

Political and Ethnic Identity in Violent Conflict: The Case of Central African Republic

Wendy Isaacs-Martin, Archie Mafeje Research Institute, University of South Africa, South Africa

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Political and Ethnic Identity in Violent Conflict: The Case of Central African Republic

Wendy Isaacs-Martin, Archie Mafeje Research Institute, University of South Africa, South Africa

The conflicts in the CAR were largely ignored by the international community until 2013. International interest rose with the presidential coup by Michél Djotodia, the first Muslim president of the CAR, who later resigned in January 2014. As the violence in the country escalated, it was mainly portrayed as a conflict fuelled by religion between Muslim militia, Christian defence units and civilians. This paper focuses on this conflict and contextualises it within a trajectory of conflict. It argues that the conflict has other facets apart from a religious strife, and includes ethnic and political factions and conflict as well. Through a case study method a narrative of events is provided and processes, groups and identities are analysed. The data were retrieved from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) briefing notes and news series, and cover the period from 2000 to 2014. The results show that apart from a long-standing conflict related to changes in political leadership, there are other paths of violence, which are representative of other ethnic and political identities. The violence, which is currently defined as sectarian religious conflict is actually related to the contestation of political leadership, and the exploitation of different conflicts and groups for purposes of power.

1. Trajectories of Conflict in the CAR

Since independence in 1960, the CAR has experienced violent conflicts. These were embedded and resulted from competitors attempting to usurp or maintain political leadership and power, and the constant scourge of rebel armies, militias, armed youths, bandits, and civilian criminality. This led on to the persistent weakening of state institutions, including democratic social and political structures, as well as a faltering economy that cannot incorporate the majority of the population. CAR thus experiences violence, extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, and rampant state corruption. In addition, multiple actors – non-state actors as well as government – are involved in violence, and conflicts between state and non-state actors have been a defining feature. As such, CAR exemplifies very well what Gerlach (2010) has defined as an ‘extremely violent society’.

The 2013–2014 conflict is often understood as a religious confrontation pitting government troops against militias that eventually spilt over into civil and community con-

frontations. However, a characterisation of the conflict as Islam versus Christianity, government troops versus paramilitaries, and militias versus civilians fails to capture the true scope, parties and factions of the conflict.

CAR has experienced four violent changes in political leadership across the past decades, most of which have been the result of coups. Ange-Félix Patasse was elected democratically in 1993 a development in CAR politics moving away from coups such as that in 1981 by General André-Dieudonné Kolingba, against the first president of CAR, David Dacko. Unfortunately Patasse was then ousted by François Bozizé in 2003. Bozizé in turn was ousted by Michel Djotodia who proclaimed himself president in 2013. Current president Faustin Touadera was elected democratically, after the caretaker interim government of Catherine Samba-Panza, although his rival Anicet Dologuele claimed there were irregularities. Apart from the democratically elected Patasse, the CAR has continually experienced violent political transition with the use of the military or militias; this violent confrontation with state

forces has increased since 2000. During this period an increasing number of militias can be observed in the various prefectures,¹ established by government and non-government forces, and in partnership or conflict with government forces, other militias or civilians.

This paper aims to demonstrate that there are two strands of violence and violent conflict in CAR. The first is the long-standing pattern that brings about change in political leadership by force in the form of coups. The second form, a corollary to the first, is a new and different path of violence that involves different types of non-state actors: civilians, defence units, and militias. This paper analyses the conflict and its dynamics between different types of actors, and explores the coalitions between these, and their regional distribution for different periods and in different prefectures.

Within the broad conceptual framework of extremely violent societies a descriptive case study method is used. The primary data source is United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) titled as news stories and briefing notes between 2000 and 2014. A total of one hundred documents were analysed. As a corpus, they provide a detailed and differentiated picture of the changing situation and violent activities in the CAR. The narrative follows the patterns according to which conflict and violence occurred over the four presidential terms. Each president's term features an escalation of violence, claims to political legitimacy and power, changing relationships between leaders, armies and militias, and ensuing conflicts after they are ousted. The movement of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, as documented in the UNHCR reports and briefings reveals the trajectory of government troops, militias, and bandits attacking particular areas. These paths of persistent violence and attacks create an environment of fear, hopelessness, and desperation that elevates tensions within and between village and urban communities. The research reveals that the recent violence in the CAR is both a continuation of earlier patterns of violence and behaviours, coupled with a new dimension

from September 2013. The article will first describe the fluid landscape of ethnic and religious groups, and then move on to the various state and non-state actors involved in the conflict and violence.

