An Analysis of Sectarian Conflict in the Central African Republic (2012–2020) from the Lens of the Protracted Social Conflict Theory

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Abstract

The Central African Republic has been entangled in new cycles of conflict since the upsurge of the Seleka insurgency in December 2012. Although a number of reasons account for the violent nature of the conflict and its protracted nature, sectarianism appeared to be the most glaring and leading driver of the conflict. The dominance of the Christian majority over the Muslims in every aspect of life, the questionable Central African citizenship of CAR Muslim population have led to overt discrimination against the minority Muslim population. This discrimination on religious lines adds to ethnic discrimination by various CAR leaders who offer preferential treatment to members of their ethnic groups through appointments to top government and military positions, to the detriment of the other tribes, breeding ethnic division. Applying the Protracted Social Conflict theory, this article attempts to investigate into how sectarianism contributed to the protraction of the CAR conflict from 2012–2020. The paper applies a qualitative method of analysis to investigate the sectarian roots of the 2012 conflict in the CAR. Data collection and analysis involved secondary sources in the form of books, scientific journal publications, reports and other relevant internet sources to answer the central question in the research.

Keywords: Central African Republic, communal discontent, protracted social conflict, sectarianism, need deprivation

1. Introduction

The political trajectory of the Central African Republic (CAR) after attaining its independence in 1960 has witnessed successive military coups and internal ethnic clashes, recurrent armed insurgencies and weak state institutions. The current cycles of violence in the country stemmed from the Seleka insurgency in December 2012, which launched attacks against the CAR government, besieged the capital Bangui and successfully overthrew President Francois Bozize in March 2013. As a counter-offensive to the Seleka brutality, the anti-Balaka (Sango word for 'invincible'), a dominantly Christian militia, emerged and engaged in reprisal hostilities against the Seleka. The violence increased ethnic tensions and division and amplified religious enmity in the phantom state of the CAR.

The Seleka offensive and ultimate seizure of power in Bangui in March 2013 constituted the final stage of the unavoidable collapse of the CAR. The country, with its recurrent violence since independence, has not recorded such an increase in collective violence (International Crisis Group – ICG, 2015). The violence orchestrated the disintegration and weakening of the existing state institutions, ignited inter-communal clashes and a *de facto* separation of the CAR territory into two. The anti-Balaka persecution of the Muslims in the country's West induced their forceful migration and stimulated the urge for vengeance and the discourse of separation in the eastern CAR (Ibid). In the wake of 2015, the violence perpetuated by the Seleka coalition and the anti-Balaka militias took the form of deadly inter-communal clashes resulting in the establishment of Muslim enclaves in the

western CA, a fighting zone in the centre and the growth of armed banditry. Maireri (2014) contends that the advent of the conflict on a communal basis has reawakened the question about the right to live and land ownership in the CAR. The religious connotation of the violence is perceived by the Muslims being regarded as foreigners, revealing the deep fracture of the country's social fabric from the religious perspective.

The Bangui forum was organised in May 2015 amid high inter-communal clashes and a national divide to achieve genuine national reconciliation. The over 600 participants of the forum representing the various territorial units of the country, different religious bodies and political parties indicated a bold step toward national unity. However, the outright rejection by some armed groups of some of the forum's recommendations, particularly on the principles of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), raised the fear that such a lofty initiative will end on pieces of paper like previous meetings (Ndiyun, 2022a).

This article attempts to analyse the sectarian divide between the Seleka and the anti-Balaka that became a stimulus for the conflict in the CAR. The central question that guides this discussion revolves around the underlying motives of the sectarian clashes that ignited the conflict that subsequently led to its protraction. The paper aims to provide a deep understanding of the conflict in the CAR from December 2012. The focus of this research is to provide insight to policymakers and researchers about the sectarian connotations of the 2012 CAR conflict, which has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and the protraction of the conflict in the CAR.

2. Methodology

This research paper, which attempts to gather in-depth information about the CAR conflict and make a meaningful analysis of the situation, is qualitative. It mainly aimed at finding the underlying causes of the sectarian clashes in the protracted conflict in the CAR. A narrative approach was employed to examine and investigate how the experience has impacted current events in the CAR conflict. The research article has collected and interpreted data from secondary sources available in books, research journals and articles, internet sources, reports and other relevant sources. This paper has a timeframe limitation from 2012 to 2020 and thus only focuses on events during these nine years.

