to the overthrow of long-standing President François Bozizé in March 2013, drew the country into an unprecedented spiral of violence. Clashes between various

armed groups set in motion a complex set of conflict dynamics, characterised by large-scale killings, widespread intercommunal violence, the destruction of private and public property, and the displacement of roughly a quarter of the country's 4.5 million citizens.

Parallel to the destruction and violence there were ongoing efforts to find peaceful solutions. The 2015 Bangui National Forum was a major step forward in the process. Between 2015 and early 2019 several efforts to come to a peace agreement failed. But on 6 February 2019, the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (also commonly referred to as the Khartoum Agreement) was signed between the government and 14 recognised armed groups under the African Union (AU) Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR, which continues to be the focus of both national and international stakeholders.

While overall levels of conflict have declined, a year after its signing there are still regular violations of the peace agreement and serious incidents of violence and human rights violations. In his latest report, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres lamented the 'persistent lack of good faith among the signatories, in particular the three main ex-

Séléka armed groups, the Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation group and Anti-Balaka groups, and a nominal commitment by parts of the Government, especially the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic, as well as sensitive matters such as transitional security and justice mechanisms, contributed to delays'.<sup>i</sup>

While the upcoming 2020 presidential elections are important to the peaceful resolution of conflict in CAR,<sup>ii</sup> they also have the potential to derail the implementation of the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR and to negatively impact on the safety and security of citizens more generally. The combination of an international community that wishes to promote rapid democratic elections, to be able to deal with a legitimate government, and the short-term interests of elites to maintain powerful positions can be a security risk. A risk that is at odds with long term sustainable solutions that require prolonged investments in the political process.

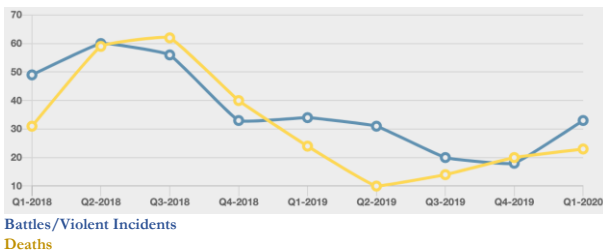


Figure 1 | Battles and incidents of violence against citizens in CAR by quarter between 10 February 2018 and 31 April 2020.<sup>iii</sup>

As Figure 1 suggests, political tensions relating to the upcoming elections may *already* be generating an increase in incidents of violence, thus reversing a trend in declining levels of violence since the Khartoum Agreement. This is at least partly due to the fact that opposition leaders and parties are gearing up to face off with incumbent President Faustin-Archange Touadera. In addition to the tensions related to

the upcoming presidential and legislative elections the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential impact on an already dire humanitarian situation could lead to further instability. This brief will provide an overview of some of the current challenges to the implementation of the peace deal in CAR and the risks associated with the upcoming elections. It will then examine the current measures underway to prevent an escalation in violence, their weaknesses and some potential solutions.

### THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE KHARTOUM AGREEMENT: KEY SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES TO DATE

On 9 February 2020, the first anniversary of the signing of the Khartoum Agreement was commemorated at the presidential palace, with the participation of 13 of the 14 signatory armed groups, political parties, civil society groups and the international community. The United Nations (UN), the AU and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) issued a joint communiqué to mark the occasion and call for the full implementation of the agreement. To date, several of the agreement's implementation and monitoring mechanisms are operational, concerted effort has been applied to ensure continued commitment among armed groups, and there are increasing efforts to apply more punitive measures against violators.

Since the signing of the peace agreement, the CAR has seen a modest decrease in violence across the country. While armed groups still functionally control large swathes of territory, there has been a gradual return of state authorities, 16 prefects and 76 sub-prefects to their posts and the increased deployment of civil servants to remote areas. By February 2020, the number of police officers and gendarmes deployed outside Bangui reached 1,086, police stations in volatile neighbourhoods such as PK5 reopened, while additional recruitment drives have resulted in an additional 1,000 recruits for training.

