

= Saint @-@ Sylvestre coup d'état =

The Saint @-@ Sylvestre coup d'état was a coup d'état staged by Jean @-@ Bédél Bokassa , leader of the Central African Republic ( CAR ) army , and his military officers against the government of President David Dacko on 31 December 1965 and 1 January 1966 . Dacko , Bokassa 's cousin , took over the country in 1960 , and Bokassa , a military officer in the French army , joined the CAR army in 1962 . By 1965 , the country was in turmoil ? plagued by corruption and slow economic growth , while its borders were breached by rebels from neighboring countries . Dacko obtained financial aid from the communist People 's Republic of China , but despite this support , the country 's problems persisted . Bokassa made plans to take over the government ; Dacko was made aware of this , and attempted to counter by forming the gendarmerie headed by Jean Izamo , who quickly became Dacko 's closest adviser .

With the aid of Captain Alexandre Banza , Bokassa started the coup New Year 's Eve night in 1965 . First , Bokassa and his men captured Jean Izamo , locking him in a cellar at Camp de Roux . Bokassa 's men then occupied the capital , Bangui , and overpowered the gendarmerie and other resistance . After midnight , Dacko headed back to the capital , where he was promptly arrested , forced to resign from office and then imprisoned at Camp Kassai . According to official reports , eight people were killed for resisting the coup . By the end of January 1966 , Izamo was tortured to death , but Dacko 's life was spared because of a request from the French government , which Bokassa was trying to satisfy . Bokassa justified the coup by claiming he had to save the country from falling under the influence of communism , and cut off diplomatic relations with China . In the early days of his government , Bokassa dissolved the National Assembly , abolished the Constitution and issued a number of decrees , banning begging , female circumcision , and polygamy , among other things . Bokassa initially struggled to obtain international recognition for the new government . However , after a successful meeting with the president of Chad , Bokassa obtained recognition of the regime from other African nations , and eventually from France , the former colonial power .

Bokassa 's right @-@ hand man Banza attempted his own coup in April 1969 , but one of his co @-@ conspirators informed the president of the plan . Banza was put in front of a military tribunal and sentenced to death by firing squad . Dacko , who remained in isolation at Camp de Roux , sent a letter to the Chinese ambassador in Brazzaville in June 1969 , which Bokassa intercepted . Bokassa charged Dacko with threatening state security and transferred him to the infamous Ngaragba Prison , where many prisoners taken captive during the coup were still being held . A local judge convinced Bokassa that there was a lack of evidence to convict Dacko , who was instead placed under house arrest . In September 1976 , Dacko was named personal adviser to the president ; the French government later convinced him to take part in a coup to overthrow Bokassa , who was under heavy criticism for his ruthless dictatorial rule . This coup was carried out on 20 and 21 September 1979 , when Dacko became president again , only to be overthrown in another coup two years later .

= = Background = =

In 1958 , after the French Fourth Republic began to consider granting independence to most of its African colonies , nationalist leader Barthélemy Boganda met with Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle to discuss terms for the independence of Oubangui @-@ Chari , a French colonial territory which later became the Central African Republic ( CAR ) . De Gaulle accepted his request , and on 1 December 1958 , Boganda declared the establishment of the autonomous CAR , with full independence to follow soon . He became the autonomous territory 's first Prime Minister and intended to serve as the first President of the independent CAR . However , he was killed in a plane crash on 29 March 1959 , while en route to the capital , Bangui .

Boganda 's right @-@ hand man Abel Goumba , described as " intelligent , honest , and strongly nationalistic " by author Brian Titley in *Dark Age : The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* , succeeded him as the leader of the CAR . In May 1959 , a month into Goumba 's term , David

Dacko took control of the government . Dacko , a former member of Boganda 's cabinet and party leader of the Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa ( MESAN ) , had the support of the French high commissioner Roger Barberot , the Bangui chamber of commerce and Boganda 's widow Michelle Jourdain . Two months later , Dacko dismissed Goumba from his new post as minister of finance . Goumba and Pierre Maleombho , the former president of the National Assembly who was ousted by Dacko , left the MESAN party and organized their own opposition party , Democratic Evolution Movement of Central Africa ( MEDAC ) , on 25 June 1960 . Meanwhile , on August 13 , 1960 , Boganda 's dream was realized when the Central African Republic ( CAR ) attained formal independence from France .

