

The Central African Republic – An Artificial State

Written by Keith Somerville

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/25/the-central-african-republic-an-artificial-state/>

KEITH SOMERVILLE, FEB 25 2014

Apart from the sensationalist coverage of the coronation of President Jean Bokassa as Emperor of the renamed Central African Empire in December 1977, and then the sensational reporting of his trial (which included allegations of cannibalism), the Central African Republic is one of the least known of Africa's states. However, it is also one of the most fragile and most dependent on external forces, notably France. In the early months of 2014 it gained international notoriety again with reports of attempted genocide, and ethnic cleansing in fighting between rival political forces and communities. These events have led to French and African Union intervention and a breakdown of law and order.

On 12 February 2014, the interim President of the Central African Republic (CAR), Catherine Samba-Panza, said she would "go to war" with Christian militias carrying out revenge attacks against Muslims. The attacks were the latest episode of communal violence since the Seleka rebel alliance overthrew President Francois Bozize in March 2013. Human Rights Watch has warned that the "minority Muslim population in the Central African Republic is being targeted in a relentless wave of coordinated violence that is forcing entire communities to leave the country". It urged the CAR government as well as French and African Union peacekeepers to take urgent steps to protect the remaining Muslim population from revenge attacks by predominantly Christian militias and allied residents. Two days later, France opted to increase its peacekeeping force in the CAR by 400 men to 2,000, who are supplementing more than 6,000 African Union peacekeepers.

The breakdown of law and order, the disintegration of the CAR army and the impotence of African Union and French peacekeeping troops meant that Muslims (who were being targeted because of the perception that they were responsible for the killings, rapes and looting carried out by the predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels after they seized power) were vulnerable and were fleeing in large numbers. But how did the seizure of power by Seleka create a level of hatred between Christian and Muslim communities that had not been apparent before?

The CAR: An Artificial Creation

The boundaries of what is today the CAR "were the outcomes of hazardous explorations, diplomatic agreements and the whims of colonial administrators," according to a former senior French colonial official who served there; It is almost a caricature of a post-colonial state which is a geographical expression rather than a nation with a sense of shared identity or purpose.[1] It was a source of earnings for the French colonial system through the export of gold, diamonds, cotton, coffee and timber. Apart from the small export-led sectors of the mining and agricultural economy, CAR was left undeveloped by colonialism. The republic, which became independent in 1960, was poor, had little infrastructure and no great sense of national identity among the eight major and 54 smaller ethnic groups which inhabited it. It was situated in a part of Central Africa that was to be wracked by conflict arising out of the artificial nature of the post-colonial states and competition between the new political elites.

Two of its five neighbours – Chad and Sudan – were to experience almost continuous warfare from the 1960s through into the new millennium. The porous borders and shifting patterns of warfare in the central African region, as well as the way that colonial borders had split communities between states (with ethnic groups in border areas of the CAR having close links with closely related populations in South Sudan, Darfur, Chad and the Congo) meant that the republic was ineluctably drawn into these conflicts and even ended up being the refuge for the Lord's Resistance

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Army (LRA) when it was forced out of Uganda and South Sudan.

External Interference

The CAR's position within this unstable region with external forces (Sudan, Libya, Chad and France) interfering in it or seeking to use its territory as a base for troops, meant that conflicts spilled over into the republic. Another consequence of the regional situation was that relations developed over time between warring factions in Chad or Darfur and CAR communities that had ethnic or linguistic links with them, particularly those in marginalized rural areas remote from the capital, Bangui, and from the more prosperous main export-dominated agricultural areas. This has led to accusations that Muslim groups in the CAR are foreigners or working for foreign, most recently Chadian, interests. France has consistently intervened in CAR politics since independence. It handed over power to a chosen CAR nationalist, David Dacko, who was initially seen as an ally who would allow France to maintain a military presence and continue to exploit economic resources through preferential access to mining and other resources.. French military forces (used both to intervene in CAR politics but also in neighbouring states such as Chad) stayed after independence and remained there until 1997 – they are back now in the guise of a peacekeeping force. The desire, emerging from its wider strategies in West and Central Africa, to maintain influence over government in Bangui led to the French assisting or even organizing coups in 1965, 1979 and 1981.[2] France even bankrolled the coronation of the CAR dictator, Jean-Bedel Bokassa.

In opposition to the French presence, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi sought closer relations with Bokassa as his excesses drove away even the French, who plotted to overthrow and replace him with David Dacko. At the time of his ouster in September 1979, Bokassa had been in Libya negotiating a deal for Libya to use military bases in the CAR near the border with Chad. The replacement of Bokassa did not end Libyan involvement, mainly because the CAR bordered Chad, where France and Libya were on opposite sides in the decades old war. Both Libya and France saw the CAR as a pivotal state, strategically linking the Sahel with the rest of Africa, as well as a source of potentially valuable or strategic resources – diamonds, gold and uranium. In the new millennium, Chad under Idriss Deby became an increasingly influential power in the region and it, too, saw the CAR as both a key border state influence over which could bolster Deby's control by denying opposing Chadian factions use of its territory. Deby became increasingly interested in gaining concessions to mine for uranium in CAR – Chad's involvement in supporting a series of CAR leaders (including Bozize and then the Seleka alliance) were linked with Deby's regional ambitions and attempts to get concessions for uranium exploitation.

