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The Crisis in CAR: Navigating Myths and Interests

Ilmari Kähkö and Mats Utas

Abstract: “Anarchy”, “religious war”, “genocide” and, recently, “cannibalism” – these are some of the most commonly used words in Western news media when referring to the crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR), at least since the takeover of power by the rebel coalition Séléka in March 2013. In the context of these media stereotypes, this article unravels some of the complexities that have arisen in the CAR conflict since the fall of the Bozizé regime and the Séléka takeover. We show how international actors have been pivotal in shaping the current crisis in the country. In order to help steer CAR out of its predicament, we show how important it is that international peacekeeping operations, policy-makers and diplomats understand not only the situation on the ground but also the close ties major groups in CAR have with various regional and other international actors. If context awareness remains scant, there is a serious risk that their activities will at best be suboptimal and at worst aid in fuelling the crisis.

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“Anarchy”, “religious war”, “genocide” and, recently, “cannibalism” – these are some of the most commonly used words in Western news media when referring to the crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR), at least since the takeover of power by the rebel coalition Séléka in March 2013.

The conflict, which in December alone resulted in approximately one thousand deaths, has uprooted one-fifth of CAR’s population. This conflict was by and large a consequence of former rebel leaders’ and some of their soldiers’ lack of future prospects within the troubled political-economy of the country. It is not easy to control military forces during a war – even less so after a war, when the minimum unifier (typically, regime change) has been achieved. In many cases, this is when the real problems start, as interests begin to diverge and promises made by the politicians to the fighters are not kept. This is very much the case in CAR.

Séléka was disbanded after the coup when its leader, Michel Djotodia, declared himself the new interim president of CAR. The coalition subsequently fell apart and began carrying out atrocities and looting Bangui and its surroundings with impunity, as they felt Djotodia was still indebted to them. In reaction to the violence and by and large to protect itself, the population founded self-defence groups collectively referred to as *anti-balaka* (“anti-machete”).¹ While Séléka is predominantly Muslim, they have never targeted people because of their faith. It is thus slightly surprising that *anti-balaka*, at least in Bangui, have used their Christian faith as a common denominator and targeted Muslims. Perhaps it is a strategy to draw sympathy from the West; it is certainly the key reason why Western media currently label the conflict “religious”. This is clearly an oversimplification. It seems to be the case that “religion maps onto a host of other historical divisions in the country, chief among them ‘foreignness’”, as Louisa Lombard (2013) has suggested.

Furthermore, there is the lingering threat of genocide, which is based on this (incorrect) idea of the religious nature of the conflict: If the conflict were primarily about religion, this would imply that there were clearly demarcated groups at each other’s throats. It is equally possible that the gloomy and looming twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and the revived vow of “never again” also has helped to frame the conflict as spiralling towards something similar. While the use of the term “genocide” is likely well intentioned and has led to increased international attention concerning the conflict, it has also helped to sell

1 There is increasing evidence concerning the role played by supporters of former President Bozizé in supporting and using *anti-balaka* for their political purposes; see, e.g., Marchal 2014.

newspapers. The problem is that, with such an erroneous framework, the international peace and aid machinery risks taking the wrong decisions and focusing on the wrong issues.²

While it is true that hate-filled cellphone text messages have been circulating in Bangui, genocide has not taken place. One reason for this is that it is simply impossible to successfully execute genocide in the current situation: Genocides require a high level of organization, which does not exist at any level in CAR. Reports suggest that like Séléka, the *anti-balaka* groups are splintered and anything but well organized. In fact, some observers have suggested that what we are seeing now is a manifestation of vengeance following an attack by a Christian militia on a Muslim village ninety kilometers north of the capital on 2 December 2013 (*BBC News* 2013). Others view a more organized attack three days later committed by supporters of Bozizé as the turning point (Marchal 2014). Violence can, of course, quickly intensify, and just because it is not genocidal it does not mean that preventive measures should not be taken. But it must be highlighted that claims of genocide obstruct what the conflict is really about. Unlike rebel activities in the past (Mehler 2011: 133), the genocide claims have brought international awareness to the situation in CAR. Of course, the problem with such claims (which Lombard [2014] suggests are made primarily for the purpose of advocacy) is that talking about genocide makes it possible for the international community to redirect its attention from the underlying problems, which are much more difficult to resolve once somebody declares that the risk of immediate genocide has been averted.

