



Religious Dimension of Conflict and UN Peacebuilding in Central African Republic

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Abstract

Despite being political, violent conflict in Central African Republic (CAR) have always had hidden dimensions that include ethnic and religious ones and this dimension resurfaced in recent development. This paper aims to assess the deliberation of religious dimension of conflict in UN Peacebuilding efforts while engaging civil society in its peacebuilding efforts and find out what these offices could do in empowering civil society participation in conflicts where religious dimension persists, to prevent further recurrence of violent conflict. Using CAR conflict as a case study, this paper will first observe religious dimension and the importance of engaging religious actors in peacebuilding. Second, drawing information from BONUCA and BINUCA as the manifestation of UN's peacebuilding activities in CAR as well as the nature of CAR conflicts, it will then seek to explore these offices engagement of religious actors as part of civil society involvement in UN peacebuilding effort. Third, the position of religious players and consideration of religious/faith-based aspect of conflict will be analysed and see what prospect it could bring in tackling violent conflict and what the UN could do. In helping CAR, UN PBC have the potential to play a central role in bridging both international community with material resources and religious leaders in domestic level with potential to build a bottom-up peacebuilding process.

Keywords: UN Peacekeeping; Central African Republic; religion in conflict; Peacebuilding

Introduction

Past violent conflicts in Central African Republic (CAR) have always been political in nature since its independence from France in 1960. Violent government transitions (usually in a coup supported by France) have colored CAR's history, occurred in 1965, 1979, 1981, 2003 and 2013. In 2003, disenchantment over president Patasse's administration have ostensibly become the reason of a coup (and most coup through CAR's history) led by Francois Bozize. In turn, Bozize was also overthrown by Michel Djotodia in 2013 military coup.¹ Surprisingly in 2016, this political conflict changed its face into mass killings of Muslim minority and ethnics such as Fulani, indicated that this conflict originally has multidimensional character.² Despite being political, violent conflict in Central African Republic have always had hidden dimensions that include ethnic and religious ones and this dimension resurfaced in recent development.

To help CAR government handle the situation, United Nations' (UN) peacebuilding mission for CAR was established in 15 February 2000, under the name UN Peacebuilding Support

¹ Wendy Isaacs-Martin, "Political and Ethnic Identity in Violent Conflict: Case of Central African Republic," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 10, no. 1 (2016).

² Reuters, "Dozens Killed in Central African Republic Massacre,"

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/dozens-killed-central-african-republic-massacre-160918040453325.html>.



Office in the Central African Republic, or commonly known as BONUCA.³ UN peacebuilding effort have existed through the years of CAR conflict since the idea of peacebuilding emerged in UN forums, through the establishment of BONUCA, subsequently replaced by BINUCA in 2008.⁴ However, given recent emergence of religion-based persecution in CAR conflict, a question remains unanswered whether UN peacebuilding efforts have embraced religious dimension of conflict, and especially in engaging religious institutions and actors as a part of civil society participation in peacebuilding. HIPPO report clearly acknowledged the importance of religious dimension of conflict and recommends UN to call upon religious actors when necessary.⁵ Could this recent mass killing be hindered with involvement of religious actors in UN peacebuilding efforts?

Using CAR conflict as a case study, this paper aims to assess the deliberation of religious dimension of conflict in UN PBC's activities while engaging civil society in its peacebuilding efforts and find out what these offices could do in empowering civil society participation in conflicts where religious dimension persists, to prevent further recurrence of violent conflict. To do so, this paper will first observe religious dimension of conflict and the importance of engaging religious actors in peacebuilding. Second, drawing information from BONUCA and BINUCA as the manifestation of UN's peacebuilding activities in CAR as well as the nature of CAR conflict, this paper will then seek to explore these offices engagement of religious actors as part of civil society participation. Third, it will analyze the position of religious actors and consideration of religious/faith-based aspect of conflict in peacebuilding and see what prospect it could brought in tackling violent conflict and what the UN could do in the future in establishing peacebuilding in conflict where religious dimension exists.

