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Stiftung
Wissenschaft und
Politik

German Institute
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Security Affairs

Central African Republic: Peacebuilding without Peace

Challenges on the Road to Accountable Government

Louisa Lombard

Fifteen years of UN-led peacebuilding efforts in the Central African Republic (CAR) should have culminated with the elections in January and March of this year. But the elections were far from free and fair, and frustration among the country's rebels and other non-state armed groups has only grown. How did this happen? One reason is that the transitional structures that international agencies advocate – for example political dialogue, disarmament, and elections – have grown out of a vision of how the state *ought* to be and ignore how politics *actually* play out on the ground. Because of this, Central African leaders are able to play the peacebuilding game for their own benefit, and peace and democracy slip further away. To foster a more accountable government, would-be peacebuilders must begin by critically assessing where political will for change does and does not lie. Doing so should inspire creative solutions to the security and development challenges confronting the region, such as centring the analysis and resolution of security threats on affected communities themselves rather than placing the central government in the role of lead actor.

On 15 March 2011, the eight-year anniversary of his coup, François Bozizé again installed himself in power. Bozizé's 2003 coup unleashed a cycle of rebellion the country has yet to escape. Victories in the presidential elections of 2005 and 2011 have consolidated his hold on power. However, this time he claimed 64.34 per cent of the vote already in the first round on January 23 and thus avoided a run-off poll. The other candidates – ousted former president Ange-Felix Patassé (21.43%), former prime minister Martin Ziguélé (6.80%), and

former minister of defence and armed group chief Jean-Jacques Demafouth (2.79%) – lagged far behind. Just over half the voting population turned out. In the legislative elections, too, Bozizé's Kwa na Kwa ("work, nothing but work", KNK) party took a solid majority. Tellingly, some 20-odd members of the new parliament have a direct family relationship to the president – including his wife, sons, cousins, nephews, and even mistresses.

The opposition decried the conduct of the elections. However, their challenges did

*Louisa Lombard was a guest researcher in SWP's Africa and Middle East Division and is
a PhD candidate in Cultural Anthropology at Duke University*

not go far in the Constitutional Court, which is headed by Bozizé's cousin. Election observers from both the African Union and the European Union noted a host of irregularities, such as – in the words of EU Head of Delegation Guy Samzun – "massive fraud" and "terrorization of voters and certain candidates by the state officials and security forces."

Meanwhile, insecurity reigns across much, if not most, of the country's terrain – the month of April 2011 brought continuing attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has preyed on Central African communities for more than three years, and clashes between two Central African armed groups and government forces. Peace and democracy seem more distant goals now than in 2005, before the current phase of internationally supported peacebuilding began.

What went wrong?

As a former UN coordinator in CAR, Toby Lanzer used to entreat donors, "CAR is a country we should be able to fix." He would refer to the traits that seem to make the country a simple problem for peacebuilders: a small population; a government eager for international intervention; plenty of water and other resources for local development; low levels of armament; quite basic requests from armed groups (primarily greater inclusiveness in government and welfare largesse); and of no strategic interest for actors from outside the region. The UN Peacebuilding Fund, created in 2007, likely thought CAR would be a straightforward case when they chose it as a pilot site and dedicated a budget of USD 10 million.

But a glance at the country's history suggests a less optimistic diagnosis: peacebuilding – including a succession of peacekeeping forces; a slew of dialogues and negotiations; and a series of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes – has been ongoing in CAR since army mutinies over salary arrears in 1996-7, and a step backward has accompanied every step forward. Because donor-supported efforts are guided more by hopes for the future – chiefly, the attainment of a rational-bureaucratic state – than by a critical analysis of present political dynamics, they are easily hijacked for non-democratic ends. In this case, that has meant that, despite their objective of making politics more inclusive, these efforts have resulted in the consolidation of power by Bozizé's family, party, and allies.

What is the state in CAR?

CAR is at best an improbable state. With an area the size of France and a population numbering fewer than four million, its territory spreads around the geographic centre of the African continent. Though observers often note that the country is "potentially rich" (it has reserves of timber, oil, diamonds, gold, and uranium), for a range of reasons its resources are hard to exploit on anything but an artisanal scale.

The government has never had much of a presence outside the capital. Until the nineteenth century, the people in this area lived in what anthropologists used to call "stateless societies", because coercion was spread among members rather than held by a hierarchical or otherwise centralised authority. In the years just prior to granting the colony independence, France admitted that the colony was probably the worst-off of its territories – in terms of both the weakness of governing institutions and its empty coffers. Self-proclaimed Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa's profligacy notwithstanding, the country never had the resources to undertake any grand nation-building projects.

A substantive political contract between leaders in the capital and rural residents has never been established. Instead, leaders evidence ambivalence towards their putative constituents, especially those in the remote areas. Proponents of state-building, such as international donors like the UN, assume that government officials do not address the needs of poor and isolated

citizens because they lack the "capacity"; that is, they see the neglect as first and foremost a problem of insufficient money and skills. But this assessment ignores the fact that solidarity has not yet been constructed between CAR's rulers and citizens. Such a political contract is something international aid has proven inept at facilitating. The structures that donors fund are in the main technical rather than political – at best they displace such a contract from forming, and at worst they actively prevent it.

