



The Interfaith Peace Platform receives one of the Four Freedom Awards (source: ANP)

Making peace reality – the impact of the Interfaith Peace Platform on the peace process in the Central African Republic

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Preface

Can three people change the course of a nation's history? It is said that the ones with most hope will be the ones with most influence. The Central African Republic (CAR), which has been plunged into a bloody conflict that began at the end of 2012, is a country where hope has become a rare asset in the past four years. Not only does the international community occasionally refer to CAR as the "forgotten country", but even its own citizens have struggled to find solutions to end the crisis.

What critics would call idealistic and supporters refer to as an inspiration for other countries, were the tireless efforts of three religious leaders to encourage dialogue and reconciliation at the community level. Together with Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Central African Islamic Council, and Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance in the CAR formed the Interfaith Peace Platform. In a conflict, in which religion was declared the dividing element, their friendship challenged community leaders to promote peace and mutual understanding at village level throughout the country. As their influence grew and their efforts multiplied, their advice was sought both by the political elite on a landmark national reconciliation forum and the international community.

This paper aims to provide an overview of their work and seeks to identify key factors for their success. It also raises the question of whether the application of these factors could be a help for other countries facing similar crises.

1 Overview of national political development since 2014

The Central African Republic was plunged into violence in 2012, when the predominantly Muslim rebel group Séléka began capturing major towns throughout the country and moved towards the capital Bangui in December. Three months later they ousted President Francois Bozizé and the leader of Séléka, Michel Djotodia, seized power. However, he lost control of his own soldiers who burned and looted homes, killed civilians and caused thousands to flee their homes. To defend themselves mainly Animist and Christian rebels formed the anti-Balaka. Even though Djotodia officially dissolved Séléka in September 2013, the fighting between the two armed groups cost the lives of thousands and came to a point when anti-Balaka targeted not only Séléka but the Muslim minority in general. Djotodia stepped down in January 2014.¹ By then a major international lobby was underway in which the religious leaders played a central part. This led to a unanimous resolution of the UN Security Council in April 2014. The whole process is documented in WEA's earlier brochure "The Contribution of the Interfaith Peace Platform to the CAR Reconciliation Process".

The election of Catherine Samba-Panza as Interim President by the National Transitional Council in January 2014 was widely welcomed.² The successful businesswoman, who is also known as a high-profile civil activist and supporter of women's rights,³ is a Christian, but is regarded as being politically neutral.⁴ Even though the general level of insecurity dropped,⁵ looting and violence continued across the country and many trade-hubs remained under control of armed groups.⁶

Regional powers have deprecated Samba-Panza's lack of strategy.⁷ In early April 2014, Chad's president Idriss Déby pulled out his 850 troops that were part of the African Union's peacekeeping mission (MISCA) in CAR,⁸ after the Chadian soldiers were accused of siding

¹ 'Donors Pledge \$2.2bn to Help Central African Republic Recover', *World Watch Monitor*, 2016 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/11/4751837/>> [accessed 3 January 2017].

² Simon P. Alain Handy, 'Catherine Samba-Panza: New Hope for Central African Republic?' <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/catherine-samba-panza-new-hope--201412265942549291.html>> [accessed 15 December 2016].

³ 'Fears for the New Regime', *Africa Confidential*, 55.3 (2014), 4–6.

⁴ 'Central African Republic MPs Elect Catherine Samba-Panza', *BBC News*, 20 January 2014, section Africa <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25811250>> [accessed 14 December 2016].