MEDAC became moderately popular , was approved by Etienne Ngounio ( the Dacko @-@ appointed president of MESAN ) , and received significant support in by @-@ elections on 20 September . Dacko viewed MEDAC as a dissident party and sought to disestablish it ? he soon received power from the National Assembly to deal with his opponents in any way he saw fit . In December 1960 , Dacko dissolved MEDAC and Goumba was arrested for " fomenting disorder by questioning Dacko 's assumption of power " . Goumba was eventually sentenced to life in prison , but fled into exile in France .

On 1 January 1962 , Dacko 's cousin , Jean @-@ Bédél Bokassa , left the French Army and joined the military forces of the CAR with the rank of battalion commandant . Over a year later , Bokassa became commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the 500 soldiers in the Central African army . Due to his relation to Dacko and experience abroad in the French military , Bokassa was able to quickly rise through the ranks of the army , becoming the Central African army 's first colonel on 1 December 1964 .

Bokassa sought recognition for his status as the army 's leader ; he frequently appeared in public wearing all his military decorations , and in ceremonies often tried to sit next to President Dacko to hint at his importance in the government . Bokassa constantly involved himself in heated arguments with Jean @-@ Paul Douate , the government 's chief of protocol , who admonished him for not following the correct order of seating at presidential tables . At first , Dacko found his cousin 's antics for power and recognition amusing . Despite the recent rash of African military coups , Dacko publicly dismissed the possibility that Bokassa would someday try to take control of the country . At a state dinner , he said , " Colonel Bokassa only wants to collect medals and he is too stupid to pull off a coup d 'état " . Other members of Dacko 's cabinet saw Bokassa as a major threat to the regime . Jean @-@ Arthur Bandio , the minister of interior , recommended that Bokassa be brought into the cabinet , which he hoped would both satisfy the colonel 's desire for recognition and break his connections with the army . To prevent the possibility of a military coup , Dacko created the gendarmerie , an armed police force of 500 , headed by Jean Izamo , and a 120 @-@ member presidential security guard , led by Prosper Mounoumbaye .

= = Origins = =

Dacko 's government faced a number of problems during 1964 and 1965 : the economy experienced stagnation , the bureaucracy started to fall apart , and the country 's boundaries were constantly breached by Lumumbists from the south and the rebel Sudan People 's Liberation Army from the east . Under pressure from radicals in MESAN and in an attempt to cultivate alternative sources of support and display his independence in foreign policy , Dacko established diplomatic relations with the People 's Republic of China ( PRC ) in September 1964 . A delegation led by Meng Yieng and agents of the Chinese government toured the country , showing Communist propaganda films . Soon after , the PRC gave the CAR an interest @-@ free loan of one billion CFA francs ( 20 million French francs ) ; however , the aid failed to prevent the prospect of a financial collapse for the country . Another problem which plagued the government was widespread corruption . Bokassa felt that he needed to take over the CAR government to remove the influence of Communism and solve all the country 's problems . According to Samuel Decalo , a scholar on African government , Bokassa 's personal ambitions most likely played the most important role in his decision to launch a coup against the government .

Dacko sent Bokassa to Paris as part of a delegation for the Bastille Day celebrations in July 1965 . After attending a 23 July ceremony to mark the closing of a military officer training school he had attended decades earlier , Bokassa planned to return to the CAR . However , Dacko had forbidden his return , and Bokassa spent the next few months trying to obtain the support of friends in the French and Central African armed forces . Dacko eventually yielded to pressure and allowed Bokassa back in October .

