

Legal framework

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a secular and democratic state. The current constitution was adopted by the Constitutional Court in August 2023, 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) 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 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, 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 which included representatives from the 14 armed groups that 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 emergence 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 with their respective governments. The UN Special Representative and Head of MINUSCA, Mr Mankeur Ndiaye, reported that a government counter-offensive against the CPC had caused 'an unprecedented humanitarian crisis', resulting in more than 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 result 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.

December 2025 elections

In August 2023 the Constitutional Court approved – having initially rejected – a controversial constitutional referendum that removed presidential term limits, allowing President Touadéra to run for a third term in December 2025.

While the elections were largely peaceful, opposition parties, including the main opposition party, the Republican Block for the Defence of the Constitution (BRDC), boycotted the vote. The electoral commission delayed the approval of two prominent opposition politicians, Anicet-Georges Dologué and Henri-Marie Dondra, during the campaigning period, and presidential candidates reported restrictions on their freedom of movement and ability to effectively campaign in all parts of the country.

On 28 December 2025, as the country went to the polls, the Azandé Ani Kpi Gbé (AAKG) or Azandé Militia launched a series of attacks targeting security stations, police stations, soldiers and police in Bambouti, Haut-Mbomou Prefecture. Several officials were also kidnapped by the group. On 3 August 2026 Gendarme Séverin Ketemalet escaped after seven months in captivity after being abducted by the AAKG in Bambouti on 28 December 2025 together with

three others, including an agent of the national elections authority.¹

After the initial attacks, the violence moved to Zemio, where at least 2,000 people were displaced as the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) and Russian fighters from the Africa Corps (formerly known as the Wagner Group) fought the AAKG.

On 19 January 2026 the Constitutional Court affirmed that President Touadéra had received 77.90% of the vote, a marginal increase on his vote share of 76.15% from the provisional results released by the National Elections Authority on 5 January.

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

In March 2021 a group of UN experts, including the Working Group on Mercenaries, raised concerns 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 international media 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.²

The UN Security Council reported that the government of CAR had stated it had no knowledge of the incident on 16 – 17 January 2022. MINUSCA reported that between mid-December 2021 to early January 2022 40% of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law had been perpetrated by ‘state agents and other security personnel’ ostensibly referring to the CAR armed forces and Africa Corps mercenaries.³

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.⁴

Insecurity in the southeast: Zemio

Zemio, a town and sub-prefecture of Haut-Mbomou Prefecture in the southeast, located along the CAR's border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 1,025 km west of the capital, Bangui. In May 2024, after two months of training by Russian soldiers, 100 Azandé Ani Kpi Gbe militiamen who had surrendered their arms were integrated into the FACA. The Azandé 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 Azandé militia men who had integrated into the FACA as the ‘Wagner Ti Azandé,’ referencing their working relationship and the training they received from the Russian mercenaries. On 29 August one leader was killed in a 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 Azandé 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 Azandé 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. The following day, Russian mercenaries detained two men they believed were responsible. This resulted in unofficial roadblocks being set up, members predominantly of the Azandé militia calling for an end to electoral registration in the city, and a ban on all Muslims and non-Azandé 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 Azandé community alone. A UN peacekeeper was killed soon afterwards in an attack on a patrol vehicle. Russian fighters subsequently arrested a man belonging to the Wagner Ti

1 Radio Ndeke Luka, ‘Gendarme Séverin Ketemalet, one of the hostages held by the Azandé Ani Kpi Gbé militia, has finally been reunited with his family’, 7 August 2026 <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/104000-le-gendarme-severin-ketemalet-un-des-otages-des-miliciens-a-zande-ani-kpi-gbe-retrouve-enfin-sa-famille>

2 Al Jazeera, ‘UN probing alleged killings by CAR forces, Russia mercenaries’, 22 January 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/22/un-probing-alleged-killings-by-car-forces-russia-paramilitaries>

3 UN Security Council, February 2022 Monthly Forecast: Central African Republic <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-02/central-african-republic-15.php>

4 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/>

Azandé militia, whom they suspected was involved in the more recent attack and arranged his transfer to Bangui. A large crowd attempted to prevent the helicopter carrying the suspect from leaving; however, they were unsuccessful and instead dispersed into Zemio town. Three properties and the mayor's official residence were razed to the ground. The mayor had to be evacuated to Bangui for her safety. The market and local businesses remained closed during this period.⁵

As mentioned, violence in the Haut-Mbomou province also affected Zemio in December 2025 during the presidential elections, with an acute humanitarian crisis causing civilians to seek shelter in Zemio's Catholic Church or to flee to the DRC.

On 29 June 2026 Father Crepin Martial Monga, a priest of the Catholic Parish of Bangassou, was killed near his residence in the town. Father Monga had led a local committee for peace and reconciliation in Zemio that had been engaged in the recent conflicts. This incident shocked the town of Zemio, which held Father Monga in high regard, and drew statements of condemnation from the National Assembly.

Tensions on Sudan border: Am Dafock

On 29 June 2026, three Zambian Peacekeepers deployed as part of MINUSCA were injured in an attack on their base in Am Dafock, Vakaga Prefecture, which borders South Darfur in Sudan. The attack was perpetrated by members of the former Seleka alliance, the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC) led by Nouredine Adam, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for his role in the commission of atrocity crimes in CAR, and the Democratic Movement for the Rallying of the Central African People (MDRPC). These armed groups were reportedly joined by armed elements from an area of Sudan which is currently under the control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The attack led to at least 28 civilian deaths and has triggered an acute humanitarian crisis, with civilians seeking refuge at the MINUSCA base. The violence prompted a national response, including the opening of an investigation by the Special Criminal Court into crimes committed during the attack, and a joint assessment by MINUSCA and leaders of the FACA to reassure civilians that the security situation was being taken seriously. Members of the National Assembly also visited displacement camps to speak to those affected by the violence.⁶

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 respecting humanitarian and human rights laws, and that former combatants who 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.
- 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 FoRB as set out in the ICCPR.

To the government of the United States:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in the CAR and maintain the country's placement on the Special Watch List.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request an invitation to visit the CAR with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Deny US travel visas to government officials responsible for serious FoRB violations.
- The State Department should designate the Russian Africa Corps (aka the REK or Wagner Group) as an Entity of Particular Concern.
- The US should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the CAR, and ensure that programmes and projects addressing root causes of conflict, peacebuilding and strengthening social cohesion are also supported.
- Urge the government of the CAR, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above 'To the government of the Central African Republic'.

⁵ 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>

⁶ Radio Ndeke Luka, 'Security: MPs and military leaders in Birao and Am-Dafock to reassure the population', 30 July 2026 <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/103582-securite-deputes-et-chefs-militaires-a-birao-et-am-dafock-pour-rassurer-la-population>

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 FoRB in their reporting on the CAR, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities and those seeking to assist them.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise FoRB concerns in the CAR and to offer recommendations to advance FoRB.
- 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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