3. Applying the Protracted Social Conflict Theory in the Central African Republic's Conflict

The birth and proliferation of conflict with protracted and ethnic features in the third world prompted theorists like Edward Azar to argue that the management and settlement of these conflicts necessitate a holistic approach which recognises and addresses their causes (Utterwulghe, 1999). Azar (1990) used the term PSC to delineate an ongoing and seemingly unresolvable conflict. Ryan (1995) contends that PSCs denote interethnic conflicts that have endured and seem beyond resolution to the belligerents. Ndiyun (2022b) argues that societies with multi-communal setups are fertile ground for PSCs as the quest for communal identity abounds. To him, PSCs emerge in societies from factors such as 'underdevelopment, identity cleavage and structural deprivation' with ethnic segregation as a gauge of structural discrimination unevenly affecting some groups and profiting others (Ndiyun, 2022b: 14). Azar advances that the discontent of communities due to the deprivation of their essential needs on the premise of communal lineage primarily culminates in a protracted conflict in that society (Kara, 2018). According to Kara (2018), such dissatisfaction results from a complex causal link involving aspects of international linkages and the state's role. The resulting conflict endures long, leading to the breakdown of state institutions, weakening national cohesion and promoting demoralisation and pessimism in the community.

Azar (1990) outlined three main interconnected stages of the PSC: Genesis, Process Dynamics and Outcome Analysis, with each having its dynamics in conducting an in-depth examination of a given prolonged conflict. The genesis stage, characterised by the dominance of a particular group over state power and control of natural resources, depicts the transformation of a non-conflicting situation into violence. Azar (1986) suggests that such dominance is rooted in history and related factors. To him, any failure by the state to reconcile and incorporate other groups into the system of governance will trigger unfriendly relationships, leading to division, communal discontent and eventually to PSC. Communal discontentment arises due to some communities' deprivation of access to resources that offer them essential human needs, inequitably distributed in fractured societies. These basic needs include participation in the state's political life and the state's recognition of the existence of the communities through the preservation of their identity (Ndiyun, 2022b).

A society witnessing the factors presented in the first stage above necessitates just a trigger to engender violent conflict. To Azar (1986), this conflict starter constitutes the 'process dynamic' stage of the PSC. The final phase or outcome analysis depicts the factors that cause and reinforce such PSC (Azar, 1990). Azar argues here that PSCs are distinguished by their outcome. An unfavourable outcome is observed when there is no likely end to the conflict. Azar (1986) also contends that no distinction between endogenous and exogenous sources of the conflict and the significant protagonists characterises a PSC. As such, it becomes challenging to ascertain the start of the conflict and anticipate its end. The birth and expansion of these interconnected motives and variables

within a society serve to distinguish a conflict as protracted or not.

This research offers an in-depth analysis of the prolonged features of the CAR conflict between 2012 and 2020 through the lens of the PSC theory. By testing the three main phases of Azar's PSC theory on this case, the paper attempts to investigate why the 2012 conflict has endured in the CAR despite the numerous measures of resolving it.

3.1 The Genesis of the 2012 Central African Republic's Conflict

The genesis of the conflict delineates the presence of a set of factors that converts a non-conflictual environment to a conflicting zone. According to Azar, four main factors account for the genesis of a conflict: communal content, human needs, the state's reaction to the conflict and international linkages (Kara 2018; Ndiyun, 2022b). One can affirm that these factors are fulfilled in examining the CAR conflict.

The CAR society's multi-communal setup satisfies the PSC's initial condition. It lays a solid foundation to trigger conflict. CAR, a Christian-majority state (about 89%), is composed of different ethnic groups (International Religious Freedom, 2021). Eight main ethnic groups constitute the CAR population, with the most prominent and conflictual being the *Sara Kaba* in the east, the *Gbaya* in the West and the *Mandjia* in the centre (Ndiyun, 2022b). The CAR, a dominant Christian state, has been ruled by Christian leaders since its independence. In the political landscape of the CAR, political leaders have used various ethnic groups as a political mechanism to remain in power and preserve their political positions, developing and framing their political strategies in line with their ethnic lineages (Marcucci, 2019). The political elite made recourse to ethnic and religious identities to cause sentiments of discrimination and ignite violence on ethnic and religious bases. (Institute for Peace and Security Studies-ISSP, 2018).

