Central African Republic:
The Politicization of Religion and Conflict

Robert Kosho NDIYUN

Abstract: The Central African Republic (CAR) has been a theater of hostilities for decades, including the Seleka rebellion in December 2012, which caused religious-based discrimination, especially between the Muslim minority and Christian majority. Opportunistic political leaders and armed groups have misused religion for political and egocentric gains in the CAR. The purpose of this qualitative content analysis research is to investigate the use of religion for political motives in the CAR and how such actions impact conflict and sectarian divides in the so-called phantom state. The paper recommends ways to mitigate political influence and the misuse of religion by political and armed group actors in the CAR. Very little or no literature on conflict in the CAR has specifically addressed the influence of politics on religion and how it contributes to fueling conflict in the country. This study fills the gaps in the literature by investigating the historical narratives of the CAR conflict while highlighting instances of political abuse of religion. A review of existing literature on the political manipulation of religion establishes the basis for a critical analysis of the influence of politics on religion in the CAR and its impact on conflict.

Keywords: Politics, religious identities, conflict, Central African Republic, anti-Balaka, Seleka.

Introduction

The Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced recurrent episodes of violence and political instability since gaining independence from France in 1960, with the most recent conflict beginning in December 2012. The conflicts in the CAR have been marked by an array of multifaceted factors, including political, economic, social, and historical elements.

One significant driver of the conflicts in CAR is the politicization of religion. The

Robert Kosho NDIYUN

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: ndiyun2@gmail.com

country's two major religions are Christianity and Islam, accounting for approximately 80% and 10% of the population, respectively. Unfortunately, religion is often exploited for political gains, resulting in violence between the two religious groups and leading to a bloody conflict in the country.

This paper seeks to explore how religion has been politicized in the CAR and how this has contributed to cycles of violence and conflict.

The politicization of religion is not a new phenomenon in the CAR and has been a feature of the country's political landscape for several decades (Bouquet, 2013). However, the current conflict has seen a sharp escalation in the degree to which religion has been politicized, with religious identity becoming a key marker of social and political affiliation, and religious leaders and institutions increasingly and publicly taking on political roles, as well as political leaders using religion for political motives (International Crisis Group, 2015).

Religious identities have orchestrated narratives of enduring religious-based segregation in the CAR, affecting especially the Muslim communities (McGrew, 2016). A majority of the overlapping hostilities in the CAR have been premised on identity, including the religious perspective between Christians and Muslims. A United Nations (UN) inquiry into the CAR in 2014 revealed the nature of the CAR conflict as ethnic and religious, unveiling that about 99% of the Muslims in Bangui were involuntarily displaced or murdered due to the conflict, inversely leading to a significant drop in the Muslim population in the CAR (Bukarti, 2017). According to McGrew (2016), Muslim Central Africans believe that a long practice of discrimination against Muslims by non-Muslims persists in the country. This religious-based segregation is further amplified by the interrogation of the citizenship of Muslims in the CAR, a demarche that seems to be backed by the CAR government through its hesitancy to grant official status to Muslim organizations in the country, due to the historical notion of the CAR as a state on the front of Christian sub-Saharan Africa (contrary to the Muslim north) (Ndiyun, 2022). The memories of the ill-treatment and suffering in the pre-colonial CAR ruled by the sultans, and the impending fear of a ploy to islamize the CAR with support from Sudan and Chad have also deepened this religious rhetoric, which has been a major feature of the political landscape in the CAR (Observatoire Pharos, 2014). The approach of non-Muslims towards the Muslims in the CAR remains that of distrust and violence.

While there is a growing body of literature on the role of religion in conflict, there remains a crucial need for more in-depth analysis of how religion has been politicized in the CAR and its contribution to fueling violence and instability. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between religion and conflict in the CAR, with a focus on how religious identity has been mobilized for political purposes. This subject matter has received very little or no attention in research, despite its role in triggering violence and sectarian divide in the CAR. The paper has two main objectives.

