



# Making Sense of the Central African Republic

Edited by  
Tatiana Carayannis  
and Louisa Lombard



# **Making Sense of the Central African Republic**

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Our special thanks to all the scholars, practitioners, and others – from Central Africa and beyond – who have, over the years, tried to make sense of the Central African Republic for the betterment of all living in the region.

## Acknowledgements

In late 2012, as the Central African Republic (CAR) seemed poised on the edge of another cycle of violence, and as the UN and regional partners prepared for yet another intervention, a few of us who work on (and in) this region began discussions about how to address the paucity of good, evidence-based, contemporary research on the country. The idea of this edited volume took shape while we were together in New York for an expert brainstorming on CAR for the United Nations Secretariat, a meeting convened by the Social Science Research Council's Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (CPPF) to discuss national and regional dynamics affecting the country, and how the United Nations could best support a fragile peace between the Seleka rebellion and the national government. That brainstorming was held in light of the Security Council's request for a strategic review of UN engagement in CAR a few weeks before, and it followed an earlier CPPF expert brainstorming held in Bangui in June 2012 at the request of the late Dr. Margaret Vogt, then the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative to the Central African Republic. Both meetings brought together stakeholders across the UN, World Bank, and the international community

with some of the contributors to this book to examine more deeply the social and religious cleavages emerging across the region. This book thus represents the culmination of an intensely interactive two-and-a-half-year process among a group of scholars and expert practitioners with a long history in this region. It is fair to say that much of this earlier work laid the foundation for this book.

First drafts of the chapters contained within were workshopped at a book contributors' meeting held in Paris in February 2014, generously hosted by Roland Marchal at Sciences-Po's CERI. Revised drafts were discussed at a second contributors' workshop held in June 2014 at the Social Science Research Council in New York. Our deepest debt of gratitude goes to our contributors who not only gave of their time to write chapters (some more than one), but who, by participating in these workshops and offering ideas, reactions, and comments to chapters along the way, also served as peer reviewers for the book. We are deeply grateful for their commitment to ensuring the quality of this work, which, as a result, is greater than the sum of its parts.

*Making Sense of the Central African Republic* was undertaken under the auspices of the CPPF founded in 2000 in response to the *Brahimi Report*, to connect UN decision-makers with scholars on and from conflict areas in which the UN is engaged and thus provide the UN with a deeper understanding of these places and their people; and the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP), a global research consortium based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Our heartfelt thanks go to Bill O'Neill, Alex De Waal, Koen Vlassenroot, Tim Allen, and Mary Kaldor for their steadfast support of this project. Aaron Pangburn not only helped us organize the workshops, but compiled the chronology, helped with background research and fact-checking, proofread countless chapters, and hunted down stray footnotes. Mignonne Fowlis painstakingly sifted through the alphabet soup of missions, interventions, and armed groups to compile the list of acronyms, and helped with endless

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As one of the most prominent African women political scientists of her generation, Dr. Margaret Vogt’s insistence on the UN’s need for solid research and analysis for its work – particularly to strengthen its efforts on prevention – was spot on, though it may not have been sufficient to avert the current crisis in CAR. But the importance of good research and knowledge of history to good policy is an approach we share, and which we believe can only help strengthen our collective efforts to respond to this generation’s social upheavals. We hope this book is a step in this direction.

*Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard*  
*New York and New Haven, CT, 8 May 2015*

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## List of abbreviations and acronyms

ACCB	Association Centrafricaine des Commerçants en Bétail/Central African Association of Cattle Merchants
ACF	Action Contre la Faim/Action Against Hunger
ACOBECA	Association des Commerçants de Bétail de Centrafrique/Association of Cattle Merchants of Central Africa
AEF	Afrique Equatoriale Française/French Equatorial Africa
AFDL	Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire/Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire
AFVP	Association Française des Volontaires du Progrès/The French Association of Volunteers for Progress
APFC	Association pour la Protection de la Faune Centrafricaine/Association for the Protection of Central African Wildlife

APRD	L'Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie/Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy
ASSOMESCA	Association des Oeuvres Médicales pour la Santé en Centrafrique/Association of Medical Workers for Health in Central African Republic
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AU-RCI	African Union Regional Cooperation Initiative
AU-RTF	African Union Regional Task Force
BFCE	French Foreign Trade Bank
BINUCA	Bureau Intégré de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en Centrafrique/The UN Integrated Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic
BONUCA	Bureau des Nations Unies pour la Consolidation de la Paix en République Centrafricaine/United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic
CAP	Consolidated Appeal Processes
CAR	Central African Republic
CDC	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
CDS	Contribution au Développement Social/ Corporate Social Responsibility Tax
CEEAC	Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique Centrale/The Economic Community of Central African States
CEMAC	Communauté Économique et Monétaire des États de l'Afrique Centrale/Central African Economic and Monetary Union
CEMIDO	Cellule Mixte Impôt-Douane/Mixed Taxes and Customs Unit
CEMIFI	Cellule Mixte Impôt-Finance/Mixed Taxes and Finance Unit

