

ARMY AND DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AFRICA

By Par Hans De Marie HEUNGOUP*
and Édouard Épiphane YOGO**

ON THE WAY TO MBALMAYO in the central region of Cameroon, an officer of army with whom we shared the seat said:

«What is happening in CAR is terrible. The boss (understood as the president of republic) sent 120 men there forgetting that what is happening there could arise in any country of the sub region even in Cameroon. We share the same problems. Just that here, people do bear the situation enough and stay still. Fortunately for us, we have a civilian as head of state. Elsewhere like in CAR, militaries do not consider that having been to the same schools and having the same rank another soldier should govern or rule the country. At least when it is a civilian who managed well the military corps, it is acceptable. They are ready to leave power within the hands of civilians. Actually, things can go wrong at any time in the country, the presidential guard has already raised the alarm (on January 25, 2013 an officer of the Cameroonian presidential guard shot on air when the presidential procession was going on). Anyway, when things will burst out, we know what we will have to do».¹

Such talks are current in Cameroon. During a field study from March to May 2011, we noticed through our discussion with some officers of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) and the presidential guard (GP) that among those soldiers there was a climate of mistrust and suspicion towards the other unities of the army on one hand, and towards the political sphere on the other hand.² This is not limited to Cameroon. An overview of the literature on the links between



armies and civilian authorities reveals that the latter has often been ambivalent.³ Then what role does the army play within the construction of democracy in central Africa? The following text considers that in central Africa army and democracy share a tetralogic way relationship. While certain states are ruled by militaries (CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, Rwanda)⁴, others are governed by civilians who concluded an hegemonic alliance⁵ with armies to perpetuate their power (Cameroon, Angola, Gabon)⁶ some entertain safe relationships with armies (Sao Tome



et Principe), and lastly some, struggle to protect their territorial integrity (DRC, CAR)⁷. In the meantime, the tendency resides that of armies in the backyards of democracy in central Africa-ECCAS. The present work leans on theories of *transitology*⁸ and of *consolidology*⁹. The interest of this method of analysis is that, it puts forward two sequences of the democratization process in central Africa: the pluralistic sequence of the nineties and the democratic consolidation sequence following the nineties.

CENTRAL AFRICA ARMIES AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS OF THE YEARS 1990

GENERALLY, ARMIES have shortly supported democratic processes in central Africa. This is due

to the fact that many countries of the region were ruled by dictatorships prior to 1990. Since governments granted them enough consideration, be it material or financial, armies stayed still and faithful to them. Worse, some countries have illustrated themselves in *coups d'états* against democratically elected leaders¹⁰. An analysis the historical background of the relation army-democracy in central Africa during the 1990 decade shows two tendencies: the maintenance of the *statut quo* and democratic *coups d'états*.

Army as a restraint to democratic transitions

AMONG THE TEN COUNTRIES making up central Africa, seven have known the takeover of power by force (Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, CAR, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, and Equatorial Guinea). Therefore, within the majority of states in ECCAS, *multisectorial mobilizations*¹¹ did not lead to democratic transitions but rather, to *coups d'états*. In all these cases, army stayed in the backyards of democracy. Be it in CAR or in Chad, the various *coups d'états* were committed by former officers of the regular army like Hissen HABRE and Idriss DEBY in Chad, André KOLINGBA and François BOZZIZE in CAR, and Denis SASSOU NGUESSO in Congo Brazzaville. In some countries like Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, army maintained illegitimate leaders to power¹². Hence, during the contested presidential elections of 1992 in Cameroon, Paul BIYA still held power only after putting the opposition candidate Ni John FRU NDI under house arrest and also after declaring a state of emergency in the most protesting regions (North-west and Littoral) of the country¹³.

