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# A Cinderella story gone wrong: The Central African Republic's state failure

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## **Abstract**

Over the past few decades, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been coined many names, among them: Cinderella, impoverished, phantom/failed state. This last term, has been used by many scholars, leaders, and members of organizations internationally. In the following article we study the case of the CAR's state failure by tracing its history as a French colony, by taking its former nickname the *Cinderella of French Africa* as a counter comparison to the fairy tale's happy ending and by finally presenting a qualitative analysis to confirm that it has become a failed state.

**Keywords:** CAR, failed state, colonialism, coup d'état, civil war.

## **La Cenicienta sin final feliz: La República Centroafricana como Estado fallido**

### **Resumen**

En las últimas décadas, la República Centroafricana (RCA) ha sido relacionada con diferentes calificativos tales como: Cenicienta, estado fantasma/fallido. Este último término es utilizado por muchos académicos y miembros de organizaciones en el ámbito internacional. El presente artículo estudia el caso de la RCA como estado fallido, en función del estudio de su historia como colonia francesa, de donde surge el sobrenombre *la Cenicienta del África* y contrastándola con su situación actual para determinar si ha habido un final feliz tal como en el cuento de hadas. Finalmente, un análisis cualitativo del fracaso estatal en la RCA es presentado.

**Palabras clave:** RCA, estado fallido, colonialismo, golpe de estado, guerra civil.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, the term “state failure” has become a constant in the international arena. Accompanying it are many others: civil war, violence, crimes, and refugees. While any state is susceptible to these phenomena, Africa and the Middle East are the regions which during the past decade, have hosted the highest number of failed or prone to failure States; in fact, The Fund for Peace’s 2017 annual list of fragile states continues to be topped by South Sudan, Somalia, and the Central African Republic (Messner, et al., 2017). Africa is a highlighted area for the international community because a number of its States are in the midst of breakage. These issues can be traced to a long historical background of colonialism, intervention and artificial border drawing (Agnew, 2003). European powers raced to conquest and proceed to rule quickly and devastatingly, and then spread their influence and rivalry by creating boundaries that drew arbitrarily the map of Africa. The consequences of this separation and demarcation were not only geopolitical, but also cultural and economic. In other words, these powers created a series of artificial States, in which the history, origins and ethnicity were not even remotely taken into consideration. Thus, we observe that the top three countries in the verge of being classified as failed states in the 2017 index are African. While they share a similar background, their particular contexts have led to diversity in each case. Ranked number three, the Central African Republic [CAR] suffers from what appears to be the sickness of state failure.

This state has always been nicknamed the Cinderella of French Africa, due to its role in the colonial history of France, almost three centuries later we find it in the verge of collapse; it now has another nickname to describe it: failure. This is why we are intrigued by what happened in the writing of the Cinderella fairy tale, and where *the happily ever after* went. Does it only apply to the west but not its former colonies in Africa? In this article we study the case of the CAR state failure after some observation. First, we consider the historical background of the country in order to tie it to the current situation, a religious oriented civil war. Afterwards, we analyze the present day situation through Rotberg’s criteria for classifying failed states, and also the Montevideo Convention’s definition of state hood and the indicators of the Fund for Peace’s annual list of fragile states. Finally, we will attempt to foresee a happy ending or not for the CAR.

As many other European powers, in the late 1800s, France jumped in the bandwagon of colonialism. With limited funding, in what was called the

*scramble for Africa*, it sent adventurous explorers to conquer Africa. Among these territories, the Oubangui-Chari colony [est. in 1903], which would eventually become the Central African Republic, became part of French territory. Before their arrival, the territory was run by sultans who controlled trans-Saharan economic and social networks; aside from this, the area was a raiding area for resources and also a refugee zone for raiders (Lombard, 2014). French colonists believed and made believe that their duty was to oust the sultans because Central Africans should not be governed by foreigners. Paradoxically, they took over the land and its resources.

## **2. A brief history of CAR: France's Cinderella**

The history of French colonization in the central African region is not a lovely one; it became a synonym of violence, discrimination, slavery and unsuccessfully weak administration. Despite this, the French continued to hold on to its colonies in the region with financing from the French state to keep companies afloat and its army to maintain the territory through coercion (International Crisis Group, 2007). The former colony of Oubangui-Chari, "once known as the Cinderella of the French Empire" (Lombard, 2014), became exactly as its name depicted it, an impoverished free labor Cinderella that worked with its limited resources to the expenses of its stepmother, France and its stepsisters, the French colonists. As the well-known fairy tale narrates, with the intervention of the stepmother, what looked as an opportunity of prosperity, liberty and welfare, actually was a path towards the opposite.