CEN-SAD	Communauté des Etats Sahélo-Sahariens/ Community of Sahel and Saharan States
CMRN	Comité Militaire de Redressement National/ Military Committee for National Recovery
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
COAC	Coalition pour les Actions Citoyennes/Coalition for Citizen Action
COCORA	Coalition Citoyenne d’Opposition aux Rebellions Armés/The Citizen’s Coalition Opposing Armed Rebellion
COOPI	Cooperazione Internazionale/International Cooperation
CPJP	Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix/Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DGSE	Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure/ French secret service
DoD	Department of Defence
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECHO	European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
ECOFAC	Ecosystèmes Forestiers de l’Afrique Centrale/ Conservation and Rational Use of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa
ECOFAUNE	Ecosystèmes Fauniques du Nord-Est/Wildlife Ecosystems of the North East
EITI	Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative
EPI	Expanded Programme on Immunization
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force
EUFOR-RCA	European Union Force–Central African Republic
FAC	Forces Armées Congolaises/Congolese Armed Forces

FACA	Forces Armées Centrafricaines/Central African Armed Forces
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAZ	Forces Armées Zairoises/Zairean Armed Forces
FDPC	Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain/ Democratic Front for the Central African People
FEA	French Equatorial Africa
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
FOMUC	Force Multinationale en Centrafrique/ Multinational Forces in CAR
FORSDIR	Force Spéciale de Défense des Institutions Républicaines/Special Forces for the Defence of Republican Institutions
FROLINAT	Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad/ National Liberation Front of Chad
FWA	French West Africa
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GFATM	Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
GTZ	German Cooperation Agency
HDI	Human Development Indicators
HDPT	Humanitarian and Development Partnership Team
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICSID	International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MCLN	Mouvement Centrafricain pour la Libération Nationale/Central African Movement for National Liberation

MESAN	Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa
MICOPAX	Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique/Mission for the consolidation of peace in Central African Republic
MINURCA	Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine/United Nations Mission for the Central African Republic
MINUSCA	Mission Intégrée Multidimensionnelle de Stabilisation des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine/United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MISAB	Mission Interafricaine de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui/Inter-African Mission to Monitor the Bangui Accords
MISCA	Mission Internationale de Soutien à la Centrafrique sous Conduite Africaine/African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic
MLC	Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo/ Movement for the Liberation of Congo
MLPC	Mouvement pour la Libération du Peuple Centrafricain/Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People
MONUC	Mission de l'Organisation de Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo/United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MONUSCO	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo/United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MPLA	Movement for the Liberation of Angola

MSF	Médecins sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NOC	National Oil Corporation of Libya
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OLT	Operation Lightning Thunder
PAM	Programme Alimentaire Mondial/World Food Programme
PBC	United Nations Peacebuilding Commission
PCV	Per diem, Carburant, Voiture/Per diem, fuel, car
PDRN	Programme de Développement de la Région Nord/Northern Region Development Programme
RECAMP	Renforcement des Capacités Africaines de Maintien de la Paix/Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capabilities Programme
RSM	RSM Production Corporation
RTF	Regional Task Force
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SAM	Société Anonyme Minière/Anonymous Mining Company
SODIF	Société de Détection des Importations Frauduleuses/Fraudulent Imports Detection Company
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TNC	Transitional National Council
UFDR	Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement/Union of Democratic Forces for Unity
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNOCA	United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa
UPDF	Uganda People’s Defence Force
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WES	Western Equatoria State
WFP	The World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

## Chronology

**c. 1780:** The Bandia-Nzakara founded the Kingdom of Bangassou around the Ubangi River basin.

**c. 1820–1825:** The Gbaya, Zande and Mandja peoples settled on Central African soil after escaping persecution from various regional slave traders.

**c. 1830:** The Dar al-Kuti, an Islamic Sultanate was established by a prince of the Banguir called Djougoultoum. Its zone of influence covered most of present north-eastern CAR and parts of modern-day Chad, and was active in slave raiding throughout its eighty-two year reign.

**29 April 1887:** France and Belgian King Leopold II established the north bank of the Ubangui River as the border between the French and Belgian zones of influence.

**25 June 1889:** The French post at Bangui was established.

**July 1899:** Paris subcontracted much of the French Congo – 667,000 of 1,233,000 sq km – to forty private companies that were granted a thirty-year monopoly on the exploitation of ‘vacant and un-owned land’. Forced labour was common throughout this period.