Theoretical Framework: Religious Aspects of Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding have long been considered as an integral as well as important part of creating peace. Galtung have offered a tripartite approaches as lenses to look at peace, one of them is associative approach in form of peacebuilding that traces the root cause of conflict, creating the 'structure of peace.'⁶ The term peacebuilding, as we understood now in its broader term, refers to "multidimensional effort" that includes "all activities" aimed at "managing and preventing conflict and sustaining peace," by "creating conducive conditions for economic reconstruction, development, and democratization as precondition for legitimate democratic order, but should not be equated and thus confused with these concepts."⁷

In establishing sustainable peace, many peacebuilding theorist/practitioners have recognized the importance of civil society in peace process. Lambourne explains that efficacious participation of civil society is the most determining element to create peacebuilding that

³ United Nations Security Council, "Chapter V - Subsidiary Organs of the Security Council," in *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council*, ed. United Nations Security Council (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2015).

⁴ Gustavo de Carvalho and Amanda Lucey, "Fractured Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic: Lessons for African Union Engagement," in *Policy Brief* (Institute for Security Studies, 2016).

⁵ "Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People," ed. United Nations General Assembly and United Nations Security Council (New York: United Nations, 2015).

⁶ Johan Galtung, "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking and Peacebuilding," in *Essays in Peace Research*, ed. Johan Galtung (Copenhagen: Ejslers, 1975).

⁷ Thania Paffenholz, "Civil Society and Peacebuilding," in *Civil Society & Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Thania Paffenholz (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2010).



conforms to local situation both in terms of conflict and cultural context.⁸ The importance of civil society in peacebuilding is manifested in UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) mandate 'to bring together all relevant actors...for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery' as well as 'to serve as a platform to convene all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations... including... civil society.'⁹

Religion is an element of civil society that has a unique role, especially in relation to peace. Religion indeed plays a crucial role in civil society where religious freedom prevails, advancing discussion about morality and social vision as well as benefitting for civil society as it provides material resources, volunteers, leadership, physical space and social mobility.¹⁰ It means that religion has become a social capital that facilitate advancement of civil society. In peacebuilding, religion plays the similar role as civil society's role mentioned above, as well as as the 'middle layer' that connects policy-makers and grassroots, a crucial aspect of democratization in post-conflict reconstruction.¹¹

Unfortunately, the fact that religion has been politicized to justify war in many cases have accentuated the conflictual face of religion.¹² This politicization of religion in conflict can be found all over the world in the past and present, such as Israel-Palestina conflict, recent terrorist attacks, Kashmir, Bosnia and Hercegovina, etc. As a result, many peacebuilding scholars/practitioners' sees religions as threat to peace.

This is, nevertheless, a distorted view of the relation between religion and peacebuilding. Conflicts are not simply about religion, but it is much more about politics, ideology, economics, sociocultural, etc.¹³ The consideration of religious dimension of conflict is one crucial aspect in measuring the necessary actions for peace.¹⁴ It means that eventhough one dimension of conflict dominates, conflict always has multiple dimension.

In relation to conflict, religion indeed plays role in legitimizing conflict and as a source of recruitment, but the peace settlement role is surely worth more attention if one's looking for a way to create peace.¹⁵ Brubaker's study supported this idea, emphasizing that there's no direct causal relation between religion and political violence, however religious institution is equipped with valuable modalities and mechanism that can support violent conflict as much as it can support any nonviolent influential actions.¹⁶ Thus it's this potential in religion's resources that can be utilized in peacebuilding, regardless of the existence of religious dimension of conflict.

⁸ Wendy Lambourne, "Towards Sustainable Peace and Development in Sierra Leone: Civil Society and the Peacebuilding Commission," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 4, no. 2 (2012).

⁹ "60/180. The Peacebuilding Commission," in *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 20 Desember 2005*, ed. United Nations (New York: United Nations, 2005).

¹⁰ Donald E. Miller, "Civil Society and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, ed. Michael Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott, "Faith-Based Diplomacy: An Ancient Idea Newly Emergent," *Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs* (Fall 2003).