Tensions between Dacko and Bokassa increased . In December , Dacko approved a budget increase for Izamo 's gendarmerie , but rejected the budget proposal for Bokassa 's army . At this point , Bokassa told friends he was annoyed by Dacko 's treatment and was " going for a coup d 'état " . Dacko planned to replace Bokassa with Izamo as his personal military adviser , and wanted to promote army officers loyal to the government , while demoting Bokassa and his close associates . Dacko was not silent about his plans ; he hinted at his intentions to elders of the Bobangui village , who informed Bokassa of the plan in turn . Bokassa realized he had to act against Dacko quickly , and worried that his 500 @-@ man army would be no match for the gendarmerie and the presidential guard . He was also concerned the French would intervene to aid Dacko , as had occurred after the 23 February 1964 coup d 'état in Gabon against President Léon M 'ba . After receiving word of the coup from the country 's vice president , officials in Paris sent paratroopers to Gabon in a matter of hours and M 'ba was quickly restored to power .

Bokassa found substantive support from his co @-@ conspirator , Captain Alexandre Banza , who was commander of the Camp Kassai military base in northeast Bangui , and , like Bokassa , had served in the French army in posts around the world . Banza was an intelligent , ambitious and capable man who played a major role in planning the coup . By December , many people began to anticipate the potential turmoil that would result . Dacko 's personal advisers alerted him that Bokassa " showed signs of mental instability " and needed to be arrested before he sought to bring down the government , but Dacko failed to heed these warnings .

= = Coup d 'état on 31 December and 1 January = =

Early in the evening of 31 December 1965 , Dacko left the Palais de la Renaissance to visit one of his ministers ' plantations southwest of the capital . At 22 : 30 WAT ( UTC 21 : 30 ) , Captain Banza gave orders to his officers to begin the coup : one of his captains was to subdue the security guard in the presidential palace , while the other was to take control of Radio @-@ Bangui to prevent communication between Dacko and his followers . Bokassa called Izamo at his headquarters , asking him to come to Camp de Roux to sign some papers that needed his immediate attention . Izamo , who was at a New Year 's Eve celebration with friends , reluctantly agreed and traveled in his wife 's car to the camp . Upon arrival , he was confronted by Banza and Bokassa , who informed him of the coup in progress . When asked if he would support the coup , Izamo said no , leading Bokassa and Banza to overpower him and hold him in a cellar .

Shortly after midnight , in the first minutes of 1 January 1966 , Bokassa and Banza organized their troops and told them of their plan to take over the government . Bokassa claimed that Dacko had resigned from the presidency and given the position to his close advisor Izamo , then told the soldiers that the gendarmerie would take over the CAR army , which had to act now to keep its position . He then asked the soldiers if they would support his course of action ; the men who refused were locked up . At 00 : 30 WAT , Bokassa and his supporters left Camp de Roux to take over the capital . They encountered little resistance and were able to take Bangui . Bokassa and Banza then rushed to the Palais de la Renaissance , where they tried to arrest Dacko , who was nowhere to be found . Bokassa began to panic , as he believed the president had been warned of the coup in advance , and immediately ordered his soldiers to search for Dacko in the countryside until he was found .

Dacko was not aware of the events taking place in the capital . After leaving his minister 's plantation near midnight , he headed to Simon Samba 's house to ask the Aka Pygmy leader to conduct a year @-@ end ritual . After an hour at Samba 's house , he was informed of the coup in Bangui . According to Titley , Dacko then left for the capital , in hopes of stopping the coup with the

help of loyal members of the gendarmerie and French paratroopers . Others like Thomas E. O 'Toole , professor of sociology and anthropology at St. Cloud State University , believe that Dacko was not trying to mount a resistance ? instead , he was planning on resigning and handing his power over to Izamo . In any case , Dacko was arrested by soldiers patrolling Pétévo Junction , on the western border of the capital . He was taken back to the presidential palace , where Bokassa hugged the president and told him , " I tried to warn you ? but now it 's too late " . President Dacko was taken to Ngaragba Prison in east Bangui at around 02 : 00 WAT . In a move that he thought would boost his popularity in the country , Bokassa ordered prison director Otto Sacher to release all prisoners in the jail . Bokassa then took Dacko to Camp Kassaï at 03 : 20 WAT , where the president was forced to resign from office . Later , Bokassa 's officers announced on Radio @-@ Bangui that the Dacko government had been toppled and Bokassa had taken over control . In the morning , Bokassa addressed the public via Radio @-@ Bangui :