Demands for a blanket amnesty made by rebel groups at the time of the peace negotiation were rejected by the government, and earlier commitments to justice made at the 2015 Bangui National Forum were reaffirmed in the Khartoum Accord. This aligned with demands by CAR citizens that perpetrators of human rights abuses be held accountable and refused amnesty, as shown in surveys.<sup>iv</sup> In efforts to address impunity and establish the rule of law, CAR's ordinary courts have started to hear cases of abuses by armed groups and acts of gender-based violence. For example, in February 2020, the Bangui Court of Appeal sentenced 28 former Anti-Balaka members for their roles in the killings of civilians and peacekeepers in Bangassou in May 2017. Their sentences ranged from ten years to life imprisonment. The Special Criminal Court, established in February 2019 with the authority to try serious crimes committed during the country's armed conflicts since 2003, also continues to investigate actively ten important cases of human rights abuses.<sup>v</sup> In addition, in December 2018 and January 2019 two CAR rebel leaders, Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona and Alfred Yekatom, were arrested and handed over to the International Criminal Court, where they stand accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Alongside criminal justice efforts, the signatories of the Khartoum Agreement committed to engaging in a national process of reconciliation, including the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission. To date, a series of public consultations have been held and the steering committee has handed its report and a bill to establish the Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparations and Reconciliation (CVJRR) to the president in the presence of the opposition, victims' associations, national institutions and international partners. The bill was subsequently passed in parliament.<sup>vi</sup>

The CVJRR is mandated for an initial period of four years (renewable) to investigate serious human rights violations; look into their causes, circumstances and motifs; identify those who are responsible for the

violence; hear the perpetrators and victims; promote forgiveness and create a special fund for victims' reparations. The CVJRR is tasked with short-term actions like investigations and justice but also with long-term investments in social cohesion and peace building.

In addition to national-level efforts, local peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives have seen some successes in curbing violence, from local nonaggression pacts between armed groups to deals regarding access to specific areas to community violence reduction agreements. In line with the recommendations arising out of the 2015 Bangui Forum, a network of 38 Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees (LPRCs) working across seven regions of CAR have also been established with the goal of building participatory and inclusive dialogues to ensure sustainable reconciliation. As called for in the peace agreement, committees for the prevention and management of transhumance-related conflicts have further been established but are currently limited to Ouham and Nana-Grébizi Prefectures.

The importance of these local initiatives should not be underestimated. As Azou-Passonda et al (2019) argue in their study of all 14 CAR peace agreements signed in CAR since 2007, these have repeatedly failed because they are dominated by elites, favour Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) as their main mechanism for conflict resolution and do not address local drivers of conflict and the sense of exclusion experienced at the community level.<sup>vii</sup> Similarly, in UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's most recent report, he makes an effort to 'underscore the importance of local-level dialogue and reconciliation to prevent and manage conflict. Such mechanisms make a tangible difference in the lives of many who live together in a community, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. I welcome the establishment of committees for the prevention and management of transhumance-related conflicts in affected prefectures'.<sup>viii</sup>

The most significant challenge to the implementation of the peace deal has been the establishment and deployment of the Unités Spéciales Mixtes de Sécurité (USMS). These mixed-security units, comprising both armed groups and regular government forces, were supposed to be operational within 60 days of the signing of the Khartoum Agreement. However, training, vetting, and funding issues, in addition to disagreements around their span and area of control, have continued. Three leaders of signatory rebel groups were appointed ‘Special Military Advisors’ to the prime minister overseeing the USMS units in the designated defense zones. However, constant pressure on President Touadera not to cede control to armed groups meant that the positions remained largely without funding or authority.<sup>ix</sup> Two of the three special military advisers – Mahamat al-Khatim of the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC) and Abbas Sidiki of Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R) – have since resigned. In October 2019, the northwest unit of the USMS was inaugurated in Bouar. However, the operationalisation of the northeast and southeast units remained unclear as many of the chosen armed groups are in constant conflict with each other. In addition, Disarmament, Demobilization, Reinsertion and Repatriation (DDRR) operations, which include the vetting of members for the mixed security units, have also seen a number of delays, and the national authorities’ 20 January 2020 deadline for the conclusion of DDRR operations was missed.<sup>x</sup>

Throughout these processes, several armed groups have continued to violate the terms of the agreement, including staging attacks on civilians, state representatives and humanitarian workers; engaging in the illegal taxation of transhumance routes; and fighting each other for control of illegal checkpoints, mining areas, and to expand their territories. The UN Panel of Experts argues there are three main factors which account for the discrepancy between the statements of armed group leaders in support of the peace agreement and their contradictory actions on the ground: (1) many armed leaders believe that the

government has not implemented the agreement in good faith, as illustrated by arguments around the mixed security units; (2) armed groups are satisfied with the status quo, which enables them to continue to generate significant revenue, in particular through illegal taxation, levying tolls on roads, transhumance routes, and trafficking in weapons, gold, and diamonds; and (3), some armed groups suffer from a structural inability to implement the agreement, such as the lack of a defined leadership.<sup>xi</sup>