**29 December 1903:** A French decree merged the region of Upper Ubangui and Upper Shari to create a new colony of French Congo, Ubangui–Shari, whose boundaries were close to what is modern-day CAR.

**1910:** Ubangui–Shari was absorbed into Afrique Equatoriale Francaise (AEF), a federal arrangement merging the French colonies of Chad, Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville.

**1911:** Dar al-Kuti’s Sultan al-Sanusi assassinated by the French resident at Ndele.

**1921–1929:** Labour from the AEF was used to construct the Congo-Océan railway from Brazzaville to Pointe-Noir, but the project suffered from desertion, death, and massive illness and ultimately was embroiled in scandal after the horrific labour conditions were revealed.

**1928–1931:** In the western and south-western corners of the colony, the Kongo-Wara rebellion was a widespread anti-colonial workers revolt against the exploitative practices of concession industries in Oubangui-Chari. While the uprising was eventually squashed, once news of the abuses reached France, public pressure helped ensure that the concessions were not renewed.

**1934–1946:** Various administration reform efforts were attempted within AEF, to reduce costs, break up the structure into various territories and increase autonomy. The changes did little to satisfy growing local frustrations.

**10 November 1946:** Barthélemy Boganda became Oubangui-Chari’s first national leader, and also its first native Catholic priest, as he was elected as the territory’s Deputy to the French National Assembly in Paris.

**28 September 1949:** Boganda founded the Mouvement pour l’évolution sociale de l’Afrique noire (MESAN) to spread throughout the region, which provoked a hostile reaction from colonial administrations, and grew into the first political party of the Central African state.

**17 June 1951:** Boganda was re-elected as Deputy, despite strong opposition from many in the administration and colonial circles.

**March–May 1957:** MESAN won all of the seats in the Ubangui-Shari territorial assembly, and the constitution of the first Ubangui government was presided over by the newly appointed President and Vice-President of the Grand Council of the AEF, Boganda and Abel Goumba.

**29 March–May 1959:** Boganda died in a plane crash, Dr Goumba succeeded him, only to be excluded from the government by the National Assembly and replaced by David Dacko, the Minister of the Interior.

**13–14 August 1960:** The Central African Republic gained independence, with David Dacko named Provisional Chief of the Republic.

**January–November 1962:** The Central African Army was formed, opposition forces were put on trial, and MESAN was named the sole legal political party of the state.

**15 November 1963–5 January 1964:** CAR was changed from a constitutional to a presidential regime. Dacko was elected and named President of the Republic.

**December 1964:** Jean-Bédél Bokassa was appointed Chief of Staff of the Central African Army.

**31 December 1965–1 January 1966:** While the Commander of the Gendarmerie, Jean Izamo staged a coup attempt, Bokassa intervened, killed the commander, and took control of the capital after Dacko was arrested.

**4 March 1972:** Bokassa was proclaimed President for Life of the Central African Republic.

**4 December 1976:** A new constitution was adopted declaring CAR as a hereditary empire with a parliamentary-monarch system. Yet, the legislature was never convened and Jean Bédél Bokassa became Emperor in a lavish ceremony a year later on 4 December 1977.

**January–June 1979:** Student demonstrations over obligatory uniforms were met with mortar fire and the violent response killed hundreds of Central Africans. This response led France to sever ties with the Emperor and host the four largest opposition movements in Paris to come up with a common strategy to overthrow him.

**20 September 1979:** Operation Barracuda, composed of twenty-one paratroopers, facilitated the takeover of Bangui, while Bokassa was visiting Libya. David Dacko reluctantly returned to power and barely won his re-election over Ange-Félix Patassé in early 1981.

**1–2 September 1981:** President David Dacko was deposed in a military coup led by General André Kolingba. The Comité Militaire pour le Redressement National (CMRN), headed by General Kolingba, took control of the government and suspended the constitution.

**October–November 1986:** Bokassa returned to the country and was arrested on murder charges. A popular referendum on a new constitution was passed with 80 per cent approval, and Kolingba's Rassemblement Democratique Centrafricain (RDC) was established as the new single party of the nation, providing the president with another six-year term.

**October 1991–October 1992:** After growing calls for multipartyism culminated in an opposition meeting in Bangui of 10,000 people, and twenty opposition parties demanding an independent national conference, France intervened and conditioned any further aid on democratic progress. The results of a hastily convened vote were cancelled by the Supreme Court, and a French-observed presidential election was rescheduled for 1993.

**19 September 1993:** Ange-Félix Patassé of the Mouvement pour la Liberation du Peuple Centrafricain (MLPC) was elected President with 53 per cent of the vote in the second round of the presidential election and inaugurated as President on 22 October 1993.