The communal divide in the CAR based on religion or ethnicity dates back to the slave trade era. Smith (2015) holds that the devastating effect of the slave trade era generated a cluster of scattered ethnic groups in the CAR. These ethnic groups have continuously maintained unfriendly ties, characterised by mistrust and conflict. Ndiyun (2022b) contends that the various presidents of the CAR have accorded preferential treatment to their families and ethnic groups. Andre Kolingba, who ruled the country between 1981–1983, significantly favoured his minority *Yakoma* ethnic group (constituting about 5% of the CAR population) by offering then tom positions in his government, the public administration and the military, to the detriment of other ethnic groups and spreading further sentiments of discord and enmity (Isaac-Martin, 2016). In the same vein, after the successful overthrow of Kolingba in a military coup, Ange Felix Patasse discriminated in favour of his ethnic *Kaba-Sara* community in all spheres of the government as payback against his predecessor's *Yakoma* ethnic group (Ndiyun, 2022).

In 2003 when Francois Bozize became CAR president through a military coup, he concentrated on empowering his *Gbaya* ethnic group by placing them in critical positions in the government, public service and the defence forces to exclude other ethnic groups. Ndiyun (2022b) argues that Bozize's discriminatory policies were startling, especially against the northeastern region of the CAR. The CAR's persistent discriminatory economic and socio-political governance system has promoted political and socioeconomic inequalities for the past decades. When a new leader takes over power, important positions in decision-making institutions are held by the people belonging to their ethnic group, with other groups having no or very restricted access to power and politics. This open marginalisation operates primarily based on their (ethnic) identity, which is not affiliated with that of the ruling class.

The latest cycle of conflict in the CAR that emerged in 2012 was not triggered by sectarianism in its early stage but by socioeconomic and political grievances. The Seleka rebellion was inspired by the motive to overthrow Bozize, whom they criticised for bad economic governance, predation of the country's resources and the failure to implement former peace agreements (Ndiyun, 2022a). According to Weyns et al. (2014) and Kaihko & Utas (2014), religious motives did not account for the outbreak of the rebellion. The Seleka launched their attacks without discrimination to religious affiliations, with greed-related goals. Notwithstanding, the Christian-dominated anti-Balaka in their riposte manifested a more open and intentional anti-Muslim offensive. Their leader claimed that the anti-Balaka was fighting in self-defence of the Christian Central Africans against the Seleka attacks (The New Humanitarian, 2014). The anti-Balaka militia directed indiscriminate assaults on the Islamic faith without differentiating between the Muslim civilians and armed Seleka fighters (Human Rights Watch-HRW, 2013; Amnesty International, 2014; Walheim, 2014). The Seleka, as a result, launched retaliatory attacks on Christian civilians and other groups based on religious lines. Twenty-one per cent of the anti-Balaka hostilities against civilians targeted Muslims, while 17 per cent of the Seleka offensive was directed against Christians (Armed Conflict Location and Data-ACLED Project, 2014). Ratcliffe (2017) posits that the clashes fuelled enduring enmities between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority, promoting the sectarian connotation of the conflict, which already featured an illegal struggle for natural resources among the various armed groups.

Faced with the imminent threats from the Seleka in December 2012, Bozize and his political allies appealed to religion by calling on the CAR's young Christian population to prepare and "fight against the Muslim invaders" (Ndiyun, 2022b). This call rapidly spread among the non-Muslim communities, establishing a breeding ground for religious hatred and changing the conflict narrative by the end of 2013 to a conflict not only opposing armed groups – Seleka and the anti-Balaka, but also between communities, and hence a sectarian war (ICG, 2013). The anti-Muslim feeling in the CAR is rooted in the country's history, as Muslims are considered foreigners. Meyer (2017) argues that anti-Balaka violence against the Fulani pastoralists could be justified because some pastoralists fought within the ranks of the Seleka in raiding villages and buying raided cattle. As such, many farmers, to avenge their loss and recover their stolen livestock, integrated into the anti-Balaka militias. In comparison, Marchal (2016) contends that the conflict had no religious agenda but inter-community tension, while Weyns et al. (2014) hold that a religious difference in the CAR did not trigger the conflict but broadened the fault line between the protagonists. It is therefore argued that the socioeconomic and political roots of the CAR conflict feed into the already existing religious and communal fault lines.