### **RISKS POSED BY THE 2020 ELECTIONS**

In recent months, the political climate has become increasingly tense ahead of the presidential elections, as parties begin to instrumentalise real and perceived government failings to gain support. In particular, the return of former President François Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, the man who led the Séléka to overthrow him in 2013, has caused concern. Both could likely mobilise armed actors to fight on their behalf should they choose. Djotodia remains the political head of CAR's main armed rebel group, the Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (FPRC), which maintains control over much of the northeast of the country, while Bozizé still has a considerable level of support among the army.

While President Touadéra’s government remains largely unpopular in CAR, the opposition is divided, and it remains to be seen how alliances between opposition parties and platforms will shift and evolve in the build-up to the elections, especially in regard to their support of Bozizé, Djotodia, and other relevant contenders. In 2019, an amorphous coalition of civil society groups and opposition parties known as Ë Zîngo Bîani emerged to lead public marches in Bangui to protest government corruption, poor governance and concessions to armed groups within the framework of the Khartoum Agreement, which the group has publicly declared as ‘high treason’. Important political

figures such as former head of the National Assembly, Karim Meckassoua, who was born in PK5 and maintains support among segments of CAR's Muslim community, have come out in support of Ë Zîngo Bïanî.

The former ruling Kwa Na Kwa party, which supports Bozizé, announced in August 2019 its departure from the presidential majority and intention to align with opposition political parties. In addition, new political opposition groups, such as those led by former prime minister Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, who was beaten by Touadéra in the second round of the presidential vote in 2016, have been able to point to stalled progress in the implementation of the Khartoum Agreement to gain support as an opposition party.

The increasingly tense political climate created by the upcoming elections poses a number of risks to the implementation of the peace agreement in CAR and to human security in the country more generally:

- As political leaders increasingly prioritise mobilising popular support and international attention shifts to the elections, less focus and support will be given to the continued implementation of the peace agreement and its various DDRR, Security Sector Reform (SSR), and Transitional Justice components, particularly where these are seen to conflict with electoral stability;
- Politicisation of obstacles and challenges surrounding preparations of the elections and the development of electoral legislation could result in provocations and a spike in insecurity and political instability. There is a risk in this respect if the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a delay for the elections and/or the impossibility to organise them in

parts of the country. This risk is aggravated because parts of CAR are under de facto control of rebel groups;

- Currently, more than half of the population is in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, with some 2.6 million individuals in need of food, water, shelter, protection and more. Humanitarian needs are constantly exacerbated by continued violations of the peace agreement by armed groups. The availability of funds from donors may reduce because of the impact on the economic situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. This reduced funding to address the humanitarian situation may lead to more tensions;
- Political leaders seeking to consolidate support may employ rhetoric which undermines social cohesion and touches on religious and ethnic fault lines and spark widespread or intercommunal violence. As Pangburn (2020) succinctly states, 'Debates over who is strongest and most capable to lead the country have begun to supersede any spirit of accommodation and power-sharing that informed the signing of the peace agreement. Political manoeuvring in the capital will likely not help address the causes of the rebellion in CAR that have historically emerged from the marginalised peripheries of the state';
- The current three-way-battle between Touadéra, Bozizé and Djotodia has the potential to escalate into full-scale conflict should the elections not run smoothly or the results be contested. While Bozizé remains popular among soldiers, many of whom are from his Mgbaya ethnic group, Djotodia retains support among some factions of the ex-Séléka. In addition,

institutional frameworks to settle electoral disputes peacefully, such as the national electoral commission and the Constitutional Court, are weak and lack broad-based legitimacy;

- Competition between leaders, particularly Bozizé and Touadéra, could also have a serious impact on the already strained cohesion of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). Bozizé maintains considerable support among soldiers. Before becoming president in 2003, he was a high-ranking military officer and then minister of defence under Jean-Bedel Bokassa. As mentioned, he is also popular among soldiers due to ethnic ties. President Touadéra, on the other hand, is an academic turned politician who has found difficulty in consolidating support among the military since taking power in 2016. Adding to these tensions is the fact that Djotodia also has support among factions of the ex-Séléka, including those who have now taken positions in the army. A split within FACA, as a result of political contestation around the elections, would be disastrous for the Khartoum Agreement and could itself spark off renewed widespread conflict;
- Both Bozizé and Djotodia have been implicated in serious human rights violations for their roles in the 2013-2015 violence. Should President Touadéra choose to ally with either to consolidate support ahead of the elections, this could damage the legitimacy of the government and impact upon efforts to fight impunity in the country, as called for in the peace agreement. Should Bozizé or Djotodia take power, the implications for the peace agreement and its implementation would likely be profound;

