

Central African Republic

Instability yesterday, violence today, confidence tomorrow?

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The magnitude of the new cycle of violence in which the Central African Republic has been immersed since 2013 is unprecedented in the country's history. Its dynamics must be sought in deeper reasons that will help in understanding certain characteristics of the Central African state. Thus, the answers provided to alleviate this situation – articulated around building trust, as stipulated in the Brazzaville Agreement on the cessation of hostilities, signed in July 2014 – are insufficient since, besides not sufficiently mitigating the prevailing instability, they barely provide an answer to the structural problems that the country must confront. The aim of this policy paper is to provide radiography of the past and present of armed violence in the Central African Republic, by considering its actors and dynamics. It also contributes elements to provide a clearer perception of the near future, by making recommendations before the Bangui Forum is supposed to be held in January 2015, which should give continuity to the abovementioned Brazzaville Agreement, concerning both the challenges to be overcome and the roles of the main actors.

Analysis

Understanding yesterday's structural instability

The democratic tradition of the Central African Republic has always left much to be desired, as a succession of coup d'états have resulted in the alternation in power of a series of regimes that have normally benefitted the members of their ethnic group. Thus, the decentralized representation of the state (authorities, health structures, infrastructures, etc.) has been practically nonexistent outside Bangui, which dilutes any state perspective beyond the common flag and the national anthem. To all of this must be added different socio-economic aspects, whether the control of natural resources (very localized in gold and diamond mines), or the historical chain of confrontations between pastoral nomad groups practicing transhumance and sedentary agricultural communities in the north of the country.

The historical marginalization of the north-eastern zone was to be the leitmotiv of one of the main rebel coalitions that has plunged the country into the present situation. Facing the impression of neglect

and lack of governability in certain parts of the country, a series of rebel groups gradually formed in the northern strip of the country over the last decade. With time (following different restructurings) some of these groups formed the "Séléka" rebel coalition (meaning "alliance" in Sango, the local language). Making a meteoric advance, this organization took several towns and communications axes, until it captured the capital on 24 March 2013, which led Michel Djotodia to proclaim himself president of the Republic.

Since then instability has been growing worse in both the capital and the interior, with constant reports of violent activities, to which must be added a constant impression of government inaction – clearly reflected, for example, in the non-payment of salaries to civil servants for many months – and the dismantling of what was already a weak state, as well as the sensation of insufficient accompaniment by the international community. As a result, especially facing the lack of control by the state security forces, the impunity of Séléka's activities provoked growing opposition to it. The renewed upsurge of confrontations in the north of the country continued, with cases appearing sporadically in different localities.

The high point was reached on 5 December 2013, when the anti-Balaka militias (“anti-machete” in Sango, initially traditional groups of hunters) carried out attacks in Bangui that caused over a thousand deaths and injuries, as well as the displacement of half a million people in Bangui alone. Additionally, a growing stigmatization could be noted between the Christian and Moslem communities, related in a general way with the anti-Balaka and Séleka armed groups, which developed into a phenomenon of ethnic cleansing, as denounced by several human rights organizations.

Since then, different efforts have been made to alleviate this new spiral of violence, essentially based on political and security stabilization, in the capital above all. The year 2014 began with the forced resignation of President Djotodia, who was replaced by Catherine Samba-Panza. She formed a transitional government with the main aim of taking the country to presidential and legislative elections, which are currently scheduled for mid-2015, as well as a Constitution referendum.

There can be no doubt that many challenges must be met to reach this goal, starting with the struggle against the impunity of the ongoing violence throughout the territory, the improvement of the humanitarian conditions of a large part of the Central African population or the stabilization of security at the national level, to cite the most urgent aspects.

At present, the framework for trying to carry this out is provided by the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities of Brazzaville (Republic of Congo), signed in July 2014. More concretely, this agreement calls for a cessation of hostilities by the signatories, reconciliation amongst them and the reinsertion of ex-combatants, amongst other aspects. This process must be ratified, according to the stipulations, by a process of national agreement, which must culminate in a new forum in Bangui, envisaged for instance in January 2015, in order to lay foundations that will make it possible to arrive at the elections mentioned above. While the positive momentum created for the signing of that agreement should be appreciated, the context and the procedure for creating these measures merit a critical review.

Analyzing today’s violence

The agreement on the cessation of hostilities presented all the agreed points in a highly abstract form. To try and alleviate this, the international community made an appeal, which was also long-winded, for the creation of “measures of trust” for its fulfilment. Thus, for example, contrary to what one might think, disarmament is not being carried out in the most sensitive areas; instead a control is being carried out of the stocks of armaments that continue in the armed groups’ possession. In general, to this day there is still no plausible alternative to weapons

being seen as the main tool for survival.

