

Legal framework

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a secular and democratic state. The current constitution was adopted by the Constitutional Court in August 2024, which validated the July 2023 constitutional referendum that altered the qualifications for becoming president and removed term limits. The post-conflict constitution, adopted in 2016 after a national referendum in December 2015, guarantees freedom of conscience, assembly and worship. However, the constitutional provisions do not fully reflect the definition of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which the CAR has ratified.

Political context

The CAR returned to democratic rule in 2016 following the election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. In March 2013 a coup led by the Seleka rebel alliance removed the government of François Bozizé's and ushered in a significant deterioration in the human rights and humanitarian situation. The CAR had no previous history of sectarian violence, but during this time there was increased targeting of the Christian population by Seleka elements. By December 2013 violence intensified significantly as the country's minority Muslim community came under attack by anti-Balaka militia who self-identified as Christian, but who eventually also targeted members of the Christian community.

Violence regularly reported during the transition period included grenade attacks, bombs thrown into occupied church buildings, looting, desecration of places of worship, and the destruction of buildings providing essential social services. Religious leaders working toward peace and protecting vulnerable groups, and especially the Muslim community, were also targeted by armed groups.

2019 peace agreement

In February 2019 a peace agreement negotiated by the African Union (AU) was concluded between the government and 14 armed groups operating in the country. It called for the immediate surrendering of arms by these groups and a cessation of hostilities. A new prime minister, Firmin Ngrebada, was appointed and a revised cabinet was announced on 22 March 2019 that included representatives of all 14 armed groups which were party to the agreement. The peace agreement was seen as a path towards security and stability; however, it raised significant concerns as civil society expressed reservations regarding the immunities extended to armed groups that had committed gross human rights violations.

December 2020 elections

Violence escalated significantly ahead of and during the country's parliamentary and presidential elections in 2020,

following a Constitutional Court ruling against the candidacy of former president Bozizé.

Soon afterwards, a coalition of six major armed groups linked with Bozizé known as the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) that comprised former Seleka and anti-Balaka elements announced its intention to disrupt the 27 December elections. It launched an extensive campaign of violence ahead of the vote that included the targeting of the president's second home in Damara. The creation of the alliance marked the breakdown of the 2019 peace agreement.

The fighting pitted the allied militia against the national army, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and troops from Russia and Rwanda, whose presence was secured following bilateral agreements between the CAR and their respective governments. The UN Special Representative and Head of MINUSCA, Mr Mankeur Ndiaye, reported that a government counter-offensive against the CPC had led to 'an unprecedented humanitarian crisis', resulting in over 57% of the population needing humanitarian assistance.

On 4 January 2021 President Touadéra won a second term in office, with an estimated 53.9% of votes cast, a declaration that was subsequently confirmed by the Constitutional Court on 18 January, although the political opposition demanded the annulment of the elections on the grounds that fighting had prevented over half of all registered voters from voting.

Violations by Russian Africa Corps (Wagner Group) and the FACA

A group of UN experts, including the Working Group on Mercenaries, raised concerns in March 2021 about private military and foreign security contractors working in coordination with the government of the CAR and maintaining close contact with UN peacekeepers.

The UN experts cited reports from the ground that Russian contractors connected to the Wagner group, a paramilitary group which included forces that saw action in Syria and the Ukraine, were implicated in gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the use of torture, summary executions and attacks on humanitarian workers.

On 21 January 2022 AFP news agency reported a UN announcement that it would investigate reports of more than 30 civilians killed by CAR forces and Africa corps mercenaries in a military operation from 16-17 January 2022 targeting the UPC. It also reported that the UN expert group had not been functioning since 31 August 2021, when Russia blocked the renewal of its mandate.

Young men from the CAR are alleged to be among hundreds from Africa and Asia recruited by the Wagner group and transported to Russia and fight in Ukraine.¹

Insecurity in the southeast: Zemio

Zemio, a town and sub-prefecture of the Haut-Mbomou prefecture in the southeast, sits along the CAR's border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and is located 1025 km west of the capital, Bangui. In May 2024, after two months of training by Russian soldiers, 100 Azande Ani Kpi Gbe militiamen who had surrendered their arms were integrated into the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). The Azande militia was formed in 2023 to fight against the UPC in the Haut-Mbomou Prefecture.