Firstly, it seeks to provide an overview of the politicization of religion in the CAR, including an analysis of the historical, social, and economic factors involved. Secondly, it seeks to examine how the politicization of religion has contributed to conflict in the CAR. The research is guided by the question of how was religion used for political motives in the CAR and what impact it yielded on the conflict in the country.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for conflict prevention and resolution in the CAR. By providing a deeper understanding of how religion has been mobilized for political purposes in the CAR, this research can inform the development of more nuanced and context-specific approaches to conflict prevention in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Methodology

Methodology-wise, this qualitative research paper draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, including analysis of media reports, and other publicly available sources, and a review of relevant literature on the CAR, and the misuse of religion for political motives and conflict. The analysis is guided by a framework that combines a historical analysis of the politicization of religion in the CAR with a more contemporary analysis of how religious identity has been mobilized for political purposes in the CAR conflicts.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of the historical narrative of the conflict in the Central African Republic while the second section dwells on a review of literature on the use of religion for political motives. The third section examines how religious identity has been mobilized for political purposes in the CAR. The fourth section offers a critical appraisal of the misuse of religion for political gains and its impact on conflict. The final section concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for conflict prevention and resolution in the CAR.

**The Historical Narrative of the Use of Religion
for Political Goals and Conflict in the Central African Republic**

The CAR gained independence from France in 1960, and since then has experienced recurrent episodes of violence and instability, including multiple coups and rebellions. The country has a diverse population, with over 80 ethnic groups and a mix of Christian, Muslim and African traditional religions. The politicization of religion has been a feature of the secular state's political landscape for several decades and has contributed to the multiple conflicts that have plagued the country, including that which began in December 2012. Historically, the CAR has been marked by a complex relationship between religion and politics, with its leaders and politicians mixing both. During the colonial period, the French authorities supported Christian missions and provided them with resources and privileges, while at the same time suppressing Muslim practices

(Debos, 2011). This created a legacy of inequality and distrust between the Christian and Muslim communities that persists to this day.

After independence, the country experienced a period of political instability and conflict that was characterized by a series of coups and rebellions. The country's first president, Barthélémy Boganda was the first CAR Roman Catholic priest. Subsequent leaders in the country employed religious cards to foster their political interests. After his trial in 1986, Jean-Bedel Bokassa referred to himself as the thirteenth apostle. In the 1990s, the country transitioned to democratic rule, but this period was marked by corruption, economic inequality, and political marginalization of certain groups, including Muslims (Tièno, 2019). The politicization of religion continued during this period, with Christian and Muslim leaders and institutions taking on increasingly political roles. Patassé and Bokassa both deviously converted to Islam to gain financial assistance from Libyan leader, Qadhafi, although Bokassa returned to Christianity twenty-one years later (Filakota, 2009). Bozize also made his house of worship, the Celestial Church of Christ, a center of political power, taking inspiration from other African leaders like Boni Yayi of Benin and Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi. The strong popular mobilization of the Celestial Church of Christ added to the abortive coup in 2001 frightened President Patasse who suspended the church's activities based on illegal functioning. International Crisis Group (2015) reported that "many religious leaders are tempted to enter politics" (p. 21), citing the case of two pastors of the Alliance of Evangelicals in the Central African Republic who were expelled for constantly supporting the anti-Balaka.

The 2012 conflict in the CAR is rooted in a complex mix of political, economic, and social factors including the marginalization of certain groups, competition for resources, and the legacy of past conflicts (International Crisis Group, 2015). However, religion has been a key factor in the current conflict, with religious identity becoming a key marker of social and political affiliation, and religious leaders and institutions playing prominent roles in the conflict (Henderson & Mulo-Katamba, 2019). The clashes between the Muslim-dominated Seleka and the majority Christian anti-Balaka militia did not exhibit any religious connotation in the initial stage. Isaacs-Martin (2016) posits that the attacks against communities and individuals on account of religion erupted when the Seleka entered Bangui in 2013 and Djotodia subsequently resigned as head of state.

The religious undertone of the CAR hostilities was intensified in the first quarter of 2013, with the Seleka overthrow of Bozize, and their short stay in power, a period characterized by extra-judicial killings, massive looting, and setting ablaze and destruction of villages inhabited by Christians (International Crisis Group, 2013). Despite being formed as a self-defense tool against the Seleka attacks amid the security vacuum in the CAR, the anti-Balaka mostly in Christian communities transformed the hostilities in the country into a sectarian conflict (International Crisis Group, 2013). Ousted president Bozize on 28 December 2012 in a speech in Sango, invited Central Africans to resist

the Seleka rebellion, and "to be on their guard and be ready to defend their homes with arrows and machetes" (International Crisis Group, 2015, p. 4). This speech was followed with action, as machetes were distributed to youths in Bangui. Adhering to the politicized narrative of religion by Bozize and his entourage, the anti-Balaka considering Muslims as foreign invaders directed indiscriminate attacks against Muslims throughout the country, particularly in the west and Bangui, to terrorize them and cause them to run, and discard all signs of peaceful coexistence (Walheim, 2014; Amnesty International, 2014).