2. Data and Methods

This article offers a qualitative case study of a conflict that is still ongoing. Current information is largely limited to websites and news media, which are subject to bias and distortion. The main data source used here is a set of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports referred to as news stories and briefing notes covering the CAR during the period from 2000 to 2014. In line with its remit, the UNHCR reports are mainly about refugees and victims, but also cover perpetrators of violence. They provide a consistent, differentiated, and competent account of relevant events during the period. The reports often focus on a single event, for example an attack on a particular area or community: the armed groups involved, the violence perpetrated against civilians, and the movement of civilians, or entire communities, from the site of violence to areas perceived as safer or to refugee camps. Other reports place these events in a larger trend or timeline of increasing or subsiding conflict and violence. Often, accounts of violence are based on victims' reports, but the number of displaced individuals is tallied by the UNHCR. This provides a twofold narrative from the briefing notes. Firstly, the accounts of particular events are related by those who witnessed, experienced, or fled the violence, and secondly the UNCHR estimates give an impression of the intensity of the violence. Each report provides an event, a place, and an outcome and often, although not always, the number of people displaced, supported by maps. The reports describe antagonists in struggles for political leadership, political change, violence, conflict, displaced populations, refugee sites, and armed forces.

Reports were extracted for the period January 2000 to December 2014; up to seven briefing notes and news stories were selected for each year, for a combined total of

¹ A prefecture is an area under the administrative jurisdiction of a governor or appointed prefect (Adrien-Rongier 1981).

one hundred. The potential limitations of this data should be noted: the UNHCR, like other organisations working with refugees, may elevate numbers of refugees in order to create a greater sense of urgency (Rice 2009, 27). However, specific numbers of refugees are of minor importance for the arguments made in this paper.

The UNHCR news stories and briefing notes also reveal the tensions that arise between ethnic groups within the refugee sites in the form of verbal conflicts and demands for exclusion and expulsion of particular groups, often mirroring events outside. Within the refugee camps this results in populations separating along ethnic and religious identities.

The period under discussion, 2000 to 2014, includes four presidencies, namely those of Patassé, Bozizé, Djotodia, and Samba-Panza. Patassé, the fifth president of CAR from 1993 to 2003, was the first democratically elected president since independence in 1960.² His second term in 2000 was marred by revolts that led to further conflict within the various prefectures.³ This period marked the beginning of accelerated violence in the CAR. Links to political and armed forces in neighbouring states exacerbated internal conflict led to increasing numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) as well as refugees entering CAR from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan, and Chad (Vinck and Pham 2010). The UNHCR briefing notes and the news stories can thus be seen as a narration of trajectories of violence that include various actors with differing motivations, coalescing and parting again. The article is generally based on these one hundred documents.⁴

3. Identity, Religion, and Violence in the CAR

State formation and state-building remain complex in Africa due to persistent economic, political, and security fragility (Francis 2005). This can be partly attributed to the legacy of European colonialism, expansion, and resource

extraction. These states, with borders determined by colonial administrators, were vulnerable from a security perspective. Many, including the CAR, were weak to begin with and descended into violence soon after independence. Political authority in Africa has mutated into an institution of personal power rather than institutional leadership. As leaders use ethnic and religious affiliations, in the form of client relationships, to maintain political power, this process has undermined the potential for nation-building and patriotism. The state has become the means by which political elites in Africa have for decades enriched themselves by prioritising their personal interests over the needs of the people and development. According to the Index of State Fragility the CAR is a fragile state, like numerous other states in Africa. Due to internal and external factors a series of governments have been unable (or unwilling) to protect all civilians. Instead there has been a retreat to using and manipulating identities to maintain positions of power.

In the African context, conflicts often begin at higher levels between elites and subsequently trickle down into the population. The political environment is conducive to use of violent means to gain and maintain access to political power. Where armed groups are incorporated into political processes, conflicts are transferred from the political sphere to the civilian environment and communities, where they are easily (re)interpreted as ethnic or religious identity concerns. Individuals and groups may show loyalty to a particular identity – ethnic, national, or religious – not because they were born into it but because there is an assumption of benefit associated with it (Eriksen 1996).

Conflicts begin when there are perceptions of exclusion, marginalisation, and preferential treatment of certain individuals and groups. Civilians receive information from government sources or militias that certain groups are being favoured or targeted. As identities are embedded in ethnicity, religion, or tribal allegiances people are easily

² Patassé became the first democratically elected president in 1993 as a result of international donor influence on the need for elections to the government of General André-Dieudonné Kolingba. Kolingba seized the presidency in a coup against David Dacko in 1981 and served until 1993.

³ Patassé's leadership was plagued by conflicts, revolts, and failed coups. He was eventually ousted in 2003.

