

Violence in the Central African Republic: Causes, Actors and Conflict Dynamics

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Since the rebel coalition Séléka seized power in the Central African Republic (CAR) in early 2013, violence has escalated in the country. More than one million people have been forced to flee and thousands have been killed. Despite the presence of some 6000 French and African peacekeepers, violence continues to tear the country apart. What started out as a struggle for political power has developed into a violent conflict between different groups in society.

The rebel group Séléka committed serious crimes against civilians before and after they took power, as well as throughout their rule during most of 2013. The Christian part of the population felt particularly targeted, although everyone was affected by the violence. The Anti-Balaka militia, which was formed as a reaction to atrocities committed by Séléka, vented its anger on Muslim civilians, resulting in ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population in large parts of the country.

While the violent conflict has resulted in polarisation of Christians and Muslims, characterisation of the conflict as religious or ethnic is simplistic and does little to help understand the causes of the violence. In fact, the conflict stems from a power struggle between individuals within the political elite. These political entrepreneurs manipulate religious and ethnic identities in order to mobilise segments of the disenfranchised population into combat.

Underlying causes

Instability has reigned in CAR for a long time and armed groups challenging the government is nothing new, although previous violence never reached the levels seen over the past year. The root causes of the violent conflict currently tearing the country apart can be found in the population's lack of security, which is the result of four main factors:

The absence of a functioning state and state security forces has resulted in a lack of basic service provision, such as health care, education and security, for the population in large parts of the country. This is illustrated by the expression "the state stops at PK12", i.e. the state does not reach further than 12 kilometres from the centre of the capital, Bangui. People in the countryside have felt abandoned by the elite in the capital and the grievances have created a breeding

ground for recruitment to different rebel groups. The lack of security has been particularly striking, with both the state security forces and armed groups constituting a threat to the population. The police and the military have been neither willing nor able to provide the citizens with security, resulting in the formation of self-defence militias and rebel groups.

The marginalised northern parts of the country have been neglected since colonial times and the north-east has historically been considered to be inhabited by foreigners. With the Séléka coalition coming from the north-east, the deep-rooted fear of foreign, Arab or Chadian invaders from the north was evoked among the population in the south. Northern CAR has been the base for a number of rebel groups over the past decade. The absence of state institutions and basic services has been particularly apparent in this part of the country. The lack of economic opportunities in the north has pushed many people into joining the rebels, with membership viewed as a job opportunity.

Power struggles within the political elite have resulted in individuals from the elite mobilising parts of the population in order to pursue their own personal interests and take power. During the regime of François Bozizé (2003-2013), the President tightened his grip on the state apparatus and after the 2011 elections people outside Bozizé's immediate entourage started to criticise these exclusionary politics. Political entrepreneurs have long been mobilising segments of the population by manipulating ethnic and religious identities, a process that is also evident in the ongoing conflict. The elite power struggles are closely interlinked to the corrupt political system. Patronage and a failed democratisation process have resulted in violence becoming the established mode of competition in CAR and grabbing power a way to access resources.



CAR is part of a regional conflict complex as the country is located in an extremely unstable region and borders other conflict zones. Porous borders and inadequate control by governments over their territories have allowed armed groups to move freely between countries. Weapons and natural resources, which finance different rebel groups, can easily be trafficked in the region. The conflict in CAR has first and foremost been influenced by instability in Chad and Sudan (Darfur), since individuals from these countries have joined Central African rebel groups since the beginning of this millennium. The governments of Chad and Sudan have also had a direct role in the ongoing conflict, supporting Séléka.

Actors and conflict dynamics

The two main parties in the conflict, Séléka and Anti-Balaka, are groups characterised by a high level of internal division, with disagreement within the leadership, unclear command structures and lack of control of the soldiers. Factions of both groups commit atrocities directed against civilians and are engaged in combat with the peacekeeping troops, while also fighting each other. At the outset, Séléka comprised several rebel groups from the north-east, mainly Muslims, from parts of CAR and Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries. The goal was to overthrow the incumbent president François Bozizé, which they did in March 2013. Séléka was formally dissolved in September 2013 and their leader Michel Djotodia was forced to resign as president in January 2014, but ex-Séléka elements have since regrouped in north-eastern CAR. The rebels have created parallel security structures and appointed a new military leader. Today Séléka controls the north-eastern parts of the country, something that has reinforced the fear of CAR splitting into two.

The Anti-Balaka militia currently constitutes the main threat to peace and security in CAR and has deliberately targeted civilian Muslims with the aim of killing them or forcing them to flee. The militia was created in order to oust president Djotodia, the Séléka leader. At present the group's agenda is rather diffuse, but there are indications that former president Bozizé is supporting the Anti-Balaka with weapons and economic resources. Due to Bozizé's involvement in the ongoing conflict, the UN Security Council has decided on targeted sanctions against him. The Anti-Balaka is composed of three different elements: self-

defence militias from the countryside, former government soldiers loyal to Bozizé and criminal groups. Following the French military intervention in December 2013, the power balance has shifted to the Anti-Balaka's advantage, with the French forces only disarming ex-Séléka at the outset.

International engagement

In April 2014 the UN Security Council decided to send a Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission, including almost 12 000 peacekeepers, to CAR. The UN mission, MINUSCA, is envisaged to begin deployment in September 2014 and will include personnel from MISCA, the AU peacekeeping operation which has been in CAR since the end of 2013. Following accusations of Chadian MISCA forces committing crimes against civilians, N'Djamena decided to withdraw all Chadian troops from CAR in April 2014. Parts of the EU force, EUFOR RCA, arrived in Bangui at the end of April 2014 in order to support MISCA and the French military operation Sangaris.

MISCA and Sangaris still face threats from ex-Séléka rebels and the Anti-Balaka militia. The security situation in Bangui and the rest of the country is critical and the humanitarian emergency dire. The transitional government led by President Catherine Samba Panza is in need of economic assistance from the international community for the administration to function. In addition, firm international engagement is necessary so to help the government handle the security situation, allow humanitarian aid to reach the people in need and find a long-term solution to the conflict.

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This briefing is based on:
Gabriella Ingerstad, *Central African Republic – Trapped in a Cycle of Violence? Causes, Conflict Dynamics and Prospects for Peace*, FOI-R--3877--SE, 2014.

See also:
Gabriella Ingerstad, *Willing and Able? – Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Weak Post-war States: Insights from the Central African Republic*, FOI-R--3470--SE, 2012.