¹² Muhammad Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 6 (2001).

¹³ David Little, "Phenomena of Faith: Religious Dimension of Conflicts and Peace," *Harvard International Review* 26, no. 4 (2005).

¹⁴ Isak Svensson, "Fighting with Faith: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 6 (2007).

¹⁵ Little.

¹⁶ Rogers Brubaker, "Religious Dimension of Political Conflict and Violence," *Sociological Theory* 33, no. 1 (2015).

To embody this potential, this paper will draw attention to faith-based diplomacy as a model of religious engagement in peacebuilding develop by Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott.¹⁷ The concept originally comes track two diplomacy conducted between non-state actors that includes Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), individuals and religious leaders to draw upon religious resources in creating peace in warzones. However, it's possible to apply this model to peacebuilding. It's based on the principle of divinity and reconciliation, implemented in impartation of shared moral vision, the work of civil society in engaging people, personal relationship, spiritual conversation, prayer and fasting and rituals for reconciliation.¹⁸ The success of this model requires several condition in society: the existence of religious dimension of conflict, charismatic religious leaders, willingness to conduct civilizational dialogue, and the crucial role of faith-based diplomats.

This paper will identify the consideration of religious aspects in UN peacebuilding effort that includes participation of religious actors, consideration of religious dimension of conflicts and utilization of faith-based peacebuilding UN PBC activities in CAR.

Context: CAR and Religious Persecution

The root of conflictual character in CAR's society can be traced back to French colonial era when society are divided into ethnic groups for administrative purpose.¹⁹ This ethnic division enables French colonial administration to implement divide and rule policy, inculcating division and sentiment within the society. When it's finally independent in 1960, France's divide and rule policy were still present in CAR in order to carry forward France's interest especially in diamond, gold and uranium resources. This is evident by looking at a number of coup sponsored by France such as the coup by Bokassa to overthrow David Dacko who allegedly were bonding ties with China and in turn Bokassa was also ousted as he didn't serve France's interest in CAR.²⁰ CAR's political history is marked by constant violence motivated by political interests of both internal and external actors.

The context of religious violence in CAR is even based on political dynamic between groups. People of different religion in CAR, where the population is 51% Protestant, 29% Catholics, 10% Muslims while 11% local believers or having no religion, have cohabited peacefully prior to recent conflict.²¹ Religion as identity provides an instrument to mobilize mass that in turn can become social capital to create a powerful militia. However, it's important to note that neither militias are representing religion/religious or ethnic groups because both are not using religious values in its movement, oftentimes recruiting new members from neighboring Chad and Sudan.²²

Current development of conflict began in 2012 when president Bozize was overthrown from government by Seleka rebel coalition, considered to be Muslims who come from northern border with Chad, due to disappointment over Bozize's administration. During this coup, many considered that Seleka excessively conduct violence indiscriminately toward Christian population. In return, Christian population formed anti-balaka militia when Djotodia quitted

¹⁷ Cox and Philpott.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Isaacs-Martin.

²⁰ Victor Le Vine, "The Coup in the Central African Republic," *Africa Today* 15, no. 2 (1968).

²¹ Dennis P. Petri, "Central African Republic: Religious Persecution and Political Conflict," Religious Freedom Institute, <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/7/14/central-african-republic-religious-persecution-and-political-conflict>.

²² Isaacs-Martin.



the presidency in 2013 and retaliated by launching attack toward Muslim communities, aiming at wipe away Muslims from CAR.²³ This chain of religion-based violence lasts until now as this paper is written (2017).

RESULTS

UN Peacebuilding in Engaging Religion

UN peacebuilding mission in CAR was established as BONUCA and BINUCA. BONUCA was the first UN Peacebuilding mission deployed to CAR in early 2000 until 2010 to replace peacekeeping mission, known as MINURCA, after presidential election was held 1999. In relation with civil society, BONUCA's mandate, as stated in UNSC Resolution No. S/2001/886, includes working together with civil society 'to advance democratic process in CAR.'²⁴ Subsequently as the the Libreville peace agreement was achieved in 2008, BONUCA was replaced by BINUCA. BINUCA worked as a coordinating body that connects different UN subsidiaries like PBC, Peacebuilding Fund, UN Office of Central Africa and many other bodies working in CAR.²⁵ The dissolution of BINUCA into MINUSCA occurred because the conflict broke out again in 2012 when Bozize was overthrown by Seleka rebels that became the start of religious-based conflict in CAR.