⁴ The news stories and briefing notes are available at www.unhcr.org.

convinced that their group is being exploited, excluded, targeted, or condemned. These sentiments have political and social consequences that in their extreme form can result in ethnic cleansing and expulsion (for ethnic cleansing in general, see Mann 2005). Yet others such as Stalyvas (2006) and Collier (1999) argue that these identities and social, ethnic, and religious divisions are not the sole reason for conflict; instead they need to be contextualised in broader economic and political developments. Ethnic groups can be defined as sharing common descent, history, culture, language, religion, or territory (Mann 2005) and experience. These groups, although embracing cultural, religious and behavioural traits, are defined by outsiders as possessing an inherited status and aligned to certain rituals and mythologies. They thus create boundaries between groups and within communities (Cohen 1985). Hale (2008) argues that this creates an emotional connection between group members that is conducive to the use of violence against members of the outgroup and even against those within the group who are seen as traitors to the in-group and its identity (for example by marrying a partner from the outgroup). Leaders then use these sentiments to evoke images of unity and blood connections to incite hostilities towards the outgroup and the 'Others' (Hughey 1998).

History demonstrates that it requires little effort for these sentiments to be translated into issues of self-defence, preservation, and opportunism (Weber 1998). Using these sentiments and traits of identity, ordinary civilians are capable of engaging in collective violence – in particular if such behaviour is supported by institutions, and thus seen as legitimate. Often this behaviour is interpreted as self-defence and, ironically, it is often the perpetrators that consider themselves the victims (Staub 1989). Alternatively, ethnic tensions may lead perpetrators to consider their violence a necessary pre-emptive attack, as they perceive, or are led to believe, that their lives are inevitably in danger (Mann 2005).

Like ethnic violence, religious violence stems from perceptions and interpretations of humiliation and exclusion,

according to general studies on discrimination and violence. While these humiliations can be real, in the form of discrimination, poverty, and exclusion, it can also be ideological and a mere perception (Jones 2008, 39–40). These feelings of humiliation provide the psychological motivation, but not the justification, for a radical polarity of good and evil, and finally for violence. Ethnic and religious identities are then perpetuated through the violent process, and seen as fixed and incommutable. The ethnic and religious framework thus forms an “ethical” framework and purpose for the militias, government troops, and armed civilians.

However, general scholarship about solidifying ethnic or religious identities causing violence applies with some qualification in the case of the CAR. Ethnic groups in the CAR are fluid and change due to social and economic circumstances (O'Toole 1986). In 1952 the French colonial authorities defined eight distinct ethnic groups based on administrative perceptions of differences and similarities. Later studies recognised thirty-one distinct ethnic groups (Lumba, Van Dyk, and Van Dyk 2009, 86). These included the Gbaya Manja (or Manza), Banda (many of whom converted to Islam under the sultanate of Dar al-Kuti), Ubangians (a riverine population living between the Kemo and Mbomu rivers), Sara (and co-ethnic NzaKara originally from south-western Sudan), Zande, and Muslims (a group of traders that are not an ethnic but a religious group and popularly termed Hausa), as well as Cameroonian refugee groups in the northwest mountains (O'Toole 1986, 75; Kalck 1971, 11). The main groups are divided further; for example the Ubangians are comprised of Mbaka and Yakoma. Both O'Toole (1986) and Falck (1971) note that while the Muslim minority represented a distinct group, the other ethnic groups did not distinguish themselves according to religion. The form of Christianity was enmeshed with traditional beliefs and many, even today, continue to adhere to animist faiths (distinguishable by talismans and amulets).⁵ The society was and remains based on kinship and lineage relationships and this social pattern is exploited by the political regime.

5 For extensive, although dated, histories of the CAR, see O'Toole 1986 and Kalcke 1971.

While ethnic groups remain distinct with underlying tensions, the CAR has not had a lengthy history of ethnic conflict, and almost no religious conflict, even as it has faced continuous economic difficulties, deprivation, and marauding banditry in the rural areas. Since 2002 much of the conflicts and violence has been popularly attributed to competing political elites rather than to strife between communities of different ethnic identities (Vinck and Pham 2010, 13). As Lumba, Van Dyk, and Van Dyk (2009, 87) note in their study, the general opinion amongst respondents was that ethnicity had been abused by “outside groups” and this was amongst the causes of the continuous conflicts in the region. Groups with diverse interests – like the coalitions described below – joined together to target others (for example Muslims) leading to assaults, murders, and expulsion of individuals and groups, as occurred during the period 2013 to 2014 (see Cohen 1985 and Gerlach 2010).

4. Conflict Landscapes in the CAR: State and Non-state Actors

In the complex political, ethnic and religious environment of CAR, the 2013 to 2014 conflict defies simple and dichotomous portrayals of ethnic and religious strife. For example, attacks against Muslims, who are assumed to be Séléka supporters, are seen as a defence, and not an attack, by “Christian” civilian defence units known as the anti-Balaka, thus creating a good versus evil scenario, bad Muslim Séléka versus good Christian anti-Balaka. Such perceptions severely underrate the nature, role and activities of militias and armed groups in the conflicts.

