

Religion in The Central African Republic Is Not the Problem, But Could be the Solution

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This paper examines the current conflict in the Central African Republic. I first outline the history of the region, beginning with its colonialization, showing that generations of its citizens have never experienced a stable and just government. I suggest this has lead its people to identify more with their religion instead of their collective nationality. Next I examine the religious undertones of the current conflict, emphasizing that religion is not the source of the problem, but rather a tool used by political factions to justify their destructive actions. I then examine religious peacebuilding exercises used in other conflicts and how they could be applied in the Central African Republic. Finally, I examine how religious leaders are already attempting to unite the country through religion. Overall I believe reconciliation between the factions is possible, and that peacebuilding exercises will lead to a stable and unified democratic government.

Introduction

The Central African Republic (CAR) has had a tumultuous history. After their independence from French rule nearly 55 years ago, the country has never had a truly stable, democratic government. The current situation is bleak, with the country still in turmoil and the possibility of a genocide being committed. The divides among the populous have shifted from being political to having the appearance of a religious conflict. Religion has been used by political factions to divide the country but can potentially be used to end the interreligious violence and unite the people of the CAR once again. In this paper I will argue that religion should play an important role in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in the CAR. First I will provide an overview of the history of the CAR to show that the state has never been stable enough to allow citizens to take pride in or derive their identity from it. I will then examine the current religious demographics of the state and examine a few ways both rebel and state leaders have used religion to justify their actions. Then I will examine how religion has been used as a peacebuilding tool in other conflicts and how this should be applied in the CAR. I will also show how religion is already being used by Christian and Islamic leaders to promote peace in the region.

A Bloody History

The CAR has a past full of political strife. The French colonized the area now known as the Central African Republic in the late 1800s, and was officially claimed by the French in 1903. From 1890 to 1940 nearly half the population was killed by a combination of microbial shock and Colonial Violence (International Crisis Group. 2007. 3). Beginning in the 1950s, there was a nationalist movement in the CAR for independence, with them gaining independence in 1960.

David Dacko was elected their first president when they gained independence. His electoral win was hardly legitimate; he surrounded the parliament building with an army of pygmies armed with poisoned arrows and forced the deputies to choose him. He quickly established an authoritarian regime by passing legislation which prohibited the formation of an opposition (International Crisis Group. 2007. 4). After five years of poor leadership, Dacko was overthrown in a military coup by General Jean-Bedel Bokassa on December 31 1965. He remained president until 1977 when he declared himself Emperor of the Central African Empire in a thirty-million-dollar coronation ceremony modelled after Napoleon's (French. 1996). Initially France Supported Bokassa until 1979 when it was alleged he participated in a massacre of 100 schoolchildren. On September 20 1979, the French military overthrew Bokassa and returned Dacko to power (International Crisis Group. 2007. 6).

Dacko's return to power was short-lived; General Andre Kolingba overthrew him in a bloodless coup two years later. Kolingba successfully led the CAR for 12 years. In 1993 external pressures forced him to implement a multiparty system and subsequently lost the democratic election to Ange-Felix Patassé. This was the first time in the CAR's history since independence that their leader was democratically elected (International Crisis Group. 2007. 9). Patassé's leadership was just as troubled as his predecessors, with no less than three attempted mutinies in 1996. Various agreements were signed in 1997 and a UN peacekeeping force, MINURCA, was deployed to help maintain stability. MINURCA operated under Patassé until 2000, when the UN decided to change their tactics from peacekeeping to peacebuilding (UN Statement by Security Council President. 2001).

In 2003 Patassé lost control of the state in a military coup to Francois Bozizé, who maintained power until 2013. During his rule the country was rife with conflict, as multiple rebel groups fought for control of the country (International Crisis Group. 2007. 9). The Central African Republic bush war devastated the country until its end in 2007, when Bozizé and the rebels agreed to a truce (Baptise. 2014).

From the creation of colonize French Equatorial Africa and through the creation of an independent state in 1960, the CAR has seen very few years of peace and stability. A violent colonial history, a large number of coups, and a 5-year civil war do not create an environment conducive of a peaceful society. Individuals who have never experienced rule under a stable government will inevitably turn to other sources of support which often comes in the form of religion. When more support is being given by a religious institution rather than a national one, citizens may begin to identify primarily with their religion over their nationality. When citizens feel closer to their religion than their state, religion could become a divisive factor within state borders, leading to religious violence.

The Beginnings of a Religious Conflict

In a country with such a tumultuous history, it is likely most of its citizens would have experienced some sort of interpersonal trauma during their lifetimes. Bryant-Davis and Wong argue that interpersonal trauma, such as war, causes individuals to turn towards religion as a coping mechanism (2013). Many atrocities were committed during the Central African bush war, causing many people to turn to religion for support, increasing the potential for religious conflict between groups in the CAR.