The clashes between the Seleka and the anti-Balaka, added to their indiscriminate attacks directed at the civilian population, have led to massive human rights violations and heinous acts. The Muslim versus Christian connotation of the CAR conflict further complicated and thwarted the country's inclusive and operational political machinery highly desired by the population. The recurrent victimisation of the CAR population by political leaders on identity lines compelled members of various ethnic groups and religions to cling to their sectarian affiliations for the political and socioeconomic benefits of mutual survival and security. The multi-communal composition of the CAR society and the overt discrimination of some ethnic groups on identity bases by successive political leaders to the detriment of other groups fulfil the first feature of Azar's PSC.

According to Azar, the second variable accountable for the outbreak of a PSC is individual and communal needs. This variable focuses on the extent to which individuals' needs for subsistence and well-being are attained. Such needs include the level of access by an individual or community to political participation and institutions. Any individual or group denied access to state institutions or encountering unmet needs for subsistence and well-being will recourse to violence to express their discontentment. In the CAR, the governance system has operated following a methodology that when each leader comes to power (mainly through force), only his ethnic group members and their allies' benefit. While Kolingba favoured his ethnic *Yakoma* group during his reign, his successor Patasse also accorded top government and military command positions to his *Kaba-Sara* ethnic group. Bozize between 2003 and 3013 observed the same trend by empowering mostly his *Gbaya* ethnic group and appointing his family to top political and military positions. During his reign, Bozize carried out discriminatory policies, especially against the northeastern part of the country hosting the Muslim population. The discriminatory economic policies, corruption at the helm of the state, and unequal distribution of state power and resources amplified the grievances of the poor masses. As such, the individual basic needs of survival and well-being were not met. Those without ties with the regime or the ethnic identity have been deprived of their essential needs, like the Muslim-dominated armed groups in the northeastern CAR to protest against the regime of Bozize in December 2012. Those belonging to the ethnic group other than the president have been deprived of basic facilities, including security, by the state. Such realities reflect a sectarian stance, resulting in an uprising where the Seleka clashed with the anti-Balaka militia groups, with close ties with the Bozize regime, thus protracting the conflict.

The third variable that triggers a PSC is the state's role in addressing the population's complaints. The successive regimes in the CAR have been negligent in addressing the socioeconomic and political grievances discussed above. The political leaders constituting a minority instead embark on policies repressing political liberty and predation of economic resources. Azar argued about the dominance of the majority group in a society, which suppresses other minority groups to curtail their participation in politics to consolidate their position in power. The CAR situation affirms the standard set by Azar, as leadership has remained in the hands of the Christian majority since independence. However, some minority ethnic groups like the *Yakom* between 1981 and 1983 (constituting less than 5% of the CAR population) have ruled and discriminated against majority ethnic groups.

The fourth and one of the critical variables that trigger a PSC is interference by international and regional powers or international linkages. Azar elaborated on this variable as a client relationship wherein the conflict-pruned state economically relies on other states (Kara, 2018). Such dependence gives the foreign state the power to impose political and economic policies on the dependent state, contrary to the population's desires and resulting in disillusionment between the state and the citizens. The CAR conflict has witnessed the involvement of regional and international powers not only due to economic and military dependence but also because of the sectarian nature of the conflict. Other states have had a significant influence on the CAR conflict. Some have contributed significantly to peace and stability in the country.