**April 1996–January 1997:** A series of three army mutinies destabilized the capital, requiring a larger intervention by French forces. Regional leaders began to play a bigger role in diplomacy

and peacekeeping, in part due to encouragement from France. The Bangui Accords were signed in January and led to the deployment of MISAB, CAR's first regional peacekeeping force.

**28 May–October 2001:** A coup was waged by a group of soldiers said to be loyal to former President Kolingba. Ten days of fighting ensued, with approximately 300 deaths and 50,000 displaced from the capital. The Yakoma, Kolinga's ethnic group, were targeted in a campaign of reprisal killings, and an increasingly paranoid President ordered the arrest of his Minister of Defence, and dismissed the army Chief of Staff, General François Bozizé, in October.

**October 2002–March 2003:** Under threat from Bozizé supporters, Patassé called upon Jean-Pierre Bemba, the leader of the Mouvement pour la Liberation du Congo (MLC), a rebel army from Equateur province in DRC, and Colonel Qaddafi of Libya to provide troops to reinforce the capital. Bemba's involvement in CAR eventually led to his indictment by the ICC in 2008.

**16 March 2003:** While President Patassé attended a regional conference in Niamey, General Bozizé took over the capital with Chadian and French support, dissolved the National Assembly, and became the self-proclaimed head of state.

**13 March 2005–8 May 2005:** Bozizé's party, the National Convergence 'Kwa Na Kwa' (NC-KNK) won 42 out of 105 seats in the National Assembly during the legislative vote. He was elected President with 65 per cent of the vote in the second round of the presidential election in May.

**January 2005–October 2006:** Three major rebellions emerged in the north of the country. Two of the groups – L'Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la République et la Démocratie (APRD) and the Front Démocratique du People Centrafricaine (FDPC) – were remotely controlled by Patassé from his exile in Benin, while the Union des Forces Democratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR) was led by a convergence of local actors from the north-east of the country and former government officials.

**June–December 2008:** Representatives of the government and the three rebel groups (FDPC, UFDR, and APRD) signed a comprehensive peace agreement in Libreville, Gabon. This led to the passing of an amnesty law, preparations towards a demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programme and an inclusive political dialogue process that failed to live up to its name.

**January–March 2011:** Much-delayed legislative and presidential elections were held resulting in the re-election of President Bozizé (66 per cent of the vote) and the maintenance of a NC-KNK majority in the National Assembly. Opposition forces called fraud, and demanded the result be invalidated.

**2 December 2012:** The Seleka rebellion, a coalition of the various rebel groups from the north, issued its first press release, after taking the market town of Ndele, in which the coalition set out its demands. Chadian combatants, fighters from Darfur and heavily armed poachers soon swelled the rebellion's ranks, as they took over much of the north-east of the country.

**11 January 2013:** The Libreville Agreement was signed by President Bozizé and the Seleka rebellion to establish a union government and resolve the crisis in the Central African Republic. Nicolas Tiangaye was appointed Prime Minister a week later.

**21–24 March 2013:** The Seleka rebels crossed the red line set in Damara (an hour outside the capital), engaged the FACA and South African soldiers, and finally took Bangui on 24 March. Bozizé fled to the DRC and was then transferred to Cameroon.

**18 August 2013:** The transition period officially began, as Michel Djotodia was officially sworn in as Interim President, committing his government to national elections within eighteen months.

**13 September 2013:** President Djotodia formally dissolved the Seleka coalition, but this pronouncement did little to limit the series of abuses and counter-abuses between the former rebels and supporters of the Bozizé government.

**5 December 2013:** UN Security Council resolution 2127 authorized the deployment of an ‘African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic’, known by its French acronym MISCA, to stabilize CAR alongside a French mission, Operation Sangaris. In response, and to continue Seleka rule, a group of local self-defence militia, and former army officials attacked Bangui, under the name of Anti-Balaka. Additional offensives were launched around Christmas and on 5 January 2014.

**10 January 2014:** A regional Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) meeting of African leaders in N’Djamena strong-armed President Djotodia and his government into offering their resignation, after airlifting the Transitional National Council (TNC) to endorse the occasion. Upon its return to Bangui, the TNC chose from among eight candidates a new interim head of state, Catherine Samba-Panza, previously the mayor of Bangui, and only the third female head of state in Africa.

**10 April 2014:** The UN Security Council authorized a UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA) to be deployed in September 2014 and urged the holding of elections as soon as technically possible and no later than February 2015.

**October 2014:** Violence flared again in and around Bangui culminating in the arrival of international mediator Dennis Sassou Nguesso, the President of Congo-Brazzaville. After consultations and town hall meetings, a general agreement was achieved to hold a Bangui Forum in January 2015 and the National Electoral Authority chose to extend the electoral timeline, with the constitution referendum set for May 2015, and the two rounds of the presidential and legislative votes scheduled for July and August 2015.