In January 2013, CAR Minister Josue Binoua, while triggering the feat of Islamist conspiracy theories and invaders, announced the presence of Jihadis propagandizing Wahhabism (International Crisis Group, 2015). The looting and other atrocities by the Seleka in Bangui in 2013 permitted opportunist politicians to equate it to slave raids by Muslims in the precolonial CAR. Central Africans considered Muslims as professional killers who moved with knives and hit people the same way as during the slave trade era (International Crisis Group, 2015). All this rhetoric especially by politicians promoted the stigmatization of Muslims and equated the Seleka to Muslim invaders. In some parts of the CAR, some citizens held the opinion that CAR identity cards be withdrawn from foreigners, especially Muslims, while anti-Balaka leaders at the Bangui Forum in 2015 requested the withdrawal of official identification documents and resident permits issued under the Seleka rule.

The politicized religious cards intensified clashes between the protagonists, leading to the commission of heinous and grave violations of human rights by the two opposing groups, with a high rate of civilian victims. The shift in conflict narrative and the clashes between Muslim and Christian communities have significantly obstructed and intricated the functional political mechanism of the country.

The Seleka was given a religious identity because a majority of its militants and leader, Djotodia were Muslims. As such, the Seleka attacks on civilians introduced a narrative that innocent Christian civilians were being targeted by Muslims. These also escalated into inter-communal clashes, leading to the establishment of Muslim settlements in the eastern part of the country as they fled for safety (Ndiyun, 2023). These intercommunal clashes resurrected the question of who should live and own land in the CAR. Ndiyun (2023) corroborates that the religious component of the conflict also emerged with Muslims being regarded as foreigners with no right to ownership in the CAR. Muslim residential areas in some neighborhoods of Bangui were looted, with houses demolished or set ablaze. International Crisis Group (2015) reported that over 30 mosques in Bangui and 400 in other parts of the CAR were destroyed.

The historical and social context of the politicization of religion in the CAR is complex and multifaceted and has contributed to the current conflict. Addressing this issue requires a nuanced understanding of how religion has been mobilized for political

purposes, as well as the broader historical and social context in which this process has taken place.

Literature Review:
The Influence of Politics on Religion and Conflict

Religion has played a great role in promoting social cohesion in societies by bringing people together socially and institutionally (Maoz & Henderson, 2020). As such, religion has been considered a pillar of both inner and social peace, as no contemporary religion encourages violence in its principles (Hall, 2003). Through this significant function in society, religion has become entangled with political power, as it offers a collective identity and sense of togetherness, which is essential to the success of any political leader (Echele, 2023). Religion significantly influences the way people interact with politics, especially its role in undermining or promoting legitimacy. As such, religion can serve as a base for both democratic leadership, as well as repressive and non-democratic regimes. According to Echele (2023), religious-based norms and institutions can maintain inequality and act as a tool to support repressive religious and political leaders.

The relationship between politics and religion is complex and can have significant implications for conflict and peace-building efforts. While Basedau et al. (2011) argue that there is little evidence to sustain the contention that the frequent politicization of religion automatically increases the chances of conflict, other authors (Moghadam, 2003; Fox, 2007) contend that the resurgence of religion in politics over the last years did not result in a corresponding escalation in religious conflicts. Haynes (2009) affirmed that the majority of violence leading to civil war in Africa is sourced from religious plurality. However, for religion to instigate conflict or stimulate its believers into violence, it must be politicized. Apart from this, other alternatives for religious politicization include the probably already prevailing inter-religious strains and feelings of discrimination by religious clusters (Basedau *et al.*, 2011).

Putting religion in the African political context, Ahanotu (2012) holds that in Africa, religion is persistently part of talks on national issues, including leadership and mode of management of the state. Before the independence of South Sudan, religion alongside other elements like the fight over natural resources, marginalization, and democratic rule accounted for the war between South and North Sudan (Møller, 2006). The political unrest in Kenya during the rule of Daniel Arap Moi had a religious undertone, as it originated from the refusal of official recognition of the Islamic Party in Kenya (Ahanotu, 2012). Njepel (2013) also contends that religion has constantly been used by Nigerian politicians to attain their political motives. According to the author, during the reign of Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigerian political elite from the north mobilized religion to avert any politician from a different religious background from taking power, or using the Boko Haram conflict to blot his regime.