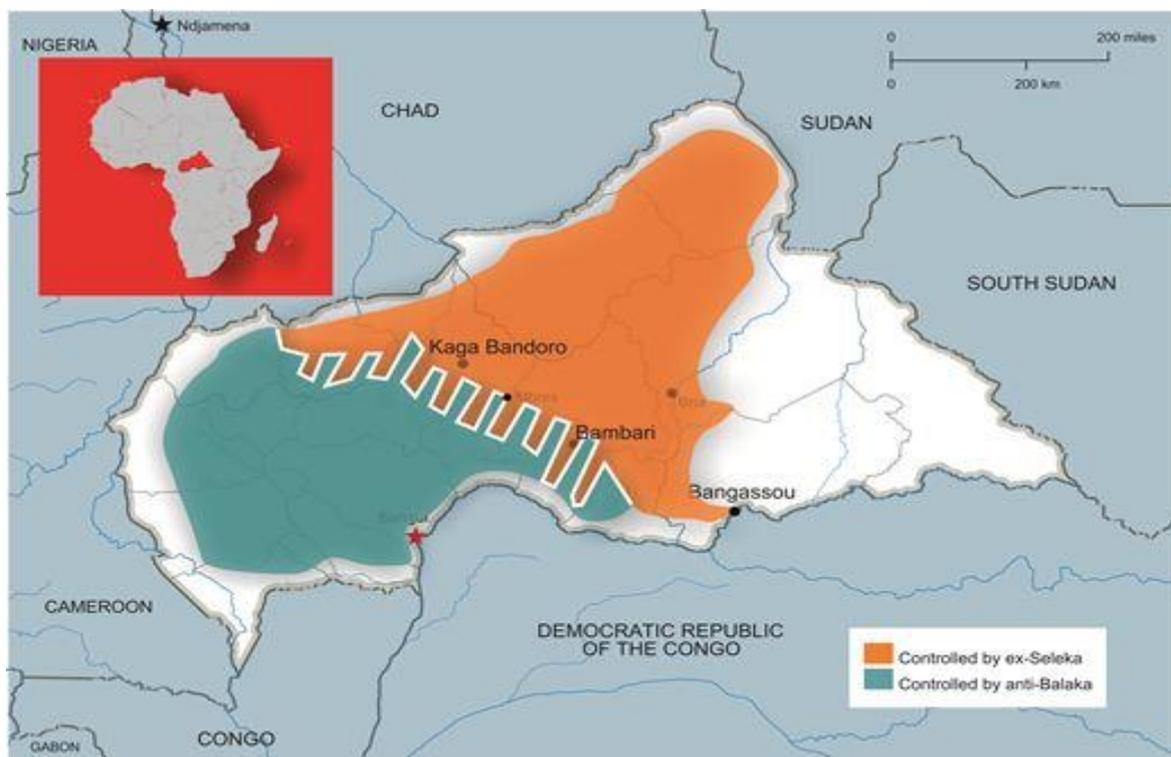
⁵ 'UN Chief Calls for Immediate International Action to Halt "deplorable Atrocities"' <<http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/12/201412204.html>> [accessed 15 December 2016].

⁶ Kasper Agger, 'How to Stabilize the Central African Republic' <<http://time.com/4278352/central-african-republic-president/>> [accessed 15 December 2016].

⁷ 'Regional Leaders Take Charge', *Africa Confidential*, 55.14 (2014), 8.

⁸ 'CAR Peacekeeping Efforts Dealt Blow as Chad Pulls out Troops', *Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/634fda8e-bb43-11e3-b2b7-00144feabdc0>> [accessed 19 December 2016].

with the Séléka.⁹ A spark of hope rose with the UN Security Council’s unanimous decision to form a 12,000-strong peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA) on 10 April 2014 to stabilize the country beginning on 15 September 2014.¹⁰ Many observers questioned whether Samba-Panza’s election actually brought about tangible improvement on the ground. Under pressure from strengthened anti-Balaka groups and with the political tide not bolstering Séléka fighters, the latter withdrew to the north and to Chad.¹¹ As early as February 2014, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, warned that a “de-facto partition of the Central African Republic is a distinct risk”, dividing the country in a mainly Muslim and a predominantly Christian area.¹² Especially within Séléka’s ranks the secession of northern received additional impetus.¹³



Anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka fighting for land and resource control, territorial distribution¹⁴

⁹ John Irish and Madjiasra Nako, ‘Chad to Withdraw Troops from AU Mission in Central African Republic’, *Reuters*, 2014 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-centralafrica-idUSBREA320YT20140403>> [accessed 2 April 2017].

¹⁰ ‘Security Council Establishes UN Peacekeeping Mission in Central African Republic’, *United Nations News Centre*, 2014 <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47541#.WFf6UH0jFzI>> [accessed 19 December 2016].

¹¹ André-Michel Essoungou, ‘Central African Republic: Killings in the Time of Transition’, *Africa Renewal Online*, 2014 <<http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2014/central-african-republic-killings-time-transition>> [accessed 21 December 2016].

