

Dangerous Divisions

The Central African Republic faces the threat of secession



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Summary

The Central African Republic (CAR), a country that has seen more than four years of deep political crisis and unprecedented violence against civilians, is undergoing a process of de facto partition. In February 2014, then-U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned the international community that CAR was at risk of splitting apart, stating that, “[T]he situation continues to worsen. Both Muslims and Christians have been murdered and forced to flee their homes. The sectarian brutality is changing the country’s demography. The de facto partition of the CAR is a distinct risk.” Despite his warning, CAR did not escape this fate. In 2017, more than 14 armed groups compete for the control of the territory and its natural resource wealth.

These groups forcibly tax people in the areas under their control, effectively holding local populations hostage while turning the impoverished victims of violence into the funders and participants in a system that sustains the violence and persecution that is used against them. The armed groups’ leaders use sectarian violence as a survival strategy, orchestrated to serve their political ambitions to rule and to defend personal economic interests. With no adequate steps taken to end the armed struggle and intercommunal divisions, there is a real danger that CAR’s citizens will exist in a state of permanent war, which will have a much more severe and longer impact on a region that already faces multiple security challenges.

Of these 14 groups, four are factions formed by leaders who were previously part of the Séléka coalition that seized power in March 2013, and these four continue to pose the most significant threat to peace and to the country’s overall unity. Séléka coalition leaders have persistently manipulated ideology to justify their existence. In 2013, they initially voiced political grievances towards the repressive system of ousted President Francois Bozizé. However, their motives quickly shifted to power and greed, as coup

leaders and participants reportedly proclaimed, “It’s our turn now” to rule, upon taking Bangui. During their ten months in power, rampant atrocities and widespread financial crimes characterized the Séléka’s predatory ruling system. The end of Séléka’s rule, announced in January 2014, resulted in a retreat by the fighters to the east and north of the country, resulting in their taking control of almost 60 percent of CAR’s territory.

Today, to generate popular support for their cause and build a semblance of legitimacy, Séléka’s leaders coordinate acts of violence that motivate members of their ethnic group or religion to act against people of different ethnic groups or religions. The widespread violence has in turn created the perception that civilians need the protection of these armed leaders, who argue that protection requires partition and separation from the other groups. This climate of fear also contributes to the creation of conditions necessary for the recruitment of young people who have no other choice but to join the armed struggle.

The fact that different ethnic and religious communities have traditionally lived together in peace does not serve Séléka’s true political interests and is a reason they deliberately stoke intercommunal violence. By ensuring their engineered threat of violence persists and that they maintain a permanent threat of a possible coup, leaders of the four Séléka factions have been negotiating for the rewards they seek: outright rule or at least a share of the leadership, military integration, attractive ministerial positions, and the maintenance of the de facto partition, all with the recognition of the international community and associated economic benefits.

Among the Séléka, one faction’s enduring bid to rule has now taken the form of a push for official partition, which they justify and legitimize by the intercommunal and interreligious conflict they also stoke. Secession’s lead proponent is the Popular Front for the Central African Renaissance (FPRC), which is led by rebel leader Nourredine Adam and Djotodia, who was CAR’s president for almost ten months during Séléka’s brief rule. Both men are subject to multilateral and U.S. sanctions. Since December 2013, FPRC leaders have repeatedly brandished the threat of secession and even attempted to create the Republic of Logone, or Dar El Kuti.

To strengthen the secession threat, Nourredine has tried, so far with limited success, to reunify the four Séléka factions, with the intention to establish the city of Bambari as the Republic of Dar El Kuti’s new capital. However, the Union Pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC), led by Ali Darassa and in control of Bambari, has refused to join this call and opted for an independent position. This has resulted in recent fratricidal struggles between the UPC and the FPRC. However, if the four Séléka groups unite, their combined military power could pose an extremely serious challenge to the international community and the government, which would have to make a difficult decision: dismantle the Séléka by force, for which there is presently no inclination—particularly after the removal of French military forces—or negotiate with them, but with little hope that this would lead to a sustainable peace.

CAR ultimately needs a revived conflict-resolution effort and a peace process that tackles the root causes of violence while recognizing the need for more rigorous actions towards stopping the armed groups. The international community and the government must:

- Expand and strengthen the implementation of financial pressures, including sanctions, that target the interests and vulnerabilities of the armed groups as well as the businesses that support them, whether through targeted asset freezes or measures that inhibit investment in ventures benefitting armed groups.

- Seek accountability for those who are most responsible for the atrocities and economic crimes, while implementing a process of disarmament that ultimately aims to reintegrate the combatants and the communities in a fair and equitable way.
- Stop enabling the legitimacy of armed groups that use violence, particularly against civilians, to seize power and/or wealth, and recognize that the system of violence does not necessarily reflect the aspirations of the combatants or of the populations who live in the areas controlled by armed groups.
- Support initiatives that restore social cohesion, foster economic interdependence, and help communities heal.
- Develop inclusive policies, particularly for Muslims, and address the urgent need to decentralize power as well as promote local democracy and local development.