What about the claims of cannibalism? Recent feature stories with headlines such as “‘Mad Dog’ the Cannibal Pictured Eating SECOND Muslim in as Many Weeks ...” (Thornhill and Pleasance 2013) bring the world’s attention to the conflict – especially since the cannibal is named “Mad Dog” (note that there is already a book and a film about African wars with the name *Johnny Mad Dog*³). In the Western world, cannibalism clearly sells newspapers even better than genocide. It is worth mentioning that using sensational news to raise funds for aid programmes, however shortsighted that may be, is a well-trodden path to success. While cases of cannibalism may take place in conflicts in this region, the vast majority of cannibal stories – even the ones told by the “cannibal” him/herself or, in rare cases, the survivor – are not true, and in local

2 Similar points have been raised by others; see, e.g., Boås 2014.

3 The novel *Johnny Mad Dog*, written by Emmanuel Dongala, was originally published in French as *Johnny Chien Méchant* in 2002. The film based on it was released in 2008.

understandings represent more a brutal comment on political movements or individual politicians and their ambitions than the depiction of real scenarios. What cannibalism stories do is skew the picture, presenting *Heart of Darkness*-style imagery to peacekeepers and aid workers that are in dire need in the region. There is no doubt that these practitioners will go to CAR, but if they fear cannibals there is a risk that it will affect their understanding of certain parties involved in the conflict, which may cause them to take the wrong action at a time where doing the right thing is absolutely crucial.

What, then, should we focus on? Naturally, one needs to understand the national context. But more attention should also be paid to regional, continental and international actors. The main regional actor in CAR is Chad, whose president, Idriss Déby, has for a long time been running his business by proxy across the border.⁴ It is no secret that François Bozizé, a former president of CAR, whom Séléka forced from power in 2013, was helped into office by Déby a decade earlier. It has been suggested that Déby had simply “lost his patience” with Bozizé, who declined to negotiate with the opposition and, despite Déby’s advice, maintained his plans to change the constitution to cater for his continued rule (ironically following Déby’s example, rather than his advice). When Bozizé’s relationship with Déby began to falter, the former turned to South Africa. Despite this game change, Chadian troops protected Bangui during the first attack in December 2012, as they believed Séléka had ties with Chadian rebels. After receiving assurances from Séléka that CAR would not become a safe haven for Chadian rebels, Chadian soldiers laid down their arms and allowed the Bozizé regime to crumble (*RFI* 2013). After the shift of government, Déby openly started supporting the new regime. As a shrewd politician, he has also maintained his support of other groups (including non-Muslims).

There is also a wider international aspect to the current conflict in the sense that CAR belongs to the French sphere of influence: French companies have for a long time been extracting most of the mineral wealth from the country. When Bozizé turned to South Africa for support, South African companies also began to move in; alongside them, South African military advisors and soldiers were deployed in 2007 in a move that some interpreted as evidence of Bozizé’s attempt to become less politically dependent on France. When Séléka reached Bangui in March 2013, more than a dozen South African soldiers were killed, with many more wounded, in a firefight with the rebels. Following these casu-

4 For a detailed analysis of Chad’s involvement in CAR, see Debos 2008.

alties and the subsequent scandal at home, the South African troops were withdrawn (see, e.g., *Mail and Guardian* 2013). Relations between Chad and France warmed considerably after Déby sent experienced forces to fight insurgents in Mali, who ended up playing a crucial role in many of the initial battles on the ground (Bøås and Utas 2013). France may have used this rekindled friendship as a way to eliminate unwanted competition in CAR in order to strengthen its grip on the country. The collaboration with French and international troops in Mali managed to mute stern criticism of Déby's government, allowing him to more easily manipulate political actions in the region – including in CAR.

The resignation of Djotodia as president of CAR on 17 January 2014 has had two major effects: First, it has underscored the role of Idriss Déby as kingmaker, not least because Djotodia resigned in Chad at a summit of the Economic Community of Central African States. Second, it has now become obvious that though Djotodia and Séléka had attempted a real societal upheaval, only a short-lived rebellion was achieved (Käihkö 2013). Unable to control the local political and military situation and partly because he faced international pressure, Djotodia left for Benin. For a few days following his departure, violence, at least in the capital (few accounts from the rest of the country have surfaced), decreased. Djotodia was succeeded by Catherine Samba-Panza, who had been in office for one year as the mayor of Bangui. She won a vote in the provisional parliament, the Conseil National de Transition, beating two sons of former presidents – not a minor achievement in a country like CAR. As representative democracy has historically faced difficulties in CAR amidst several coups and rebellions, it was fortunate that all candidates represented civilian political parties (Mehler 2011). Even the practical task of holding elections in the future will be daunting due to the lack of infrastructure and the security situation.