Militias are non-state military actors. They are thus not part of – or only loosely connected to – the conventional armies and security forces of a state, but may be part of a rebel military organisation. In Africa they are overwhelmingly formations of armed men and youth who are linked either to the regime or to militias. Militias operate outside of the military and security forces of the state, but they are often created and led by senior government officials, and receive weapons, training and other support from the regular army. Although militias operate outside institutional frameworks they can cross over into the legitimate political environment, become auxiliaries to political parties, and usurp political leadership. Created in the rural

areas, militias are often, although not always, based in a dominant ethnic or religious group; their rank-and-file members consist of ex-soldiers, mercenaries, bandits, and unemployed youth. These groups form and disintegrate quickly, seeking access to material gains first in the locality where they monopolise violence (from which they often originate) (Alden, Thakur, and Arnold 2011; Gerlach 2010). While the interests of militias vary, one of the elements they seek to protect is often a particular ethnic or religious identity. This allows the militia to assert ideological control over a region to the exclusion of competitors such as loyalists and government troops.

When governments are dominated by a single ethnic group whose interests they promote, they may purposely exclude other groups from accessing state institutions. In countries where economies are state monopolies, and access to employment and economic opportunities are limited, usurping control of the state becomes a goal, or “the” goal (Mann 2005, 31–32). This is an environment that is conducive to conflict over scarce resources and power, and encourages the formation and use of militias; with multiple groups and actors such conflicts become particularly violent, and involve all types of violence, against state institutions, against state employees, and eventually against civilians.

In the course of the conflicts and political turmoil, CAR has been a fertile ground for the development of a number of militias and armed groups, and various more or less fragile coalitions among these. The Séléka is a coalition of the largest militias in CAR: the Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix (CPJP), the Convention Patriotique pour le Salut wa Kodro (CPSK), the Union des Forces Démocratiques pour la Rassemblement (UFDR) and the Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain (FDPC). Each of these armed groups controlled parts of particular prefectures, and the coalition formed in December 2013 exercised virtually complete control of the northern and eastern prefectures. The fragility of these relationships and the instability of the militias is illustrated by the defection of segments of the CPJP militia to support the government forces. These armed groups in the CAR exhibit loose social affiliations and shared ethnic, religious and regional iden-

tities. The origins of the anti-Balaka armed group are like those of any militia. It is reported that it was created by Bozizé, but its origins most likely lie in the 1990s as a self-defence group responding to attacks by both bandits from the north of CAR and the Armée pour la Restauration de la République et al Démocratie (APRD). In addition, they sought to expel Chadian cattle farmers from lands belonging to villagers (Layama and Nzapalainga 2014, 8). It is argued that many former soldiers and ex presidential guards joined the anti-Balaka in order to regain their previous civil employment. Like the Séléka, the anti-Balaka became, and remains, a coalition of interest groups. These associations are more about convenience and pursuing a particular aim than acknowledging conscious identity: for the leaders of these groups there appears to be no ideology other than material gain and access to political power. The Séléka militia faced little resistance from government forces as it moved toward the capital, Bangui, in 2013.

This advance was halted by the Libreville peace agreement in 2013, in which it was agreed to allow President Bozizé to serve until 2016. However the agreement collapsed in what the opposition perceived as the government's deliberate foot-dragging and renegeing on agreements. Members of the Séléka rebelled and continued to fight, as they opposed the peace agreement. There was no religious or ethnic component to the conflict at this stage. When Séléka entered Bangui and President Djotodia resigned, the militia broke up into Séléka and anti-Séléka; the latter proceeded to attack civilians and turned against Séléka forces in the capital.

This led to revenge attacks by communities and individuals on the basis of religion. From March 2013 Djotodia was portrayed as a Muslim and the militia was given a religious identity. Anti-Séléka attacks on civilians created a narrative that Muslims were targeting innocent Christian civilians. Christians, characterised in positive terms, were portrayed as having had little choice but to react. However, attacks took place against all civilians, Muslims, Christians, and animists alike. Misreading, and therefore misunderstanding the conflict in the CAR mainly as motivated and driven by religion fails to recognise the complex pattern of temporary coalitions that emerge and disappear under different

leaderships, and then coalesce against a perceived new enemy or enemies – usually the existing government (Rubin 2006, 17). The formation and division of the Séléka are exemplary for these developments.

