
Central African Republic: Religious Persecution and Political Conflict

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In late July, Amnesty International released a new report calling attention to the ethnic cleansing of Muslim minority communities in the Central African Republic (CAR). Forms of religious persecution described in the report include restrictions on movement, bans on prayer and other practices, the destruction of mosques, and forced conversion to Christianity. This week, Cornerstone asks contributors to describe the status of religion and religious freedom in the CAR prior to this ethnic cleansing.

Introduction

The conflict in Central African Republic (CAR) has claimed thousands of lives, displaced hundreds of thousands, and caused severe destruction of property. The United Nations inquiry used the heading “Christian militias engaged in ethnic cleansing of Muslims in ongoing Central African Republic civil war.” [Amnesty International released a report](#) under the title “Erased identity: Muslims in ethnically cleansed areas of the Central African Republic.” It claims that the Christian anti-Balaka militias are committing crimes against humanity against Muslims.

Yet it seems, if one goes back to the beginning of the conflict, that the reports are missing many important factors—one of them being the atrocities committed by the Seleka forces against Christians. These are the very atrocities that later provoked those committed by the anti-Balaka forces.

The purpose of this article is not to condone or justify any form of atrocities, whoever the perpetrators or the victims are. The writer believes that any form of atrocities committed against another group is abhorrent and needs the strongest condemnation possible. The aim of this piece is to shed light on the fact that Christians were also severely persecuted at the start of the conflict in 2012, and that they are still vulnerable to persecution in the northern provinces of the country. A secondary aim is to correct or complement the distortions in the reporting about the Central African conflict.

A Country Riddled with Conflict and Coups

The Central African Republic (CAR) has seen many conflicts since its independence from France in 1960. According to a 2007 report by the International Crisis Group, “The Central African Republic is if anything worse than a failed state: it has become virtually a phantom state, lacking any meaningful institutional capacity at least since the fall of Emperor Bokassa in 1979.” Since its independence, the country has seen five coups.

The volatile nature of CAR’s post-colonial political system has caused the establishment of basic civil liberties and political rights to be very underdeveloped. Freedom House, the global watchdog monitoring political freedom, categorizes CAR as “not free” with a score of seven (lowest score possible) for both civil liberties and political rights in its 2015 index. In addition to recurrent military takeovers of power, CAR has also been afflicted with chronic instability as a result of various rebel groups taking up arms against the central government. Most of these rebels turn to insurgency as a result of alleged sectarian exclusion and marginalization.

The instability of CAR and the weakness of its successive governments as well as their lack of legitimacy has meant that France, its former colonizer, still plays a very decisive role in CAR. (See the International Crisis Group’s report “Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State”.) It has to be noted also that there are countries with a vested interest in CAR. As one analyst pointed out, “The violence in the Central African Republic needs to be understood in the historical context of foreign interests in the country.”

More than any other country, the influence of France has been predominant throughout the history of CAR. There have been many direct French military interventions in CAR in support of the governments of the day and at times to protect its own nationals and foreigners living in CAR. While the rebels and those who lead military takeovers of power often allege that they are motivated by a desire to root out corruption or ethnic or religious discrimination, very often it seems that they are motivated by the material rewards of political power and the opportunities for patronage and corruption it offers. (See the International Crisis Group’s report “The Central African Crisis: From Predation to Stabilization”.) The recurrent pattern of conflict and crises has turned CAR into an archetypal failed state. Considering this characterization of CAR, it should not be surprising to see conflicts flaring up in the country. Yet, the recent conflict seems to have garnered an enormous amount of international attention. But why?

The Recent Conflict

What makes the recent conflict more dangerous is the fact that it has a religious dimension. This put the country in the spotlight as one of the most troubled countries in Africa. UN chief Ban Ki-moon said that CAR has suffered a “total breakdown of law and order.” In September 2014, the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened a second investigation in the country. The Chief Prosecutor stated that “the list of atrocities is endless.” Experts believe that what

brought the Seleka forces into the picture was, among other things, the failure of the government to address social problems and the lack of good governance.

However, the manner in which the Seleka forces tried to express their alleged grievances casts doubt on their true motives. To mention just one example, [Human Rights Watch researchers confirmed](#), “in attacks on 34 villages and towns, primarily carried out by Seleka fighters from February 11 to June 2, 2013, more than 1,000 houses had been burned and at least 40 civilians killed. Seleka forces targeted some communities to quell resistance and to pillage.” These communities were mainly Christian even though many organizations failed to recognize that fact.

In 2013, [Amnesty International also reported](#), “The de-facto government forces, known as ex-Seleka, retaliated on a larger scale against Christians in the wake of the attack, killing nearly 1,000 men over a two-day period and systematically looting civilian homes.” There should not be any reason whatsoever to kill Christians indiscriminately in order to address any sort of alleged longstanding injustice. After all, as a country, both Christians and Muslims have suffered from the lack of good governance, the absence of rule of law, and incompetence by central governments for many years together. Moreover, the killing of Muslims by anti-Balaka forces—just because they were Muslims—cannot be condoned.

One of the dangers we are facing now is that while attempting to solve the crisis, it seems that important issues in the conflict are being neglected. The inquiry by the UN experts and Amnesty International suggest that Christian militias (anti-Balaka) are committing ethnic cleansing against the Muslim minority. However, they do not mention the crimes the Seleka forces had committed previously, although it was widely reported that the Seleka forces targeted Christians. According to a [report by the Telegraph](#), “The largely Muslim militia [the Seleka forces] has been fighting to stave off a counter-coup attempt by forces of the Christian majority in this ‘state’ in the capital Bangui and the northern city of Bossangoa. Because they get no pay, they pay themselves by looting the population they claim to protect: notably the Christian population.” The relationship between religious communities in CAR prior to 2012.

