

Central African Republic: Closing Civic Space

Journalists, Civil Society, Opposition Parties Face Harassment, Restrictions



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Selection of Central African Republic newspapers, Bangui, January 2023 © 2023 Lewis Mudge/Human Rights Watch

- The government of the Central African Republic is cracking down on civil society, media, and opposition political parties ahead of local elections in 2023.
- The specter of a de facto one-party state should raise serious concerns about the potential for human rights violations and the narrowing of democratic space and free expression.
- Diplomats and regional groups should press for building strong institutions to protect human rights, but the greatest responsibility falls on the president himself.

(Nairobi) – The government of the [Central African Republic](#) is cracking down on civil society, media, and opposition political parties ahead of local and national elections later in 2023, Human Rights Watch said today.

Government institutions, including the police, have threatened civil society advocates, accused them of collaborating with armed groups, and prevented opposition political protests. The government should end these violations and strengthen government entities – including by assuring the independence of the judiciary – to ensure that officials who attack critics of the government are held accountable.

“With the elections on the horizon, Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra should be responding to critics and seeking ways to work with them instead of attacking them,”

said [Lewis Mudge](#), Central Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Instead, government officials are harassing civil society, journalists, and opposition party members, crushing the hopes that a rights-respecting state would emerge after the 2016 ratification of the new constitution.”



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Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra speaks at his inauguration in Bangui, March 30, 2021 © 2021 AP Photo/Adrienne Surprenant

The pressure and threats against political opponents and civil society members come as local elections, originally slated for September 2022, are due to be held in July. The government and allies from the ruling party, the United Hearts Party (*Mouvement Cœurs unis*, known by its French acronym MCU), are also pushing for a referendum to amend the constitution to allow the president to run for a third term in 2025.

As debate around a constitutional referendum intensified, the government prevented opposition parties from protesting the proposed change, while permitting supporters from the pro-referendum camp to hold rallies, sometimes with police protection. This is a violation of the right to peaceful protest, protected both by the Central African constitution and by international law, Human Rights Watch said.

In January and February 2023, Human Rights Watch interviewed 30 journalists, civil society activists, political opponents, and diplomatic and government officials in Bangui, the capital.

Journalists and activists said they have been reluctant to criticize the government to avoid being labeled as political opponents and threatened. Two pro-MCU associations that mobilize youth, the *Requins* and *Galaxie Nationale*, are campaigning for the referendum and harassing opponents, both online and in the streets.

In March 2022, the government used a dialogue intended to establish a roadmap for reconciliation with the opposition after the 2020 presidential elections to promote a constitution reform that would allow a third presidential term. Opponents to a constitutional change condemned the move while some even boycotted the dialogue.

Despite these protests and [statements](#) of concern from some members of the international community, President Touadéra and his party continued to advocate changing the constitution, first proposing a technical committee to recommend changes. The Constitutional Court ruled that such a committee was unconstitutional. In response, Touadéra [removed](#) the court's [president](#), setting off a judicial crisis that continues to threaten the court's legitimacy.

The former court president, Danièle Darlan, told Human Rights Watch that on March 7, 2022, Russian Embassy officials visited her and asked her for advice on how to change the constitution to enable Touadéra to stay in power. "It was not normal for a diplomat to approach the head of the court to see how to get the president to stay on," Darlan said.

Russian forces from the Wagner group, a Russian private military security contractor with apparent links to the Russian government, have been in the country since 2018, operating under murky training agreements with the government. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) that Russian forces, possibly linked to Wagner, have summarily executed, tortured, and beaten civilians since 2019. The pro-MCU youth groups, in particular Galaxie Nationale, also have marched in support of Russian intervention in the Central African Republic and across the world. Media reports [indicate](#) that Wagner has provided financial support to Galaxie Nationale.

Central African Republic government officials have threatened and harassed individuals who are not in favor of the referendum. Three political opponents told Human Rights Watch that prosecutors, court officials, or police summoned them in recent months to respond to false allegations that they are linked to armed groups.