The second element is the ethnical orientation of some armies that leant on ethnic considerations to support ethnocratic governments leading to civil wars, tribal wars or genocides in central Africa. Hence, central Africa leaders, in a bid to perpetuate in power, referred to presidential guards for ensuring their personal security. The fundamental question does not reside on the essence of such guards, but rather, deals with



their management. They are managed like an army within the army. They benefit from better formations, rationing and equipments. Also, they acquire better advantages than the regular army. The general report from the above is that of pretorianism of presidential guards, ethnicization and presidentialisation of the regular army¹⁴. Placed under the authority of an Israeli general, after the death of Colonel SIRVAN, it is more equipped than the regular army and appears like an army within the army. For instance, how come within an army of 30.000 soldiers, a presidential guard alone encompasses 3000 men? Taking into account such a ratio, compared with France for instance, one could imagine a presidential guard of about 30.000 men or around 150.000 men in case of the *US Secret service*. How come within an army of 30.000 men, a special force like BIR alone comprises 4.500 men? How come BIR and the presidential guard together comprising 7500 men (one quarter of the Cameroonian army)? It clearly appears that there is an overinvestment towards the security of the president of the republic¹⁵.

The third element concerning armies of central Africa is their tendency to violate human rights. This can be seen in Rwanda or actually in DRC. Beyond the exceptional situation in Rwanda and DRC, the everyday life of armies must be questioned. Their brutality towards populations too must be re-examined. One must think about the exactions of the Cameroonian army during the “*operational commandment*” in 2001. According to some estimation, banditry caused the death of about 1700 civilians while the relation between army and civilian remains deleterious and marked by a feeling of superiority and abuses¹⁶.

Army as a relief for democratic transitions

IF ONE NOTICES that armies stayed at the backyards of democracy in some countries, it is also observable that some of them helped their people

in moving out dictators from power and did organized free and transparent elections.

But in central Africa, none of the various armies did that. In Cameroon, the army is simply an ally of the executive power without taking part to the political scene. In Gabon, it is the same case. Corruption and enrichment of the military staff by Omar BONGO ONDIMBA helped in keeping away the army from the political scene. In Equatorial Guinea the current president took over power by force as above mentioned. In DRC, CAR and Chad, militaries or former militaries are president arrived by force or through *coups d'état* without bringing in the democracy or changing their fellow citizens way lives conditions. In Rwanda, a General arrived by a *coup d'état* holds power. Only Sao Tomé et Principe seems to be better. In that country, none

CORRUPTION AND ENRICHMENT OF THE MILITARY STAFF BY OMAR BONGO ONDIMBA HELPED IN KEEPING AWAY THE ARMY FROM THE POLITICAL SCENE.

the three illnesses characterizing central Africa armies does exist. No president has ever took over power by *coup d'état*, there is no military as president of the republic and there is no hegemonic alliance between the army and the executive power for the latter's perpetuity. Contrarily, in West Africa examples of vanguard armies for democratic processes are numerous. In Nigeria, OLESSEGUN OBASSANJO evicted General Sani ABACHA from power. After this, OBASSANJO retired from power and this released the democratic transitions within that country which today, appears to be a sturdy model of consolidation process. In Mali, Ahmadou AMANI TOURE's *coup d'état* got rid the country of a military dictatorship and instituted a democratic transition. Unfortunately, at the time when those countries started a consolidation process, a new



coup d'état has come to decline the democratic process there: one can talk of a *reflux*.

CENTRAL AFRICA ARMIES AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AFTER THE YEARS 1990

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION HERE is to know how far one can talk of consolidation in central Africa in a context where many states are still under the democratization process, where transitions are eluded or where reflux are numerous? As Patrick QUANTIN states, "through the magic of words, liberalization processes were perceived like democratizations and retrospectively, common sense interpreted them as such"¹⁷. Many countries of central Africa have tried to start a transition process since 1990. Today, some of them clamped the consolidation process. From this viewpoint, one can mention Cameroon, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, and Sao-Tomé et Príncipe. Within that process, armies hesitate between supporting presidential autocracies or enrichment.