The seeds of rebellion

In fact, to describe the government's attitude towards governing its hinterlands as ambivalent is an understatement. Downright hostility has also been in evidence: this, for instance, is how the three main rebellions began. In mid-2005 a cigarette truck under guard by soldiers was attacked – by whom remains unclear, but the area at the time was confronting grave threats from nomadic armed robbers. The soldiers responded by attacking the local population, whom they labelled complicit. Self-defence groups rallied in protest. Somewhere along the way, Demafouth, living in exile in France, declared himself the president of the local forces – the People's Army for the Restoration of Democracy – and took them under his tutelage.

Most of the other armed groups have similar origins: mistreatment by state forces caused already-existing defence groups to retaliate/fight back with their own show of strength, at which point some sidelined politician claimed these marginalised forces as his own and helped them assume the form of a rebel group. With the notable exception of Damane Zakaria of the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity, the rebel leaders never fought alongside their men on the ground and have only a tenuous connection to them. The leaders have used frustrated rural youth as a tool to manoeuvre for access to national politics in CAR's capital, Bangui, while failing to address the frustrations themselves.

The limited returns of technical peacebuilding processes

DDR is a case in point of how technical peacebuilding processes can sideline exactly those people who are the intended beneficiaries. UN planners conceived of DDR as a way to help former armed group members rejoin their communities as productive, unarmed workers. However, the approach starts to become problematic once it meets the complexity of specific situations. There is no clean break between "wartime" and "peacetime". Rather, these phases usually blend together, with ongoing insecurity and violence after the signing of peace agreements. This is the case in CAR, where the main security threats people are confronting fall outside the scope of peacebuilding efforts. The increasingly fragmented LRA and amorphous armed robbers and gangs continue to roam and attack. The self-defence-groups-cum-rebels are communities' only hope of protection. Taking away their guns, as DDR would in theory do, runs at cross-purposes to that need.

On the ground, DDR is less about collecting guns (few are ever collected) than it is about distributing patrimonial largesse to dispossessed youth. The "Bozizé model" looms large in armed group members' minds: like the fighters who helped Bozizé seize power, they were encouraged to join armed groups with the promise of material rewards. Leaders made promises about the pay-out that awaited fighters through DDR, and the ranks of the groups ballooned – all after the signing of peace agreements.

At the same time, the DDR Steering Committee – composed of armed group leaders and government ministers, with the participation of international donors – met in Bangui and procrastinated. The Steering Committee chair, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General in CAR (Sahle-Work Zewde at the time), presided, effectively mute, over the stalling. In early 2011, after two years of this, the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) DDR funding (a total of USD 27 million, from several

sources) had more or less run out before any activities on behalf of ex-combatants had taken place. In the meantime, Steering Committee members (and expatriate DDR staff) had benefited from comfortable per diems and/or salaries associated with their positions.

The rebellions were the reason for the convening of an Inclusive National Political Dialogue (DPI) in Bangui in December 2008. This was the third such inclusive dialogue in a decade. Donors pushed for the DPI as a way of bringing armed opposition, civil society, and the ruling government together to air grievances, discuss the distribution of political power, and create more inclusive structures.

This did not happen. In response to the DPI's recommendations, Bozizé created two new ministerial posts – the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Housing – and headed them with people from the rebellion sites. But the addition of a couple of new ministers did not change the balance of power in the government, which remained solidly in Bozizé's favour. Just after the DPI concluded its meetings, another armed rebel group – the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace – popped up to protest its exclusion. Yet again, international brokering of peace processes fed factionalisation.

A stalled transition

The DPI and DDR should have paved the way for the holding of inclusive elections. Donors footed most of the bill for the elections (9.5 million euros from the EU and 6.7 million euros from UNDP) and helped design the process using their best technical processes, such as the creation of an Independent Electoral Commission, to ensure fairness. Far from being independent, its composition slanted heavily in favour of the ruling party.

DDR, inclusive dialogues, and elections were all much more pressing concerns for donors and diplomats than for the local

politicians who stood to make them happen.

Those giving and implementing aid projects tend to try to shield themselves from politics by assuming roles as mere "technical advisers". The aid workers' technical mandates silence them, but, far from being apolitical, this unwillingness to call out Central African leaders' lack of will for peace and inclusiveness ends up propping up the status quo. Dispossessed rural folks, for their part, find themselves silenced too – partly by these technical processes, and partly by their remoteness. Deeply frustrated by their leaders' failure to take their grievances seriously (the infrequent ministerial visits to the hinterlands furnish nothing but empty promises), they have found that neither peaceful nor armed opposition allow them an effective voice in debates over the politics of resource distribution. What options remain?

Conclusions

In the recent elections, people have voted, but the result is not democracy. Changing this will require, among other things, donors such as the UN, EU, and the World Bank to craft programmes that start from an analysis of politics as they actually play out, rather than as it is hoped they will become. And it will require a more hard-headed assessment of political will than has previously been the case. To that end, the EU Head of Delegation's efforts to expose election fraud and the World Bank's decision to channel DDR monies directly into youth-centred rural community programmes all appear to be positive steps.

Now that the elections have taken place, donors and new ministers are drawing up plans to re-orient development aid. By prioritising efforts that directly bolster Central African citizens' livelihoods, donors can help give people resources to launch a truly inclusive political process of their own.