On at least one occasion, in October, Russians thought to be from the Wagner group were present when the police had summoned an opposition leader. "It is meant as a threat and intimidation," the political opponent told Human Rights Watch. These political opponents have been threatened with arrest and are increasingly referred to by Touadéra as enemies of the country, criminals, and terrorists.

The president's claims are repeated online by pro-government youth associations whose members openly threaten individuals perceived as opponents, which appears to be part of a broader strategy to instill fear, restrict political participation, and eventually suppress dissent, Human Rights Watch said.

On November 22, 2022, the United Nations' independent expert on the situation of human rights in Central African Republic, Yao Agbetse, [warned](#) that the political situation could erode the peace and reconciliation process. "Speculation and arguments interpreting the law, including on social networks ... are likely to create a climate of mistrust of politicians and sow confusion."

Human rights defenders said that pro-government groups were creating a climate of fear. "The victims don't want to talk to us now," one activist said. "Doctors won't share information with us, they won't even give us the medical certificates from attacks and human rights abuse because they are scared. It is difficult for us to work."

Political tensions around the referendum are occurring amid a resurgence of armed group activity in the north and southeast.

Diplomats in Bangui said they encourage officials to respect the rights of political opponents, journalists, and activists. Regional institutions like the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) could encourage the country to carry through on its promises to build stronger institutional mechanisms to protect human rights. However, the responsibility for truly reining in hate speech and threatening language rests with Touadéra himself, Human Rights Watch said.

The Republican Bloc for the Defense of the Constitution (*Bloc Républicain pour la Défense de la Constitution*, known as the BRDC), a coalition of opposition parties, has announced it will boycott upcoming local elections.

“The specter of a de facto one-party state should raise serious concerns about the potential for human rights violations and the narrowing of democratic space and free expression,” Mudge said. “International partners, including regional bodies, should publicly call out the Central African Republic’s ruling party and insist that it needs to work with its critics, rather than to silence them.”

For additional details, please see below.

The Central African Republic has been in crisis since late 2012, when mostly Muslim Seleka rebels began a [military campaign](#) against the government of then-President François Bozizé.

In August 2018, the Central African Republic and Russian authorities signed an [agreement](#) under which “primarily former military officers” from Russia, also called “specialists,” would train national forces. Some civil society leaders and political opponents believe the Russian presence has played an important role in the movement to roll back term limits and allow authoritarian rule to reemerge in the country.

Rwanda has troops in the Central African Republic both as a part of the UN peacekeeping mission – known by its French acronym MINUSCA – and also as a part of a bilateral agreement with the government. Media [reported](#) in late 2022 that troops present under the bilateral agreement are officially to be based in Bangui, but they have also been seen outside the capital.

Attacks on Opponents, Media

The use of hate speech against those who oppose the governing party, or even against journalists who report on the opposition’s position, raise the chances for politically motivated violence.

One prominent journalist said: “We continue to have red lines that we can’t cross. Our editors are scared for our safety, so they don’t want us criticizing the Russians or the Rwandans. They don’t want us talking about the rise in insecurity. They don’t want us talking about the referendum.”

Another journalist said: “There are subjects that are getting difficult to raise: Chadian rebels who are supported by Russians, Ndassima [a gold mine in the central Ouaka province controlled by Wagner forces] is almost impossible to talk about The editors at the radio decided that there were some things we had to be careful with. If the Russians killed their own that easily, they wouldn’t think twice about killing Central Africans.” This reference is to three Russian journalists who were killed in an ambush north of Bangui in 2018. The journalists were investigating Wagner’s increasing role in the country and [independent reports](#) point to Russians as being behind their assassinations.

Members of civil society also feel threatened. One activist’s young son was handed a note outside the boy’s nursery school. “This is for your [parent],” a man on a motorbike said to the boy. The note said, “shut up.” Days later, several young men approached the activist’s home. “We just want to see the traitor,” the young men said.

“They said this because I have been raising questions about what the government is doing with this referendum and asking why Wagner and the Rwandans are here,” the activist said.

