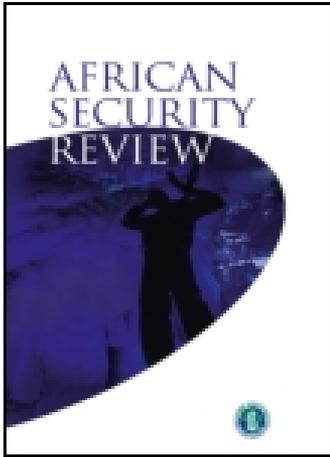


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Understanding the ‘failure’ of the Séléka rebellion

Gino Vlavonou

This paper examines the downfall of the Séléka rebellion, which staged a coup in the Central African Republic in March 2013. The coup plunged the country into violence and chaos, and there has been an uneasy quest for peace ever since. This article explains why the leader of the rebellion lost control over his troops and was finally pushed by regional actors to leave power. The article concludes that the Séléka rebellion was already fragile and, together with the poor leadership demonstrated by the coalition leader, the rebellion was unable to hold on to power.

Keywords Central African Republic, Séléka, rebellion, conflict, failure.

Introduction

Due to the current instability in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has been on going for over a year now, it is important to understand why the rebellion staged by the Séléka coalition became so chaotic. The CAR has been prone to military and political conflict since its independence and, as such, the present situation was almost predictable. This landlocked country at the heart of the African continent has suffered several dictatorships and various military mutinies.

From the authoritarian regime of David Dacko in 1960 to that of Francois Bozizé in 2003, the CAR has had a history of political instability. President Dacko created an authoritarian regime that dissolved political parties, trade unions and associations. A few years later, when Jean-Bédél Bokassa came to power in 1976 through a coup, he changed the constitution without consultation and proclaimed himself Emperor the following year. Five presidents succeeded each other, each exhibiting the same authoritarian behaviour, and there were several coup attempts by the opposition during this time. For instance, in 1981 André Kolingba came to power through a coup, and in 1983 Patasse attempted a coup to remove him. After this coup failed,¹ Patasse managed to be elected in 1993 but his rule was also arbitrary and brought about no change, which ultimately caused his downfall in another coup led by General François Bozizé in 2003.

The troubled history of coups in the CAR shows that political differences in the country are settled through violence. The last coup, staged in March 2013 by the Séléka coalition rebel group, unfortunately pushed the country into greater chaos than had any previous coups. The Séléka rebels launched an offensive on the capital, Bangui, on 22 March 2013, setting up a new regime with self-proclaimed President Michel Djotodia. The coup sparked extensive looting and the destruction of public and private property in Bangui. A few months later, the new leader had been forced to resign from power after losing control over his rebel group, pitching the country into a renewed cycle of violence.

This article is an attempt to understand the ‘failure’ of the Séléka rebellion to rule over the country after they had seized power. A key question is why Michel Djotodia was forced to resign when former presidents of the country have always managed to rule after their coups, at least before being toppled by another coup. The paper contends that the Séléka coalition was already carrying the seeds of its own failure. Regional politics – with Chad and Sudan already meddling in the country’s internal affairs – as well as poor political leadership and retaliations from vigilante groups, forced Séléka out of power.

Origin of the crisis

The root causes of the current situation are related to decades of ethnic politics based on exclusion and marginalisation, successive regimes of corruption, and unequal distribution of resources, all of which have animated successive rebellions. In fact, several factors prompted the CAR to relapse into civil war.

The CAR has often experienced a violent change of governments. The CAR has had several rebellions and coups since its independence (in 1960), sometimes with the help of France or neighbouring countries like Chad; however, none of the previous coups or rebellions in the country ushered in violence of the magnitude or protraction currently seen. Because of the chronic instability, neither economic transformation nor democratic political transition has been realised. The World Bank suspended its budget support in late 2010 and, despite having substantial natural resources, the CAR has not managed to reduce poverty.² Linked to the history of coups, mutinies and rebellions in the country, the implementation of various peace negotiations (the peace negotiation of 2007 and the recommendations of the Inclusive Political Dialogue of 2008) has lacked political will; and various security sector reform (SSR) and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes have been unsuccessful.