Central Africans ! Central Africans ! This is Colonel Bokassa speaking to you . Since 3 : 00 AM this morning your army has taken control of the government . The Dacko government has resigned . The hour of justice is at hand . The bourgeoisie is abolished . A new era of equality among all has begun . Central Africans , wherever you may be , be assured that the army will defend you and your property ... Long live the Central African Republic !

= = Aftermath = =

Officially , eight people died trying to resist the coup . Afterwards , Bokassa 's officers went around the country , arresting Dacko 's political allies and close friends , including Simon Samba , Jean @-@ Paul Douate and more than 60 presidential security guards , who were all taken to Ngaragba Prison . Prosper Mounoumbaye , the director of the presidential security , fled the country . Weeks later , he was detained by the Congolese and handed over to Bokassa on 23 January 1966 . At Camp Kassaï , he was beaten and tortured to death , in full view of Bokassa , Banza and Dacko . Jean Izamo met a similar fate : he was transferred to Ngaragba Prison on 10 January , but was tortured to death by the month 's end . President Dacko 's life was spared , as Bokassa wanted international recognition for his government and France had threatened to cut off aid to the CAR if Dacko was killed . Bokassa had Dacko detained in a small room at Camp Kassaï , where he was cut off from communication with the outside world and placed on a highly restrictive diet . On 3 February , he was taken to Camp de Roux , where he remained in isolation .

In the meantime , Bokassa engaged in self @-@ promotion before the media , showing his countrymen his French army medals , and displaying his strength , fearlessness and masculinity . He formed a new government called the Revolutionary Council , invalidated the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly , calling it " a lifeless organ no longer representing the people " . In his address to the nation , Bokassa claimed that the government would hold elections in the future , a new assembly would be formed , and a new constitution would be written . He also told his countrymen that he would give up his power after the communist threat had been eliminated , the economy stabilized , and corruption rooted out . President Bokassa allowed MESAN to continue functioning , but barred all other political organizations from the country . In the coming months , Bokassa imposed a number of new rules and regulations : men and women between the ages of 18 to 55 had to provide proof that they had jobs , or else they would be fined or imprisoned ; begging was banned ; tom @-@ tom playing was allowed during the nights and weekends ; and a " morality brigade " was formed in the capital to monitor bars and dance halls . Polygamy , dowries and female circumcision were all abolished . Bokassa also opened a public transport system in Bangui and subsidized the creation of two national orchestras .

Despite the positive changes in the country , Bokassa had difficulty obtaining international recognition for his new government . He tried to justify the coup by explaining that Izamo and communist Chinese agents were trying to take over the government and that he had to intervene to save the CAR from the influence of communism . He alleged that Chinese agents in the countryside had been training and arming locals to start a revolution , and on 6 January 1966 , he dismissed the communist agents from the country and cut off diplomatic relations with China . Bokassa also

believed that the coup was necessary in order to prevent further corruption in the government .

Bokassa first secured diplomatic recognition from President François Tombalbaye of neighboring Chad , whom he met in Bouca , Ouham . After Bokassa reciprocated by meeting Tombalbaye on 2 April 1966 along the southern border of Chad at Fort Archambault , the two decided to help one another if either was in danger of losing power . Soon after , other African countries began to diplomatically recognize the new government . At first , the French government was reluctant to support the Bokassa regime , so Banza went to Paris to meet with French officials to convince them that the coup was necessary to save the country from turmoil . Bokassa met with Prime Minister Georges Pompidou on 7 July 1966 , but the French remained noncommittal in offering their support . After Bokassa threatened to withdraw from the franc monetary zone , President Charles de Gaulle decided to make an official visit to the CAR on 17 November 1966 . To the Bokassa regime , this visit meant that the French had finally accepted the new changes in the country .