The *Requins* (French for sharks), one of the youth groups pushing for the referendum, were [created](#) in 2019 by Héritier Doneng, chief of staff in the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth and Sport. Galaxie Nationale, the other group, is a vehemently pro-government association, or platform, led by Didacien Kossimatchi.

In January, Doneng [stated](#) that Gervais Lakosso, a civil society leader, was not Central African but Congolese, that he worked for the political opposition, and that he should leave the country. “It is an indirect threat,” Lakosso told Human Rights Watch. “The real objective here is to silence those who criticize the referendum, so they want to discredit me and say that I am not a Central African.”

Kossimatchi and Galaxie Nationale have been among the most hostile toward political opponents. In July 2022, the organization released a communiqué announcing operation [Barbarossa](#) and recommending that its supporters should use machetes, bats, and knives to capture targeted individuals alive. Operation Barbarossa's targets included leaders of armed groups and opposition politicians. Targets they have named include: Emile Bizon, the head of the Central African Bar Association; Olivier Manguéréka, the lawyer for Martin Ziguélé, a political opposition figure; and Ben Wilson Ngassan, a journalist.

In September 2022, Galaxie Nationale issued a statement calling for the arrest of several political opponents, providing the location of their homes.

Galaxie Nationale was formally suspended by a government decree, but it continues to regularly publish communiqués, some of which threaten groups and individuals, on its Facebook page.

Touadéra has often called for the need to rein in hate speech and has established a [mechanism](#) to address it, but this appears to be a halfhearted measure. A foreign diplomat told Human Rights Watch: "Touadéra calls for the punishment of anyone who has partaken in hate speech, but then he is silent on Galaxie. It is striking and it's clear the group enjoys total impunity and won't face any retribution. The Galaxie communiqués are echoing his messages."

On December 1, 2022, the country's independence day, Touadéra gave a speech accusing the BRDC opposition coalition leaders of violating laws and provoking hatred of the country. He said the bloc is close with rebel groups and called them a criminal organization. During the speech the president also called on his "compatriots to ... be vigilant and to continue to denounce ... all the plans of the enemies of the Republic." He later condemned "speeches inciting hatred and violence that have gone viral on social networks," without acknowledging that his supporters have been [linked](#) to acts of incitement.

One prominent political opponent told Human Rights Watch, "Touadéra has his own militias, the Requins and Galaxie. They are openly saying that we should be eliminated. They say that we are tied to the CPC [the French acronym for a coalition of armed opposition groups]. We have nothing to do with the CPC. We are in a political fight, but they will say that we are terrorists."

A civil society activist said: "To be called the CPC is to be threatened, it is a death threat. Héritier [the leader of the Requins] said I was CPC. So now I just don't go out at night."

The Constitution and the Republican Dialogue

The guiding principles of the Central African Republic's constitution, adopted in 2016, were initially set forth as recommendations of the 2015 Bangui Forum, a series of national consultations to map out a political transition after widespread violence in 2013 and 2014. Key issues included the need to curb impunity, tribalism, and corruption; prevent coups, and end indefinite rule of heads of state. Article 35 of the [Constitution](#) strictly limits presidential office holders to two consecutive five-year terms. Touadéra was first elected in 2016 and was re-elected in 2020 amid an [offensive](#) by armed opposition groups that briefly threatened Bangui. The next presidential vote is due in 2025.

A republican dialogue was held in March 2022 as part of a ceasefire declaration by Touadéra.

He said the dialogue was an essential part of a [roadmap for peace](#), known as the Luanda Roadmap, negotiated by the heads of state and governments of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) in 2021 under the auspices of Angola and Rwanda.

During the dialogue, members of Touadéra's party proposed amending the constitution to allow the president to run for a third term in 2025. This proposal drew verbal protests from the opposition and civil society. One participant in the republican dialogue told Human Rights Watch: "We went [to the dialogue] and we wanted to talk about reconciliation and peace and how to have a political compromise, but [the MCU] just wanted us to take up a different subject: changing the constitution."

The Requins and Galaxie Nationale

In 2019, the Requins emerged as a group aligned with the ruling party. The group attacked and threatened the political opposition online and spread false information about them.