In contrast, others have played a double standard game, promoting violence and concurrently purporting to

contribute to durable peace and social cohesion in the CAR (Kah, 2014). Kah (2014) further contends that the presence of CAR in the middle of warring neighbours like Chad, Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo is worrisome, added to the indirect and overt participation in the CAR conflict by countries like the United States, France, China, Russia, South Africa and Uganda with different agendas, promoting instability and disintegration of the CAR and the sub-region. Arieff (2014) argues that Central Africans accuse France of either double playing or protecting only its interests in the CAR to the detriment of political stability and peace in the country. Debos (2008) postulates that President Idris Deby of Chad provided military support to Bozize to overthrow Patasse in 2003. A disagreement between the two leaders in 2012 led to the withdrawal of Chadian military support to Bozize, making his country vulnerable to the Seleka attacks (Carayannis & Lombard, 2016). The entry of Russia into the CAR conflict through the Wagner group has contributed to protracting the CAR conflict as the group's mercenaries are accused of committing severe human rights violations in the CAR (HRW 2022, ICG, 2022).

3.2 The Process Dynamics and Protraction of the Central African Republic's Conflict

The second phase of Azar's PSC is the course or process of the conflict, which is overtly manifested based on the underlying causes. The sources of the protracted conflict in the CAR are highlighted above. The second phase's enduring conflict manifests through communal actions and approaches, the state's reaction and built-in conflict mechanisms (Kara, 2018).

Small events provoke collective actions and strategies, leading to full-scale conflict. In the CAR, the triggering aspect of the 2012 conflict was the claim by armed groups that the government had failed to implement the peace deals of 2007, which ended the Bush War. On December 10, 2012, the Seleka (CPSK-CPJP-UFDR) launched offensives against the towns of N'Dele, Sam Ouandja and Ouadola. The expansion of the Seleka and its continuous advances towards Bangui, the capital, prompted the CAR government to call for unconditional talks with the rebels in Libreville, Gabon. The outcome of the talks was a ceasefire accord, amongst other agreements, on January 11, 2013. The terms of the agreement included a replacement of the Prime Minister by a member of the opposition, dissolution of the Parliament and its replacement by a coalition government, integration of rebel troops into the defence forces, and economic and social reforms. The ceasefire agreement was broken a few weeks later, with the government blaming the Seleka. In contrast, the rebel coalition blamed the government for failing to implement the provisions of the power-sharing deal (Ndiyun, 2022a). The breach of the agreement caused the Seleka to continue with its hostilities towards the CAR capital. On March 25, its leader Michel Djotodia auto-proclaimed himself president, becoming the first Muslim president of the country, a day after the overthrow of Bozize.

During the Seleka insurgency, the CAR government applied all the policy options as propounded by Woodhouse (2011), including political accommodation and repression, yet all proved futile. The Bozize regime employed strategies that exposed the conflict as an attempt by foreign invaders to overthrow the Christian government purely on sectarian bases. Such manoeuvres account for the anti-Balaka mobilisation and indiscriminate hostilities against Muslims in the CAR. The conflict which arose against the repressive rule of Bozzie and its failure to implement peace deals soon catapulted into a sectarian conflict by many elements, resulting in its protraction.

The last variable of the PSC, Process Dynamics, is the enduring conflict's effect on the protagonists' perceptions and attitudes. The experience of various communities triggers this variable. The effect of enduring conflict is always worst, resulting in negative perceptions on both sides, characterised by fear and past experiences and leading to great suspicion of any move taken by the opposing parties. Consequently, communal disunity is further solidified by the negative pictures of the conflict in the minds of the communities. As presented above, the CAR society is constituted of ethnic and religious diversities, sharing a history of confrontations and conflict, especially between local Christian farmers and Muslim pastoralists over farming and grazing land. All these historical experiences have cemented communal discontent in the CAR, promoting a trust deficit amongst the communities. These negative perceptions and motives of the communities against each other have contributed to the current CAR conflict.

3.3 The Outcome of the Conflict

One of the critical variables of Azar's PSC is the war's outcome, in which the author contends that in a PSC, no clear winner or loser emerges, but rather a more divided and fractured society. The CAR conflict, which erupted due to the Seleka insurgency in 2012 and later took a sectarian form, is a solid example of a PSC. After numerous years of fighting between government forces and rebel groups, and amongst rebel groups, the CAR has a messy theatre of regional and international indirect conflict. The numerous negotiated and peaceful settlement endeavours to the conflict have either met deadlock or been short-lived. The military solution has proven to be unachievable. Resolving the conflict through force will hardly usher at the end of hostilities but will instead widen the gap between the state and the population.

