

Colonialism and Foreign Intervention: Coups, Conflict and Sectarian Violence in the Central African Republic

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The Central African Republic is currently awash in media coverage regarding the ongoing sectarian violence and general upheaval in the country. While many outlets have discussed the situation in the CAR, there have been few fully encompassing analyses of the violence that it in a proper historical context and discuss the interests of some of the countries that are in the CAR such as France or Chad while others are watching from afar, yet still interested, such as the United States. The violence in the CAR is unprecedented and worrisome; however, historically this is nothing but another unfortunate and bloody chapter regarding the instability of the country.

A History of Violence

The CAR is a former French colony, with the country having gained its independence soon after a 1958 French constitutional referendum which dissolved France's African holdings.[1] The first president, Barthélemy Boganda, died in a March 1959 plane crash and power was transferred to David Dacko who oversaw the CAR's declaration of independence on August 13, 1960 and established a one-party state by 1962.

Unfortunately, Dacko's days were numbered. In 1965, Jean Bedel Bokassa, who was a colonel in the CAR military, "was plucked by France to overthrow the Central African Republic's first President, his cousin David Dacko, when Mr. Dacko began establishing close ties with China." [2] Bokassa was chosen due to this fierce devotion to France and his anti-Communist stance. After overthrowing Dacko in a bloodless coup, Bokassa quickly broke off relations with China and took on a multitude of titles, which would eventually culminate in his declaring himself king in 1977. In addition to changing the CAR's foreign policy, Bokassa also suspended the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly, allowing him free reign to do as he pleased.

Though he showed increasingly strange behavior as time passed, the French still maintained good relations with him, even going so far as to congratulate him when he declared the CAR an empire and took the title of emperor.

However, the French eventually turned their backs on him [3], due to his increased yearning to decide foreign policy on his own, and helped to put Dacko back into power via a coup against Bokassa in 1979.

In 1981, elections took place and Dacko emerged victorious over challenger Ange-Félix Patassé, but charges of fraud remained. Just months later in September, Army Chief of Staff General André Kolingba seized power in a military coup. While, there was a coup attempt

against him involving Ange-Félix Patassé[4], the coup failed and Patassé fled to the Togo, eventually coming back in the early '90s.

Kolingba operated what was essentially a military dictatorship into the 1990s due to a new constitution in 1986, which “provided him a single-party state and six-year term as president.”[5] This aided him in the 1988 elections as opposing political parties were not allowed to participate.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, a pro-democracy movement sprouted and blossomed in the CAR, with Kolingba’s response being to detain many pro-democratic protesters. However, Kolingba eventually agreed to free elections, after having come under pressure from “countries like the United States and France, but also agencies and organizations like the UN.”[6]

In 1993, Ange-Félix Patassé was elected president of the CAR. The instability of the country continued with three different army mutinies in April, May, and November of 1996. The first mutiny occurred when some 400 soldiers demanded paychecks, with soldiers “[entering] the homes of business executives, demanding money and vehicles and beating those who refused.”[7] It would be proper to note here that the governments that have ruled over the CAR have generally been extremely corrupt, with the IMF/World Bank noting in 2013 that on a regional level, corruption was hindering the growth of many Central African states.[8] According to Transparency International, the CAR is near the bottom on a list of the least-corrupt states, ranking 150 out of 175.[9] It was, in part, due to corruption and larger economic problems, which led to army members not being paid.

In May of 1996, the army mutinied again as they accused Patassé “of transferring the army’s armory to his presidential guard.”[10] In order to put down the mutiny, Patassé requested aid from the French and they eventually sent 1,000 soldiers and 100 special forces commandos.[11] The mutiny eventually died down with a ceasefire being negotiated.

After the April and May mutinies, Patassé “formed a new government that included Kolingba supporters, but the country’s main opposition groups refused to join the coalition.”[12] However, a third mutiny in November still occurred as soldiers took advantage of Patassé being out of the country. Once again, the French came to his aid as they “rapidly deployed patrols throughout the city to protect key points and provide support to the Presidential Guard. Additional French Foreign Legion troops were flown into CAR from Chad to supplement the 1,750 soldiers already stationed in the country.”[13] The mutiny was eventually put down, but had threatened to devolve into ethnic conflict.

