

QUICK POLICY INSIGHT

# Coup in the Central African Republic: Chronicle of a fall foretold

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After a coalition of rebels entered the capital of the Central African Republic on 24 March, President François Bozizé fled to Cameroon.

Bangui, the capital, was plunged into chaos, and the situation there remains volatile.

On 24 March, in the latest of a series of coups and rebellions that have plagued the Central African Republic (CAR) since its independence in 1960, rebel forces seized its capital, Bangui. President François Bozizé, who himself came to power in a 2003 coup, fled to neighbouring Cameroon, leading one of the coalition leaders, Michel Djotodia, to declare himself president on 25 March. While for the EU, 'violent or unconstitutional changes of Government remain unacceptable'<sup>1</sup> as a matter of principle, Bozizé's legitimacy had been contested. A diplomatic solution to the current crisis is unlikely to include him, although it will have to include many others; any lasting reconciliation in the crisis-prone country will have to be economically and ethnically inclusive.

Bozizé's position had been untenable for weeks. The rebels, grouped into an alliance called the Séléka coalition<sup>2</sup>, met little opposition as they entered Bangui. Yet a number of casualties marked their advance: South African president Jacob Zuma confirmed that at least 13 South African troops had died and 27 were injured during the clashes. Witnesses in Bangui reported gunfire and widespread looting — by both rebels and residents — targeting shops, homes and offices, including those of the diplomatic community. The premises of UNICEF came under fire, and the Red Cross has said that hospitals are struggling with the high number of injured. The UN's humanitarian agency OCHA confirmed that the capital was in chaos. The situation is still very volatile and further aggravated by cuts to the electricity and water supplies. In this anarchical setting, humanitarian actors are finding it difficult to properly assess immediate needs and help those who need it most.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/136506.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/136506.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 'Séléka' means 'alliance' in Sango, the CAR's national language.

## Bozizé's untenable position

Capping years of violent conflict, an offensive by rebel forces destabilised the country in 2012.

Although the rebel offensive intensified over the last few months, disenchantment with President François Bozizé has long been widespread. Bozizé brought considerable hardship for the population since seizing power in 2003. While his position was confirmed in elections in 2005 and 2011, Bozizé was strongly opposed by the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), led by Michel Djotodia, and by several other rebel groups around the country.

Hundreds died and thousands were displaced in the escalation of violence that lasted from late 2004 until a peace agreement was signed in 2007, when the parties agreed on amnesty, reconciliation, and the integration of fighters into the army. The 2011 elections ushered in a unity government, but dissatisfied rebels turned to arms once again. After signs of increasing unrest in the autumn of 2012, the Séléka coalition launched an offensive in December. People took to the streets calling on the government for help against the militants, to no avail. Faced with an imminent takeover, Bozizé himself called for international assistance. The Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC), made up of troops from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), was reinforced. France also increased its military personnel, but provided them only with a mandate to protect French and international citizens. Faced with France's recalcitrance, Bozizé requested military backing from South Africa, which sent 400 troops.

Under international pressure, a ceasefire was brokered in January 2013, bringing a short-lived unity government to power.

Neighbouring countries, concerned by the potential of instability that might follow a rebel takeover, sought to broker a ceasefire agreement. The presidents of Chad, Republic of Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea mediated a ceasefire between the rebels and the CAR government, which was signed on 11 January 2013 in the Gabonese capital, Libreville. The terms of the agreement included dissolving the national assembly, instituting a one-year transition unity government, integrating fighters into the central army, releasing political prisoners, creating economic reforms and promising that Bozizé would not contest the 2016 elections. The government was restructured to include Bozizé's supporters, rebels and members of the civilian opposition. Nicolas Tiangay, a member of the civilian opposition, was appointed Prime Minister.

Only two months later, however, Séléka accused Bozizé of again failing to honour his commitments. Fighting broke out on 22 March. In just two days the rebel coalition captured the capital and seized power.

## Strong international condemnation

Following the coup, the African Union suspended the Central African Republic's membership and imposed sanctions on rebel leaders. The EU, UN, and US have all condemned the violent coup, while remaining silent on the status of the unpopular ousted president.