¹² ‘UN Warns Partition of Central African Republic “A Distinct Risk”’, *Financial Times*, 2014 <<https://www.ft.com/content/50d350dc-93c7-11e3-a0e1-00144feab7de>> [accessed 20 December 2016].

¹³ ‘Regional Leaders Take Charge’.

¹⁴ ‘CAR: Special Criminal Court Prosecutor Appointed as Killing Continues’, *World Watch Monitor*, 2017 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/02/4927187/>> [accessed 4 March 2017].

On 12 July 2014, Michel Djotodia was reinstated head of Séléka and the group changed its name to “The Popular Front of the Rebirth of Central African Republic”. Their calls for formalization of the partition of CAR were advocated by General Mohamed Moussa Dhaffane who represented the Séléka fighters in the ceasefire negotiations in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. The anti-Balaka were spearheaded by Patrick Edouard Ngaissona. The talks were mediated by Congolese president Denis Sassou Nguesso.¹⁵ On 23 July 2014, the ceasefire agreement was signed.¹⁶ Under intense pressure the Séléka representation waived the claim for partition. Apart from that, the agreement urges armed groups to repatriate foreign mercenaries within their ranks and to refrain from violent attacks.¹⁷ Acting according to another condition of the agreement, President Samba-Panza replaced the Christian Prime Minister Andre Nzapayéké with Mahamat Kamoun who became the first Muslim on the respective post.¹⁸ However, Séléka leaders felt disregarded in the decision making process and rejected Kamoun.¹⁹ The situation on the ground also remained tense as the ceasefire agreement continued to be violated by both sides.²⁰

Amidst this volatile climate, in which around 25% of the Central African Republic’s population fled their homes,²¹ the UN took over the peacekeeping Commando on 15 September 2014.²² The new forces were largely comprised of around 5,000 African Union soldiers and approximately 1,200 additional troops from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Human rights groups called for more troops to be deployed without delay.²³

One of the major tasks of MINUSCA was to secure mining sites to prohibit illicit trade.²⁴ In November 2014 international media voiced concerns that increasing numbers of rebels linked to Séléka and anti-Balaka were the beneficiaries of the export of diamonds.²⁵

¹⁵ Annyssa Bellal, *The War Report: Armed Conflict in 2014* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 137.

¹⁶ ‘Central African Republic: Factions Approve a Cease-Fire Agreement’, *The New York Times*, 23 July 2014 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/world/africa/central-african-republic-factions-approve-a-cease-fire-agreement.html>> [accessed 21 December 2016].

¹⁷ ‘CAR Archbishop Hopeful, Cautious about Cease-Fire’, *World Watch Monitor* <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/08/article_3245469.html> [accessed 21 December 2016].

¹⁸ ‘CAR President Names Country’s First Ever Muslim Prime Minister’, *World Watch Monitor* <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/08/article_3274705.html> [accessed 21 December 2016].

¹⁹ ‘Central African Republic Crisis: Rebels Reject New Muslim PM Kamoun’, *BBC News*, 11 August 2014, section Africa <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28738994>> [accessed 21 December 2016].

²⁰ ‘CAR President Names Country’s First Ever Muslim Prime Minister’.

²¹ ‘Central African Republic Crisis: Minusca New Peace Mission’, *BBC News*, 15 September 2014, section Africa <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29213557>> [accessed 21 December 2016].

²² ‘Two Pastors among 100s Killed as UN Takes over Peacekeeping in CAR’, *World Watch Monitor* <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/09/3382977/>> [accessed 21 December 2016].

²³ ‘Central African Republic Crisis’.

²⁴ Daniel Flynn, ‘Gold, Diamonds Fuelling Conflict in Central African Republic: U.N. Panel’, *Reuters*, 5 November 2014 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-centralafrica-un-panel-idUSKBN0IO21420141105>> [accessed 22 December 2016].

²⁵ ‘Diamonds Fund Rebels’, *Africa Confidential*, 55.23 (2014), 5.