These mutinies were stirred up by Kolingba, who “is from the Yakoma group, which is part of the Ngbandi ethnic group found on the banks of the Obangui river in the south.”[14] When Patassé first came to power, the military was mainly made up of soldiers from Kolingba’s ethnic group. In response, Patassé “created militias favoring his own Gbaya tribe and did not bother to pay the Yakoma-dominated regular army,”[15] which actively contributed to the mutinies. A final rebellion occurred in 1997, but was put down by a pan-African force.

The troubles didn’t end for Patassé as in May 2001; Kolingba

sponsored an unsuccessful military coup which set off a series of events that ultimately led to Patassé’s removal. After the coup attempt, the president accused his Army Chief of Staff, François Bozizé, of involvement and fired him

on October 26, 2001. Bozizé rallied troops to resist his sacking, but was ultimately forced to leave for exile in southern Chad. These events deeply split and weakened the CAR armed forces—the Central African Armed Forces—dividing it between Patassé and Bozizé loyalists.[16]

Overall, Patassé's time as president was problematic for the country, not only due to the mutinies and attempted coup, but also due to the fact that "the CAR underwent economic collapse, losing what was left of its institutional capacity to provide social services for its citizens, and increased its dependence on external aid for survival" and Patassé "built up the Presidential Guard at the expense of the army, further ethicizing the state security forces." [17]

In October 2002, Bozizé launched a coup; however Patassé was able to beat him back with the aid of Libyan forces. Gaddafi had backed the CAR government since 2001, "in return for a 99-year monopoly on extracting the republic's vast reserves of diamonds, gold and other minerals." [18]

However, in 2003 when Patassé was out of the country in Niger, Bozizé swept into the capital with 1,000 troops and took control.[19]

In December 2004, voters in the CAR accepted a new constitution which "provides for a five-year presidential term, renewable only once, and the appointment of the prime minister from the political party with a parliamentary majority." [20] Quickly following this change was the 2005 presidential elections in which Bozizé ran as an independent and won. Out of this election came the rise of the Peoples' Army for the Restoration of the Republic and of Democracy (APRD), led by Jean-Jacques Demafouth, and made up mainly of former Presidential Guard members. Another group that came out of the elections was the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), which "is made up largely of the mainly-Muslim Gula ethnic group" and "includes men who helped Bozizé overthrow Patassé in 2003 but who subsequently felt disgruntled with the lack of recompense." [21] Both of these groups are from the northern region of the CAR and have actively fought against the Bozizé government.

This rebellion had occurred due to economic and political weakness within the CAR government. Bozizé had little power outside of Bangui, the capital, "while extreme poverty and a lack of both strong government institutions and economic development have contributed to declining support for the government among CAR citizens." [22] Citizens from the north are generally anti- Bozizé and accuse him of "favoring southerners since taking power, of failing to uphold democratic commitments, and of delaying implementation of promised political and economic reforms." The rebel groups actively fought the CAR government, for example in 2006 it was reported that an escalation in fighting between the APRD and government troops caused 70,000 people to flee the country.[23]

In order to bring an end to the fighting, a comprehensive peace agreement was brokered in 2008[24] and quickly followed up an Inclusive Political Dialogue that same year. The Dialogue "called for the creation of a government of national unity; the holding of municipal elections in 2009, and legislative and presidential elections in 2010, which actually took place in January and March 2011; the creation of a national human rights commission; the launch of a program for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants." [25]

However, the goals of the Dialogue never came to fruition:

[N]early five years later, the overwhelming feeling is bitter disappointment: the inclusive government was never put in place; the 2011 elections took place but, according to observers, were marred by many accusations of fraud; the state disintegrated further; the “grey zones” outside state control expanded; most of the agreed essential reforms were never implemented; and the attitude adopted by both the government and rebel groups meant the demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) program never saw the light of day for combatants in the north east.[26]

This, coupled with the fact that democratic rule had effectively ended due to Bozizé’s authoritarian ways and “conditions inside the CAR rapidly declined as economic under-development, nepotism and corruption fostered dissent and emboldened political opponents,”[27] led to Bozizé’s ousting in 2013 by rebel group Séléka and the installment of its leader, Michel Djotodia, as interim president.