In the ensuing violence, often including mass violence, communities become participants (active or passive) in ways that often destroy social bonds (Mudge 2013). The hostilities between armed groups, including regular government forces, armed militias, bandit groups, and civilians remain haphazard (Rice 2009, 27; see also Gerlach 2010; Kalyvas 2006; Hale 2008; UNHCR 2006b, 2009e; UNICEF 2009), as is the behaviour of militias and forces loyal to the government. These groups recruit from the localities and regions where they operate, and use ethnic identity to identify and recruit potential followers. As violence escalated in this conflict it becomes easier to recruit along religious, cultural and ethnic identities. As a result it became easier to create dichotomy in recruitment and identify individuals and groups as either Christian or Muslim.

5. Identity, Power Politics, and Trajectories of Violence.

The CAR possesses large reserves of natural resources and its ongoing political instability accompanied by weak state institutions and controls make the territory a prospect for entities seeking economic gain, including existing elites, competing armed groups, and external interests (Flichy de la Neuville, Mezin-Bourgninand, and Mathias 2013). Ethnic identities, like religious identities, are used in these conflicts to serve political interests and increase material gains, rather than triggering them. The UNHCR documents reveal a fragmented country experiencing a multi-polar conflict (Gerlach 2010). Patterns of escalating violence emerge, both in the rural and urban areas (UNHCR 2001d, 2002a, 2002c). The data also reveals a consistent pattern of coerced emigration and displacement (UNHCR 2002b, 2005a, 2005b, 2005e, 2005f, 2006d, 2006e). Patterns of rioting, looting, rape, assault, property destruction and murder occurred throughout the period under discussion (UNHCR 2007c, 2007g, 2008a, 2009e). The outbreak of violence, which resulted from the failed 2012 peace treaty with former president Bozizé, added another dimension. Since 2013 the escalation of violence and forced emigration has been aggravated by foreign government troops from

the neighbouring countries of Chad, Libya, and Sudan (UNHCR 2006f, 2008c, 2010a).

5.1. Identity Politics and Trajectories of Violence

The first trajectory of violence began in 2001 when political strife between André-Dieudonné Kolingba (from the Yakoma ethnic group) and Ange-Félix Patassé (Sara-Kaba group) resulted in unsuccessful coup attempts in 2001 and 2002.⁶ In the aftermath of these failed coups government troops used excessive force against civilians, particularly villagers, accusing them of supporting Kolingba or Patassé or because they shared ethnic identity with either individual. In 2001, in the south of Bangui, 60,000 to 70,000 civilians were displaced when they fled violence orchestrated by government forces and armed groups loyal to Kolingba. These armed groups stormed the presidential palace in Bangui in an attempt to wrest power from Patassé. Civilians were killed in reprisal attacks when government forces loyal to Patassé killed ethnic Yakoma civilians and armed militias, and in retaliation those loyal to Kolingba killed ethnic Sara (UNHCR 2001b). Chaos ensued with civilians, ex-government forces, and armed militias fleeing to the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNHCR 2002f, 2001g, 2002a, 2002c). In this chaos, armed groups often moved with civilians, concealing their weapons to pose as refugees. Approximately 1,250 armed fighters posed as civilians in refugee camps. They often fuelled tensions between different ethnic groups fleeing from the same areas and violence, who had by then become hostile toward each other. (UNHCR 2001a, 2001d, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a). Communities that had previously coexisted became hostile towards, and suspicious of, members of ethnic groups outside of their own (Broch-Due 2005, 25; UNHCR 2005g, 2013e).

In 2002 government air strikes raised ethnic tensions amongst civilians. A civil war ensued when Bozizé, in his attempt to secure the presidency, launched an attack

against his former ally Patassé (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012).⁷ In this conflict, Patassé relied on his own ethnic group of northern Sara-Kaba (also found in southern Chad), and also sought support from transnational militia. The latter had a Ugandan background, and were located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and headed by Jeane-Pierre Bemba – *the Mouvement de Liberation du Congo* (MLC). On the other hand, Bozizé, from the Gbaya ethnic group, had military support from Chad and the Banyamulenge militia from the DRC. Both Patassé and Bozizé used state resources and armed groups, and reinforced notions of stable and unchanging ethnic ties amongst the population.

The second trajectory of violence began with Bozizé seizing power in a coup in 2003. In this period continuous fighting between militias and government forces included the targeting of civilians. In the same year conflict erupted between the armed groups led by Bozizé and those led by Michél Djotodia, who was the leader of the *Forcés Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR) and would later hold the presidency from 2013 to 2014.⁸ President-in-exile Patassé and former general Kolingba's supporters merged their militias to oppose Bozizé's regime. The change in political leadership resulted in a change of ethnic dominance, for both the government and its civil servants, and triggered a change of militia alliances. Members of the military, the *Forces Armées Centrafricaines* (FACA), who were members of the Yakoma ethnic group, revolted against Bozizé (UNHCR 2001a, 2001b, 2003c, 2005a)

Several ceasefires and peace agreements failed to reduce the fighting as politically interested militia groups and including the military FACA proposed political appointments from within their own ranks. This represents the third path of violence, when internal displacement as a result of various internal conflicts reached critical levels in the period 2005 to 2006. The regular armed forces FACA

6 Kolingba was self-appointed president from 1981–1993 followed by elected Patassé 1993–2003.

7 François Bozizé participated as an officer alongside Patassé in a coup to overthrow Kolingba. He conducted a coup against his ally Patassé in 2003,

and served as the sixth president of CAR between 2003 and 2013.