Another key point has been the failure of political dialogue under successive presidents. One example is that of President Ange-Felix Patasse, who was the first elected president, a fact that could have given him legitimacy and public support to undertake changes. However, his army chief of staff, General Francois Bozizé, organised a rebellion to oust Patasse in 2003, installing himself as leader of the country. Bozizé’s government was put under pressure in 2006 to have a national dialogue. In 2007, negotiations began with the rebel group – Union of Democratic Forces for Unity or *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR) – which eventually led to the signing of a peace agreement on 13 April 2007.³ Another Inclusive Political Dialogue was held from 8 to 20 December 2008 in Bangui, as an attempt to overcome the CAR’s recurrent instability. However, the inclusive government was never established, the 2011 elections were marked, according to observers, by significant fraud, most essential reforms

included in the political dialogue were never implemented and, because of the combined efforts and power of rebel groups, DDR programmes have never seen the light of the day.⁴

Ultimately, Bozizé, like his predecessors, played the same game of ethnic politics, nepotism and dictatorship. General François Bozizé's regime was marked by the solitary and paranoid manner in which he exercised his power, which prompted his allies to join forces against him. The Bozizé regime provided fertile ground for the formation of several rebellions in the northern regions of the country. In fact, most of the CAR's rebel groups officially announced their status from 2005 onwards, when Bozizé was in power.⁵ Many armed actors were beyond the control of the state and Bozizé did not act on this fact. Former presidential guards of Patassé fled to the southwest of the country, and became a security threat in that region. There were also Chadian and Central African 'liberators' (the name given to combatants who helped Bozizé to power in 2003) who were involved in acts of banditry on the roads and in villages in the centre and the north of the country. They turned to banditry, feeling that Bozizé failed to deliver on alleged promises of recompense. They have joined with other bandits, commonly called 'road cutters' (nicknamed *zaraguinas*), who were already operating in rural areas between major roads. The CAR also shares porous borders with the then-Sudan, allowing rebels from southern Sudan to cross the border and stage attacks on Khartoum from the CAR. The CAR also offered an ungoverned territory in the north for the transit and refuge of rebels, as it shares borders with countries that have their own armed groups (i.e., the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Chad). Many unemployed Chadian soldiers have become regional warriors, and nothing has been done to engage with these soldiers who are ready to be recruited for money.⁶

The neglect of these armed groups, the failure to implement recommendations emanating from the political dialogue, and the failure of different DDR programmes that did not offer alternatives to young fighters are some of the factors that prompted the relapse of the country into civil war.

The Séléka coalition: origins and dynamics

On 24 March 2013, the Séléka rebel coalition led by Michel Djotodia seized power in the CAR. This episode occasioned a general state of lawlessness, including incidences of looting, extortion, arbitrary arrests, torture and summary executions. The situation has continued to deteriorate, compounded by allegations of sectarian violence between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority, especially in the northwest and southeast of the country.

The Séléka coalition is comprised of groups from some of the old armed factions. Although there are several rebel groups in the CAR, the Séléka coalition is predominantly a grouping of rebels from the UFDR,⁷ the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP),⁸ and the Patriotic Convention for Saving the Country (CPSK, led by General Mohamed Moussa Dhaffane). Groups like the Union of Republican Forces (UFR) and the Alliance for Rebuilding (A2R) have also offered their support. The UFR is headed by Lieutenant Florian Ndjadder, who believes that his movement is campaigning for good governance, peace, security, freedom of movement for goods and people, and that they oppose armed conflict, robberies, violations of human rights, and poverty.⁹ A2R is a clandestine organisation that, on 18 March 2013, became the *Mouvement pour la renaissance et la refondation/Mouvement politique alternatif en RCA* (M2R), coordinated by Salvador Edjezekanne.¹⁰

The coalition was a direct consequence of Bozizé's rule. The coalition accused President Bozizé of not complying with commitments from the 2007 bilateral peace agreement, the 2008 Inclusive National Dialogue, or DDR programmes for armed groups in the northeast. This includes the payment of 15 million CFA francs per fighter according to the agreement, unconditional payment of a million CFA francs per fighter, the unconditional return of diamonds, gold, cash and other property expropriated by the government in 2008, and the release of all political prisoners in both Central Africa and abroad.¹¹ The coalition became radicalised during their march to seize power, demanding that the President should step down, after their success in seizing several towns resulted in the feeling that they had military leverage over the government.¹²

Michel Djotodia (from the UFDR) was the leader of the coalition and also the self-proclaimed President of the CAR after the coup. Nevertheless, as the Séléka rebellion was a coalition of various groups, it is important to note that the coalition was a mutually beneficial, but circumstantial and heterogeneous, alliance. The two groups forming the coalition were former enemies and had always fought against each other in the northern part of the CAR.¹³ In fact, the armed groups in the CAR have never really been organised and their claims have never been clearly articulated.¹⁴ There were also other experienced Chadian soldiers whose history illustrates the multiple conversions and fluid loyalties of armed men in the region.¹⁵ The Séléka is, therefore, a heterogeneous coalition whose common denominator is that the men who make up the coalition are mostly of the Muslim faith.