However, to talk about Séléka, there needs to be a discussion regarding the ongoing sectarian violence involving Muslims and Christians.

Sectarian Violence

While the CAR is home to several different ethnic groups, historically speaking “the CAR has no significant history of sectarian conflict or deep-seated religious enmity.”[28] So, then, why is this violence occurring? In order to discuss that, one must discuss Séléka and Michel Djotodia.

The Guardian reported in December 2012 that Séléka had formed and that among their demands was “the implementation of the recommendations of the inclusive political dialogue, which was held in 2008 among government, civil society, the opposition and the rebels; financial compensation for the rebels; the release of political prisoners; and the opening of an investigation into the disappearance of former CPJP (Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace) leader Charles Massi and other ‘crimes.’”[29] Thus, it can be seen that group formed, at least partially, in response to the failed political dealings with the CAR government.

Religiously, Séléka members “were recruited from Muslim communities settled in CAR or in the ‘three border areas’ (Chad, Sudan, and CAR).” The formation of the group aided in the heightening of sectarian tensions as

While Séléka fighters have notional inclinations for political Islam, they share a strong sense of communal identity and a will to avenge previous CAR regimes and their beneficiaries identified as Christians (not much of a discriminating factor, as the CAR population is more than 75% Christian). Lay Muslims in CAR today are less likely to be harassed by the Séléka, and most often, there is cooperation. The whole Muslim community is therefore perceived as supporting the Séléka and hostile to the core Christian population.[30] (emphasis added)

This anti-Christian bias was revealed soon after the group took control of the capital. The Congressional Research Service reported in May 2014 that “once in power, Séléka leaders

presided over the collapse of an already fragile state, and they oversaw brutal attacks on rural Christian communities in the northwest, Bozizé's home region.”[31]

In response to this violence, the Christian communities formed anti-balaka (anti-machete) militias and began to fight Muslims. The Christian militias attacked the Muslims viscously, with “scenes of cannibalism and the dismemberment of Muslims by Christian mobs in Bangui”[32] prompting France to send 2,000 soldiers into the country and the UN to send 12,000 peacekeepers.[33]

In January 2014, Michel Djotodia stepped down as President[34], following pressure from Chadian president Idriss Déby. Djotodia was soon replaced with Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui.[35]

However, this raises the question: What interest does Chad have in the Central African Republic? And for that matter, are there any other interested parties?

Foreign Interests

Chad

Chad is a neighboring country and has been involved in the internal politics of the CAR for quite some time.

President Déby sponsored Bozizé's rebel movement and “capitalized on this behind-the-scenes power grab by enabling his forces to operate in the north of the CAR to eliminate Chadian rebel groups using the territory as a staging ground for attacks.”[36] A main reason for Déby's interest in the CAR is security reasons. There has been a large amount of activity of Chadian rebels in the CAR and “many [Chadian rebels] who took part in the attacks from 2008 to 2010 on N'Djamena and Abéché sought shelter in the north-west of the CAR, which was virtually untouched by Bangui's authority”[37] and some even linked up with CAR rebel groups, eventually forming Séléka. There were accusations that Chad backed Séléka in order to draw the Chadian elements of the group deeper into the CAR and thus stop them from launching attacks into Chad.[38]

Another interest of Chad is oil. “‘Chad is drilling oil from that border region and it's actually a shared oilfield with CAR,’ [Enough Project's field researcher Kasper] Agger said. While there is no drilling on the CAR side yet, Chad has high interest in keeping tight control over the area.”[39]

Thus it is no wonder that Chad is keeping a close eye on the CAR, even if they did withdraw their troops earlier last year.[40]

France

The CAR's former colonial power also has interests at stake, which stem mainly from Bozizé's rule.