While some authors affirm that religious differences constitute the major source of conflict in Africa, others believe that religion is just a tool to galvanize support and participation in conflict with the goal of fighting inequality and other bad practices in society (Uzodike & Whetho, 2008; Marshall, 2009). Political actors have often sought to instrumentalize religion for their purposes, using religious identity to mobilize support and legitimize their actions. This has been the case in Sudan and Nigeria, where religion has been used for political motives, and as a weapon to gather supporters for conflict in the fight against political, economic, and social inequality in society (Njepel, 2013). Similarly, religious actors have often sought to influence political decision-making, using their moral authority to shape policy and promote their interests.

Political actors have often sought to instrumentalize religion in order to mobilize support and legitimize their actions. This can involve framing political issues in religious terms or using religious symbols and rhetoric to appeal to religious audiences. This instrumentalization of religion can contribute to the polarization of communities along religious lines and can make it more difficult to promote reconciliation. Understanding the influence of politics on religion, and the role of religious actors in conflict, is crucial for developing effective strategies for conflict prevention and resolution.

The use of religion for political motives can contribute to conflict by exacerbating divisions between communities and legitimizing violence against those perceived to be associated with the opposing religion. By framing political issues in religious terms political actors can exacerbate divisions between communities, and delegitimize the views of those who do not share their religious beliefs. This can contribute to the marginalization of certain groups and can make it more difficult to promote reconciliation. For example, in India, the use of Hindu nationalist rhetoric by political leaders has contributed to the marginalization of religious minorities and has fueled communal violence (Bhatt, 2017).

Religion has been used for political motives in the CAR in recent years, particularly during the December 2012 conflict in the country. The CAR is a predominantly Christian country with a significant Muslim minority, and religious differences have been manipulated by political leaders to gain power and control over resources. For example, the anti-Balaka justified their attacks on Muslim communities by claiming that they were defending Christianity and avenging the deaths of Christians at the hands of the Seleka. Similarly, the Seleka framed their rebellion as a struggle against Christian oppression and discrimination.

In addition to the conflict between the Seleka and anti-balaka, there have been other instances of religious tensions being exploited for political gain in the CAR. For example, in 2018, a dispute between Christian and Muslim communities over the location of a market in the town of Alindao led to violence that left dozens dead and thousands displaced. A similar massacre was perpetuated in the same town in November 2018 by

a Seleka off-shoot armed group – the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic assisted by armed Muslim civilians, leading to the death of between 70 to 100 residents (Amnesty International, 2018).

The use of religion for political purposes has had a devastating impact on the people of the CAR. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of over a million people and has left many communities divided along religious lines. According to the UN Panel of Experts, the persistence of fear and mistrust among communities in the country, as well as the incidence of hate speech, and the absence of significant social and economic opportunities all account for the protraction of the conflict in the CAR (UN, 2019).

**Critical Appraisal of the Misuse of Religion
for Political Motives and Impact on Conflict**

The foregoing analysis affirms that religion and politics both have the goal of gathering people and preaching certain values and beliefs. They thus exert some influence over their followers. Many conflicts across the globe today are considered to be motivated by religion (Echele, 2023). Authors of politicizing religion use it to promote conflict and fortify their legitimacy and rule. In the CAR as discussed above, religious identity differences between the Christians and Muslims have been exploited for political motives by politicians and armed groups. The switch from ethnic identity to religious identity mobilization only gained grounds in the CAR after the Seleka had overthrew Bozize (Wieczorek, 2017).

The Seleka was launched in the Muslim-dominated northern part of the CAR, with its membership made up of mainly Muslims, including Michel Djotodia the group's leader who self-proclaimed himself as CAR President after the Seleka coup and ruled the country from August 2013 to January 2014 (Armed Conflict Location & Data [ACLED], 2015). Khaiko & Utas (2014) contend that the Seleka from the start of its hostilities, did not target other armed groups or civilians based on their religious inclinations. This is opposed to the anti-Balaka militias which perpetuated overt and intentional attacks targeting Muslims, with its commanders attesting that their attacks based on religious identity were aimed at defending Christians in the CAR (The New Humanitarian, 2014b). The anti-Balaka is believed to have links with the regime of Francois Bozize, as it was initially constituted of fighters from Francois Bozize's ethnic Gbaya group, before extending to other ethnic groups in the West of the CAR. The birth of the group immediately after Bozize launched a call on Central Africans to defend their country against foreign invaders (Muslims) corroborates this thesis. The deliberate attacks against Muslims were politicized and carried out to attract the sympathy of the West, with the media qualifying the CAR conflict as a religious one (Khaiko & Utas, 2014).