By 2020, [according](#) to the UN, the Requins had expanded their role into a force involved in extrajudicial security operations. They emerged as a group linked to abductions and one that collaborates with some security forces, especially the presidential guard, and operates with impunity. Doneng, who did not respond to Human Rights Watch despite numerous attempts to contact him, is also the [spokesperson](#) of the Front Republicain, a pro-government organization. Civil society members said that the Front Republicain and the Requins operate together and are often viewed as the same organization.

Like the Requins, Galaxie Nationale frequently attacks the political opposition. Galaxie Nationale has also [threatened violence](#) against the MINUSCA forces, France, and anyone deemed to be against the ruling party.

In September 2022, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralization and Local Development [suspended](#) the activities of Galaxie Nationale, citing its incitement to hatred, division, and disturbance of the public order. However, the platform continued to produce news releases, signed by Kossimatchi, that were widely distributed on Facebook. The UN Panel of Experts [reported](#) that on November 23, President Touadéra gave Kossimatchi a ceremonial title on the country's independence day. Human Rights Watch was in contact with Kossimatchi, but to date he does not have the time to answer questions on Galaxie Nationale.

Media [reports](#) have also indicated that Kossimatchi is supported in part by the Wagner group.

Human Rights Watch spoke with three men, ages 26 and 27, who said that representatives of Doneng paid them to participate in protests across Bangui in support of the constitutional referendum. The men all separately reiterated the danger posed by speaking openly about the Requins and Galaxie Nationale. One man said:

If the Requins and the Galaxie knew that I was talking to you, they could kill me. You are learning hidden secrets. If someone sees me talking to a foreigner for any amount of time, the Requins will find me later and ask what we were talking about. If they knew we were talking about their operations, they would say that I was planning a coup d'état ... The Requins now do rounds at night as a part of their own "Operation Hibou [owl]." That is when they come and take people at night from the neighborhoods. This continues today.

Human Rights Watch spoke with four people who participated in a January 20 meeting with Marcel Djimassé, minister of civil service and administrative reform. The meeting was held in response to a joint letter from some members of the political opposition and civil society organizations. The letter had drawn attention to the increasing fuel costs across the country and raised the possibility of popular action. In response, Djimassé is reported by meeting participants as saying, "You threaten us, but we have our own people. We have our Requins and our Galaxie and we can get them out on the street." [Human Rights Watch attempted to contact Djimassé, but he did not respond.](#)

Several sources, including journalists, members of civil society, political opponents, former armed rebels, foreign diplomats, and UN staff expressed concern to Human Rights Watch that the Requins and Galaxie National members could be turned into a quasi-official militia.

Push Toward a Constitutional Referendum

In May 2022, despite protests from the political opposition and civil society, the governing party [announced](#) a parliamentary committee to propose constitutional changes that would remove term limits. In August, Touadéra announced a constitutional referendum to amend the constitution. Later that month, he officially created a committee to draft a new constitution. In [response](#), the UN independent expert on the situation of human rights in the Central African Republic, and the UN

special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association said that the government should “ensure that drafting of a new constitution does not jeopardize ongoing efforts towards peace and reconciliation in the country.”

In September, the Constitutional Court – the highest court in the country for electoral disputes and other constitutional issues – [declared](#) the president’s move invalid. “The presidential decrees establishing the committee responsible for drafting the new constitution and designating members of the committee are unconstitutional and are annulled,” Darlan wrote in the ruling.

Media reports [quoted](#) Doneng, the Requins leader, as saying the decision was “treason against the will of the sovereign people.”

On September 29, a well-orchestrated protest took place outside the Constitutional Court to repudiate the decision and demand Darlan’s removal. Protesters interviewed alleged that Doneng and Kossimatchi, who were reportedly present, paid some of these protesters.

One participant in the protest said:

We were promised 5,000 francs (approximately US\$8). They had a bus, and we met at the pickup spot the next day at 8 a.m. ... They had banners and signs made. Some were professionally made, others we just cardboard and charcoal. On the banners things like “We want Madame Darlan to be fired” and the like were written. On the cardboard signs, there was more nasty stuff, calling her names. On the cardboard we had a skull with an X over it.