Right before he was overthrown, in 2012 Bozizé called on the French to aid him in beating back the Séléka rebels.[41] This call went unanswered of course and this was mainly due to problems with the CAR government and with CAR-China relations. A 2009 U.S. diplomatic cable noted that

The constant frustrations facing French commercial giants such as Total and AREVA are well known. While France used to count on the CAR as a valuable reserve of uranium, it is very clear that the double dealing of the Minister of Mines, among others, in renegotiating contracts is pushing the French beyond even their normally generous limits.[42]

While France does have “extensive interests in Africa, in oil, minerals, infrastructure projects, telecoms, utilities, banking and insurance,” “its market share is being eroded by competition from China, Brazil, India and others.”[43] Bozizé actively worked with the Chinese, to the ire of the French. It was reported in December 2012 that “in March and April 2012 that the South African company DIG Oil had been awarded two exploration contracts and that a Chinese company had also obtained such authorization”[44] to explore for oil in the CAR. He was quite wary of the French, noting in a December 2012 speech that he was being attacked due to giving an oil exploration contract to the Chinese, saying “We gave them [the French] everything. Before giving oil to the Chinese, I met Total in Paris and told them to take the oil; nothing happened. I gave oil to the Chinese and it became a problem. I sent counselor Maidou in Paris for the Uranium dossier, they refused. I finally gave it to the South Africans.”[45] Due to his dealings with the Chinese and other problems, the French were disinterested in propping up Bozizé and thus let him fall.

In 2013, the French did send in troops to aid in the peacekeeping, along with African forces[46], but drew their forces down in January 2014 from 2,000 troops to 800 noting that UN peacekeepers had arrived.[47]

United States

The US sent their UN ambassador Samantha Power to the CAR in late 2013 to appeal for peace.[48] It should be noted that Power wants the US to intervene more and “has made a career out of scolding the U.S. for not intervening around the world enough,”[49] such as in her magnum opus where she lamented that the US didn’t intervene to stop the Armenian genocide during the First World War. In fact, she is quite fond of the ‘Responsibility To Protect’ doctrine and “was one of the driving forces behind the United States intervention in Libya.”[50] So an eye should be kept on her, knowing that she may push for further US intervention.

So far the US has sent delivered aid to peacekeepers[51], airlifted African troops into the CAR[52], and sent troops to support the US embassy resuming its activities[53], but not much else.

On a regional level, the US is interested in the CAR not just for any of its vast resources, but specifically oil. A 2013 Brookings Institution report entitled *Top Five Reasons Why Africa Should Be a Priority for the United States* noted that “significant new discoveries have prompted the [International Energy Agency] to anoint sub-Saharan Africa the ‘new frontier’ in global oil and gas” and “the emergence of new oil and gas producers in the region presents potential benefits for U.S. national security interests, if this new found wealth is managed appropriately [...] Several countries could also potentially become oil suppliers to the US, further diversifying the sources of US imported oil.”[54]

The US concern with African oil is nothing new as it was noted in 2002 that

Already, 15 percent of the United States’ imported oil supply comes from sub-Saharan Africa. Oil experts predict that the amount of oil the United States

receives from the prolific fields of Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea and Angola will double in the next five years.

“African oil is of strategic national interest to us and it will increase and become more important as we go forward,” Walter Kansteiner, assistant U.S. secretary of state for African Affairs, said during a July 2002 visit to Nigeria – the largest oil producer in West Africa with an estimated 24 billion barrels in reserve.[55] (emphasis added)

Just as with the French, the Americans are also concerned about China. From that same Brookings report:

China’s engagement in Africa has profound geopolitical implications for the U.S. global strategy. [...] China is looking beyond the traditional pursuit of economic benefits and aspires to increase and solidify its strategic presence through enhanced political, economic, diplomatic and academic resources. The failure to perceive and prepare for China’s moves would be dangerous, unwise and potentially detrimental for the United States in the near future.[56]

So, the US is concerned with resources, but all the more so due to a major competitor that is actively making moves in the region.

More recently, in January 2015, the UN stated that it had found evidence of ethnic cleansing done by Christian militias against Muslims[57], giving confirmation to the alarms that had been raised in June 2014[58] and even before that in late 2013.[59] Unfortunately, the violence is only continuing.

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