**26 January 2015:** Secret negotiations between Anti-Balaka factions represented by Joachim Kokate and a Seleka faction by Nourredine Adam and Michel Djotodia in Nairobi led to the signing of a provisional agreement, with provisions on DDR,

amnesty for all perpetrators of violence and the removal of current transitional authorities. The exclusion of CAR transitional authorities and international stakeholders caused resentment and the UN and AU refused to endorse the deal.

**9–10 March 2015:** The Security Council mission visited Bangui and Bria, underscoring the fragility of the environment across the country, and highlighting the importance of the Bangui Forum, which was delayed until 4 May 2015.

**26 March 2015:** MINUSCA received authorization from the Security Council for an additional 750 military personnel, 280 police personnel, and 20 corrections officers to support the original 10,000 that were approved in its initial 2014 mandate.

# 1 Making Sense of CAR

## An Introduction

*Louisa Lombard and Tatiana Carayannis*

What has become increasingly clear with each successive crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR) is that, despite being such a low priority for the international community, it is, in fact, the crossroads of regional and international conflict and gamesmanship. Since its independence in 1960, CAR has had but one democratic transfer of power – in 1993, in an election organized by the United Nations. For its first thirty years, changes in executive office holders were spearheaded or otherwise facilitated by France, the country's former colonial power. Since then, army mutinies and serial rebellion that draws on collaboration with regional leaders and men-at-arms have resulted in two successful coups, one led by François Bozizé in 2003, and one in 2013, almost exactly ten years later, by a disparate rebel coalition called Seleka that ousted him. Moreover, over the last two decades, the country has become a kind of testing ground for peacebuilding initiatives. Just prior to the deployment of MINUSCA, in early September 2014, it was even proclaimed 'the world champion of peacekeeping missions' (AFP, 2014). The country has indeed hosted a two-decade-long succession of UN and regional (CEN-SAD, CEMAC, ECCAS,<sup>1</sup> European Union, African Union) peacekeeping missions, special political missions, peacebuilding missions, and bilateral (Chad, France) military interventions. Yet despite lying at the centre of a

tumultuous region (its neighbours include Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC), CAR and its turbulent history have often been overlooked by analysts. Indeed, no single volume has addressed the country's post-independence political economy, the role of conflict, and influence of regional and international actors. *Making Sense of the Central African Republic* begins to fill that gap – a gap whose breadth has become all the more glaringly apparent as people have scrambled to address the war that began in December 2012.

Again and again, interventions in CAR have failed, in part because those spearheading them have operated as if the crisis of the moment was the first of its kind. That is, they have failed to address the longer-running dynamics that have grown out of CAR's position in the world. The book argues that the CAR's history of turmoil and instability can only be understood in the context of its violent history of colonization, limited political institutionalization and centralization, and position (geographic as well as geopolitical) in the region. With this in mind, the book focuses less on explaining the post-Seleka crisis, and more on the dynamics that have animated the CAR political economy over the past two centuries, with a focus on the post-independence period. As much as the Seleka crisis reflects new tendencies and new actors, it also reflects these longer-running dynamics (*plus ça change*). Any attempt to help Central Africans emerge from this nadir will have to consider not just the symptoms but the underlying causes of their plight – a cliché that has been frequently uttered but rarely done when it comes to peacebuilding in CAR.

This book shows how the fault lines across the broader region (ethno-religious rivalries, north–south, transnational armed groups, etc.) are being replicated and re-energized in CAR, feeding off the absence of formal state institutions and creating increasingly complex transnational conflict dynamics. The peripheries of the Central African state – in particular the North, but really every border area – are now more connected to the

peripheries of its neighbours than they are to the government in the capital, Bangui. But in contrast to the picture of a shapeless, amorphous political space that emerges in most accounts of this ‘failed state’, there is instead a hive of competing authorities across the region born of specific historical relationships and dynamics. CAR thus merits much more attention than it has received from researchers and international policymakers alike, and we continue to ignore it at our peril.

In this introduction, we offer a snapshot history of CAR and then provide a thematic overview of the book.

### **An ‘unfortunate colony’ becomes a ‘failed state’**

Central Africans, whose country was once known as the ‘Cinderella’ of the French Empire (or, less charitably, as *la colonie poubelle* – the trashcan colony [Brégeon, 1998]), have never had an easy time of it. When French colonists arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, they found sultans connected to trans-Saharan economic and social networks, as well as dynamic communities seeking both to participate in these new long-distance trades and avoid the wrath of the sultans’ armies. The French saw their task as removing the ‘foreign’ sultans, arguing that they were a colonizing force with no right to rule over Central Africans (the irony of this stance was lost on the French). French colonization was alternately brutal and neglectful.<sup>2</sup> Rather than develop their colony themselves, the French leased most of the country’s territory to concessionary companies to exploit (Coquéry-Vidrovitch, 1972). Penury, corruption, and the difficulty of retaining skilled officers plagued the colonial government. A century and a half of slave-raiding, forced labour (which did not officially end until 1954 and which continued unofficially even longer), and new diseases de-populated much of the country. Even today, after rapid post-independence population growth, only about four million people call this territory just larger than France (or the size of Texas) home.