- Newcomers to Bangui, who have been brought into government as part of the peace agreement and lack political cachet, may resort to violence or other illegal means to win votes and/or achieve their political objectives. Many of these newcomers perceive the government as having failed to uphold their side of the peace agreement, which may elevate the risk of violence;
- and lastly, the elections could provide an opportunity for the divergent interests of regional neighbours, such as Sudan and Chad, and other international powers to advance their own political interests regardless of whether these are in the best interest of CAR or the implementation of the peace agreement.

Political uncertainty surrounding the elections may slow economic growth and thereby further impact on the humanitarian situation and impair the government's already limited service delivery capacity. In addition to these risks posed by the 2020 elections, the CAR must also deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Simply put, if the pandemic spreads, it is likely to exacerbate almost all of the above risk factors, in addition to adding its own. Globally, we have seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has not only created public health crises in multiple countries but has also devastated economies, exacerbated humanitarian disaster situations, generated increased political tensions, led to the spread of dangerous and divisive conspiracy theories and disinformation, and increased levels of domestic and sexual violence against women and girls, to name a few. As of 5 May 2020, the country has seen 85 positive cases, ten recoveries and zero deaths. In collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), the government has developed a response plan aimed at preventing

the spread of the virus and addressing some of the national health system's main weaknesses in a more durable way.

### **SAFEGUARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE KHARTOUM AGREEMENT**

In the coming months, as the approaching 2020 elections in CAR receive increasing attention from both national and international stakeholders, it is imperative that the implementation of the peace agreement and ongoing efforts to build peace and reconciliation in the country are kept front of mind. In addition, as political leaders negotiate the future of the country, efforts must be made to ensure ordinary citizens have a voice in these discussions. Below are some key recommendations to this end:

**Functioning grassroots-based and inclusive early-warning systems** should be developed to identify regions and communities where electoral violence or other violations of the electoral procedures or peace agreement may be emerging. All sectors of society should be represented in this local mechanism. This should not be limited to early warnings but also feed into an effective response mechanism that determines what kind of intervention is necessary, be it, for example, conflict mediation, civic education or strategic communications. Making an inventory of existing initiatives/systems, approaches, effectiveness, support/acceptance and coverage is a first step to building a nation-wide system that helps to prevent and mitigate risks at an early stage. Geographic reach is also important, and UN and INGOs will have to play a role to ensure that efforts reach across the territory of the CAR.

**Increased communication and exchange of lessons between INGOs and local stakeholders**, particularly women's and youth groups, but also religious actors, local business

leaders, and other relevant community stakeholders in the build-up to the elections is necessary to help identify and respond to emerging elections-related challenges and conflicts.

### **Continue and strengthen inclusive donor coordination, where necessary, to support the electoral process and the implementation of the peace agreement.**

International actors and the CAR government must continue to coordinate efforts despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. All actors should remain part of the coordination mechanisms in place.

**National and international stakeholders must emphasise a message of unity** in the build-up to the election through strategic communications, civic education and campaigns. Here, President Touadera will have to use rhetoric that promotes compromise, collaboration and unity over political competition. The AU, as broker of the peace agreement, with support from the EU and UN, could also play an important role in discouraging divisive political rhetoric.

**Invest in the candidates who run in the elections.** With the aid of INGO's and the UN, the government should develop a preparation scheme for candidates and a collectively undersigned code of conduct for all those who run in the elections. The code should stipulate ground rules for candidates in the run-up and during the elections.

**Accommodate debates.** The government, assisted by the UN and donors, should facilitate and accommodate public debates to openly discuss different positions, debunk fake news and make voices heard.

**Invest in coordination and cooperation.** To be successful, the constituent components of the peace agreement, including SSR, DDRR and transitional justice should be linked and work together. The same is true for initiatives that promote civic education and peaceful elections. Improving coordination and cooperation among and between international and national stakeholders would help to strengthen linkages between these processes and guard against inefficient resource and capacity allocation. In particular, agreement among international actors as to the role government ministries should take in fulfilling their mandates and leading implementation of the peace agreement components is needed. Working independently of government, based on conviction or past experience, may impact upon much needed improvements in government capacity.