BONUCA and BINUCA have indeed engaged civil society, however, religious institution has not been embraced until the religious persecution occurred in 2013. During Annan's administration, especially, BONUCA activities rarely include civil society in it.²⁶ Civil society might have been included in national reconciliation and multiethnic national security institution. Article (3) National Reconciliation Pact mentions its goal to unite the country culturally and socially, suggesting a possibility of civil society role in peacebuilding.²⁷ There are at least seven possible aspect where BONUCA might have engaged civil society: human rights, political dialogue, national reconciliation, armed force training, security fact-finding, conflict early-warning, and institution building.

Civil society participation gained major attention since Secretary General Ban Ki-moon led UN. In 2007, BONUCA held mediation and dialogue training for leaders in local community among CAR civil society in 8 to 17 March. Furthermore, Panel of the Wise was established, comprising eminent figures in CAR's civil society and civil society organizations to participate in national consultation and political dialogue.²⁸ Both leaders of civil society and civil society organizations are provided with broad range of opportunity to take part in peacebuilding process. When peacebuilding office turned into BINUCA, the embodiment of

²³ Mouhamadou Kane, "Interreligious Violence in the Central African Republic," *African Security Review* 23, no. 3 (2014).

²⁴ Kofi Annan, "Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Situation in the Central African Republic Pursuant to the Statement by the President," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2001).

²⁵ "Political Missions and Offices,"

http://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/subsidiary_organs/special_political_complete.shtml.

²⁶ "Third Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Situation in the Central African Republic and on the Activities of the United Nations Peace-Building Support Office in the Central African Republic (Bonuca)," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2001).

²⁷ Antonio Deinde Fernandez, "Letter Dated 11 March 1998 from the Permanent Representative of the Central African Republic to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 1998).

²⁸ Ban Ki-moon, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Central African Republic and the Activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2007).



religious dimension in peacebuilding is evident in BINUCA's mandate 'to assist in reconciliation efforts, at both the national and local levels, including through inter-religious dialogue,' suggesting faith-based reconciliation to be used in BINUCA's peacebuilding effort.²⁹ The importance of religious aspect of conflict was also recognized, but the implementation is still at its minimum level. It's evident in many BINUCA's activities that exclude religious institution from it.³⁰

A wake up call for UN peacebuilding effort regarding the engagement of religious actors rang when religious-based violence occurred in 2013. All of a sudden, religious dimension became so evident and essential in settling conflict. In solving this problem, BINUCA expand the National Transitional Council to include religious leaders in the discussion.³¹ Looking at past experiences, it's clear that UN peacebuilding effort have not yet engaged religious actors directly and consider it as an extension, instead of becoming an integral part of peacebuilding throughout the process. This pose a challenge to UN peacebuilding effort in the future.

Evaluation of UN Peacebuilding Work in CAR

The transformation within UN Peacebuilding in engaging civil society into its system suggests UN's adaptability in answering the needs of current peacebuilding issues. This ability to adapt is crucial since every situation is always distinct from one another and needs special attention to what characteristic that the conflict have. This transformation can be seen in the increasing engagement of civil society into BONUCA 2007 and then in religious actors into BINUCA in 2013. Furthermore, the fact that the inclusion of religious leaders in CAR peacebuilding immediately after the conflict broke out demonstrates that UN PBC can respond problems in timely manner. The fact that Secretary General should provide annual reports of peacebuilding mission in host country supported the immediacy of UN action in responding emergency.