The current wave of conflict erupted in 2012 when Francois Bozizé failed to uphold his promises made in the 2007 ceasefire agreement (Baptise. 2014). In March 2013, the primarily Muslim rebel group, Séléka, ousted Bozizé and established Michel Djotodia as president. Djotodia was unable to reign in the Séléka as they continued to commit atrocities across the region, especially against non-Muslims, which sparked the formation of the anti-balaka, a primarily Christian rebel group. On January 10 2014, Djotodia resigned as president due to international pressure after his failure to stop the religious violence in the country (Nako and Ngoupana. 2014.). Catherine Samba Pamza was appointed interim leader of the state on January 20 2014 and currently holds the position (Nossiter. 2014).

After the rise of the Séléka, religion has played a central role in the ongoing political conflict in the Central African Republic. Approximately 50% of the population practices some form of Christianity, half being catholic and the rest dispersed among other protestant denominations. 35% still practice traditional beliefs, and 15% form the Muslim minority (CIA World Factbook. 2014). Both Christians and Muslims in the CAR practice a syncretic type of faith, with animistic beliefs being interwoven into the more popular world religions. Prior to the current conflict, religion was not a major source of controversy in the unstable country.

There are no clear motivations behind the current conflict in the CAR. It would be unjust to call it a religious war, even though from the surface level that is what it appears to be. Séléka, while being composed of the Muslim minority, was motivated to overthrow the government because of Bozizé's refusal to fulfill promises made in the 2007 truce, rather than having any sort of religious motivations. The religious aspect of the conflict did not present itself until the Muslim minority rose to power. Djotodia was unable to maintain control of the Séléka forces, which refused to disband when ordered to (Smith. 2013). They quickly started abusing their power, a prominent theme in the Central African Republic's history, and many took this as an attack against the Christian minority thus heightening the religious tensions.

During Francois Bozizé's reign, he often used anti Muslim rhetoric in order to delegitimize the Séléka rebels in an attempt to maintain order. He promoted violence against them by having his children distribute knives to civilians in the outskirts of Bangui, commanding the young people to fight an invasion from the "foreigners." A common rhetoric was used accusing the Séléka forces of being composed of mostly Chadian or Sudanese fighters, rather than citizens of the Central African Republic, further painting Muslims as foreigners in their own country (Kam Kah. 2014. 38).

The rise of the Anti-Balaka, a group composed of non-Muslims has also increased the religious tensions in the country. After UN peacekeepers forced Séléka to retreat, they quickly filled to power void left. Some groups started attacking Muslim civilians as retribution for crimes committed by Séléka and

have been accused of committing atrocities worse than what the Séléka ever did (Katz. 2014). Again, this has only increased the religious undertones of the conflict.

The conflict has had massive implications on the people of the Central African Republic. An estimated 5000 people have died since December of 2013. The death toll may be much higher as it has never been officially counted because some of the violence was committed in remote areas, and overwhelmed aid workers may have overlooked many of the victims (Larson. 2014.). 554 800 people have been displaced internally and 359 834 have sought refuge in other countries as of May 2014 (Einsporn. 2014). The UN initially stated there was a risk of genocide in the country, but has since declared the actions of the anti-balaka to be an ethnic cleansing, rather than falling under their definition of genocide (Nichols. 2015).

The UN is currently operating in the Central African Republic. The operation, called MINUSCA, started April 10 2014, and took over operations from the previous mission, BINUCA (UN Resolution 2149. 2014.). The mandate uses the 6200 troops already stationed there as their force (BBC News. 2014). The principle goals of the peacekeeping mission are to protect civilians, with increased protection for women and children, to support the transition process, and help create a stable, democratic and authoritative government, to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, protect United Nations personnel, promote and protect human rights, support national and international justice, and to disarm, demobilize, reintegrate and repatriate the former combatants. They currently have authorization to operate until April 30 2015. The only mention of religion in the Mandate is their intention to “[work] with relevant regional and local bodies and religious leaders, including through inclusive national dialogue, transitional justice and conflict-resolution mechanisms, while ensuring the full and effective participation of women” (UN Resolution 2149. 2014).

Moving Forward: Religion as a tool for Unity

Religion can play a major role in the peacebuilding effort in the Central African Republic. Their current conflict bears a striking resemblance to conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In the Yugoslavian conflict, sides were drawn upon cultural and religious lines, yet religion was not the only factor, or even the primary factor in the division (Coward and Smith. 2004. 232). Former communist leaders, who never previously held religion in high regard, used it as a tool to fuel their causes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The state was incredibly unstable before the uprising, just like the current situation in the Central African Republic (Coward and Smith. 2004. 232).

Coward and Smith suggest that peacebuilding efforts used to bring religious communities together need to be focused at the grassroots level; “For any religion-based solution to have a lasting impact, it must be convincing to the average layperson” (2004. 233). They also argue that in societies where no consensus exists between ethno religious groups, pure democracy will not work. The minority will fear the tyranny of the majority and eventually pursue separation and formation of their own state. This is of special concern in the Central African Republic where the sizeable Muslim minority has been unhappy with the state, and was unable to maintain power under Djotodia. Pure representative democracy must be abandoned and a system must be put in place which minorities are also given fair voice.