The road to independence was not easy either. The International Crisis Group (2007) establishes that colonial crimes and the increasing depopulation became important factors towards the struggle for independence, Central Africans, unsatisfied by not being paid for their work, fled to the forest where colonists eventually would find them and set up hostage camps with their coercive power. Those who resisted were brutally murdered and their villages raided and burned down. In addition to these events, the murder of two local leaders<sup>1</sup> led to more insurrection (Lombard, 2014). The new republic's political values would be formed from this moment on.

While the CAR began to establish a democracy, its first step towards a State that would eventually be marked by a pattern of *coup d'états* took place. The "then minister of the interior... David Dackowho was supported by French colonialists, surrounded parliament with a band of pygmies armed with poison arrows and forced the deputies to elect him as president"

(International Crisis Group, 2007). Amidst the emerging political culture of the new state, the CAR's first president imposed himself as so, and it would set the example for the following governments to come. Lombard (2014) states that *coups* were now the norm, and highlights that these were French fabricated and violent. Since, she recalls, the French did not believe that out of its colonies, CAR was ready for independence: their mission was to prevent previous mistakes such as Congo (Lombard, 2014). The republic instead of moving forwards in terms of democracy and freedom, stepped back with its first government. The International Crisis Group (2007), narrates that a 'predator' state began to grow:

An authoritarian regime was very quickly created by voting through a whole series of laws against freedom that allowed the government to repress acts of resistance or disobedience to the authorities; dissolve political parties, trade unions and other associations incompatible with public order; intern individuals judged to be dangerous and censor subversive writings, etc.

In addition, the French appeared to be supporting this regime, because, as the former colonial power it was more convenient to see the CAR breakup into pieces and come back as a child who seeks his mother after realizing that it cannot sustain itself alone.

After Dacko, a series of similar governments stepped up, all of them characterized by forceful coups. Bokassa threw a coup to cleanse the republic and instead he became emperor Bokassa I and CAR's lifelong president (Kalck, 2005). Albeit, certain disagreement at first, the French government acknowledged him and strengthened ties with the CAR. All appeared to run smoothly on the exterior, but in the inside the CAR was a rotten apple; an enormous debt and a series of political unrests led by former prime minister Ange-Félix Patassé showed a discontent in the population (International Crisis Group, 2007). Bossaka's forces massacred millions of children in what was called the Bangui Children's Massacre, and thus, the emperor became to be watched closely by France who tightened forceful sanctions to pressure him to step down. In the end, the French opted for operation *Barracuda* in which Bossaka was overthrown while visiting his ally Qaddafi in Libya in September 1979 (Kalck, 2005).

Thus, Dacko assumed power once again and the French *Barracuda* officers stayed in the CAR to ensure protection and safety. With the presence of the French, the government's power hungry tactics and opposition leaders' counter movements the CAR's turmoil continued. In terms of

conflict, a very important separation was made during the time; an ethnic distinction that would continue spurring conflict in the following years, tribes hosted politically based violence and the term ethnicity was coined “if one understands by that the manipulation of tribalism for political ends, in a country united by a true lingua franca, Sango, and in which the origin of people had not had any importance for some time” (International Crisis Group, 2007). As we have observed the issues between tribes and religions in the country are not recent problems, they all go back to colonialism and French intervention. Therefore, the fact that the French coined the expression ethnicity and divided people by it would serve to further explain future problems.

While having French protection, Dacko, fearing another coup decided to leave his power willingly to the military. André Kolimba, a military chief, took charge in 1981 and caused a series of harmful acts that would also bring consequences to the future of the state; among these were burning down the villages of his enemies, massacred civilians and provoked ethnic tribal hatred and a north/south division in the country (ibid). Amidst the fall of the Berlin Wall, the French began a process of democratization, agreed upon by Kolimba, as exchange for aid from the colonial mother, and after a series of events and elections, a new president was democratically elected in 1993; Ange-Félix Patassé, Bossaka's ex-prime minister (ibid). Being the first president from the north caused clashes within the population (Arieff, 2014). Since he favored his tribe and turned the state security force into a tribal militia, not only the people of the south wanted him ousted, also several of the regions leaders, especially Idriss Déby from Chad (Lombard, 2014). A major plan to remove Patassé was put into place “with François Bozizé, a military man and former Patassé confidant. “Bozizé took Bangui in March 2003 with a force that was seven-eighths Chadian, drawn from among that country's many mobile men-in-arms” (ibid). At first, it seemed as the situation in CAR was improving and that this would finally be the head of state that would lead the country to development, peace and security. However the reality was different, in spite of the economic aid it received, Bozizé, his family and fellow ethnic comrades absorbed the power, were corrupt, and hosted a government that was unable to deliver goods and services, foster development, respect the military and implement peace accords with armed groups to achieve security (Arieff, 2014). All these gaps and nuances led to a continued deterioration of the state the following years and many rebel groups began to form in the territory unraveling the beautiful dress that covered Cinderella.