**Focus on national reconciliation.**

Government should prioritise national reconciliation as a way of guarding against electoral rhetoric that undermines social cohesion and touches on religious and ethnic fault lines. This national reconciliation should be translated in local grassroots activities. Significant investment is needed in the development of the capacity of the Truth, Justice, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission to initiate and actively engage in local reconciliation activities and fulfil its mandate, without which it risks being an empty government promise. Moreover, the work of the TJRRC should not be isolated and work in conjunction with DDRR and SSR initiatives, as well as in complementarity with criminal justice efforts through the Special Criminal Court and the ordinary courts. National and international stakeholders should focus on sufficiently consolidating the progress of transitional justice efforts ahead of the elections, so that they can be resilient in the face of changes in political

(re)configurations in Bangui as a result of the elections.

**CONCLUSION**

Even though the Khartoum Agreement was initially received with little enthusiasm by the international community, the resilience of the political arrangement has proved to be stronger than expected. Sure, there have been violations and obstacles, but this is also true for any peace agreement, anywhere. Today, CAR is confronted with a combination of challenges. Some are related to the conflict, while others are unrelated and totally unforeseen. Without exaggeration, one can state that CAR is standing at a crossroads. It can go either way. The upcoming elections in times of Corona are a necessary but delicate step on the road to a new political arrangement in CAR, that can turn into a positive or a negative gamechanger. Which way it will go depends on the concerted actions of all of the actors involved, including the AU, ECCAS, UN, EU, INGOs and other donors. It is imperative that all those involved harmonise their approaches and work in solidarity to respond to the myriad challenges facing peace and reconciliation in CAR.

*Peter Knoope is an expert on political violence. He has worked in CAR for over five years with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and with In Transformation Initiative (ITI), both based in South Africa. His work in CAR focuses on conflict analyses and the consequent conflict transformation activities and the Truth and Reconciliation mechanism more specifically.*

*Stephen Buchanan-Clarke is Senior Project Leader at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) where he manages a project to support peace and reconciliation efforts in the CAR.*



*Dr. Valerie Arnould is Senior Research Fellow in the Africa Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations and a research associate at the Leuven Institute of Criminology, University of Leuven (KU Leuven). She is an expert on*

*transitional justice and peacebuilding, and currently conducts research on transitional justice processes in the CAR.*

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- <sup>i</sup> United Nations Security Council (2019) Central African Republic – Report of the Secretary-General. UN Doc. S/2020/124.
- <sup>ii</sup> Currently, the presidential election is set for Sunday, December 27, 2020. If necessary, a run-off vote will take place on Sunday, February 14, 2021. National Assembly voting is scheduled for Feb/Mar 2021. However, at the time of writing it is not sure whether the elections can indeed take place in 2020. The developments around the pandemic could force the government to postpone to later into 2021.
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- <sup>iv</sup> Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2019) *CAR – Peace, Justice and Security Polls Report 4*. May, 25-26. Available at: [http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/sites/m/pdf/CAR\\_Poll4\\_Engl\\_Final.pdf](http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/sites/m/pdf/CAR_Poll4_Engl_Final.pdf)
- <sup>v</sup> Surprenaut, A. (2020) Briefing: In CAR, rebels fight on as peace deal falters. *The New Humanitarian*, 4 November. <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/11/04/Central-African-Republic-rebels-fight-peace-deal>
- <sup>vi</sup> *VoA Afrique* (2020) La Centrafrique lance sa commission « vérité et réconciliation ». 28 February. Available at <https://www.voafrique.com/a/la-centrafrique-lance-sa-commission-v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9-et-r%C3%A9conciliation-/5308498.html>
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- <sup>viii</sup> United Nations Security Council (2019) *Central African Republic - Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Doc. S/2020/124.
- <sup>ix</sup> Diatta, M. (2019) *Can the Central African Republic’s peace deal be saved?*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-central-african-republics-peace-deal-be-saved>
- <sup>x</sup> Pangburn, A. (2020) *One Year After CAR Peace Agreement, Looming Elections Distract from Current Dangers*. New York: IPI Global Observatory. Available at: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/03/one-year-after-car-peace-agreement-elections-distract-from-current-dangers/>
- <sup>xi</sup> United Nations Security Council (2019) *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution*. UN Doc. S/2454 (2019).



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