In August and September 2024 tensions in Zemio increased as members of the Puel or Fulani ethnic group called on the government to relocate them away from the area. Their leaders referred to the Azande militia men who had integrated into the FACA as the 'Wagner Ti Azande,' referencing their working relationship and the training they received from the Russian mercenaries. On 29 August one leader was killed in the raid, and was buried on the same day, causing tensions and fear within the community.

The leader of Zemio Central Mosque, Imam Moussa, was arrested by the Azande unit of the FACA in August 2024. The imam was detained and accused of hiding weapons in his home; however, his home was not searched. The day after his arrest, Imam Moussa was reportedly taken out of his cell and publicly beaten by members of the Azande unit. He was released in September 2024 following intervention by MINUSCA, which also provided security for him at their base.

Further tensions arose in the area on 15 March 2025 when two young men from the Fulani community travelled to the town to register to vote. After they left Zemio, they did not reach their homes and were later found dead. Four others who travelled to Zemio for medical treatment boarded a motorbike taxi but never arrived at their homes and are still missing, with officials presuming they may be dead. On 16 March Russian Mercenaries detained two men they believed were responsible. This resulted in unofficial roadblocks being set up, and members predominantly of the Azande militia calling for an end to electoral registration in the city, and a ban on all Muslims and non-Azande residing in or visiting Zemio.

On 24 March the Mayor of Zemio, Rosalie Nawira, attempted to bring communities together, including the town's Christian, Fulani and Muslim groups, with a view to restoring peace in the area. The meeting was tense and resulted in

her calling for peaceful coexistence in response to calls by others for Zemio and its surrounding areas to be for the Azande community alone.

On 28 March UN peacekeepers were attacked outside of Zemio resulting in the death of a Kenyan peacekeeper.

On 2 April Russian fighters arrested a man reportedly belonging to the Wagner Ti Azande militia who was suspected of involvement in the killing of the two Muslim men on 15 March and the 28 March attack on the MINUSCA patrol. The suspect, referred to locally as 'Ballie', was transferred to the gendarmerie on the same day. A crowd followed calling for his release, causing the FACA to fire into the air to disperse them, while UN peacekeepers prevented them from reaching the mayor's residence.

On 3 April the suspect was transferred by helicopter to the capital, Bangui. A crowd amassed attempting to prevent the helicopter from leaving, and when that failed, they dispersed into the town, targeting the mayor's official residences and causing the market and local businesses to shut down. Three properties, including the mayor's official residence, were razed to the ground. For her safety, the mayor was evacuated to Bangui by MINUSCA. The unrest also led to the displacement of civilians.²

In a press conference on 9 April³ a UN spokesperson announced the increase of MINUSCA presence in Zemio town and joint patrols with the FACA. The local Member of Parliament for Zemio, Éric Kpidigu, organised meetings in the town on 14 April to speak with the community, and the town has seen the tentative resumption of activities since then.

Constitutional change and elections

In July 2023 the Constitutional Court validated a referendum vote on a constitutional amendment that raised the presidential term from five to seven years and removed the two-term presidential limit. The change will allow President Touadéra to seek a third term in 2025.

The president had formed a new commission to draft a new constitution in 2022; however, the President of the Constitutional Court, Daniele Darlan, objected to the changes allowing for the removal of term limits. In October 2022 she was removed from her position after refusing to bow to executive pressure. On 4 April 2025 a democratic opposition platform, the Republican Block for the Defence of the Constitution (BRDC) took part in a peaceful demonstration against President Touadéra's potential third term.⁴

1 Africa ExPress, 'Russia's Tentacles in Africa: Wagner Enlists Young Central Africans to Fight in Ukraine', 15 October 2024 (Italian) <https://www.africa-express.info/2024/10/15/i-tentacoli-della-russia-in-africa-wagner-arruola-giovani-centrafricani-per-combattere-in-ucraina/>

2 Radio Ndeke Luka, 'Zémio: timid resumption of activities after recent violence', 14 April 2025 (French) <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/83826-zemio-reprise-timide-des-activites-apres-les-recentes-violences>

3 Radio Ndeke Luka, 'Central African Republic: MINUSCA strengthens security in Zémio to ease tensions', 10 April 2025 (French) <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/83669-centrafrique-la-minusca-renforce-la-securite-a-zemio-pour-apaiser-les-tensions>

4 Radio Ndeke Luka, 'Central African Republic: BRDC demonstrates to oppose Touadéra's third term', 4 April 2024 (French) <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/83404-centrafrique-le-brdc-a-manifeste-pour-sopposer-au-3eme-mandat-de-touadera>

Local and regional elections scheduled for July 2025 will be the first of their kind since 1988 and will bring the state closer to the people. There are concerns over insecurity and challenges to rolling out voter registration ahead of these elections. The registration process will also prove significant as presidential elections are due to take place in December 2025.