= = = Banza and Dacko = = =

Alexandre Banza , who stood by Bokassa throughout the planning and execution of the coup , served as minister of finance and minister of state in the new government . Banza was successful in his efforts at building the government 's reputation abroad ; many believed that the natural @-@ born leader would no longer accept serving as Bokassa 's right @-@ hand man . In 1967 , Banza and Bokassa had a major argument regarding the country 's budget , as Banza adamantly opposed Bokassa 's extravagance at government events . Bokassa moved to Camp de Roux , where he felt he could safely run the government without having to worry about Banza 's thirst for power . On 13 April 1968 , Bokassa demoted Banza from minister of finance to minister of health , but let him remain in his position as minister of state . The following year , Banza made a number of remarks highly critical of Bokassa and his management of the economy . At this point , Bokassa realized that his minister would soon attempt to take over power in the country , so he removed him as his minister of state .

Banza revealed his intention to start a coup to Lieutenant Jean @-@ Claude Mandaba , the commanding officer of Camp Kassaï , who promptly informed Bokassa . When he entered Camp Kassaï on 9 April 1969 ( the coup was planned for that evening ) , Banza was ambushed , thrown into the trunk of a Mercedes and taken directly to Bokassa by Mandaba and his soldiers . At his house in Berengo , Bokassa nearly beat Banza to death before Mandaba suggested that Banza be put on trial for appearance 's sake . On 12 April , Banza presented his case before a military tribunal at Camp de Roux , where he admitted to his plan , but stated that he had not planned to kill Bokassa . Nevertheless , he was sentenced to death by firing squad , taken to an open field behind Camp Kassaï , executed and buried in an unmarked grave .

Ex @-@ President Dacko remained in isolation at Camp de Roux , where the French government , which expressed concern for his well @-@ being , sent a military attaché to visit him . Dacko told the attaché that he had not been given anything to read for more than two years ; the attaché negotiated with the prison head to get Dacko some books . However , Dacko 's living conditions failed to improve , and in June 1969 , Dacko sent a letter to the Chinese ambassador in Brazzaville , asking that he offer financial support to his family . The message was intercepted and handed over to Bokassa , who thought the letter was ample reason for him to get rid of Dacko . Dacko was charged with threatening state security and transferred to Ngaragba Prison . However , Bokassa dropped the charges on 14 July , after Judge Albert Kouda convinced him that there was insufficient evidence to get a conviction . Dacko stayed at the Palais de la Renaissance until his health improved , after which he was sent to live in Mokinda , Lobaye under house arrest . It was not until October 1969 ? almost four years after the coup ? that Bokassa began releasing other prisoners from Ngaragba .

Dacko remained under house arrest until he was named private adviser to President Bokassa on 17 September 1976 . Bokassa dissolved the government and formed the Central African Empire , which led to increasing international criticism in the late 1970s . Dacko managed to leave for Paris , where the French convinced him to cooperate in a coup to remove Bokassa from power and restore

him to the presidency . Dacko was installed as president on 21 September 1979 , but was once again removed from power by his army chief of staff , André Kolingba , in a bloodless coup d'état on 1 September 1981 . Bokassa lived in exile in Paris and was sentenced to death in absentia in December 1980 . Upon returning to the CAR in October 1986 , he was arrested and charged with treason , murder , cannibalism and embezzlement . He was cleared on the cannibalism charges , but was convicted on the rest and sentenced to death on 12 June 1987 . Kolingba commuted his sentence to life imprisonment in February 1988 , and then commuted it again to 20 years in prison . Kolingba later declared amnesty for all prisoners , so Bokassa was released from prison on 1 August 1993 .