Factional Conflicts and Rebel Risings

The overthrow of Bokassa in 1979 did not lead to a less conflictual style of politics in the CAR. Military and political leaders like General Andre Kolingba and Ange-Felix Patasse would compete both in elections, after the return to civilian rule in 1993, and militarily, as when Kolingba attempted a coup. Patasse then had to fight rebels from within the army who supported Kolingba and General Francois Bozize, a former chief of staff. External involvement in the factional conflicts was substantial with Libyan, Chadian and Congolese rebel forces all fighting for Patassé. When Bozize seized power, Chad swapped sides and backed him while developing ties with rebel groups from the Muslim communities along the unpoliced borders with Darfur and Chad. Muslims make up about 15% of the CAR population and have a strong role in the trading sector of the economy and in livestock production. In the most recent conflict Muslim groups came together in the Seleka rebel alliance, after Bozize was accused by rebel leaders of renegeing on a peace deal reached with them. Chad again swapped sides. In late 2012, Seleka forces now supported by Chadian fighters funded by Deby, overran much of the north and centre of the country. In March 2013 they took Bangui. Seleka/Chadian forces clashed with South African troops who had been sent by President Zuma to support Bozize as part of a deal that would involve South African companies gaining access to uranium and other mineral concessions. The South Africans suffered a humiliating defeat, with 13 soldiers killed. Bozize fled and Seleka took over. But Seleka was not an organized force with a clear command structure or the experience to run the government. It was a movement fighting to redress grievances of the people from a particular region and the anger of the rebels over Bozize's bad faith. The result was that the seizure of power led to a vacuum in a divided and unstable country vulnerable to external intervention.

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Plunder Trumps Political Power

The new head of state, Michael Djotodia, was nominally a Seleka leader but had little control over the bulk of the Seleka forces or the Chadians who had backed them. What followed was looting, killing and rape on a massive scale, as rebels sought to profit from their seizure of power at the expense of civilians. Many of the victims were Christians and media reports alleged, with the French government weighing to support this interpretation, that a Muslim movement was carrying out sectarian genocide. It was not. It was a previously marginalized and diverse rebel coalition seizing its chance of exploiting the prerogatives of military power. Intervention by an African Union military force (including, ironically, a large contingent of Chadians) and then French forces failed to stabilize the situation and Christian communities fearing attack formed their own militias, known as the anti-balaka. They fought back against the Seleka forces but began, with incitement by community leaders, to attack Muslims in general. Bangui has a large Muslim population, including traders from Chad, Sudan and Cameroon. These became targets as the anti-Seleka discourse of the militias became anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner, too.

The forced resignation of Djotodia and his replacement by a new interim president, Samba-Panza, backed by the AU, France and regional did not end the violence but appeared to give the green light to the anti-balaka to launch more concerted attacks against Muslims. This led to revenge attacks and to the fear expressed by human rights groups of the sectarian “cleansing” of Muslims. The effects of the factional fighting and ambitions of power-hungry politicians and rebel leaders has engendered violence between communities previously unknown in the CAR. It was not a country with a strong national identity but it did not experience sectarian violence and was not divided sharply along religious lines.

The causes of the conflict are rooted in the greed and selfish ambition of CAR political and military leaders, abetted by the interference and self-interest of France, Libya and Chad and compounded by the problem of developing national identity in an artificially-created state in which power-sharing, nation-building and inclusiveness have been the lowest priorities for a succession of regimes and their backers. The horror, confusion and clutching at all-encompassing explanations like sectarian hatred is “caused by inadequate descriptions of complex issues. The real problem lies in the fact that misdiagnosis is a dangerous business. Once a label is fixed to a conflict it can become an exclusive explanation for that”.[3] The misdiagnosis is that the conflict has been described – by human rights groups, NGOs and the French government – in simple terms like genocide or ethnic cleansing that grab attention and cry out for international solutions. There is clearly a need to stop the violence and restore government, but there is a pressing long-term need for an inclusive, power-sharing and redistributive solution that empowers people across the CAR’s regions and ends the marginalization of those not part of a ruling faction and its patronage network.

Conclusion

By the end of February 2014, the new interim government, African Union forces and the enhanced French presence had not made serious progress in disarming militias or ending sectarian violence. The lasting danger for CAR is that conflicts which were about rebel grievances and competition between powerful factions has been transformed into deep splits within the CAR that may have been latent for decades but which had not been characteristic of CAR politics. The CAR is an artificial creation with no great sense of national identity and a history of competition, with external interference for resources. CAR’s politicians, the AU and France are in for a long haul if they are to overcome this bitter divide that has opened and create the conditions for compromise and real sharing of power.

[1] Pierre Kalck, *Central African Republic: A Failure in Decolonization*, New York, Praeger, 1971, p. 1.

[2] See Keith Somerville, *Foreign Military Intervention in Africa*, London: Pimnter, 1990. Chapters two and three.

[3] Lucy Hovil, *Why are African conflicts so often misunderstood?*, African Arguments, 14 February 2014, <http://africanarguments.org/2014/02/10/why-do-we-continually-misunderstand-conflict-in-africa-by-lucy-hovil/> accessed 14 February 2014

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