A year earlier a ban was imposed on raw gems from CAR by the Kimberly Process, a group of 81 nations joined together in order to prevent blood diamonds from funding armed conflict. Nevertheless, it was estimated that additional 140,000 carats of diamonds worth \$24 million were smuggled out of CAR.²⁶

On 9 April 2015, the warring parties signed a controversial ceasefire agreement in Nairobi. The Séléka was represented by Michel Djotodia and for the anti-Balaka Joachim Kokate signed the agreement. However, the CAR transitional government did not recognize the agreement, since it was neither present nor otherwise consulted.²⁷

The National Reconciliation Forum, which was held in Bangui (short Bangui Forum) from May 4 to 11, 2015, is however considered by all stakeholders as essential for the prospect of peace in the country.²⁸ The agreement, which was signed by the government and rebel groups after the talks, calls for commitment to disarmament and permits a postponing of the national elections which were scheduled in August 2015.²⁹ The Bangui Forum was originally supposed to be held in October 2014. The delay shows the shaky ground any peace efforts are built on in the crisis-stricken country. Still, the outcomes of the forum were internationally welcomed. Armed groups and the transitional government signed an accord on disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and repatriation of combatants expressing their pledge toward ending the conflict. Furthermore they endorsed an agreement to halt the recruitment of child soldiers and to release all child soldiers currently in their ranks.³⁰ It was also decided that Samba-Panza's term would be extended right up to the elections.³¹ The date of the referendum, however, which was supposed to be held on 4 October 2015, did soon prove to be unrealistic, even though the international community continued to emphasize its utmost importance.³² France in particular insisted on adhering strictly to the timetable set out - wanting to meet its short-term goals and reduce its presence in the country - which became virtually impossible.³³ Electoral registration finished in the capital only on 31 July 2015 while it should have been completed throughout the entire country by 27 July 2015.³⁴

Finally, on 30 December 2015, the citizens of the Central African Republic cast their votes. The first round of the presidential elections had a heavy turnout. There were 1.8 million

²⁶ Daniel Flynn.

²⁷ Bellal, p. 138.

²⁸ 'Reconciliation for Beginners', *Africa Confidential*, 56.11 (2015), 6.

²⁹ Bellal, p. 138.

³⁰ Jeff Rathke, 'Situation in the Central African Republic - Completion of the Bangui Forum', *U.S. Department of State*, 2015 <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/05/242137.htm>> [accessed 28 December 2016].

³¹ 'Reconciliation for Beginners'.

³² 'A Vote Too Far', *Africa Confidential*, 56.18 (2015), 4–5.

³³ 'Risks of a Hasty Exit', *Africa Confidential*, 56.13 (2015), 3–4 (p. 3).

³⁴ 'A Vote Too Far'.

registered voters. One month before, Pope Francis visited the country expressing his hope that the elections would “enable the country to embark serenely on a new chapter of its history.” Many Central Africans were astounded that Pope Francis even went to PK5, a very unstable and risky district of Bangui, in which predominantly Muslim residents are encircled by armed anti-Balaka forces.³⁵

Anicet-Georges Dologuélé and Faustin-Archange Touadéra who succeeded in the first round, went head-to-head in the second round of presidential elections, which was held on 31 January 2016. Both candidates were former prime ministers under the then Presidents Ange-Félix Patassé and François Bozizé respectively. Despite the elections delay and poor organization, violence by Séléka and anti-Balaka was rare and localized, which could be largely attributed to the presence of additional international troops.³⁶ With almost 63 per cent of the votes in the second round of presidential elections Faustin-Archange Touadéra won and became inaugurated president on 30 March 2016. Even though turnout in the second round of the polls dropped, the overall trend clearly showed the wish to turn a new page after a tumultuous three-year transition period.³⁷

Touadéra, a mathematics professor who has lived in Bangui for much of his life, gained more popularity than his rival who worked abroad for various international financial organizations. At the same time, others are skeptical about his ties to ousted president Bozizé. Before the vote, Touadéra announced that he wanted to make disarmament and reconciliation priorities.³⁸ He tried to lead by example when he, being a Christian, was seen celebrating Ramadan in Bangui. And indeed, the tensions appeared to decrease as, for example, traders of both religious communities started talking to each other again in the market. In other aspects, however, only little has changed as the government does not have the capacity to offer basic services to the population or to rebuild the national army. The country is therefore dependent on the UN peacekeeping troops to maintain a certain level of stability.³⁹ Nevertheless, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, identifies the peaceful transfer of

³⁵ Margaux Benn, ‘Central African Republic Elections, Long Delayed, Are Peaceful’, *The New York Times*, 30 December 2015 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/31/world/africa/central-african-republic-elections.html>> [accessed 29 December 2016].