It is clear from the composition and structure of the coalition that the combatants were just men in arms and were not really fighting for any specific ideology. Each faction had its own leader, with Michel Djotodia at the head of the coalition. The common ground they did find was that the Bozizé government was 'exclusionist' and had policies favouring his own ethnic group while ostracising other ethnic and political groups, particularly Muslims.¹⁶ The rebel coalition had more than double the total number of the Central African Armed Forces, estimated at 10 300 men equipped with small arms and rocket propelled grenades.¹⁷ The coalition had the means and men to overthrow Bozizé, with support from key players in the region. Unfortunately, in their race to power, Séléka – composed predominantly of Muslim men from the CAR, Chad and Sudan – abandoned their political claims. They looted, raped, robbed, killed, and destroyed public and private property and facilities, particularly Christian churches.¹⁸ Atrocities were committed by Séléka in a context where Muslims had not always been accepted in mainstream CAR society. For instance, people from southern CAR frequently refer to all north-easterners as 'foreigners' (Chadian or Sudanese), meaning that regardless of their actual citizenship status, they do not belong in the country.¹⁹

Louis Khabure points out that, since 2011, the central government has developed an anti-Muslim discourse in their politics: 'They have repeatedly referred to the presence of Sudanese "Janjaweds" and other Chadian "Islamists" in rebel movements and the SELEKA coalition. ... and numerous arrests of Muslims and northerners have increased in Bangui'.²⁰ As frustrated as most Central Africans were with Bozizé, who ruled in an increasingly unaccountable manner, Djotodia had little to no popular support and, moreover, had demonstrated poor leadership over his troops.²¹ The arrogance of Séléka and the atrocities that continued for more than nine months after their takeover sparked resistance. Rebels who helped Djotodia come to power started demanding the bonuses and high payment that they had been promised, and

disagreements arose between the coalition leaders. Finally, as the violence could not be contained, regional leaders came into play and pushed the Séléka leader to resign.

Failure of the Séléka rebellion: amateur leadership and anti-balaka resistance

Two key factors explain why the Séléka coalition could not hold on to power: the fragility of the coalition and the resistance organised by vigilante groups.

Firstly, the Séléka coalition was fragile and had problems with its leadership. The leaders were divided and apparently unable (or unwilling) to control their troops. Immediately following the coup, Michel Djotodia was unable to keep the coalition together. The Séléka coalition was divided over salaries for the troops that helped defeat Bozizé.²² The new government had difficulty controlling its own 'creature' and the authorities were overwhelmed by events. Séléka forces had grown to 20 000 by the end of June 2013, attracting unemployed individuals drawn by the 'promise' of money and power, and were spread across the country.²³

Instead of addressing the serious issues arising within the coalition, on 13 September 2013 Interim President Djotodia opted to dissolve the Séléka group that had helped him to power. David Zounmenou notes that 'with the dissolution of Seleka, Djotodia [had] taken a decision that [had] the potential to destroy both him and the country'.²⁴ After the formal dissolution of the coalition, the security situation in the country spun out of control and retaliations against members of the coalition began. Similar situations have been seen before in the CAR, where new presidents have turned their backs on those who have helped them come to power. For instance, the relationship between former President Bozizé and the Chadian soldiers who helped him stage a coup in 2003 deteriorated after he seized power. The combatants had been promised high bonuses during recruitment but Bozizé was not able to keep his promises. Nevertheless, drunk on power or leadership inexperience, the fact is that by dissolving Séléka, Djotodia had less and less control over the coalition. This was a mistake, especially in light of the fact that the CAR had no real armed forces and the number of men in the coalition greatly surpassed those in the regular army. Indeed, the historical trajectory of rebellion in the CAR shows that armed men do not always follow their leaders, which is what happened when the group was dissolved. While the coalition accused Bozizé of not respecting the various recommendations of the Inclusive Political Dialogue or the implementation of different DDR programmes, once in power the coalition demonstrated their political ineptitude. They had no coherent programme and Djotodia continued to behave like a conqueror, with a 'little putchist tool box'.²⁵ In fact, it is reported that the actions of Djotodia were based purely on political ambition, as it is said that he wanted nothing more than to be President.²⁶ By all accounts, Séléka had no governance or development vision for the CAR but were exclusively interested in the redistribution of patrimony from having captured the state.²⁷ Moreover, as mentioned above, the composition of the coalition was not homogenous (Chadian soldiers, bandits, etc.), which meant that the rebels were not constrained by any official governmental regulations and, in their position of power, they felt that they could do whatever they wanted to whomever they wanted, transforming the CAR into a lawless state that they could no longer govern.