When the Seleka launched their attack against Bangui in early 2013, Bozize manipulated religion to sow the seeds of violence and mutual skepticism between the Muslim

and Christian Central Africans, when he warned Bangui inhabitants of the threats by the Muslims (Kilembe, 2014). He openly called on Central Africans to fight against the Muslim invaders. This carefully crafted message aimed at mobilizing the majority Christian population to back his political agenda and standing at loggerheads with the Muslim population. He intended to mobilize multi-ethnic support from the ethnic groups in the southern part of the country. Such mobilization could not be achieved on an ethnic identity basis due to the nepotism, corruption, and favoritism that character- ized his regime, favoring his ethnic Gbaya to the disadvantage of other ethnic groups. As such, Bozize had to make recourse to religion to gain the support of the ethnic groups in the south of CAR.

The move by Bozize was adopted by his supporters, as the International Crisis Group (2015) reported a Bangui-based Christian politician who claimed that they welcomed the Muslims in the CAR but had betrayed them. To match action to the religious rheto- ric, the Bozize government in February and March 2013, started distributing weapons to self-defense groups (mostly youths from the ruling party and Christians from the neighborhoods) in Bangui, in anticipation of the Seleka offensive (Smith, 2015). These armed groups attacked, harassed, detained, and even killed Muslims in Bangui for their suspected sympathy for the Seleka. This aroused fear among the Muslim population, and things got worse when barricades were raised in Muslim enclaves in Bangui. When the Seleka entered Bangui in March 2013, thousands of Muslims in Bangui were ready to integrate their ranks.

According to Human Rights Watch (2014) report, the Seleka only launched reprisal attacks on Christians based on their religion after the anti-Balaka continued with in- discriminate attacks against Muslims without distinction between civilian Muslims and armed Seleka Muslims. ACLED (2015) statistics revealed that 17% of violent incidents by the Seleka targeted Christians, while 21% of those perpetuated by the anti-Balaka against civilians targeted Muslims. These figures defeat the goal of the anti-Balaka stated above and also contradict the opinion of a religious conflict in the CAR. ACLED statistics validate the argument in this article that religion was used as a tool to achieve egocen- tric political goals, fueling sectarian conflict and disunity in the CAR by political actors.

In early 2014, Bangui inhabitants and communities in the west of the country regarded the anti-Balaka militias as patriots, and coined their slogans in a "brutal pseudo-religious and nationalist" manner, declaring that the Seleka and their Muslim sympathizers were non-Central Africans to Islamize the CAR and as such, should be hunted and chased out (AI, 2014: 15). The resignation of Seleka leader Michel Djotodia as CAR leader in January 2014 further aggravated anti-Muslim resentment and violence, provoking the displacement of the Muslim population, with a majority fleeing to eastern Cameroon. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) (2014) cited anti-Muslim slogans by the anti-Balaka and sympathizing civilians like "Muslims must leave or die", attesting

that Muslims Central Africans regarded as foreigners were no longer needed in the CAR (p. 54). McGrew (2016) holds that the anti-Muslim feeling aroused among the ranks of the Seleka commanders the necessity to protect the Muslim population of the CAR. While clashes between armed groups of various religious identities portrayed the CAR conflict as sectarian involving Muslim versus Christian confrontations, the Institute of Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) (2018) reported that the recurrent exploitation of ethnic and religious divisions by political actors in the CAR has significantly accounted for political unrest, distrust and division in the defense forces, inevitably leading to multiple coups.