8 Demonstrating the fluidity of these arrangements, the UFDR coalition in 2003 comprised the *Groupe d'action Patriotique pour la Liberation de Centrafrique* (GAPLC), *Convention des Patriotes*

pour la Justice et la paix (CPJP), *Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricaines pour la Justice* (MLCJ), *Armée pour la Restauration de la République et al Démocratie* (APRD), and the *Front Démocratique Centrafricain* (FDC).

were accused of orchestrating mass violence against villagers, equalling, if not surpassing the atrocities of the militias. Like many armies elsewhere in Africa FACA is understaffed, poorly trained, ill-disciplined, and ill-prepared to confront rebel movements and militias. Furthermore their erratic behaviour was, and continues to be, compounded by the Presidential Guard, also drawn from the membership of FACA, that acts outside of military command structures as a security force of its own and commits atrocities against civilians.

In 2005 increased fighting in the northernmost part of the country forced 6,000 refugees into Cameroon and 27,800 into Chad (UNHCR 2006a, 2006c, 2006f, 2007a, 2014a). In September 2005 the town of Markounda in Ouham prefecture was attacked by militias, forcing the inhabitants to flee across the border. In 2005 violence erupted between the Armée pour la Restauration de la République et al Démocratie (APRD) and other militia groups in the northwest; in 2006 the Forcés Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR) led a rebellion in the northeast (Vinck and Pham 2010, 7–10). In October 2006 and March 2007 the UFDR attacked Barao in Vakaga prefecture, resulting in the mass exodus of the entire town. More than seven hundred homes were razed; all food supplies and farming stocks were destroyed. In June 2007 villagers fled from the north to northwest CAR as a result of fighting between government forces and militias where houses were looted and burned. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) estimated that 212,000 civilians from the north were forcibly displaced in the eighteen months after December 2005. It was common for houses and crops to be razed; all along the Ouham-Pendé to the Vakaga prefectures. Few IDPs returned to their homes (UNHCR 2010d, 2011, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e, 2013f). Facing a lack of security and increased food shortages and fearing a return of militias to the region, many IDPs moved to the intensely contested northern areas of Bangui.⁹

The fourth trajectory of violence relates to the history of flight, security, and shelter of CAR (Martin 1998, 18). It is further compounded by refugees from neighbouring countries fleeing violence and famine in Sudan and Chad (Buijtenhuis 1998, 35). In 2010 herdsmen and militias clashed in Ouham prefecture, resulting in 1,500 IDPs and the destruction of thirteen villages (UNHCR 2010a) and in 2011 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a militia that operates across the state borders of Uganda, the DRC, and Sudan, continued to attack, murder, and kidnap villagers in the CAR (UNHCR 2010b, 2012b, 2014b, 2014c). In 2011 the United Nations observed militias, international groups, and bandits involved in criminality in the east and northeast of the CAR (UNHCR 2014a, 2014d), and the area experienced inter-community and inter-group/ethnic violence. The conflict here largely involved the UDFR and the CPJP in the Vakaga, Haute-Kotto, and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures bordering Chad and Sudan, where militias share the same religion but are of different, and often opposing, ethnic identities. Conflict between armed groups, displacement of civilians, and levels of violence raised ethnic tensions and brought the northern-southern divide to the fore. This trajectory culminated in the successful coup by Djotodia in 2012.

5.2. Leadership Changes and Political Power

The greater the violence perpetrated by militias, the greater the opportunity to enter negotiations with those who control central power structures. This is the rationale and calculation of militias, which underlies their dual purpose. In CAR the recruitment and formation of militias follows two patterns. Firstly, self-defence units are established to protect villages and communities from the bandits – *zaraguinas*. Secondly, when these units are absorbed into militias many of the young recruits are often motivated by poverty, deprivation, exclusion, and fear. For them the militias represent opportunity and security.

Many residents in Bangui have long been a target for marauding groups of youths who terrorise residents and

⁹ The failure of the 2007 and 2008 peace agreements was attributed to Bozizé reneging on promises made to militias like the UFDR to integrate their fighters into the state army; this was one of the goals

and expected rewards of many militia members as it remains one of the few stable employment opportunities in the country.

target foreigners (UNHCR 2003a, 2003d, 2005f, 2013e). Looting and vandalism are widespread, along with murders, assaults, rapes, and kidnappings. Without a respite from violence, the communities experience – and possibly themselves perpetrate – extensive and continuous property and violent crime.