The US State Department (citing the 2003 census) [reported](#), “The population is 51 percent Protestant, 29 percent Roman Catholic, 10 percent Muslim, and 4.5 percent other religions, while 5.5 percent have no religious beliefs.” Islam entered the country with Arab traders in the Middle Ages, and the primary basis for Islam up until the present day is made up of “CAR citizens of Arab heritage. Primary Islamic support among the Central African peoples is found among the Hausa and Bororo peoples in the northern part of the country.” (See *Religions of the World*, edited by J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann.) Christianity entered the country around the end of the nineteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church arrived in 1894 as the French were taking full control of the country and the surrounding region, with the Protestants coming later in 1920. There had not been any severe conflicts between the two main religions in the country until 2012. Thus, it can be fairly said that all these groups lived together relatively peacefully for more than a century.

What Is Happening Now?

The international community and the administration of the interim president are focused on various tasks that are considered to be essential in the transition process and in bringing about peace and stability in CAR. One of these tasks is to organize a peace process and a forum for dialogue in which various militant, ethnic, religious, and civic groups could participate. This forum is supposed to be a forum of reconciliation and aims at ending the conflict and strife that has characterized CAR for so long. Interim President Catherine Samba-Panza said, “I strongly call on the fighters to show patriotism in putting down their weapons.”

In the meantime, the two former political leaders of CAR, General François Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, the leader of the rebels who had ousted Bozizé, have signed a peace deal in Kenya, although both the UN and the National Transitional Council have not recognized the talks held between these two individuals. The value of the agreement between these two former archenemies is questionable since they do not have control over the armed groups that they once commanded. In the meantime, the interim government is in the process of establishing a criminal tribunal composed of national and international judges that will hold those responsible for atrocities committed during the conflict that has spanned over a decade in CAR.

Furthermore, once the task of the reconciliation forum is completed, an election is expected to be held in October 2015 to replace the National Transitional Council. The success of the ongoing reconciliation efforts and the election are crucial for bringing about peace and for ending the tragic humanitarian crisis in CAR. If these two main projects fail, CAR will be back at square one. That would mean that the recent trend in the conflict—that is, the religious dimension—would continue, and hence religious persecution would become more prevalent. It is also crucial to take note of the fact that CAR is bordering some countries where religious radicalization is growing tremendously.

Distortions in Reporting about the Conflict

Much of the reporting about the conflict in CAR omits the fact that the violence against Muslims, which is by no means justifiable, comes after Christians have been confronted with the enormous brutality of Seleka, which has often been attributed, erroneously, to the Muslim population in general. This has led to the outrage of many Christians. In addition to this, young Christians feel frustrated because of extreme poverty and the fact that Muslims dominate commerce. Finally, the high numbers of youths in the country with little hope for the future easily fall prey to violent impulses. With no democratic institutions to channel social discontent and virtually no economic opportunities, the violence caused by the Seleka triggered a vicious circle of violence and resentment.

In addressing the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bangui and the western region of CAR, the near-genocide by Seleka of non-Muslims in the pre-December 2013 period must not be

underestimated, and the thousands of non-Muslims who were victims of Seleka atrocities during its 12-months-long period of terror before, in the interior of CAR, must not be neglected.

By emphasizing the anti-Balaka violence, only part of the picture is given. All reports about the conflict in CAR must be welcomed, but more research is needed about the violence currently still going on, away from the eyes of the international community, particularly in northern areas of CAR where the former Seleka is still active.

The Challenges Ahead

The recent conflict in CAR has fundamentally changed the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country. The conflict has claimed thousands of lives on both sides. The two communities who have lived together for more than a century now lack trust in each other. The reconciliation process, which is backed by the international community, has started to address this problem. However, it has to be underlined that, unless the reconciliation process and the attempt to end the cycle of impunity in CAR succeed, there is grave risk that the polarization and conflict among Muslims and Christians in CAR will continue and exacerbate religious conflict.

In the process, the fact that Christians have been targeted for no other reason except for the fact that they are Christians should also be underscored and accepted, a fact which many reports completely fail to acknowledge. Some media groups and organizations who have been reporting in a very unbalanced way have already created a misconception that might have a severe effect on the reconciliation process. Therefore, the outcome of the reconciliation process—as well as holding those who are responsible for committing crimes against humanity accountable for their actions—is essential in building peace and stability in CAR. Furthermore, the credibility and outcome of the election to be held in October 2015 are also crucial in determining the future of CAR.

Conclusion

The current conflict in CAR, unlike those in previous decades, has pitted one religious community against another. It is increasingly difficult to make sense of it all, but it is clearly too simplistic to describe it as an interreligious conflict alone. As reports stated, the Seleka forces committed atrocities mostly against Christians. This led to the creation of the anti-Balaka militia. Although it is true that the anti-Balaka militias call themselves Christians and fight to preserve and protect Christians, their fight is not of a religious nature; it is largely political. Moreover, the Christian majority and Christian leaders in CAR have officially and vehemently distanced themselves from the anti-Balaka violence. In fact, many Christians are also suffering from anti-Balaka. There are reports that suggest Christians and Church leaders who have dared speak out against them are being attacked and threatened.

The existence of these two forces, Seleka and anti-Balaka, has created a sense of insecurity among the religious communities. Many have been killed because of their faith, and many have been forced

to flee their homes. Moreover, in the Northern provinces of CAR, the former Seleka rebels are still active.

As it stands, the level of religious persecution in the country is very high, and attempts to bring about political solutions have not been successful at easing the tension between the religious communities. The reason for this is that those who have committed atrocities are still at large and acting with impunity.

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