Ultimately this situation pushed the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) to sanction both the president and his prime minister. They were accused of not being able to restore order. President Djotodia's lack of control over the Séléka fighters led to his dismissal by regional leaders at the ECCAS Summit on 9 January 2014 in Ndjamena, Chad. Despite the military action taken, a political solution was clearly needed; however, the executive duo (Djotodia and his prime minister Nicolas Tiangaye) could not provide one, as there was no consensus around their leadership. They lost all legitimacy with the public and the support of international actors.

Secondly, the Séléka rebellion did not take into consideration that they would encounter resistance from vigilante groups. The continued looting and human rights violations on civilians prompted the formation of vigilante groups under the banner 'anti-balaka'.²⁸ On 5 December 2013, anti-balaka elements armed with machetes launched attacks on and massacred many Muslims whom they accused of supporting the Séléka from the north. More than 600 people were killed in the capital Bangui alone. From then, the lines of the conflict became greatly blurred.²⁹ In fact, atrocities reached their climax after 4 and 5 December 2013 when anti-balaka tried to seize power by force.³⁰ There were also political entrepreneurs and members of vigilante groups who tried to take advantage of the imbroglio in Bangui; a destructive mix of political and military entrepreneurs, without any real control over their troops.³¹ It did not take long for members of the vigilante groups to also commit human rights violations, indiscriminately attacking Muslim people and their properties.

Séléka is believed to be weaker after the International Support Mission in the Central African Republic [*Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique*] (MISCA) operation, but they are far from defeated. Rumours are spreading that they are now preparing to partition the CAR, and without great difficulties, as the north of the country is difficult to access due to poor infrastructure. They also continue to commit atrocities in areas under their control, and the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen is said to have sent a small group led by one of his mines experts, Marimba Willow, to help the Muslims fight against the Crusaders.³² On 11 May 2014, Séléka held a conference in the northern part of the country.³³ They reorganised themselves, and appointed General Joseph Zindeko as the army chief. Thus, while focusing on the anti-balaka around Bangui, a potential resurgence by the Séléka should not be overlooked by the current leadership in power.

Restoring peace in the CAR: what are the options?

At this point, the role of the international community is crucial to restoring peace. Whether it is militarily or politically, there is much to be done in the short and long term to find peace. Militarily, in the short term, there is a need to increase the troops present in the CAR. The simultaneous deployment of French and African operations weakened Séléka, and the presence of the African Union-led MISCA and the French operation Sangaris helped to diminish the violence, but these operations are still struggling to restore peace. MISCA is now estimated to be 6 000 strong (in January 2014) and the French have also dispatched 2 000 soldiers to support MISCA for a period of six months, while the European Union is ready to deploy up to 1 000 soldiers. Moreover, a report from the United Nations Secretary General proposed to increase the troops to 12 000.³⁴ Nevertheless, the effort by the

international community is still not enough to restore peace in the CAR. For comparative purposes, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) deployed approximately 50 000 troops to Bosnia and Herzegovina (12 times smaller than the CAR) and Kosovo (56 times smaller than the CAR) to stabilise the two countries after the war.³⁵ This shows that the current military effort deployed in the CAR is still not enough.

In the long term, the next DDR programme needs to take a regional approach because the armed men are a combination of Chadians, Sudanese and bandits from northern CAR. Previous DDR programmes have suffered from political interference by the regime, in order to exclude undesirable soldiers and officers. This led to frustration from people who were ready to take back their arms and fight. After bringing security back to the country, it will be critical for these DDR programmes to take into consideration that the economic and social context of the CAR does not make ex-combatants' reinsertion into civilian life easy. State institutions are weak and the conditions of extreme poverty that prevail in rural areas are not favourable to reinsertion, especially when opportunities to live by the gun are numerous. Finally, to be able to implement these recommendations, a large amount of capital is needed in order to provide adequate means for the government to redeploy administrative capabilities (pay salaries and military officers) and eventually organise elections.

Conclusion

The CAR, like other countries in the region, is characterised by a complex security situation whereby peace in one state depends on the actions of neighbouring states. The availability of mercenaries from bordering countries in the less controlled northern part of the country has provided fertile ground for rebel activities. Thus the CAR has been prone to insecurity, coups, and instability since gaining independence. The centralisation of power in the capital city and the neglect of the hinterland have formed part of the reason why people take up arms, in a context where one fights to have access to political and economic resources.