International reaction has unanimously condemned the coup and called for calm and for the respect of January's agreement. In a quick and decisive move, the African Union (AU) 'suspend[ed] with immediate effect the Central African Republic from all the African Union's activities'<sup>3</sup>. The AU also imposed travel bans on rebel leaders and froze their assets. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon denounced the 'unconstitutional seizure' and called 'for the swift restoration of constitutional order'<sup>4</sup>. The UN Security Council convened emergency talks and has said it was ready to adopt 'further measures'.

The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton called on all parties to engage in talks and to work within the framework of the Libreville agreement. Her statement highlighted the need to uphold international humanitarian law, protect the civilian population and avoid human rights abuses. A similar statement was issued by France. The United States expressed its deep concern 'about a serious deterioration in the security situation' in the CAR and called on parties to establish law and order in Bangui, restore basic services, allow unhindered humanitarian access and respect the Libreville Agreement.

## Deteriorating humanitarian situation

Even before the latest rebellion, the country faced a deepening humanitarian crisis.

The backdrop to this latest military and political turmoil is a deepening humanitarian crisis in the CAR. Even before the coup, a number of international organisations reported difficulties assisting civilians, including refugees and internally displaced people. The eastern and southeastern areas of the country have been under attack by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a militant group operating in a number of countries and led by Joseph Kony. OCHA has highlighted the area's poor infrastructure, insecurity, looted offices and stolen vehicles as major problems. The World Food Programme has estimated that 80 000 people throughout the country are likely to suffer from severe food shortages<sup>5</sup> in the coming months. In the north and northeast, shortages are likely to be exacerbated by the rainy season.

In the European Commission's 'General Guidelines on Operational Priorities for Humanitarian Aid in 2013', the Commission allocates EUR 8 million for vulnerable populations in the CAR. For the EU — which remains the CAR'S largest donor, having pledged EUR 137 million under the 10th European Development Fund (2008-2013) — the CAR's current

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/25/us-centralafrica-rebels-african-idUSBRE92O0DI20130325>

<sup>4</sup> <http://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/car-coup-comes-amid-deepening-humanitarian-crisis>

<sup>5</sup> <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Bulletin%20humanitaire%2001%20eng-1.pdf>

circumstances offer a bleak account of the Union's development cooperation. The upcoming 11th EDF (2014-2020) must therefore pursue its efforts to strengthen governance and socio-economic and financial rehabilitation.

## The need for regional support and political transformation

At this stage, a return to some sort of normalcy will depend, initially, on halting the looting and chaos, and then on whether the rebel groups remain politically unified. Whilst Michel Djotodia's own men have contributed to the worsening public security situation and have taken part in the lootings, he has appealed to regional peacekeepers to help restore public order.

It is essential that public order and stability are restored and that the risk of regional spillover contained.

But just how much foreign troops can do to stabilise the situation is an open question. France increased its forces to 550 troops last weekend, while reiterating that they served only to protect French nationals. Both the military contingents of the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central Africa (MICOPAX), partly funded from the EU's African Peace Facility (APF), and the South African troops deployed to CAR were unable to stop the rebel advance. The ineffectiveness of multinational forces has once again highlighted the challenge facing the region in terms of security cooperation. Yet the very fragility of the situation and its potential to destabilise neighbouring countries mean that these neighbours and the wider region have a vested interest in securing peace and stability.

In line with the calls of the international community, Djotodia has pledged to respect the terms of the Libreville agreement and to institute a power-sharing government — likely to be largely unchanged from January's government, with the notable exception of Bozizé. Djotodia has announced that Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangay will remain in office. Yet major changes are underway. On 25 March, Djotodia suspended the country's constitution, dissolved the national assembly and declared transitional rule — meaning he will rule by decree — until elections are held in 2016.

The country's new self-proclaimed President, Michel Djotodia, has pledged to maintain a power-sharing government. He will need to create a wider, inclusive political and economic model to achieve lasting stability.

The big question remains the cohesion of the Séléka coalition. The short- and long-term stability of the country will depend on the solidarity of its ruling forces — an uncertain prospect given the current loose alliance of rebel groups. Long-term peace and stability in the CAR will also depend on creating a more broad-based and inclusive political and economic model than the one that has reduced a country so rich in resources to one of the poorest in the world. Diamonds, timber, gold and uranium have not raised the CAR above its dismal position in the UNDP's 2013 *Human Development Report*: 180th of 187 countries.