With the current stakes, the conflict in the CAR has been so calamitous that it created the worse humanitarian, security, human rights and political crisis the country has ever witnessed since its independence. At the peak of the conflict between December 2013 and January 2014, over 2.5 million needed humanitarian assistance, including 922.000 internally displaced persons, over 250.000 refugees, and 99 per cent of the Muslim population fleeing Bangui for safety (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs-UNOCHA, 2014). The conflict has led to a drastic drop in CAR's Gross Domestic Product per capita from 653 US Dollars in 1990 to 414 US Dollars in 2020, and the country ranks 179 out of 187 poorest countries in the world (Kouame, 2022). Thousands of lives are lost in the conflict, including the massive destruction of property. Also, the conflict has touched neighbouring countries through the infiltration of arms and rebels who seek hideouts from the CAR. Moreover, the burden on some countries harbouring CAR refugees has been enormous.

Beyond the humanitarian and economic effect of the prolonged nature of the CAR conflict, it has also shattered the social and political basis of the country. Azar opined that a PSC would result in the deformation of state institutions and the setup of society. The CAR conflict has crumbled the essential mechanism and institutions necessary for the smooth functioning of the state and society and has broadened the trust gap between the government and the governed. The conflict proved to be a visible threat to the weak and decaying institutions in the CAR. For the past ten years of fighting, the conflict has weakened the CAR military to the extent that very little or no distinction could be made between the government forces and the rebel troops regarding the number, equipment and logistics. The government forces had to rely on support from the anti-Balaka militia to fight against the Seleka as they marched on Bangui (Meyer, 2017). The CAR is unable to provide security to the population, and most central Africans rely on armed self-defence groups to protect their communities. This fragmentation in the security dispositive in the CAR is a clear outcome of sectarian disgruntlement that breaths in the core of problems in the CAR. The notion of self-defence groups in various communities gave rise to the anti-Balaka militias in 2013. The CAR conflict has led to the deformation of the already weak state institutions and brought to lamplight the fragility of the successive regimes in the country. Based on the previous failed attempts to resolve the CAR conflict, there are little or no signs of a viable solution to the conflict in the nearest future. The sectarian connotation of the conflict, added to the participation of regional and international actors, has amplified the issues and resulted in its protraction.

4. Discussion and Presentation of the Findings

In analysing the existing literature on the CAR conflict, various debates arise, which attempt to put forth the underlying elements accountable for the protraction of the conflict. Knoope & Buchanan-Clarke (2017) link the sources of the current CAR conflict to the country's history. Lombard (2014) holds that the CAR, prior to colonial rule, was reputed for slave trade activities by traders who used the Nile river and Saharan routes as well as a host of refugees who fled the slave raids and permanently settled there; this contributed to ethnic diversity and mobility od settlers of the area, resulting in a culture of resistance and self-defence among the settler communities against invaders (Knoope & Buchanan-Clarke, 2017). With the arrival of the French imperialists, some of the many ethnic groups allied with the French while some had slave trading ties with the Fulani-Muslim slave traders, and others preferred to resist imperial rule and slave trade, like the dominant *Gbaya, Mboum, Mandjia* and *Banda* ethnic groups which resisted between 1928 and 1931 (Lombard, 2014). These opposing motives significantly contributed to disunity amongst the ethnic groups in the CAR, hence sectarianism.