As we arrived there the leaders said: “We will tell you what to do.” Héritier [Doneng] and Kossimatchi were both there when we arrived ... All of this in front of the court was just to show the population that there are people in favor of the referendum. But it is mostly young men. Some women came later. Not everyone was paid, and there are some true MCU members there to support the party, but most of the young men were paid ...

When we arrived, it was like school; they choose the shortest to be in front with the banner and the others get behind. This is for the photos. Then they tell us to yell, “Madame Darlan must leave!” The police were there to make sure that we did not have any problems. They were all around us. The protest went until about noon. They gave us some water and a ride home in the bus. In the end, they handed out the money very discreetly through a focal point. We only got 1,500 francs (approximately US\$2.40). Some of the guys got less and ripped up the money they were so mad.

On October 10, the Public Service Ministry issued a decree stating that Darlan, among others, was forcibly [retired](#) as a law professor at Bangui University. On October 24, she was dismissed from the Constitutional Court by presidential decree, which stated that her retirement as a professor was an impediment to her continued service on the court.

On January 3, 2023, the Constitutional Court, now under a new president – Jean-Pierre Waboué – declared that the decision to forcibly retire Darlan from the court was unconstitutional. However, the court ruled that there was nothing practical to be done because Darlan had [announced](#) on a radio program that she was turning a page and did not intend to return to the court.

The president and his supporters have continued to insist that a referendum on the issue would show the will of the people.

On February 22, Touadéra reiterated in a television [interview](#) that a referendum was “something the people needed,” and something “the people wanted.” A paid protester challenged that statement, telling Human Rights Watch, “The president of the country says that this referendum is the will of the people, but it is fake, or at least I was a fake protester.”

On January 20, the Constitutional Court declared that a plan to initiate a referendum was legal, clearing the way for the constitutional reform. Any referendum will be debated in parliament but is

likely to pass as the MCU is the majority party. A leading member of the opposition told Human Rights Watch: “Now we wait for the referendum. We will debate it in parliament, but we don’t have the numbers.”

Barriers to Protest

As political tensions continue, opposition leaders and members of civil society are finding it increasingly difficult to organize peaceful street protests. While the MCU and President Touadéra have used rallies to support the referendum, government officials have not always allowed the same right to groups that oppose it. Public protests, which are protected by [international law](#), are an important means to express discontent across the world and enable people to freely express support or opposition to government policy.

Opposition members have pointed to at least three specific instances in the last six months in which they sought authorization to protest the referendum but were denied permission based on security concerns. At the same time, rallies in support of the referendum – led by the Requins and Galaxie Nationale – are allowed and sometimes given police protection.

One opposition leader said: “It is illegal for us to march in the streets and that was something we did in the past. We called the people to join us, to show force. But now the government says we can’t because it disturbs public order ... But the pro-referendum camp is doing marches. Their strategy is to say that ‘the people are insisting.’”

On April 5, Human Rights Watch spoke with Didacien Kossimatchi, the leader of Galaxie Nationale, who said:

The Minister of Interior suspended our actions, but we were not officially notified. Galaxie Nationale is a member of the civil society. We say no to rebellion and no to coups d’état.

The opposition supports the rebellion. The opposition insults the people of the Central African Republic. The BRDC is linked to the CPC, we have explained this on our social media sites. The BRDC even sends the rebels money.

It is not right to say that Galaxie Nationale promotes hate. However, the opposition insults us and if these people are a threat to the stability of the country we cannot cross our arms.

We do not pay people to protest. We have over 800,000 members so yes we may buy water for them during a protest, but we don’t pay them. They do this out of patriotic duty.

We want the constitution changed. We support the referendum. That is why we asked for [Danièle] Darlan to be forcibly retired. Darlan was not doing her work as she needed to do. She is tied to Crépin [Mboli-Goumba, a member of the opposition and BRDC] and he was telling her what to do. We wanted her to do her work impartially. If she had done her work impartially it would not have been an issue.

An additional section quoting Didacien Kossimatchi was added to the report after publication.