

The Central African Republic – a history of a collapse foretold?

By Morten Bøås

■ Executive summary

Political instability and administrative weakness have been permanent features of the Central African Republic (CAR) ever since independence. This is, therefore, the history of a collapse foretold. Michel Djotodia may have had good intentions when he put together the Séléka alliance; the problem was that the only thing that kept it together was the desire to get rid of François Bozizé. When Bozizé was gone, the coalition's internal coherence also disappeared. Thus, for lack of other options, the alliance members continued to make their livelihoods based on plunder. As the situation worsened, the communities plundered established their own militias, and the stage was set for a simmering sectarian conflict between Christians and Muslims. It is in this mess of communal violence that the international forces are supposed to re-establish law and order. The main challenge, however, is how to avoid adding fuel to the sectarian fire. The international forces must tread carefully, and any attempt at disarming militias must be conducted with this in mind. What has happened and is happening is tragic, but it is neither genocide nor a full-blown sectarian conflict. This can still be avoided if the international forces behave impartially with regard to the two main religious communities in the country.

The Central African Republic (CAR) has not featured much on the international scene. Few have been there and few know very much about it apart from that it is generally seen as one of Africa's poorest countries and weakest states. However, during the last few months this has changed and CAR has suddenly received more international attention than ever before in its history as an independent country. There are several reasons for this. Some are just a matter of chance. After Mali and the Sahel, the situation in CAR simply became the African conflict of the month until events in South Sudan led international media attention to Juba. Others are related to the fact that international awareness of the Sahel and the areas bordering this region has increased immensely as a result of the crisis in Mali and the attack against the gas plant in In Amenas. This is both good and bad. It is good that the international commu-

nity has finally turned its attention to the sad plight of the people of CAR, as its problems have been ignored for decades. However, as the international community rushes into a country and a situation about which few have detailed knowledge, there is a danger that interventions aiming at a quick-fix solution to a political as well as a humanitarian crisis are made on the basis of assumptions about CAR and its conflicts that do not necessarily correspond to what the current turmoil is all about. This is not genocide; neither is it yet a full-blown sectarian conflict. In fact, both further massive levels of bloodshed and prolonged sectarian war can be avoided, but it will take resources and time as well as a fine-tuned and delicate approach. The state is so weak that there is not much to build upon and the situation on the ground is currently so fragile that great care must be taken for the international intervention not to further fuel

the sectarian fire that is smouldering, but not fully burning yet.

Currently almost 950,000 people are displaced, almost 500,000 have left the capital, Bangui, and about 100,000 people are staying at a makeshift camp at Bangui airport with little shelter and few sanitary facilities. Many internally displaced persons have also sought shelter from the violence in the bush, making it extremely difficult to reach them with humanitarian aid. Communal violence is on the rise and so is the use of child soldiers. The international peacekeepers, 5,500 in total, from the African Union (AU) (4,000) and from France (1,500), are simply too few at the moment to be able to contribute much; this is rapidly becoming a war of militias rolling through villages and cities in search of their perceived enemies, without any clear boundaries between fighters and civilians. Since Michel Djotodia installed himself as the country's first Muslim ruler in March 2013, ousting then-president François Bozizé, who came from the majority Christian population, faith-based community militias have been fighting each other, pitting the Christian majority population against the Muslim minority. The situation is, therefore, undoubtedly both chaotic and explosive, with dramatic ramifications for the population of CAR as well as for regional stability; but what is it really all about?

The situation on the ground is messy and unpredictable, but what is currently taking place is neither particularly unexpected nor difficult to explain (at least in brief). Rather, this is the history of a collapse foretold. CAR is one of the very weakest states in Africa. Its infrastructure is completely underdeveloped and does not tie the country together. Local administration exists to a certain degree, but, even in Bangui, it does not have the capacity to function as it should. The state does not even have the money to pay its own civil servants, but has been begging neighbouring countries for such funds. Sometimes civil servants are paid, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Political instability and administrative weakness have therefore been permanent features of CAR ever since independence in 1960. Before this, CAR was a colony of only marginal importance to France, so the then colonial power did not contribute much to preparing the country for sovereign statehood.

CAR's first leader, President David Dacko, was in power for six years before he was ousted by his commander-in-chief, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, in 1966. This coup marked the beginning of one of the most eccentric systems of rule that Africa has ever experienced. Nonetheless, what little exists of state power and infrastructure in the country was established during Bokassa's reign. After him, almost nothing was accomplished. Bokassa ruled CAR from 1966 to 1979. After the coup in 1966, Bokassa declared himself president for life, and then he went one step further in 1976 when he named himself Emperor of Central Africa. The coronation ceremony is supposed to have cost CAR as much as \$20 million (the crown alone is rumoured to have

had a price tag of \$5 million). This was, of course, completely bizarre, but it is equally surreal that it took place with the blessing of France and other Western powers. This was during the Cold War, and Bokassa was generally seen as an eccentric but useful ally of the West. In addition, several French politicians and higher-ranking civil servants also benefited from this kind of patron-client relationship, as Bokassa rewarded his 'patrons' in Paris with the country's natural resources. For example, diamonds were given as gifts to leading French politicians.

In 1979, Bokassa's life as the Emperor of Central Africa was over. He simply went too far. Hundreds of school-children were arrested and several executed after they protested against Bokassa's decision that all school-children had to wear school uniforms from his factory. As the protests spread, France intervened, ousted Bokassa and replaced him with the previous president, David Dacko. This was, however, not the end to CAR's problems; rather, it marked the beginning of a long period of instability. The current crisis is the most recent manifestation of this.

