Central African Republic: Pitting Muslims Against Christians

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On March 24, 2013, President Francois Bozizé, in power for the past decade, is overthrown by the predominantly Muslim Sékéla militia. Their offensive begins in December 2012, and gradually loots its way into the capital, Bangui, which they seize in March 2013. The presidential palace is overtaken and Michel Djotodia, the leader of the group, proclaims himself president of the Central African Republic.

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Séléka means ‘alliance’ in Sango, the national language of the country, and the militias come from the northeast, an infamously ‘dangerous’ zone in the region for the past decade. The statistics on their creation and empowerment are not clear since militias in the central African plateau go largely unnoticed (and the region is ripe with accounts of burning, looting and slaughtering that remain widely unknown). The final outcome is that for a number of reasons, people living at the fringes of the ungovernable nation felt dissatisfied with the Bozizé government and decided to march into the capital and take it over. And they did.

Since the self-proclaimed establishment in power by the Séléka and their exaggerated violence against civilians, a number of counter-militia groups came together to fight the intruders in equally bloody and brutal ways. These are generally known as the ‘anti-balaka’ groups. Due to the predominantly Muslim affiliations of the Séléka rebels, the anti-balaka take on a mainly Christian line; but the conflict is not grounded in religious beliefs, even though it has spiraled into a sectarian conflict. It would be a mistake to view it simply as such, and the media have played a key role in simplifying this ravaging war – which is a great humanitarian disaster – into a purely Muslim vs. Christian conflict. The anti-balaka see themselves as keepers of the old order (or of ‘order’) and many of them are soldiers from the freshly-turned-former national army of Bozizé. Their goal and demand is that the Séléka are removed from power. The only way to achieve this, of course, is via the traditional means of resistance and revenge: the machete and the gun.

At this point, if only for the sake of hinting towards a grander approach, I’d like to cite an anthropologist, Paul Richards, who might shed some light on the ‘barbaric’ nature of this war (and others in the continent). In what he saw as an expression of the crisis of modernity, Richards looked deep into the warfare methods of the Sierra Leone civil war to locate what he saw as a theatricality of war. The other element he points to is the young age of the fighters – often teenagers – which is largely the case in most African wars. Through this theatricality, a ‘performance’ is being played out, partly influenced by war movies. He reminds readers that these men are not unaware of the global entertainment culture (western movies, radio, mobile telecommunications, television, and now the internet), and these influences, what he calls “the techniques of terror” which result in this exaggerated and violent theatricality, make up for the lack of fighting means. Aspirations of these young men are for schools and jobs, he cites, but these demands are not being met and let the countryside surrender to decay and militarization.

The French government, together with the African Union, sent troops to the CAR in December 2013, but the results were not those expected. What is more, the French population’s support for the peacekeeping mission of Hollande’s government dropped significantly this month due to its inability to tackle the escalation of violence in the CAR. In the first week of January 2014, a regional summit in Chad held a parliamentary vote whose outcome forced Michel Djotodia, and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye, to resign, on the grounds that they were unable to stop the hundreds – maybe even thousands - of killings and the displacement of around one million people. On Monday, January 20, Central African Republic’s lawmakers chose the mayor of Bangui, a woman named Catherine Samba-Panza, as the new interim president of the country. Meanwhile, the European Union has agreed to send 500 troops to help restore order.

France, beyond its role as former colonial patron, has economic interests in the region, but those are not crudely expansive, Paul Melly, an African analyst, said in an interview. He continues: “France, by sending troops over to the CAR, is not aiming to restore French influence. It’s more of a considered, mature move, which bodes well with the interests of the whole of Europe, to keep Africa stable and prosperous.” Of course, this view is being
contested by many who argue that French post-colonial intervention, since the Bokassa days and up to today, is a continuation of a more general, western imperialist attitude towards its former colonies, and that, in fact, fighting and bloodshed has intensified in the CAR since the arrival of French and African Union troops⁷.

The relationship with China, as well, is to be determined from now on. Chinese officials commenced their bilateral relationship in the 1960s with the CAR, and on an on-and-off basis continue to have economic and political influence in the country up to this day. Bozizé hailed China as a role model for African nations, stating that “China made great achievements in opening up reform and modernization” for the nation⁸. It is doubtful that their economic activity will stop with the change in presidency but the slowing down of their production is a certain result of the current instability. But Beijing’s role in Africa in general has a far more wide ranging scope, which is to control the flow of resources to the West⁹. In this sense, Africa, like in the Cold War days, has once more become an unfolding ground for East/West economic interests and potentially even standoffs.

Ultimately, western (and increasingly Chinese, too) interventionism aims to secure their respective interests as well as a safe access to the mineral resources and their transportation routes to reach international markets¹⁰. Because of the CAR’s geographical position, placed between three nations with tumultuous pasts as its own - Chad, (South) Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo - and due to the historically ungovernable state of its endless bush areas which offer shelter to militia activity (the LRA was and still seems to be active in the region), keeping the conflict within the borders and finally succeeding to terminate it, is of primary importance to international actors, and the UN has called for assistance in what it names a near-genocide. Aid workers assure that the word genocide is too strong a word for what is currently going on, but given the state of (brutal) affairs, it could amount to that soon if international intervention doesn’t take place. Yet, Yossef Bodansky highlights the need to bypass western interests in order for the CAR, and Africa as a whole, to be able to stand on conflict-free feet. He notes that the (western) demands for instant-gratification cessation of hostilities is just another orchestrated move by the US-Europe alliance which will not, in the long-term, solve but further impede African development. He sees the ousting of Djotodia as an orchestrated, western-led move on the grounds that Muslims are perpetrating genocide, when in fact the case is not that at all. Recently uncovered mass graves in Bangui, he said, revealed corpses of Muslim men¹¹.

With the new president being sworn in, and the EU’s promise to aid in order to bring an end to the conflict, hopes are starting to grow that the massacres might come to a halt. Yet, the underlying, fragile grounds that brought on the war in the first place - poverty, unemployment, corruption, lack of democracy, exploitation of the massive mineral wealth which never trickles down to the population and a cycle of endless bad governance and foreign interventionism – are not being met with a mere intervention. In order for peace building to take place and for peace to become sustainable, a total remodeling of the nation’s power networks (in economic, political and social levels) has to be drafted and implemented, or the nation will most possibly reemerge as a blood basin.
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