Transparent, inclusive and democratic elections are of paramount importance, as the electing and positioning of local officials with a democratic mandate would further the state's control across the nation, both militarily and administratively.

Recommendations

To the government of the Central African Republic:

- Respect the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary by recognising the limits of executive power and not seeking to unduly influence the composition of the courts.
- Work towards disarming and demobilising armed groups operating within the country to ensure the right to life and security of all citizens.
- Ensure that the process of disarming and demobilising armed groups and the integration of combatants into the army follows internationally recognised standards of training, including in the respect of humanitarian and human rights laws, and that former combatants that have committed gross human rights violations are barred from joining the army.
- Ensure that former combatants integrated into the FACA are not deployed into communities and regions where they were fighting previously, and where their presence will exacerbate tensions within communities.
- Investigate and bring to justice all those involved in FoRB violations, including the targeting of religious leaders, regardless of the perpetrators' positions within the government.
- Ensure a thorough investigation of, and accountability for, the violations highlighted by the UN Working Group on Mercenaries.
- Support peace and reconciliation projects that aim to rebuild trust between religious communities.
- Ensure that relevant provisions within the constitution reflect the right to freedom of religion or belief as set out in the ICCPR.

To the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS):

- Foster dialogue between major protagonists of the conflict with the ultimate view of revamping and reinitiating the 2019 AU peace agreement.
- Along with relevant parties, including bilateral partners and key regional actors, formulate the most effective collective means of supporting and strengthening governance and key institutions in the CAR.

- Urge the government of the CAR to guarantee the right to FoRB for all, in law and in practice, in line with Article 8 of the ACHPR and Article 18 of the ICCPR to which the state is party.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms to include the right to FoRB in their monitoring and reporting on the CAR.
- Continue supporting the work of the UN Independent Expert on the CAR, ensuring the mandate is fully resourced, and encourage the government of the CAR's continued cooperation with the expert.
- Ensure that the concerns highlighted in this briefing are consistently raised in public and in private with the government of the CAR, including during high-level visits and other bilateral exchanges.
- Urge the government of the CAR to cooperate with international organisations, including the UN peacekeeping mission
- Increase humanitarian aid to the CAR, focusing on displaced communities, while addressing the root causes of the conflict causing their displacement.
- Support the Special Criminal Court and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in prosecuting perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Urge the government of the CAR to respect the rule of law and guarantee the independence of the judiciary by ending executive interference in court structures and processes and ensuring courts and legal professionals can operate without experiencing political or military pressure, particularly in cases involving human rights abuses.
- Encourage the government of the CAR to ensure perpetrators of gross human rights violations, whether recent or historical, are held accountable, and are not appointed to political or military positions.
- Press for the disarmament of all armed groups and ensure the transparent reintegration of combatants into society.
- Support the Special Criminal Court and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in prosecuting perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Provide resources for reconciliation initiatives that aim to rebuild trust between religious communities.
- Increase humanitarian aid to the CAR, focusing on displaced communities, while addressing the root causes of the conflict causing their displacement.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge the OHCHR, and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include a robust analysis of the situation of freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on the CAR, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities and those seeking to assist them.

- Continue to support the mandate of the UN Independent Expert on the CAR and ensure it is fully resourced and equipped to fulfil its mandate.
- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to the CAR and ensure that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Continue to pressure and assist the government of the CAR to put in place accountability mechanisms to bring those responsible for grave international crimes to justice, including supporting the Special Criminal Court and the ICC in prosecuting perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including foreign mercenaries who have committed severe human rights and humanitarian law violations.
- Urge the government of the CAR to cooperate with international organisations, including the UN peacekeeping mission.
- Support the government of the CAR in reforming the security and justice sectors by building capacity through improved training and continue supporting the implementation of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation.
- Support initiatives that aim to rebuild trust between religious and belief communities and restore social cohesion, and call on the government of the CAR to ensure protection for religious leaders.
- Urge the government of the CAR, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above 'To the government of the Central African Republic'.

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