The support to presidential autocracies

GOVERNMENTS OF ECCAS lean for almost all of them on the military force to fill their gap of legitimacy. In countries which have started the democratic transitions this can be explained by the

mobilization of armies in bloody manifestations against civilians. As noticed in a country like Cameroon, the mobilization of army to end up with manifestations against rising prices of fuel and primary products led to fire ball cartridge by the army towards the populations on February 2008. This led to a result of about one hundred deaths. In Gabon, the army affirmed its support to the actual president Ali BONGO during the transition process in 2010. As former minister of defense and successor of his father at the presidency of the republic, the latter did not find any difficulty in getting the army's support. In Chad and CAR, it is the same. Within those countries, national armies seem privatized. They tightly linked to the president of republic. This is observed by their ethnicisation. This context therefore facilitates the emergence of rebel groups since bad governance and poverty give way to ethnicity. In Chad for instance, the *Zaghawa* constitutes the majority of the Chadian army's composition. And this is more at the level of the presidential guard. Such an ethnicisation of army is a product of a *neo-patrimonial*¹⁸ and ethnocratic conception of the power's devolution in the tropics; a conception far from that of Max WEBER. The situation remains identical in Rwanda. The ethnicisation of army seems if not more,

proportionate to than in CAR and Chad. In fact, the Rwandan armed forces are in majority made up of Tutsis, the minority ethnic group the country on the numeric basis. This is observed at the level of officers whatever the rank, and at the level of the strategic posts occupied within the army. In DRC, the situation is inextricable. >>>



Since that country has never undergone any democratic transition, there is no need to talk of consolidation process. In central Africa, ethnicisation of armies leads to their privatization, to the proliferation militias and that of rebel groups with ethnic trends. One can inspire on DRC and CAR with M23 and SELEKA.

The enrichment of armies in central Africa

FACING THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATIONS many heads of state in central Africa bypassed liberalization and democratization imperatives of the political life. In consequence, they bent over corruption of the political elite. Hence, the *politics of belly*¹⁹ of Jean-François BAYART, and the paradigm of neo-patrimonialism, better explain the establishment of dubious financial mechanisms as a method of government of many states in central Africa. In a country like Cameroon, after the relative liberalization of political life marked by the October 1992 competitive elections, one notices a decline of the opposition at every consultation (presidential, communal and legislative). Actually, in that country, the political party in power controls all the arenas from the national assembly to the town halls (the Cameroon's People Democratic Movement has about 92% members of parliament and 90% of town councilors and 92% of mayors). However, income does not suffice for a regime to stay. Because if the political leaders of central Africa, as it is the case with Gabon, corrupt leaders of the opposition and of the civil society to avoid social upheavals, the large majority of the population on its part still live under poverty. Then the army was associated to the reproduction system of the political domination. For army to accept such a deal, it had to get its own part of the national cake. This led to an enrichment of army²⁰ notably, officers of high ranks and Generals who left the political arenas for the profit of civilians while vehemently intervening²¹ in favor of civil authorities.

CONCLUSION

NONE OF THE CENTRAL AFRICA COUNTRY is yet a real democracy. When examining them on the basis of Robert DAHL's criteria, one notices that they do not fit²². Up to now none of the serious think-tank in the world considers central Africa countries as democracies (*Mo Ibrahim, Transparency International, Freedom House, National Democratic Institute*). However, there has been transition attempts, frozen transitions or unfinished ones since the the Baule performative speech. But the democratic fluxes were followed by autocratic reflux. In some countries, transition turned into chaos²³. In that context, democratic consolidation seems utopian. If central Africa countries are in the backyards of democracy today it is partly due to their national armies. Hence, rethinking democracy in central Africa requires a redefinition of the role of armies and a re-articulation of the relationships between militaries and civilians²⁴.

NOTES:

* Political Scientist. Researcher at the Paul ANGO ELA Foundation of geopolitics in central Africa (FPAE). His recent book his « *Le BIR, la GP et le pouvoir au Cameroun* », Berlin, Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2011, 152 pages.

** Ph.D Candidate in Political Science at University of Yaoundé II. Researcher at the Center of Research for Political and Strategic Studies (CREPS).

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