The second-most recent president, François Bozizé, was brought to power through a coup in 2003, but also 'won' two elections (in 2005 and 2011). However, this did not contribute much to the stability of the country. Bozizé was recognised for a time as France's preferred candidate for the presidency, but his period in power is best known for widespread electoral fraud and continued instability. CAR has considerable natural resources such as uranium, oil, gold, diamonds and timber, as well as huge potential for hydroelectric power, but the majority of its resources are underexploited and the little activity that exists does not generate much income for the state; the rents go only to those that are able to control the resources for the period necessary to accumulate a small profit. In CAR, it is all about maximising short-term gains and never about the development of state and society.

This is, then, the story behind the rebellion of Michel Djotodia and the Séléka alliance, and it is not particularly hard to understand why it ended with an armed rebellion. However, it is not very difficult either to imagine why it was almost doomed to end in disaster. The regime of Bozizé was thoroughly corrupt, and as it also had obvious despotic features there was little reason to believe that he would ever leave the presidency voluntarily. Djotodia may therefore have had good intentions when he put together the Séléka alliance; the problem, however, was the alliance's lack of coherence, unity and organisation. The majority of the members of this alliance originate from CAR's Muslim minority, but at the outset this was not a huge issue, as religious and sectarian differences had never before really constituted an important cleavage in the country. Rather, just after Djotodia seized power, the main problem was that he and the Séléka alliance did not have a plan beyond ousting Bozizé. The majority of the Séléka alliance members were Muslims, but the only thing that had actually brought them together was the desire to get rid of Bozizé.

This is not much of a foundation on which to build a new regime, and it certainly did not help that, in addition to recruiting amongst their own religious community, they had also brought in help from ex-rebels from Chad.

The rebellion started in late November 2012, when three former rebel factions, which had signed a peace agreement in 2007, came together under the banner of the Séléka alliance, accusing the government of President Bozizé of failing to honour the terms of the 2007 agreement, and subsequently started an armed campaign. Their grievances were initially about payment promised to them under the 2007 agreement, which they claimed they had never received. However, as they gained territory on the ground, the Séléka rebels also started to put forward a number of political grievances addressing issues ranging from the release of political prisoners to corruption and abuse of power by the president. The rebellion started in the remote Haute-Kotto province, bordering Sudan, but in an almost blitzkrieg manner the rebels broke through the defensive positions of government forces and captured a number of towns and cities, including the diamond centre of Bria, the strategically important town of Bambari and finally the town of Sibut, some 150 kilometres from Bangui. Then they entered into negotiations with the Bozizé government in Libreville, the capital of neighbouring Gabon, under the stewardship of the regional group the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The intended outcome of this process was a sustainable negotiated settlement, but in the end Djotodia and the Séléka alliance ousted Bozizé and forced him out of the country.

This was, however, a recipe for a disaster. The moment Bozizé was gone, the internal coherence of the alliance also disappeared, and when Djotodia claimed the presidency it was that of a country whose state coffers were almost empty. Therefore, he did not have the financial means to keep the alliance together, so he had little choice but to dissolve it. The problem is that, once such a structure as the Séléka alliance is created, it does not just disappear on the basis of an order without the backing of any real authority. The warriors of the Séléka alliance therefore kept their weapons, and many of them, particularly those from Chad, had little if anything to return to.

Thus, for lack of other options, they continued to make their livelihoods based on taking what they needed from the civilian population, and it was more often than not from Christian communities, as they constitute the majority in and around Bangui. Therefore, as what little that had existed of command and control disappeared in the Séléka alliance and the situation took a turn for the worse, local

Christian communities established their own militias (e.g. the anti-balaka groups), often based on ex-soldiers from Bozizé's former army, and the stage was set for a simmering sectarian conflict.

Thus, what had started as a rebellion against a thoroughly corrupt and increasingly despotic president ended as a sectarian conflict in the making, and it is in this hornet's nest of communal violence that the French and AU forces are supposed to re-establish law and order. This is a very challenging and delicate mission. Logistically, the terrain is challenging and, numerically speaking, the current force is far too small to be able to control the whole country. However, the main challenge right now is how to avoid adding fuel to the simmering sectarian fire. As a result of historical factors, and particularly France's previous preference for Bozizé, many among the Muslim minority understand the French presence as an attempt to restore Bozizé to power and to remove Djotodia (the country's first Muslim ruler), whereas the Christian majority population harbours similar conspiracy theories concerning the forces from Chad (which are part of the AU mission). There have therefore already been both anti-French and anti-Chad demonstrations in Bangui that have resulted in casualties. Accordingly, it is of the utmost importance that the international forces tread very carefully, and any attempt at disarming militias must be conducted with this in mind. It must be balanced, and it must not create an impression that the French forces and the international community are there to protect the Christian majority; they need to make it clear that they are in CAR to re-establish law and order for everybody.

It is, therefore, important that the international forces make it clear that they did not play a role when Djotodia left the presidency and the country, but that this was a decision he reached after consultations within the country and with neighbouring states. The peacekeepers must continue to limit themselves to law and order operations and to encouraging political dialogue and reconciliation. What has happened and is happening in CAR is deeply tragic, but it is certainly not genocide and neither is it yet a full-blown sectarian conflict on a nationwide scale. That can still be avoided if the international forces, and the French in particular, behave impartially with regard to all issues concerning the relationship between the two main religious communities in the country. If not, this smouldering sectarian fire could easily ignite, and there are plenty of groups in the region, for example al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb, that would grasp the opportunity that this would give them. ■

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