At independence in 1960 the French admitted that of all their former holdings, this one was the least prepared to stand on its own (Brégeon, 1998). The country had only one hospital, and the few health dispensaries were perennially under-equipped. The country's first *lycée* had graduated its first class only four years prior. French 'technical advisers' effectively ran all the ministries. Central African politicians learned quickly that the powers that be of *françafrique* would support them decisively if they seemed able to prevent the spillover or repeat of their southern neighbour, the Republic of Congo's, political crisis (Kalck, 1971). Substantive democracy was among the victims of this policy, which continues into the present.

Despite these inauspicious conditions, a small middle class flourished. Coup leader-turned president ('for life', then emperor) Jean-Bédél Bokassa built and hired, and there remained a sense of opportunity for those educated during these decades, even though the economy had already begun its downward slope. The University of Bangui, created by Bokassa in 1969, attracted some of the region's top students. Given the dearth of qualified Central African civil servants at independence, all university graduates could count on a government job and pension. There had been no 'free and fair' elections (coups organized with French involvement had become the norm), but life mostly trundled along. The country even attracted many immigrants, among them a number of Muslim businesspeople from Chad and beyond.

Things began to change in the 1980s. Structural adjustment and a declining economy meant that government jobs dried up for all but the well-connected, and by the 1990s even the lucky few with jobs saw months upon months of salary arrears. As president, beginning in 1993, Ange-Félix Patassé abolished the head tax, and revenues from rural areas dwindled to almost nothing. At the same time, the French were eager to step back from the heavy-handed role they had played in CAR's independence politics, and by the time the century closed they had closed their military base at Bouar and withdrawn most of the soldiers based there and in Bangui.

Until the mid-1990s, civil conflict had been limited to relatively isolated incidents. The Central African Armed Forces had already established themselves as heavy-handed in dealing with possible unrest, but such incidents did not escalate into rebellion and war (Bigo, 1988).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the region had already seen quite a bit of war, notably in Chad and Sudan. Militarization became further popularized through a range of factors, including demobilizations in Chad; an influx of weaponry (especially Kalashnikovs) after the Cold War; the demise of the Mobutu regime in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire); and the broader social context of straightening economic circumstances and foundering governments. In 2002–2003, several of the region’s leaders – chief among them Chad’s Idriss Déby – decided to replace CAR’s truculent Patassé with François Bozizé, a military man and former Patassé confidant. Bozizé took Bangui in March 2003 with a force that was seven-eighths Chadian (International Crisis Group – ICG, 2007), drawn from among that country’s many mobile men-in-arms (Debos, 2008). These fighters, as well as the DR-Congolese rebels Patassé had called on for support, looted, raped, and murdered along the way.

In the following years, a number of rebellions emerged in rural areas, pointing to a recurring theme of the radicalization of those at the margins, while at least on the surface, life in the capital remained relatively calm. An ambitious mayor made a range of aesthetic improvements, like tending the city’s parks and ensuring that the electrified BANGUI sign on the hillside beside town mostly glowed. A profusion of humanitarian and development organizations opened offices. The prospects for most Central Africans remained dismal, however. With time, the network of people benefiting from the Bozizé government became smaller, and more concentrated around his family and church. Many Central Africans lamented that they were moving steadily backward at a time when the rest of the world was, from their perspective, so obviously on a forward march.

Throughout the decade of *la Bozizie* the country went through a series of internationally-led peacebuilding and state-building initiatives. The government and rebel parties to these endeavours generally endorsed them in form rather than in spirit, and worked them to their own advantage. The international actors funding the processes were invested in presenting them as successful, and, moreover, reluctantly supported Bozizé because he seemed like the ‘least bad option’, defined as usual as the person most likely to be able to prevent the ‘spillover’ of the region’s other conflicts into CAR. These calculations were a major part of why most diplomats only mutedly criticized the blatant rigging of the 2011 presidential elections. What all this meant was that grievances among the population and among the growing ranks of sidelined political elites grew in inverse proportion to the official channels (national dialogues, elections, etc.) to express them.

