

France: Why intervene in Mali and not Central African Republic?

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When France received requests from two of its former African colonies to intervene in their domestic conflicts these past couple of months, its replies could not have been more different.

Mali's calls were answered with a swift and affirmative response, and France found itself intervening in Africa once again, having been involved in conflicts in Libya and the Ivory Coast in 2011. France sent 2,500 troops who, together with the Malian army, have so far retaken several strategically important towns and are continuing to sweep north.

By contrast, when President François Bozizé of the Central African Republic (CAR) petitioned the country's former colonial ruler for assistance in fighting rebels, his calls were firmly rejected despite the fact the insurgency was gaining significant ground and looked like it could threaten the capital Bangui before too long. This seemed to be at odds with typical French post-colonial policy, especially given that the French have three military bases in the region.



Residents flee a rebel advance in the Central African Republic earlier this year. Photograph: Sia Kambou/AFP/Getty Images

Liberté, égalité, post-colonial legacé

Since independence in 1960, the Central African Republic has largely been an authoritarian state, with violence and coups an intrinsic part of its recent history. France continued to remain involved in CAR after independence, propping up dictatorships and supplying aid to the region. France even intervened in 1979 to remove Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa from power.

This was fairly typical of France's attitude towards Africa; since the 1960s, it has intervened over 50 times in former colonies.

In recent years, however, France's desire to remain involved in CAR appear to have waned. The threat to

Bozizé's rule was certainly serious enough to warrant calls for external intervention; the insurgency and ensuing humanitarian crisis posed a threat to the long-term stability of the state. And President Bozizé's policy of keeping the army weak (to mitigate the likelihood of a military coup) meant there was a genuine fear that the rebels could overrun the capital.

Rather than being the exception, however, France's response to CAR could become the new norm in the stance towards Africa. Although France is intervening whole-heartedly in Mali, it may be the case that the country is, more broadly, trying to take more of a back seat in their former colonies.

François Hollande has emphasised that engaging in northern Mali is not a neo-colonial move, but rather the result of one sovereign nation asking another for help. He seems to see the battle against militant Islamists as entirely separate to the former policy of 'Françafrique'. And it is important to note that it is not just France, but a number of other western countries such as the US and UK that are concerned about the prospect of increasingly influential Islamist militias in west Africa.

CAR stuck in reverse

So where does this leave CAR? When France refused to intervene, Bozizé had little option but to enter into peace negotiations with the Seleka rebels. But even with a tentative peace deal having been signed, it remains uncertain whether CAR can move forward, or whether the political situation will degenerate once more in the run up to presidential elections in 2016.

Now he knows France will not bail him out, Bozizé is being forced to take a more conciliatory stances towards the opposition. However, given his track record of maintaining his grip on power by any means – including trying to amend the constitution – it remains to be seen if his opponents will accept his compromises. Indeed, Bozizé's acceptance of peace talks was understandably seen by many as an act of self-preservation, and the former rebels remain opposed to his continued hold on power. Although it was a positive move, it is unlikely Bozizé's appointment of opposition representative Nicholas Tiangaye as prime minister will have done too much to change that attitude.

More broadly, CAR's weak institutions and history of coups and violence does not bode well. The International Crisis Group has described CAR as a "phantom state" and the prospect of democracy prevailing in 2016, let alone the maintenance of peace until then, seems uncertain.

As Bozizé found out recently, France today is less willing to prop up leaders in its former colonies. This will potentially leave the burden of future interventions on coalitions of African troops. Indeed, African troops were on hand to prop up Bozizé's government when western forces were found wanting.

What appears to be emerging under Hollande is a shift in French foreign policy goals in Africa. La Françafrique used to be France's foreign policy goal in itself. Now, France's stated policy is to enter into the African political sphere only when it directly relates to broader French foreign policy goals.

Hollande's predecessor, Nicholas Sarkozy, ran for office in 2007 arguing for an end to La Françafrique, before performing a swift about turn. The intervention in the Ivory Coast proved that old habits die hard. Hollande passed the first test for his new policy in CAR. Whether it can survive the desert sands of northern Mali, the next challenge to French interests or next crisis in a former French colony remains to be seen.