Correspondingly, the cracks in the CAR led to the creation of rebel groups; in particular Seleka [which in the Sango language means alliance] rose as an important actor in the events that would follow: the group led by its leader, Michel Djotoda, posed a *coup d'état* on Bozizé and seized power on March 2013. This sparked an ethno religious civil war between Seleka [Muslim] and Anti-Balaka [which means anti-machete] a Christian rebel group (Arieff, 2014). After having toppled on an already broken glass slipper, the Central African Cinderella shattered and fell in to the tunnel of state failure. Djotoda could not end the violence nor stop the ongoing path that CAR, already a weak state had taken towards failure. In 2014, he stepped down and dissolved Seleka (*ibid*). But this was not the happy ending, because with its ongoing violence, the CAR had toppled into state failure.

### **3. The path to a state failure: Present daysituation**

When we use the term failed state we refer to a state which features the disruption of its statehood. Considering the definition of statehood found in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States(1934), “the State as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states”. Then, a failed state is one that has problems fulfilling these characteristics. Rotberg (2002) presents five characteristics that failed states tend to fit in: a) lack of government; b) lack of governability; c) lack of social services; d) independence; and e) ongoing conflict. Moreover, Messner et al (2017) consider that “the reasons for state fragility are complex but not unpredictable”. Therefore, they present the indicators for analyzing the situation in each country and that make up each states’ raking in the Fund for Peace’s Annual Fragile States Index (2017):

- Security apparatus
- Factionalized elites
- Group grievance
- Economic decline and poverty
- Uneven development
- Human flight and brain drain
- State legitimacy
- Public services
- Human Rights and rule of law
- Demographic pressures



- Refugees and IDPS
- External intervention

In order to reach the conclusion that CAR is a failed state, we analyze the situation in the CAR through a qualitative interpretative methodology, using not only the previous characteristics of statehood, Rotberg's proposed characteristics and the Fund for Peace's fragility indicators, but also by features we consider relevant to state failure. Thus, we incorporate these in four categories that encompass state failure: a) delivrance of political goods; b) enduring violence and conflict caused by disharmonies between communities; c) lack of governability over the territory; and d) economic status. In the case of the Central African Republic, after independence, the path towards success has not been the right one. The deterioration of an already weak State to a failed state in less that 5 years due to not only a civil war that uses religion as the mask for power hungry groups has positioned CAR third in the world and high alert in reports such as the Fund for Peace's Annual Fragile States Index. Tension, violence and conflict increase daily diminishing the slightest possibility to revert the damage. The International Crisis Group (2007) believes that it has become "if anything, worse than a failed state: it has become virtually a phantom state, lacking any meaningful institutional capacity at least since the fall of Emperor Bokassa in 1979". We will not go as far as to depict CAR as a phantom<sup>2</sup> or inexistent state, but we will briefly consider each of the criteria of a failed state in order to analyze the relevance of putting this adjective in front of it.

### **3.1. Delivrance of political goods**

Rotberg (2002) establishes that the purpose of a government is to deliver political goods to its citizens; security, education, health services, economic opportunity, environmental surveillance, a legal framework of order and a judicial system to administer it, and fundamental infrastructural requirements. Henceforth, we believe that this criteria is fundamental because it encompasses most of the other features of state failure within it. The Central African government has not managed to accomplish this feature to its full extent in none of the post-independence governments it has had, mainly because of the easiness of *couping* a leader. For this historical reason, new leaders fear being ousted and concentrate on keeping themselves in political stability before delivering political goods to the people.

In the context of ongoing conflict as the ethnic war in the CAR, we find it more difficult for the government to guarantee optimal security,

education, health, infrastructure and justice (Arieff, 2014). For instance, in a country of 4.7 million people, according to The World Bank's data (2017) about 2.3 million people need humanitarian assistance urgently because "while more than 76% of the population continues to live in extreme poverty. At the national level, only 55% of health facilities are functional; only 25% of health facilities have an energy source, while only 2% have a potable water source". This is a red alert that the state has been unable to provide one of the most basic needs of health.