This strategy does no more than increase the accusations of inaction by the transitional government and the international community, as well as the constant suspicions of a lack of political will by the signatories. On one side, the transitional government is accused of not knowing how to meet the needs of the country at the present time, and there are even veiled accusations of lack of leadership. It is also accused of inaction and of being incapable of facing the challenges of the present context, especially regarding questions of reconciliation and inclusion. To these accusations can be added veiled accusations of favouritism at a time when the international community is responsible for paying the salaries of the public administration and for a large part of the security provided by the different forces present in the Central African Republic.

The Brazzaville Agreement should be followed by a process of national agreement and a new Forum in Bangui

At present, the international community is represented by a range of institutions with an attitude of distrust and lack of coordination amongst them. On 15 September 2014, a United Nations peace-keeping operation (MINUSCA) replaced the force led by the African Union (MISCA). To this must be added the presence of the French “Sangaris” operation (responsible for security largely outside Bangui) and the European intervention forces (EUFOR), based solely in the capital. Above all, it seems that it is the French agenda that is prevailing at the political level, with the intention that presidential elections should be held in 2015 under the premise of “better soon than well done”, as could be seen in the meeting of the International Contact Group held in Bangui in November 2014. The conditions of security and the lack of deployment of the administration outside Bangui provide grounds for thinking that the date envisaged is pure utopia, to say nothing of a possible referendum on a new constitution for May 2015, an element that has still not acquired the relevance it deserves.

With respect to measuring the contribution of the international community in general, it is difficult to verify a clear stabilization of security in the capital, as shown in the two waves of violence that have occurred there in the last five months. To date, its

understanding of maintaining measures of trust has not included exercises of reconciliation or social cohesion, but has been based instead on peace-making to rid the capital of the presence of arms. Unfortunately, the stability of the rest of the country, as well as a clear control of the unrestrained proliferation of small arms (due more to their internal circulation than to the entrance of new arsenals) are aspects that are recognized as secondary, due to lack of human means (military means), as well as to the consideration that the fight against impunity is the first battle that must be won.

With respect to the confrontations and their roots, these latter should not be sought in religious motivations, but in the creation of armed groups that, with different characteristics and motivations, have sought to show their explicit and violent rejection of the governing power at each moment. The composition and (weak) structuring of these groups is largely articulated through the ethnic origin of their components, which provides coherence to the previously mentioned fact of governing sectors giving almost exclusive priority to their zones of origin, to the detriment of the rest of the population.

At the political level, the French agenda is prevailing, with the intention that presidential election should be held in 2015

Starting with the other rebel alliance, “Séléka”, this is understood as a conjunction of armed groups from the Goula and Rounga ethnic groups (proceeding from the northeast of the country, historically opposed to each other for the control of the zone) and the Peuhl ethnic group (with a pastoral tradition in the centre-west of the country and that did not form part of the initial nucleus) that, after nearly a decade facing the impression of neglect and lack of governability in their zones of origin, decided to opt for the path of arms. Internal disagreements had already been made visible during the months of governance – where each sector only followed the instructions of its main representative. A good example of that is the fact that this alliance was represented in Brazzaville by Mousse Dhaffane, a former minister under the presidency of Michel Djotodia, who was finally removed from his post and arrested by Djotodia. The latter seems to have lost his ascendancy with respect to the factions of this alliance that have been taking shape in country’s

interior, the Peuhl of Ali Darrass, the Arab faction of Alkhtam or the Goula of Nouredine Adam. These factions appear to have structures and interests that are independent of each other.

It is possible to make a similar radiography of the origins of the “anti-Balaka” militias, which were formed in the centre-north zone of the country with their epicentre in the region of Ouham. Their nucleus was formed of members of the Gbaya ethnic group (the same as former president François Bozizé) and the Yacoma ethnic group (of former president André Kolingba). Historically they are considered to be groupings of traditional hunters (with rudimentary hunting weapons and amulets or “gri-gri”) in these zones and their degree of organization increased in protest and opposition to the actions of the Séléka coalition. They carried out actions in different localities in the west of the country from September 2013, until they reached Bangui on 5 December that year. There were suspicions that they received collaboration from members of the former Central African Armed Forces (FACA), made up of members of the above mentioned ethnic groups.

While the objective might have been clear enough, their lack of internal structuring and a mode of operating is still not so clear. Their sentiment is that they are the “heroes of the liberation” of the country, trying in this way to justify their actions as they believe themselves to be more representative of Central African society. The different splits they have experienced – with different leaders who declare themselves to be the genuine leaders – reveal that them to be a heterogeneous group with different faces: robustness as a self-defence group for the violent defence of a territory, but fragility as a militia when it comes to acquiring a more coordinated structure and when facing disparate motivations on which there is no consensus. In this respect, the “anti-Balaka” militias more closely resemble groups of criminals or bandits than structured armed groups.