Even Déby, whose soldiers had helped Bozizé remain in power all this time, grew frustrated with the president. Bozizé was pursuing a new tutelary relationship with South Africa, and he appeared to have calculated that due to his new supporters (South African soldiers arrived in the country in 2007 and were reinforced in 2012–2013) he no longer needed Chad as he had before. Meanwhile, in mid-2012 a few Central African political-military entrepreneurs met in Niamey, Niger to begin planning a takeover of power. By the end of 2012, they had assembled a heterogeneous rebel coalition they called Seleka (‘alliance’ in Sango, CAR’s main language) and obtained the go-ahead, if not direct funding, from Déby to begin their march on Bangui. Initially, many, if not most, of the Seleka fighters came from the Chad/Darfur borderland region, but when the likelihood of their success became apparent, north-eastern CAR’s home-grown rebel groups joined as well.

Seleka leaders and the government were forced into a peace process in January 2013, but none of the parties seemed particularly interested in respecting its terms. On 24 March 2013, Seleka fighters claimed power in Bangui. Little united them other

than the desire to take the capital and loot along the way. The new president, Michel Djotodia (a former CAR civil servant in the 1980s), had no real power over the various armed elements of his alliance, most of whom were politico-military entrepreneurs with much more battlefield experience than him. Seleka fighters spread throughout the country and ruled towns as their own fiefdoms, yet without the attachment to the terrain that the feudal model might suggest. Civilians suffered, and many were killed.

Whereas Bozizé had taken power through a kind of regional gentleman's agreement that included French support (ICG, 2007), Djotodia did not benefit from such regional cooperation. Some diplomats foresaw that a robust international peacekeeping mission would be necessary to restore some order, both in Bangui and in the countryside. But inertia and inaction mostly ruled the day among diplomatic actors. Crises elsewhere seemed more pressing.

In September 2013, Djotodia officially 'disbanded' Seleka. The move was an odd one for several reasons. On the one hand, Seleka was never really 'banded' in the first place, so why go to the trouble of *disbanding* it? For another, doing so removed any incentive the remaining Seleka elements had to work together or follow Djotodia's future orders. He ended up with even less bargaining power. In the wake of the disbanding, militias in the western part of the country and in Bangui began gaining strength. There is a long tradition of self-defence groups in most of CAR. These groups are less standing forces than networks that can be activated when the need arises. The new groups drew on these networks and traditions, but also far surpassed them. The various groups that mobilized in the wake of Seleka abuses called themselves the Anti-Balaka.<sup>4</sup>

As was the case with Seleka, the fact that the Anti-Balaka share a name masks that they consist of a number of different segments whose members do not share the same interests or objectives. (About half support a return for Bozizé and receive support from him; many of the others wanted Seleka pushed

from power but do not support Bozizé.) This is one reason why a number of scholars of the region criticized the ‘verge of genocide’ or ‘religious hatred’ language that international actors and journalists used to draw attention to CAR when Anti-Balaka groups began their attacks. To the extent that people have asked them about their grievances, Anti-Balaka fighters have emphasized that theirs are political gripes, not religious ones. They describe their war in terms familiar to scholars of the region’s autochthony movements; they see themselves only as standing up for the ‘true’ population of CAR, who, they argue, are being overrun – pillaged, raped – by foreigners. As Marchal describes in Chapters 3 and 8, this grievance is both understandable and not wholly fair.

Moreover, Anti-Balaka violence has exceeded its members’ statements of purpose. All Muslims in the southern and western parts of the country have been persecuted, and only a few remain in the capital, where they are able to live only because they are continually guarded by peacekeepers.

Anti-Balaka groups launched a major offensive in Bangui on 5 December 2013, the day that French and African Union peacekeeping forces received mandates to deploy to CAR. Anti-Balaka battle success was yet another sign that Djotodia lacked any real control over violence in the country, and in early January 2014 Déby airlifted the entire Central African transitional government to Ndjamena where Déby met with Djotodia and convinced him to step down. Once back in Bangui, the transitional assembly chose a new president, Catherine Samba-Panza. In a different context, CAR’s first, and Africa’s third female president (a lawyer with both a business and advocacy background) might have augured well for the country. But given the ongoing war, she has been powerless to do much about the violence, despite accruing substantial power to benefit from the perks of her office, effectively consolidating power as surely as Bozizé and other CAR heads of state before her. In a telling incident that shows this paradox, in early February 2014, President Samba-Panza

presided over a ceremony for new recruits to the Central African Armed Forces. As the event was wrapping up, soldiers identified someone they thought was a Seleka fighter in their midst and brutally killed him, a murder captured by the professional photographers there for the ceremony.