However, in order to fulfill these basic needs, first, there must be a state established on firm grounds. The previous interim president Catherine Samba-Panza, attempted to regain certain stability and with the aid of the international community, namely France, the UN, the AU, the EU and religious leaders, managed to call for elections. The elections held in February 2016 were a symbol for Central Africans to believe that they still could exercise their political will. However, we have to consider the integrity of elections amidst ongoing conflict (Messner, et al., 2017). After all, about a year has passed and the newly elected president Faustin Touadéra's government has not reached a ceasefire or decrease of the widespread violence. With weak institutions and government, there is no justice leaving militias to attack and without being held accountable for their crimes. Kraft (2017) emphasizes that while peace building processes have been going on, the first step should be to renew trust between the government and the people. Yet, in a country where swapping leaders is as common as flipping a coin, future governments must strengthen themselves before trying to fulfill any political goods. The past has shown [e.g. Bozizé] that reaching out to aid for political goods is not the priority if the governmental power is weak.

### **3.2. Enduring violence and conflict**

During 2013 and 2014, CAR was scene to the worst violence in the country's history and it continues to escalate day after day (Kraft, 2017). The religious element is only the masquerade behind which the power hungry former colony tensions lie. As Rotberg (2002) explains ethnic, religious and linguistic disharmonies are not the root cause but only a contributor to failure. "Religious differences are not the primary origin of the crisis in CAR... inter-communal tensions over access to resources, control over trade, and national identity are being expressed along ethno-religious lines" (Arieff, 2014). Despite the willingness of the transitional governments and of international organizations for a ceasefire and reconciliation, until the

deep cause of the tensions is not targeted the violence will not stop. Sectarian violence between civilians is backed by these rebel groups which seem to have great influence, nor the government nor the international community have sought to consider the way these groups work as a substitute for the government (Berti, 2015) and that in order to tackle them the government has to compete with them over the provision of political goods rather than confront them with counter force. Recent reports by the UN and Amnesty International indicate that UN peacekeepers are struggling to contain simmering violence, keep the population safe, disarm combatants and diffuse tensions (Reuters, 2017). While the Lord's Resistance Army has been contained and foreign forces are pulling out (*ibid*), violence increases in CAR and its national armed forces have proven to be weak for the ongoing conflict.

### **3.3. Lack of governability over the territory**

A strong state is one that has complete control over its territory, and usually the synonym of state power in a failed state is the capital city and one or more ethnically specific zones, because it has gradually lost control of many parts of its territory (Rotberg, 2002). Notably, this is the case of the CAR; the capital has become the only synonym of the state power and even its zones are divided while other regions have been targeted and taken by rebel groups. The conflict has forced a million people to flee their homes, (Ratcliffe, 2017) therefore, amidst a refugee crisis<sup>3</sup>, threatened civilians and neighboring countries such as Chad also dealing with the consequences of the CAR's breakage, the CAR loses governability on a daily basis.

Another aspect to consider when it comes to territorial occupation is the foreign element of intervention. External intervention influences the internal affairs regarding security of a state, pushes it to economic dependence and to be the target for humanitarian aid (Messner, et al., 2017). CAR's colonial stepmother France appeared to the rescue when conflict began to erupt in 2012 by deploying troops it then started to control many parts of the city and the airport (Arieff, 2014). In addition, borders are now more prone to be passed by anyone without proper control, consequently, the assertion that "there has been a *de facto foreign occupation* of CAR"<sup>4</sup> by rebel groups from nearby countries such as Chad and Sudan (*ibid*), in terms of territory, appeals to consider this aspect of failure; the governments have allowed for both intervention from other states [a colonial reminiscent] the UN and other international organizations, but also from rebel groups and militias that they have completely lost their state to the interest of others.