The names adopted by armed groups: Seleka and anti-Balaka also contributed to the religious rhetoric. The Seleka, a majority Muslim group with most of its militants from Vagaka province and speaking Sudanese Arabic adopted its name in Sango (the widely spoken language in the CAR) purposely to preclude the regional difference with southerners. The name Sango stands for "alliance", but the militants barely spoke the language, as Central Africans affirmed that the abusers spoke very little or no Sango (Amnesty International, 2014). The move of adopting a name in Sango was to present the group not as foreign invaders, but as Central African and gain more legitimacy. The anti-Balaka leaders were also strategic in adopting their name. While "Balaka" stands for Machete in the Gbaya language (Lombard, 2016), the name is also considered an incorporation of the Sango word AK (as in AK-47) and bullet (Wieczorek, 2017). This choice of name was purposely chosen to tally with an offensive against the Seleka who possessed Kalashnikov rifles and used machetes for some of their heinous atrocities. The "anti" attachment to the name reflected the defensive character of the group. As such, the rhetoric framed the Seleka as the aggressors and authors of violence, while the anti-Balaka stood as the defenders.

The religious rhetoric of the conflict persisted after the Seleka left power. Christian Central Africans in Bangui began referring to the period of the Seleka in power as "rizzia" a term used during the slave trade era to refer to slave raids perpetrated by Muslims from the North (ICG, 2015). Many Christian residents in Bangui indicated the fear of any foreign influence on the population and even went to the extent of writing the phrase "no more Mosques in CAR" on Muslim-owned facilities and establishments in Muslim residential areas in Bangui (Lombard, 2016). This move by the population in Bangui was the outcome of the elite framing of the Seleka and their insurgency as an invasion of the CAR by Muslim foreigners.

In 2012 with the imminent threat of the Seleka and their rebellious advances toward Bangui, President Bozize and his allies opted to politicize religion, and galvanize the support of the Christian majority in the CAR against the Seleka. The Bozize regime adopted religious narratives by requesting the CAR population to get prepared to defend their fatherland against Muslim invaders. Being in the era of social media and the internet,

this anti-Muslim hate speech is rapidly propagated particularly among non-Muslim Central Africans (ACLED, 2015). This call was answered with the birth of anti-Balaka militia who initially armed with machetes, took to both armed Seleka Muslims and unarmed Muslim civilians as their target.

The use of religion for political motives in the CAR did not occur when the Seleka started their insurgency but only became visible when they took over the city of Bangui. The Bozize regime sought to isolate the Seleka from any support from the southern part of the country by influencing the population with religious rhetoric. Given that the Seleka group's members mostly comprised of Muslims recruited from Vagaka Muslim-dominated region, religion became the only tool to be used to galvanize the Christians against the Seleka who were tagged as 'Muslim foreign invaders'. It is thus argued that without Bozize and his elite class, the CAR would not have witnessed the politicization of religion during the conflict.

The Seleka departed from power after pressure on its leader, Djotodia in January 2014. This led to the formation of a transitional government composed of a Christian President, Catherine Samba-Panza, and a Muslim Prime Minister, Mahamat Kamoun, both elected by the Parliament. This mixed government gradually quenched the mobilization of religion for political motives. This is in line with one of the arguments in this paper, that if a government comprised of both Muslims and Christians had existed in the CAR, then the incentive to galvanize religious identity would never have been a reality. Albeit the persistence of sectarian divide and violence in some parts of the CAR today, the religious undertone of the conflict has significantly dwindled after the Seleka insurgency.

The bond uniting the Seleka could not be sustained, as the group was disbanded by its leader, Djotodia in late 2013 due to reports of its atrocities on the population. While very few combatants returned home, others grouped themselves into factions[1] reflecting their pre-Seleka composition based largely on regional and ethnic backgrounds, and engaged in confrontations against the anti-Balaka (Wieczorek, 2017). These former Seleka factions did not only clash with the anti-Balaka militias but also with other Muslim-dominated militias composed of Muslims from Bangui and the Fulani ethnic group in the western part of the CAR. These new trends in the conflict in the CAR indicate that the religious rhetoric employed hitherto by the elite was to obtain the support of the masses for their political interest without any real religious intentions.

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1 Particularly the Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique (RPRC), the Mouvement Patriotique Centrafricain (MPC) and the Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC) with fighters from the Salamat. Gula and Runga ethnic groups in northeastern CAR and southeastern Chad.

The fracturing of the Seleka was also witnessed within the ranks of the anti-Balaka. The group also fractured based on regional and ethnic grounds. Most of the anti-Balaka militia groups had links with politicians who served as Ministers under President Ange-Felix Patasse and his successor, Bozize. This corroborates Herbert et al. (2013) who argue that at least two of the militia groups had links with the two former CAR presidents. Thus, the quest for position and alliance among the anti-Balaka Christian militias suggests that Christianity was only used by the elite as an umbrella when the Christian regime of Bozize was overthrown, but it did not go deep into the society.