In order for a religious based peacebuilding process to be successful in the long term in Yugoslavia, it must be led by religious leaders who genuinely believe it will be successful. Religion and politics cannot be completely isolated from each other in these situations, as we have come to expect in liberal democracies. Religious leaders should play a small role in government decisions; they will have a better idea of what the state needs than any foreign consultant. The religious leaders must also encourage their followers to reflect upon their actions and recognize that the atrocities committed by them were wrong (Coward and Smith. 2004. 236-7). All these suggestions are equally applicable to the situation in the Central African Republic and will help establish a peaceful, strong and stable government.

Religious freedom must play a central role in the peacebuilding efforts. When a stable government is established in the CAR it must promise religious freedom to their citizens which helps ensure no group feels discriminated against for their beliefs and practices. This does not mean government should be devoid of all religion; but all should be treated fairly and equally. Having input from Islamic, Christian, and indigenous religious leaders could lead to a more unified and legitimate government in the eyes of its citizens. While the previous constitution promised religious freedom, the government did not fully uphold it. It refused to register a new political party which had the explicit goal of defending Muslims in the country (US Dept of State. 2010). In cases where religion is a primary sense of individuals' identity over a nation or state, perhaps the western ideas of the separation of church and state are damaging rather than helpful.

There is also a potential for possible channels of dialogue and reconciliation through indigenous religion. 35% of the population still practices indigenous religion, and the both the Christian majority and the Muslim minority integrate indigenous beliefs into their practices. Important figures in the indigenous belief system could advocate for the unity of both sides of the conflict. It provides common cultural ground between groups and could help them form a resolution.

Media can also play a positive role in the religious peacebuilding process in the Central African Republic. The media has been used as a way to spread the news of atrocities committed by both the Séléka and the anti-balaka. Faseke suggests, in the context of the Nigerian conflict with the terrorist organization Boko Haram, that religious leaders can also use media in a positive way. He argues that in communities affected by religious violence, those who want to use religion as a peacebuilding tool may be the minority. If the peacebuilders use the media to convey their messages into these communities the same way the terrorist do, they can help reduce recruitment into the terrorist organizations (Faseke. 2013. 56).

Any time religious or cultural differences become the face of conflict it becomes inevitable to discuss Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory, which is the belief that in the new world all wars and conflicts will have primarily cultural motivations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, most ideological and economic wars have ended and many conflicts are now based in cultural differences between peoples (Huntington 1993. 22-23). Clashes will occur between civilizations in countries on the fault lines between what Huntington considers the main world civilizations (1993. 25). He argues that basic, fundamental differences between these civilizations will be the primary fuel for future wars.

It would be a mistake to label the conflict in the Central African Republic an example of a “clash of civilizations”. Cultural differences are not the primary source of conflict in the area. Years of political mismanagement and unstable governments with a history of war and military coups are. Religion, rather than being the source of the conflict has become a tool used by militias to gain support for their political ambitions. The Séléka began as a group of rebels who opposed the government for not adhering to treaty obligations, not because they opposed the Christian leadership of the country. Religion just happened to be dragged into the conflict because of the composition of the opposing groups, not because of an ideological or cultural difference between them.

The Beginnings of Religious Peacebuilding in the CAR

There has been some effort put forward by a few prominent religious leaders in the Central African Republic advocating for peace. In March of 2014, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon met with three prominent religious leaders at the UN headquarters. The meeting included Mgr. Dieudonne Nzapalainga, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bangui, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, President of the Islamic Council in the Central African Republic, and Reverend Nicolas Guérékoyame-Cbangou, President of the CAR’s Evangelical Alliance. The secretary reiterated that the conflict is not religious in nature, but religion has been twisted and used for political purposes. He also called upon the international community to support the three religious leaders in their fight to end the violence in the Central African Republic (UN News. 2014).

Nzapalainga and Layama have been working together to spread their message that the conflict is motivated by social and economic inequalities rather than religion. Both are now working to bring divided communities back together. They have been advocating for funding to establish interfaith schools as well as interfaith hospitals where people can learn and be treated no matter what their beliefs are. They also would like to establish a radio station that can broadcast across the country, rather than just inside Bangui to spread a message of peace and reconciliation (IRIN Africa. 2014). These two provide a model as to how religion can be used to encourage peace in the region, and as the country becomes increasingly stable under a new government their actions will lead to greater peace.

Conclusion

Religion is a powerful tool that throughout history has driven many to war, but can also be used as a tool for peace. In the Central African Republic corrupt governments and military coups have become the norm, leading to a civil war in the early 2000s, followed by a small period of peace, and the sudden eruption of violence in the past few years. Muslim Rebels, motivated by political reasons rather than religious ones overtook the Christian government, leading to what some believe is a religious war with a risk of genocide. Religion has become a dividing line between the sides, but can also be used as a tool of reunification after stability has been returned to the country. Increasing religious involvement in government, increasing reflection within religions, as well as emphasising common religious beliefs shared by both sides can be used as unification and reconciliation tools to help build a rhetoric of peace in the region. The media is a powerful tool religious leaders can use to spread the message that this is not a religious conflict and does neither the Christian or Muslim sides are truly fighting in the name of their religion. The Central African Republic has a long way to go in its efforts for peace and reconciliation, but

religion can help mend the broken bonds and help finally establish a strong, fair and peaceful government to the country.

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