Bagayoko (2018) argues that the *ethnicisation* of politics in the CAR since the 1980s, with ethnic groups involved in serious competition for political leadership and authority, contributed to the sectarian conflict currently plaguing the CAR. McGrew (2016) corroborates that the quest to protect religious identity has been the root of chronicles of faith-based discrimination in the CAR. The author further contends that Muslim Central Africans hold that there exist longstanding discrimination patterns against Muslims by non-Muslims. Memories of the pre-colonial era characterised by the harsh leadership of the Muslim sultans, coupled with an imminent menace of Islamisation of the CAR with assistance from Sudan and Chad, amplifies the vengeance of the non-Muslims (Observatoire Pharos, 2014). Meyer (2017) argues that although the conflict had a religious connotation, sectarianism could not make a better account of it. Meyer is focused on the intermediate rather than the underlying sources of the 2012 conflict, although she equally affirms that high levels of misappropriation of public funds, corruption, nepotism, ethnic discrimination and *clientelism* have eaten deep into political practice in the country. To her, the practice of each president giving preference to members of their ethnic groups due to mistrust against others accounts for sectarian conflict and its escalation. Some analysts believe that Bozize's bad governance plunged the country into a bad socioeconomic situation. As a result, they contend that socioeconomic and political hardship added to the bad faith of the government acted as a catalyst to triggering sectarian conflict and not the other way. (Meyer, 2017; Bagayoko, 2018). Kah (2014) posits that external; influence significantly triggered sectarian conflict in the CAR. To him, the CAR is positioned among warring neighbours, leading to the influx of arms, ammunition and rebels across its porous borders. Meyer (2017) holds that a reasonable number of the Seleka rebels were Chadians and Sudanese Muslims who had crossed borders.

However, by examining the opinions of these authors and others who have written extensively on the CAR conflict, one can understand how the perception of sectarian conflict emerged so rapidly in the CAR conflict by September 2013. Although many underlying causes account for the conflict, communal division was one of the significant factors in prolonging the conflict and should not be ignored. Ingerstad (2014) affirms that many factors accounted for the outbreak of the conflict in the beginning, including security, political and socioeconomic factors. She emphasises that the neglect and marginalisation of the northern part of the country since the colonial era (with the northeastern part historically regarded as inhabited by foreigners) encouraged the growth of rebel groups which later formed the Seleka coalition. However, the rapid growth of sectarianism and its expansion across the CAR territory overshadowed the other factors (Amnesty International, 2014; Baron, 2013; 2014; Le Point, 2013).

Kaihko & Utas argue that the anti-Balaka deliberate attacks against the Muslims as part of sectarianism aimed at attracting the sympathy of the West. The sectarian connotation of the CAR conflict pulled the interest of many western countries and the international community to the CAR as fears of a possible genocide developed. In January 2014, John Ging, the Director of Operations for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs UNOCHA, affirmed that all feasible elements and seeds of genocide were present in the CAR, as seen in Rwanda and Bosnia (Braun & Miles, 2014). To the UN staff, the organisation had to grant utmost priority to the situation in the CAR. These remarks caused an increase in the deployment of peacekeepers by the African Union and France to the CAR. In his report to the UN Security Council after he visited the CAR in 2017, the UN humanitarian boss, Stephen O'Brien, affirmed that there were early warnings of genocide in the CAR, with armed groups basing their attacks on ethnic or religious motives (Voice of America, 2017). The longstanding conception about the majority Christian Central Africans in the south about the Muslim minority Central Africans in the northeast as foreigners or intruders poses a severe threat to social cohesion in the CAR. This adds to the marginalisation of the Muslim minority by the various CAR leaders from the Christian south of the country. Hence, it can be analysed that even though the sectarian divide is not the sole factor for the protraction of the CAR conflict, it is one of the dominant factors.

5. Conclusion

The conflict in the phantom state of Africa – the CAR (ICG, 2007) has been described by Souleymane Diabaté, UNICEF representative in the CAR, as a 'forgotten conflict', despite its protraction. Although sectarianism was not the main driver of the CAR conflict in 2012, it later seemed to be the most remarkable determinant. While affirming that the failure of the Bozizé regime to implement the provisions of the 2007 peace agreement and other political and economic motives accounted for the Seleka insurgency, the quick switch of events spiralled the conflict bringing in longstanding sectarian rivalries between the Muslims and Christians, and between some ethnic groups resulted in the protraction of the conflict. The magnitude of the communal divide within the CAR invited foreign interventions to halt hostilities and negotiate for peace and political stability.

In testing Azar's PSC theory in the CAR, one can infer that all the variables for the initiation and protraction of a PSC are present in the CAR society. However, communal disunity in the CAR, where the Christian majority dominates over the Muslim minority in every aspect, has contributed to increasing violence and its protraction in the country. What began as a struggle by the Seleka calling on the Bozizé regime to introduce reforms soon migrated into a sectarian conflict with no feasible end.

Disclosure Statement

I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, no aspect of my current personal or professional circumstance places me in the position of having a conflict of interest with this article.

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