Recommendations

Facing this unpromising panorama, the upcoming Bangui Forum (January 2015) should be the platform for launching a peace process, where the issues to be dealt with on the agenda will have the same importance as the roles of all the participating actors. The following recommendations follow these two main lines.

Recommendations on the issues to be dealt with at the Bangui Forum:

1) *Holistic reform of the security sector*

Impunity and the lack of a judicial system are the main concern today, as well as the almost total

absence of the state authorities at the local level. For these reasons, this type of reform – in its broadest sense, ranging from measures of disarmament to a clear reform of the judicial system and including a restructuring of the state defense and security bodies – will be essential for supporting the democratic governability mentioned above. In this reform consideration must be given to what strategies are necessary, and their order of priority, in order to meet the threat of the armed groups (DDR process, negotiations, struggle against impunity), as well as the balance between the political path and the military path.

2) *Electoral process*

The international community, especially France, seem to be uneasy about relations with a national transitional government, hence the urgency for holding elections. Holding presidential elections – or even a referendum on a new constitution, which does not seem to be receiving sufficient mention – are not petty events, and the necessary measures should be taken to ensure that they have the highest level (political, security and logistical) of democratic guarantees.

The Forum of Bangui should be the platform for launching a peace process in the Central African Republic

3) *Socio-economic dynamics*

Although these are long term challenges, aspects like the control of natural resources or mediation in the phenomenon of land possession and transhumance deserve constant attention under the challenge of mitigating these structural problems.

4) *Empowerment at the national level*

Central African society has never been characterized by a high degree of social cohesion. Beyond the principal religious leaders, who are also challenged from within the Muslim and Christian communities, it is hard to find any accompaniment of these actions from either the state level (up to now no actions have been detected from the current executive of SambaPanza or from other levels of civil society), or the international community, which will have to

consider what role to play in this respect. This process should be accompanied by a genuine commitment to carrying it out, but, and most importantly, it must be built upwards from a community basis.

This final aspect points directly to the need to analyze what roles should be taken by the principal actors participating in the process, thus providing the second line of recommendations.

1) *National transitional government*

To meet the challenges, the country would need to provide itself with figures that combine a capacity of cohesion, a state perspective, and a real commitment to carrying out change towards a stage of stability. For that purpose, it must abandon bad national habits of a certain favouritism towards the closest sector. A process of national agreement, as envisaged in the Brazzaville agreement and carried out in an effective way, should contribute to its legitimacy; it should also present a consistent road map.

2) *International community*

It is clear that the present interests of countries like France, the United States, Chad or Sudan with respect to CAR diverge enormously. Without a homogenization of agendas and a true commitment to coordinated work and support for national sovereignty and the country's stability, no progress at all can be made. In this respect, the key question in this case should not be what role the international community should play, but what role it wishes to adopt.

3) *Rapprochement with the armed groups*

Beyond the repeated request for ceasing armed violence, rapprochement with the armed groups is an indispensable component facing the coming Bangui Forum. Beyond the presence of groups in very specific zones (LRA in the southeast, the RJ in the northwest or the FDPC of Abdoulaye Miskine, recently arrested), attention is focused on the two principal contenders in the current situation:

- **Ex-Séleka:** The need for a better understanding of its growing fragmentation (at present it is still difficult to say whether we are talking of a “Séleka” or “ex-Séleka” coalition) without this signifying increasing weakness. This should help in understanding the different goals and networks of interests, especially established according to ethnic belonging and on the basis of opposition to the *status quo* currently in force. Beyond the dynamics of peace building mentioned above, the desired short-term result of this approach at the local level should be to enable greater accessibility by the humanitarian actors to the

population, the main victim of the situation, as in so many other cases.

- **Anti-Balaka:** The need for clarification of the hierarchy of their different factions and leaders, as well as the need to fight against their constant impunity, thus avoiding a new mobilization. In this case, clarification of the agendas must be done above all on the basis of political and military criteria, while at the same time delineating the different factions that are marked by the sectors of the Gbaya ethnic group (the ethnic group of former president Bozizé) and the non-Gbaya ethnic groups.

4) Strengthening civil society

In any of the desired structures (level of influence, issues to be dealt with, etc.) the strengthening civil society is necessary in order, from a community approach, to be able to bring out the real desires of the population. The actions of civil society at the local level have a high degree of acceptance, which is why greater recognition and support are needed.

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