The new interim president certainly possesses many qualities that are appealing to the international community: She studied law in France, was involved in the reconciliation process in CAR a decade ago, and is described both as untainted by involvement with Séléka or *anti-balaka* and as a successful businesswoman. But one person is not enough to change the trajectory of the country. While the initial responses have been positive, there is much reason to be pessimistic. Even the view of the new interim president could be interpreted as at best cautious, as upon taking office she immediately pleaded for more international forces to be deployed to reinforce the two thousand French and five thousand regional peacekeepers already on the ground. The European Union will send troops, although it is somewhat foreboding that three major Euro-

pean countries, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, immediately announced that they would not contribute forces to the operation (although they might help with logistics). Perhaps surprisingly, the main contributor so far to this force is Estonia, which has said it plans to deploy fifty Afghanistan veterans. In the end, the main thrust might come from the non-EU country Georgia, which is contemplating a contribution of a company-sized deployment to the force. However, the deployment of the (maximum one thousand) EU soldiers has been postponed, and they are scheduled to stay for only six months.

This, of course, raises the question of whether the deployment will make much of a difference: One thousand soldiers in an area bigger than France is not a lot. Moreover, the needs are enormous in this country, which has been called “a phantom state” (International Crisis Group 2007) and described as being in a “state of anarchy” (Human Rights Watch 2007). The already poor infrastructure has been damaged by years of conflict, grievances will not disappear overnight, and the capital’s hold on the rest of the country has never been strong. According to the French military, their main task at the moment is guarding the international NGOs. This perhaps partly explains why the international forces have not managed to completely secure Bangui, as fighting continues, although at a low intensity. Even the different peacekeeping organizations have not been either able or willing to prevent fighting between groups – or to coordinate their actions. European Union peacekeepers could improve the situation, but this should not be taken as a given. It is reasonable to expect that they will not be deployed outside Bangui in any meaningful numbers. In fact, the current plan sounds rather modest, as the EU forces would relieve French soldiers from guarding the airport in Bangui. The French would then attempt to create safe havens in some parts of Bangui (Norman 2014). Aside from their small number and the modest goals, the rather short length of deployment that is planned clearly spells out that CAR is not high on the EU agenda.

The fractionalization of peacekeeping is a fast-growing problem in many African conflict situations, and the stability of CAR is very much dependent on a functioning cooperation between regional peacekeepers, French forces and, in the near future, EU forces. While the deployment of the small EU force has been delayed, the African Union and the United Nations have reportedly already quarrelled about who should be in charge of the intervention (International Crisis Group 2014). Another central problem is the involvement of regional peacekeepers: After years of intervening in CAR politics, can Chadian troops abstain from taking sides? Can they truly be a neutral force? Finally, even peacekeepers with-

out preconceived notions or opinions will have to tread lightly in order not to enflame existing grievances, and to maintain their perception as neutral forces.

All in all, the future does not appear too bright. Samba-Panza faces the same problem as Djotodia did ten months ago, but with increased urgency, and under even more difficult circumstances. This time, political inertia is not an alternative. But will her presence provide momentum for CAR? Can she lead the country on a path to durable change? Before being evacuated, some commentators who had been working in CAR expressed a sense that the upcoming tasks were so extensive that they cannot be achieved: “Sooner or later there will be war again.”

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Die Krise in der ZAR: Mythen und Interessen

Zusammenfassung: “Anarchie”, “Religionskrieg”, “Genozid” und in jüngster Zeit auch “Kannibalismus” – das sind einige der meistgebrauchten Begriffe in westlichen Medien, wenn es um die Krise in der Zentralafrikanischen Republik (ZAR) geht, spätestens seit der Machtübernahme der Rebellenkoalition Séléka im März 2013. Die Autoren des Beitrags greifen diese Stereotype in den Medien auf und versuchen, die unübersichtliche Lage zu entwirren, die seit dem Fall des Bozizé-Regimes und der Machtübernahme von Séléka in der ZAR entstanden ist. Sie verweisen auf die entscheidende Rolle internationaler Akteure bei der Entstehung der derzeitigen Krise. Aus ihrer Sicht sollten Leiter internationaler Friedensoperationen, Politiker und Diplomaten nicht nur über die grundlegenden Fakten Bescheid wissen, sondern auch die engen Bindungen der wichtigsten Gruppen in der ZAR zu verschiedenen regionalen und internationalen Akteuren berücksichtigen, um zu einer Lösung der Krise beizutragen. Solange sie diese Zusammenhänge nicht durchschauen, besteht die große Gefahr, dass ihre Aktivitäten bestenfalls suboptimal sind und schlimmstenfalls zur Verschärfung der Krise beitragen.

Schlagwörter: Zentralafrikanische Republik, Bürgerkrieg, Internationale Beziehungen