Integration of refugees and IDPs into existing CAR communities remains problematic. By 2009, all the participating militias had reneged on the 2008 peace treaty, and the Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricaines pour la Justice (MLCJ) launched an attack against villages and state troops. Clashes between militias such as the UFDR and the CJP transformed into conflicts between communities, resulting in widespread displacement in the Haute-Kotto prefecture. Villagers claimed that violence was retaliatory; militias would attack towns in the northern prefectures and government forces would then (re)capture the towns by performing sweeps (UNHCR 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b; Caux 2007; UNHCR 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e; Vinck and Pham 2010, 17). In this environment of a complete lack of security and mounting fear, villages were abandoned, economic activity ceased, and unemployment was widespread (UNHCR 2010c, 2013a, 2013b). Many fled into the forests and only returned to the villages sporadically during the day. Not only did villagers fear armed groups but they also feared, and were suspicious of, other communities of different ethnic and religious affiliations. The conflict led to hostilities in various neighbourhoods of the city of Bangui. Unlike the rural areas where communities formed loosely collective units of varying religious and ethnic identities, Bangui is comprised of neighbourhood *kudros*. The *kudros* are fragments of the rural kinship structure transferred to the city and thus create ethnically stratified neighbourhoods (see Adrien-Rongier 1981 for a detailed explanation of the *Kudros*). As self-contained units there is limited interaction between members from other *kudros* so ethnic, regional and religious identities become fixed.

5.3. 2013: The Séléka, Ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka Militias

In wresting power from Bozizé in March 2013, Michel Djotodia, an ethnic Gula, was identified in media reports as the first Muslim leader of the CAR. As with preceding presi-

dents, Djotodia usurped political power through the militias loyal to him. By incorporating loosely organised armed groups with poor resources into the coalition, Djotodia attempted to include various members of the Séléka into the state institutions, particularly the military and civil service bureaucracy, thus rewarding them with employment and security. This practice was meant to secure and continue armed support for the political leadership. However, an inability to please all members, and particularly the various leaders within the coalition, soon led to fragmentation and division.

The Séléka recruited militias from Sudan and Chad, as groups moved across borders seeking new coalitions and economic opportunities. As neither the Séléka nor the anti-Balaka are coalitions based on religion, any religious dimension to the conflict is overshadowed by the trajectory of pre-existing conflicts. Religious affiliation was irrelevant to the militias as they targeted civilians in an attempt to deprive other militias of resources, particularly food, medicines, and potential recruits. The Séléka set the precedent by moving beyond their original prefectures in the north, targeting the southern areas and Djotodia's political base. Djotodia's very short presidency introduced the Gula, with ethnic links in Chad, to political power and institutional access. The Séléka was, and remains, a heterogeneous opportunistic militia, opposed to the Gbaya communities from which Bozizé hails. It is not religion that is the salient linkage here, but trajectories of political power and ensuing conflicts.

The authority of the warlord does not translate into universal loyalty. As he attempted to disband the Séléka and bring the fighters under his control, Djotodia's influence and authority over the coalition faltered. Disintegrating into factions so quickly and easily implies that the group lacked a bond beyond material interests, or a shared grievance; in particular shared ethnic or religious values were missing. The new factions (splinter groups) became known in the media as the ex-Séléka. This chaotic period allowed Bozizé, while in exile, to recall the Front pour le Retour de l'ordre Constitutionnel en Centrafrique (FROCCA) to support the anti-Balaka militia (International Crisis Group 2013) as a manoeuvre to oust Djotodia from political office.

By invoking religious identity Bozizé's actions created a new dividing line in the conflict, now mainly based on religious rather than ethnic and regional identity. He thus altered the nature of the conflict, preventing any future Muslim candidates, who often come from the northern prefectures of Vakaga or Ouham, from seeking political office.

5.4. Militias and the Lack of Ideology

In CAR militias are usually composed of particular ethnic groups due to their recruitment strategies. Militias generally recruit in areas where they are supported and trusted, and as a consequence they are fundamentally structured around ethnic identity (Fjelde and Hultman 2014). For example the Armée pour la Restauration de la République et al Démocratie (APRD), which emerged in 2005, is composed of members of the Sara-Kaba ethnicity including former ex-Presidential Guards from the Patassé regime. The Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR) and the Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafrique (FDPC), formed in 2006, feature predominantly Muslim Gula. These groups operate in the Vakaga and Haute Kotto prefectures. The Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix (CPJP) are Arabic-speaking Runga from the Bamingui-Bangoran prefecture. These militias work together or against each other depending on the changing interests, power and coalition arrangements of their leaders. There are tensions based on ethnicity between various militia groups in neighbouring prefectures of the CAR. Thus the UFDR and the FDPC are antagonistic toward ethnic Kara, and the CPJP toward the ethnic Gula (IRIN 2009). Yet these three groups, all originating from the northeastern prefectures, were nonetheless united in the Séléka coalition.