In conducting peacebuilding, BINUCA and BONUCA have been strong at creating network of international community and national governments to collect resources necessary to conduct peacebuilding in CAR. BINUCA have become the meeting point of international stakeholders like IMF, World Bank, ECCAS, France government, and other UN bodies aspire to contribute to peacebuilding in CAR. This role is crucial because these actors have the necessary resources to carry out peacebuilding effort.

In adjusting peacebuilding into local context, however, both PBC envoys still faced difficulties to contextualise with cultural and especially religious dimension in CAR. UN based its work on Universal Declaration on Human Rights, a standard that recognize universality of human rights. However, in its work in many parts of the world, UN will have to face different cultural context that oftentimes doesn't fit to UN's universal value. This is evident when we're looking at UN's inability to detect the potential use of religion as a means of social mobility of conflict in CAR context. This paper initially assumes that religious institutions are element of civil society, thus once the term 'civil society' mentioned in UNSG Reports of CAR conflict before 2013, it might have included religious actors. However, the specific use of the term 'religious leaders/actors' in UNSG Reports No.

²⁹ Claude Heller and Patricia Espinosa, "Statement by the President of the Security Council," ed. United Nations Security Council (New York 2009).

³⁰ "Coordination Nationale Pour La Reintegration," United Nations, <https://binuca.unmissions.org/coordination-nationale-pour-la-r%C3%A9int%C3%A9gration>.

³¹ Ban Ki-moon, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in the Central African Republic," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2013).



S/2013/261 attracts curiosity whether this term have actually not yet been included when we read the word 'civil society' in previous reports.³² It further triggers a question regarding the position of cultural relativism in UN's work. This ambiguous use of term in reports suggests the need to clarify the meaning of and what is included in civil society in UN reports as well as its meaning in UN PBC efforts.

It's in this situation that UN peacebuilding effort failed to recognize the potential of religious dimension in CAR conflict. CAR is naturally still a violent society.³³ In the real situation, however, it's difficult for UN to persuade local actors especially militias to participate in peace dialogue. These militias are driven by politico-economic interest rather than nationalistic or even religious ones. In a situation where violence and vengeance prevails, it's difficult to trust anyone in the community as everyone might have hidden motives.³⁴ Ethnic and religious identity have been utilized to heat up the conflict. Ethnic have been used as a tool for divide and rule tactic, and religious identity have also been used to conduct violence. However, religious adherence persists in the society and religion provide a source for moral values still widely believed in religious society like CAR.³⁵ Instead of becoming the culprit, religion can become an influential source of values to conduct peacebuilding. This is a potential that can be realised.

This effort have been made by a trio of religious leaders named Interfaith Peace Platform. This trio consists of Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama from the Islamic Council of CAR and Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyameme-Gbangou, the president of Evangelical Alliance. In the wake of religious-based violence, these three charismatic leaders invites people to join in a dialogue gathering Muslims, Catholics and Protestants together. This process purely comes from within civil society and it has promote intra and interreligious cohesion in building the country toward peace.³⁶ Borrowing concept of faith-based diplomacy, this condition applies in CAR where charismatic religious leaders and religious leaders exists in the country and these actors are promoting civilizational dialogue, precondition for further step toward peace. From grassroot level, there's a hope that we can expect from them.

Conclusion

As CAR conflict has a religious dimension, a closer look at this dimension is necessary in conducting peacebuilding. Religious leaders and institutions are element of civil society, and both need to be engaged to create a robust peacebuilding. CAR is no exception to that. In helping CAR, UN PBC have the potential to play a central role in bridging both international community with material resources and religious leaders in domestic level with potential to build a bottom-up peacebuilding process. UN PBC could embrace these religious actors and invite more from various part of the country to spread network of charismatic leaders throughout CAR territory.

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³² Ibid.

³³ Petri.

³⁴ Thierry Vircoulon, "Analysis of Conflict and Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic," (Conciliation Resources, 2015).

³⁵ Paffenholz.

³⁶ Jane Morse, "Religious Leaders Work for Peace in Central African Republic," Mission of the United States, Geneva, Switzerland, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2014/01/17/religious-leaders-work-for-peace-in-central-african-republic/>.



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