The peacekeepers have struggled to contain the violence and various contingents are seen as in collaboration with the different parties to the conflict: the French supporting Anti-Balaka; the Rwandans and Burundians protecting the few Muslims who remain in the capital; the Chadians actively fighting for Seleka (the Chadian contingent withdrew in late March 2014 following furore over an incident in which they killed more than twenty people at a market); and the French and AU peacekeepers actively hampering each other's objectives. In April 2014, the UN Security Council finally authorized the deployment of blue helmets to CAR. Given budget constraints and limited interest in CAR at UN headquarters and from troop-contributing countries, many of those peacekeepers were simply re-hatted from the AU mission. The UN took authority over its new force on 15 September 2014.

Today, outside of the capital, knowledge of what is going on is spotty. Large swathes of the country rarely make it into the news, but are experiencing rapid change and their own conflicts. In north-western Ouham-Pende prefecture, for instance, a new rebel group called the *Revolution Justice* has divvied up state jobs among its members. Travellers coming from Bangui must now transit past RJ customs officials. These rebels do not consider themselves separatists; they simply feel the government is not doing its job, so they must do it for themselves (which has the perk of drawing the salaries themselves as well). The safest part of the country is probably the far south-east, thanks to the presence of Ugandan and US troops there under the auspices of the long-running hunt for the Lord's Resistance Army (see Cakaj, Chapter 12). Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced or living as refugees. And there is no end in sight.



**Map 1.1** United Nations map of the [Central African Republic](#), April 2013.

Source: UN Department of Field Support, Cartographic Section.

## Thematic overview of the book

A number of themes cut across the book's various chapters. These are, broadly speaking, the nature and importance of centre-periphery relationships in the regional system that CAR is a part of; modes of accumulation, often fraught, for government elites and the *hoi polloi*; the failures and misrecognitions of international interventions in CAR; and the growing insecurity in all aspects of life – that one might even call a 'spiritual insecurity' (Ashforth, 2005).

The chapters share in the understanding that states can only be understood as part of a broader system of states in the region and beyond (see Map 1.1). Therefore, we are sceptical of all those analyses that describe CAR's problems, including the ongoing war, as a function of its 'weakness' or even 'failure'. These descriptors tell us nothing about the nature of the *relationships* – within CAR's borders and beyond – that are the core dynamics of governance in the Central African Republic. So instead, we turn the usual centre-periphery model around. Where most such approaches focus on the centre and its determinative role, we probe the workings of political and economic life in the periphery with open minds as to the nature of its bonds with powerful actors outside its borders. CAR is, some might say, even a 'periphery of a periphery' (Cordell, 1985), but it has been an active player during the process of its '*mise en dépendance*' (the enactment of dependency) (Bayart, 2000), sometimes in surprising ways. This emphasis on relationships and their historical and geographical underpinnings runs through every chapter in the book.

Some of the chapters (Cakaj, Chapter 12; Lombard, Chapter 7) approach the question of the regional nature of the CAR state and people in the area by siting their analysis primarily in remote reaches of CAR territory. These chapters draw out the fact that the label 'peripheral' or 'marginal' connotes both a number of shared features and dynamics, but also hides important differences in the nature of the various regions' remotenesses and the connections and disjunctions it entails. Other chapters (Marchal, Chapter 8;

Carayannis, Chapter 11) make the region, and particular elements of it, their starting point for their questioning of the contours of peripheral statuses. The conclusion shared by all of these chapters is that even peripheral areas are centres of something.

A second set of themes has to do with the nature of the CAR state, and particularly the modes of accumulation associated with it. That is to say, in CAR, as Marchal draws out in his chapter ('Being Rich, Being Poor', Chapter 3), to be employed by the state has come to be seen as a way of amassing private wealth. Smith (Chapter 5) explains that the privatization of the CAR state is nothing new but rather began with the first years of French colonialism. Together, Marchal's and Smith's chapters (Chapters 3 and 5, respectively) explain how this logic of using state office for private gain has become popularized in the context of economic penury that ensued in earnest with the thinning of the civil servant ranks and devaluation of the CFA in the early 1990s. 'Thus', writes Smith, 'the Central African state is for most citizens a painful absence and a hurtful presence'.

At the same time as using public office for private gain has become a common practice that is lamented even as people justify it through a 'desperate times' mentality, other modes of wealth accumulation have come to be seen as increasingly suspicious. That is to say, if a person accumulates money through non-state based activities (commerce, etc.) people are likely to wonder whether dark arts (such as the mobilization of others' labour power while they ostensibly lie and sleep) are involved. The whole adds up to what Adam Ashforth has evocatively called 'spiritual insecurity' – the sense that not just one's physical body but one's whole metaphysical existence and understanding of the world is at risk. Dalby's chapter on diamond mining (Chapter 6) draws together these various threads related to state predation and the challenges of accumulation. Kilembe's (Chapter 4) does the same by instead looking at Bangui's most dynamic market neighbourhood through its historically cross-regional connections and recent upheaval. This upheaval has