The country has witnessed several coups, but none of them has thrown the country into the chaos occasioned by the 2013 coup. Michel Djotodia's disbanded coalition has committed human rights violations on civilians and has provoked retaliation from vigilante groups. The so-called anti-balaka are themselves committing human rights violations and targeting Muslims.

Several factors pushed the Séléka coalition to relinquish power. It encountered resistance from the local population but it was also a fragile coalition led by a weak leadership.

With the government in Bangui unable to stop the escalating lawlessness and address the humanitarian situation, there is increasing fear that the country, known for recycling rebellions in the northern part, could descend into total anarchy. The spillover effect of such a situation should not be ignored for a country that borders the DRC, Sudan and South Sudan, all known to have armed groups in their territories. Moreover, the rumours that al-Shabaab may have become involved need to be taken seriously; the addition of a terrorist threat to such a volatile situation could create a time bomb.

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Notes

- 1 The coup resulted in a bloody and punitive campaign against the rebels' homes and strongholds in the northwest of the country.
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- 4 International Crisis Group (ICG), *République centrafricaine: les urgences de la transition (Rapport Afrique no. 203)*, 2013, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/central-africa/203-centrafricaine-les-urgences-de-la-transition.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/central-africa/203-centrafricaine-les-urgences-de-la-transition.pdf) (accessed 2 February 2014).
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- 6 Marielle Debos, Fluid loyalties in a regional crisis: Chadian 'ex-liberators' in the Central African Republic, *African Affairs* 107 (2008), 225–241.
- 7 Established in 2005, the UFDR is an alliance between three groups from the north. The UFDR is better trained and armed than the other rebel groups. It has listed the following grievances: impassability of the roads in the region; lack of health care; lack of education; insufficient access to potable water; insecurity in the region; and the marginalisation of the region; see Steven Spittaels & Filip Hilgert, *Mapping conflict motives: Central African Republic*, IPIS, 2009, http://www.ipisresearch.be/maps/CAR/20090217_Mapping_CAR.pdf (accessed 2 February 2014).
- 8 The CPJP was formed in late 2008 and is present in the northeast. Its political wing is led by Eric Neris Massi, son of Charles Massi, who served as a minister under Patassé and died in 2010. Their numbers are largely unknown.
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- 13 ICG, République centrafricaine.
- 14 For a more detailed analysis of the various rebellions, see Louisa Lombard & Raphaël Botiveau, Rébellion et limites de la consolidation de la paix en République centrafricaine, *Politique africaine* 125 (2012), 189–208.
- 15 A DDR programme was undertaken in the CAR in 2004. However, this programme did not reach all ex-liberators; in particular, the Chadians were not included. After a few months, even those who participated in the DDR programme were ready to join government forces or to take up arms again in an armed group, as if there were no real differences between rebellion and regular forces.
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- 21 Lombard, Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the good little putschist's tool box.
- 22 Herbert et al, *State fragility in the Central African Republic*, 15.
- 23 FIDH, *Central African Republic: a country in the hands of Seleka war criminals*.
- 24 David Zounmenou, Dissolving the Seleka rebel group could be a recipe for disaster in the CAR, *ISS Today*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/dissolving-the-seleka-rebel-group-could-be-a-recipe-for-disaster-in-the-car> (accessed 7 February 2014).
- 25 A term used by Louisa Lombard for describing the actions of Putschists. Actions that can often be seen are the suspension of the constitution, ruling by decree, and no presidential elections. Putschists also say that they will stay out of elections, and these are classic moves after a coup. Michel Djotodia undertook similar actions and, after all, such promises had been made in the CAR many times before, including from Bozizé in 2003.
- 26 Lombard, Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the good little putschist's tool box.
- 27 Abayomi Azikiwe, Seleka rebels form new government in the Central African Republic, *Global Research*, 1 April 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/seleka-rebels-form-new-government-in-the-central-african-republic/5329329> (accessed 6 February 2014).
- 28 Anti-balaka militias are mainly non-Muslim self-defence groups (villagers and rioting urban thugs) that took up arms following the rise to power of Michael Djotodia. They have since been resisting former Séléka elements and have been joined by deserters from the army who are loyal to Francois Bozizé, the ousted president. The anti-balaka movement was not a creation against the Séléka exactions. The movement was created after the Bozizé regime due to inability of the army and police to track down 'road cutters' and bandits in the northern region of CAR. The name Anti-balaka could be understood as "anti-AK (47)" bullet, because armed men believe in witchcraft protection against bullet.
- 29 Antoine Roger Lokongo, French complicity in the crisis in Central African Republic, *Global Research*, 23 January 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/french-complicity-in-the-crisis-in-central-african-republic/5366084> (accessed 6 February 2014).
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