At the end of the Bangui National Forum for Reconciliation and Peace in the CAR held in December 2015, stakeholders concluded that the country was experiencing a political conflict with a religious undertone, brought in by political maneuvers, which resulted in putting Muslims and Christians at loggerheads. This view is corroborated by the International Crisis Group (2013) report which affirmed that the country was experiencing sectarian violence and not a religious conflict, between the CAR government and the Seleka with a majority of its members from the north. The same report argued that religion played a marginal role in the CAR conflict before the Seleka rebellion and coup in early 2013, as most of the country's conflicts were perceived from the socio-political lens. ACLED (2015:19) report contests the religious conflict thesis in the CAR, as it argues that such a move will veil the real motive of the conflict which is "the contest for power between the political actors at different levels" with religion being used as a tool. This argument is supported by Christian and Muslim leaders in the CAR who contend that the armed groups fighting in the country do not represent their respective religious ideologies and that their goals are non-religious (The New Humanitarian, 2014a).

Lombard (2014) posits that religion is closely associated with other elements of social divides in the CAR, including the notion of 'foreignness'. This ideology, linked to old practices and parlance in the CAR is associated with CAR nationals whose ascendants were Chadian immigrants who settled in the north and has been used to encompass all Muslims in the country. While Check (2014) argues that Chad assisted the Seleka in their coup against Bozize in 2013, HRW (2014) reports that Chadians and Sudanese were part of the Seleka fighters, as some CAR victims of their atrocities affirmed that the fighters spoke Arabic and not the national Sango language.

Swain (2014) tilts his argument towards the concept of foreignness, as he holds that the anti-Muslim hostilities cannot only be accounted for on a religious basis but have their roots in other elements of division in the country, like the 'national versus foreigner' divide. With the politicization of religion, Christians have been coined as nationals while Muslims are viewed as foreigners from northern Muslim-dominant countries that share common borders with the CAR. Wilson (2014) in a similar line of argument suggests that the source of conflicts in the CAR is distrust, exhibited by foreignness, complexified

by poverty, and triggered by egocentric political agendas. The religious narrative of the CAR conflict ignited by Bozize and his allies, received by the sympathizers and misinterpreted by many Central Africans tends to hide the complexities and real nature of the conflict. The intricate political landscape of the CAR and the diverse actors in the country's conflict reveal that division along religious lines does not solely account for the socio-political instability. ACLED's (2015) report attests that out of 1300 political violent incidents registered in the CAR between 2012 and 2015, 40% had no links with any of the alleged religious armed groups – Seleka and anti-Balaka.

The post-Seleka conflict era witnessed the emergence of new militia coalitions within and between religious communities. In late 2016, the former Seleka factions – FPRC, MPC, and RPRC – formed a coalition with a pro-Bozize anti-Balaka militia (Herbert *et al.*, 2013). This coalition comprised armed group leaders who perpetrated heinous atrocities in both camps during the Seleka conflict, and became the largest and most well-equipped armed group in the CAR as opposed to the government forces, as it controlled mining sites (Herbert *et al.*, 2013). These alterations in the composition of armed groups and alliances are proof of the fact that religion was used for political motives with the outbreak of the Seleka insurgency and that with the formation of a unity government led by both Christian and Muslim politicians, CAR politicians and elite altered their strategies. This argument aligns with what Njepel (2013) posits in the case of Nigeria, that the crisis in Nigeria was not rooted in religion, but that religion was only used to gather popular support to promote instability for their selfish quest for power.