### **3.4. Economic status**

Because there is a lack of legitimacy, weak institutions and infrastructure, in other words government and governability, it is natural that these issues translate also into a failed state's economy. In times of economic and humanitarian despair, the international community steps in and aids and the issue of financial aid from organizations and third party states is brought up. Ratcliffe (2017) states that “the UN announced \$45m (£35m) would be released from the central emergency response fund to four countries “struggling in crises away from the headlines” – CAR, Afghanistan, Chad and Sudan”. Besides this recent aid, over its almost four years of conflict the CAR has not only received funds from the UN but also from other international organizations and countries. However, receiving monetary aid from third-parties is not always as the perfect solution that it appears to be. Since economic instability is also a major factor for state failure, it eventually leads to corruption and or smuggling (Rotberg, 2002). We have to consider that corruption has always been a part of the history of the CAR, and it continues to be, due to the fact that it is a resource rich territory (International Crisis Group, 2007). If we stop to consider that CAR has received millions in foreign aid, we could understand that the administrators of the money in the collapsed state are usually not held accountable, leaving officials to be corruption prone. Thus, in spite of the much received international economic aid, having corrupt officials, a plummeting GDP rate<sup>1</sup> and being “the lowest ranking country in the world on the Human Development Index” (Kraft, 2017), we can confirm that the economic status is also a determinant of fragility.

As we have observed, in the midst of a civil war, economic growth paralyzes until peace is established once again and in the meantime, the most affected are the citizens. Despite the worrying “per capita income, Gross National Product, unemployment rates, inflation, productivity, debt, poverty levels, or business failures (Messner, et al., 2017)” associated with a failed state, we believe it important to note at least the slightest progress. On one hand, on a national level, “after a weak 2015, export growth appears to be more pronounced in 2016 on the back of solid production increases of key export goods such as gold, diamonds, wood, coffee and cotton” (The World Bank in Central African Republic, 2017) thus, we can see a slight recovery in production for exports. On the other hand, on a local level, the case of the PK5, the only neighborhood in Bangui composed of a majority-Muslim population, shows a small yet significant change. Once



the commercial hub of the capital, it became isolated as soon as the conflict began in 2013; earlier this year, commerce has once again been brought to life by its hesitant yet willing residents (Kraft, 2017). This example proves that Central Africans need to regain trust in themselves and that a slight strategy can help jumpstart the economy and other factors needed for the CAR to emerge from failure.

#### **4. The happy ever after possibility: Conclusions**

Throughout this article we have analyzed the case of the CAR or the *Cinderella* of French Africa. Many noteworthy factors have shaped how it has evolved as a state and an actor in the region. Unlike other African colonies, it had to work for the interests of its stepmother who constantly exploited it through free labor. After reaching 'independence', *Cinderella* was still attached to the stepmother, therefore a dependency link continued to exist. A conflux of events and circumstances would eventually led the newborn state to walk on a pair of already weakened and broken heels, and running on them would make it topple and fall into what is denominated state failure. We cannot dare to say that the fairy tale/horror story has ended, because struggling between a religious oriented civil war which, [although predominant] is not the root cause of failure, a constant power struggle, the lack of a strong government, the loss of territory, the intervention of the stepmother and also economic despair, the CAR is still on the floor. Now, stepping up is a possibility but, it has to be done slowly and cautiously in order to prevent falling again. One by one each of the factors has to be overturned, but as Berti (2015) has explained, the focus point should be a strong government, since the lack of it is the root cause of failure. Consequently, religion has been mistaken as the root cause of the problem, and although there is a tie between religion and conflict, it is only a veil for the weak government problem to be covered up.

The danger of a failed stated is when it verges towards collapse because it is then more difficult to reverse the damage (Rotberg, 2002). We can conclude that presently the CAR has met the criteria for it to be classified as a failed state. Nevertheless, it has not yet reached the point of collapse. There are many achievements that, little as the may seem, have become determinant to the possibility of overturning the current situation. Of course, it is not an easy path, yet the CAR Cinderella tale might eventually, in the long run, finally reach a happy ending.

## Notes

- 1 The French killed two local chiefs Mindogon Ngboundoulou in 1927, Jean-Bedel Bokassa's and Barka Ngainombey in 1928, both war experts and potential rebels. In all, "between 1890 and 1940, half the population of the CAR perished from a combination of microbial shock and colonial violence." (International Crisis Group, 2007).
- 2 "The absence of a civil census, an administration worthy of the name and even roads, schools and health centres, especially in the interior" reigns in the only country in the region that does not produce oil. (ibid)  
The sectarian violence uprooted nearly 1.2 million people. After four years, 384,000 people are still displaced and more than 467,000 people are still refugees in Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo (The World Bank in Central African Republic, 2017).
- 3 Testimony of Nestor-Désiré Nongo Aziagbia, Roman Catholic Bishop of Bossangoa, before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, "Crisis in the Central African Republic," (Arieff, 2014).
- 4 Data and graphics of the CAR's GDP rates can be found in <https://data.worldbank.org/country/central-african-republic>

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