Political leadership in the CAR has used militias as tools to support and maintain the legitimacy of political leaders. The population provides support, in the form of new recruits and logistics, for militias such as the anti-Balaka. To date militias have had little focus on or interest in national or regional issues (Rubin 2006, 12). Utilising mobs that identify themselves in terms of a particular religious identity is a new element to the trajectories of violence in CAR.

6. Conclusion

The trajectories of violent conflict in CAR are exemplary of an extremely violent society as conceptualised by Gerlach (2010). Most CAR citizens are affected by the violence in their country, and the tensions and conflicts created by the regular army, militias, and armed bandit groups. As agreements between armed groups are temporary, there is no specific targeted group of victims, and these groups change from region to region and across time; all civilians are fair game for armed groups from all sides. Changes in alliances result in different groups becoming victimised, independent of ethnicity and religion of victim and perpetrator groups. Coalitions are easily entered into and dismantled, with little or no ideological, ethnic or religious rationale. Instead these alliances are fuelled by self-interest, self-preservation, and material gain. Nonetheless, the pervasive violence raises suspicions and uncertainty between ethnic groups and communities, and also promotes ethnic conflicts, which then are used by political and military leaders. Further to this, internal conflicts in CAR are shaped by ongoing conflicts in the neighbouring DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, and Chad, as well as regional conflicts in Nigeria, Mali, Uganda, and Cameroon. The current violence, which is portrayed as a religious confrontation between Muslims and Christians has its roots in the 2003 conflict between Bozizé and Djotodia, and their access to competing militias and the regular armed forces. The empirical material used here demonstrates that the use of militias and rebel armies was a practice of influential individuals to gain power, political as well as economic, to stabilise their authority and to increase their military strength as a power base. Attacks on what each militia perceived to be the locus of support for a rival group – communities, villages, or ethnic groups – were attempts to deprive the other group of resources, recruits, and political support.

When alliances were formed these new coalitions comprised ex-soldiers, unemployed youth, aggrieved peasants, and professional soldiers. These coalitions exhibit different aims, different enemies, different agendas, and the support of different leaders. The complexity of the conflict is due to the fact that the aims are temporary, as are the coalitions, and today's brothers in arms become tomorrow's enemies.

The formal military has a dual role in the violence. It seeks to eliminate political opposition to the state, and therefore particular leaders, but many within the ranks seek personal and material gains; militias join in this enterprise according to their own allegiances and interests. Both then contribute to the devastation of villages and communities, and heighten discord and fear amongst the population. The violence usually begins with actions by the legitimate armed forces and militias and then trickles down to communities where it becomes widespread and often personally motivated (see Kalyvas 2006, 111–45). When conflict and strife mount within and between communities, this is often done with the tacit consent, cooperation or even instigation of armed groups. The rationale for the violence differs, though. Communities claim their violence is defensive and pre-empts attacks from potential enemies. More recently, communities have claimed to be defending religious identity.

However, Muslims and Christians are neither represented by the militias (Séléka and anti-Balaka respectively), nor do Muslim and Christian communities support them. The anti-Balaka movement as it presently exists in the CAR is not the community-based response initiatives against other militias such as the Séléka. Like the Séléka, the anti-Balaka

itself is a militia, composed of various factions of ethnic and other origin. Like the other militias, it fights for political access and material gain hiding behind the façade of self-defence and self-preservation.

The latest round of violence in CAR is different in that the scale of the operations has grown, and more individuals seek access to political power (Waugh 2014). The fighting and looting escalated beyond villages, infiltrating the rigidly ethnically defined neighbourhoods of Bangui, including the PK-12 kudros that is home to refugees fleeing disputes in neighbouring prefectures and states.¹⁰ Currently, it appears that the violence is between villages and neighbourhoods in Bangui, and the role played by militias has faded. The violence has morphed into private and personal grievances between individuals and communities. Differences between community members, however slight, led to conflict as identity boundaries shifted. Portrayals of these communities living together peacefully are not completely true as they have always been segregated by ethnic, religious, and social differences; like other groups in CAR, underlying tensions and suspicions made them vulnerable to manipulation by interest groups. What is currently termed a “religious” conflict is just another trajectory of violence in the extremely violent society of CAR.

¹⁰ PK-12 is a kudros in Bangui inhabited by displaced persons, particularly refugees. Unlike the other kudros that are established in terms of kinship structures and ethnic affiliations (and are in fact replicas of the social hierarchy and structures in the villages), PK-12 is a refuge for groups and individuals that have no place to go.

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