Despite the above shift in paradigm in the conflict rhetoric in the CAR, a few instances of sectarian violence persisted in the CAR. While President Samba-Panza and Prime Minister Kamoun appealed to both camps to drop their weapons in their inaugural speeches, some Central Africans ignored the calls, as some Christians carried out a riot in a Muslim neighborhood of Bangui a few days later, killing and incinerating the bodies of two Muslims (Cardwell, 2014). In the post-Seleka conflict CAR, just a few Mosques existed, as compared to hundreds of them before the conflict. This adds to the increased number of CAR refugees in neighboring countries after the Seleka departure in 2014, with a remarkable majority being Muslims who fled for safety. Although CAR elites may have shifted from religious identity, sectarian clashes and violence persist in the country as a result of the religion-based mobilization during the Seleka insurgency. The politicization of religion in the CAR affirms the arguments presented by Basedau *et al.* (2011), that the degree of inter-religious relations may designate the existing level of politicization or the sensitivity of various religious groups towards each other. Christian Central Africans have often considered their Muslim counterparts as foreign invaders and not "genuine" Central Africans. The Muslims on their part have decried political, economic, and social discrimination from the government for many decades. Just like ethnic discrimination, religious discrimination has the potential to trigger conflict.

**Looking Forward to Nonrecurrence
of Religious Mobilization for Political Gains**

The above analysis has revealed the link between political mobilization of religion and conflict in the CAR. Such manipulation intensified conflict, further deepened ethnic cleavages, promoted intercommunal tensions, and fragmented the country's population. Also, the misuse of religion has significantly affected efforts to promote national unity, social cohesion, and rebuilding of the CAR's social fabric.

Between 2013 and 2014, the CAR conflict took a different dimension, operating between armed communities grouped along religious lines. The glaring aspects included the punitive violence ignited by aged-old hatred against Muslims, and conspiracy theories on a suspected attempt to forcibly Islamize the CAR. These religious arguments indicate the profound fractures in the CAR that have been sidelined for a long time. Some years after the hostilities on a religious basis, hatred towards Muslims persists, requiring the adoption of mechanisms to promote reconciliation, national cohesion, and unity. The interfaith massacre believed to occur in 2008 in the CAR with fears of politicians exploiting it, was finally witnessed in 2013.

The role of local authorities in mediating and promoting peace at the rural level cannot be disregarded. The state needs to empower these local actors and support them in their efforts to ease intercommunal and inter-religious tensions and promote reconciliation at the local levels. These authorities due to their proximity to the population, and the trust bestowed upon them in the absence of state institutions in the peripheries have easy access to the population and better understand the contextual realities of the conflict in the local areas and the actors involved. These authorities at the peak of the conflict, mediated between communities, between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as quelled tensions among armed groups. Such a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and reconciliation can have a greater impact if the state and its international partners provide more assistance.

Moreover, religious leaders also have the potential to quench the religious identity-based tensions in the CAR. Religious leaders are trained, and hold the trust of the people, live closer to the population, and in some situations, they assist in resolving disputes at the local levels in the absence of the state justice system. In the same vein, the effective use of interfaith religious platforms operating in the CAR has helped to promote reconciliation and social integration. In the course of the conflict, religious leaders including Priests, Pastors, and Imams who lived in areas besieged by armed groups have played a significant role as mediators in local peace and stabilization efforts, like negotiating freedom of movement deals with armed groups, local peace and security dialogue, and promoting inter-community mediation.

Equally, the activities of the Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Reconciliation Commission should effectively be decentralized and well-funded to permit its agents to have access

to the remote areas where victims of the conflict abound. The commission has a very limited mandate with a vast mission. To fully achieve its mission, the commission needs to be provided with the necessary funds and logistics to permit it to collate the necessary data from interviews of victims and evidence from the field

Conclusion

Political instability, inequality, nepotism, corruption, and other bad governance practices in the CAR have offered political elites in the CAR with strong motivations to adopt unorthodox strategies to attain political power. At different times in the history of the CAR, political elites used various identities in the CAR for political aims. Their raison d'etre of mobilizing identity has been to galvanize support for political achievements, by opting to use an identity with a wider mobilization. Before the Seleka rebellion, the political elite used ethnic identities to establish more proficient patronage links when they were in power. With the advent of the Seleka rebellion, the rebel leaders wanted to frame the rhetoric that they were Central Africans to obtain the support of the southern Central Africans, but this move was thwarted by the southern political elite who mobilized religion against the Seleka, branding them as foreign invaders.

This paradigm changed when a transitional government representing both Christians and Muslims was put in place, as the political elites sidelined religious mobilization in favor of ethnic and regional affinities. The findings of this research have corroborated the initial argument raised, that religious identity was never a major source of violence and tensions in the CAR, and that politicians only took advantage of playing religious cards to achieve their egocentric political goals. The study thus concludes that when the opportunistic politicians failed in their move, the notion of religious conflict between the CAR Muslims and the non-Muslim population faded.

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