³⁶ ‘Democracy Sans Frontières’, 57.2 (2016), 5–6 (pp. 5–6).

³⁷ Thibaud Lesueur, ‘Central African Republic: Four Priorities for the New President’, *Crisis Group*, 2016 <<http://blog.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-african-republic/2016/05/10/central-african-republic-four-priorities-for-the-new-president/>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

³⁸ ‘Central African Republic: Touadera Wins Election’, *Aljazeera*, 2016 <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/central-african-republic-touadera-wins-election-160221044730048.html>> [accessed 31 December 2016].

³⁹ ‘Central African Republic: Touadera’s First 100 Days in Office’, *Deutsche Welle*, 2016 <<http://www.dw.com/en/central-african-republic-touaderas-first-100-days-in-office/a-19386799>> [accessed 2 January 2017].

power in March 2016 as an “important milestone”, especially since the “new government has no representative of any armed group [which is] breaking with past practices and sending a courageous signal that using violence will not lead to political reward.”⁴⁰

In October 2016, France ended its military mission (Operation Sengaris) in CAR and withdrew its 2,000 troops. According to France’s Defence Minister Jean Yves Le Drian the operation has been a success and could achieve the goals of ending the fighting, and ensuring a smooth transition with the UN peacekeeping mission as well as enabling peaceful elections. Only 350 French soldiers remain in CAR to support MINUSCA since armed groups still control large parts of the country and largely ignore the UN peacekeeping mission. Armed groups and resource raiders still control much of CAR’s territory and violence against civilians has not yet stopped. Security in the north of the country is particularly unstable. An example is the attack on a camp for internally displaced people in Kaga-Bandoro, around 300 km from Bangui on 12 October 2016.⁴¹

The crisis has left the population in dire need of humanitarian assistance as around two million people do not have enough food, 65% lack access to clean drinking water, and 800,000 have had to leave their homes to seek refuge in other parts of CAR or neighboring countries. The last donor conference that was attended by 80 international donors in Brussels on 17 November 2016, pledges of US\$ 2.2 billion were made to support the rebuilding of the country.



*Arrival of a World Food Programme cargo plane in Bangui in front of a camp for internally displaced persons*⁴²

⁴⁰ Geneva Center, ‘High Commissioner Calls Peaceful Transition in CAR Milestone, Sending a Courageous Signal, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=binvYV3-lug>> [accessed 2 April 2017].

⁴¹ ‘Central African Republic: Deadly Raid on Displaced People, Human Rights Watch’, *Human Rights Watch*, 2016 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/01/central-african-republic-deadly-raid-displaced-people>> [accessed 2 April 2017].

⁴² André-Michel Essoungou.

Makhtar Diop, the World Bank's Vice President for Africa remarks however, "Given the country's extensive recovery needs, this unprecedented effort is an investment for the future. With political will and strong coordination with other partners, the CAR can become a post-conflict reconstruction success story." The World Bank promised to support the country's development with US\$ 500 million in the next three years.⁴³

2 Contribution of the Interfaith Peace Platform to the peace process

2.1 Continuing joint efforts

In September 2013, when Djotodia officially dissolved Séléka, the three clerics visited numerous villages encouraging Muslim and Christian residents to demonstrate through their friendship that the root cause of the conflict is not religious. Their campaigns included the establishment of community peace committees in Bangui and various prefectures outside of the capital to encourage dialogue in the villages as well as calls on the national radio to restrain violence. The peace committees record incidences of violence to identify the causes and trends of micro-level conflict.⁴⁴

The efforts of the Interfaith Peace Platform also led to the UN Security Council's decision to deploy the 12,000-strong peacekeeping force in September 2014. The stabilization of the fragile security situation was and is direly needed. MINUSCA's influence, however, became disreputable when allegations of child abuse by UN and French was leaked and brought to public attention in 2015. UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon referred to sexual abuse and exploitation by UN troops as "a cancer in our system". The head of MINUSCA was fired as a consequence of insufficient response to the misconduct allegations. Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou mentioned that some Central Africans now distrusted MINUSCA, questioning the peacekeepers' motives for being in the country. He warned that the peacekeepers need to obey their UN mandate as well as operate in discipline. He clarified that "[a]longside the change at the top of Minusca, we must apply all the [UN] resolutions so that the belligerents understand that the UN force did not come for a walk in the park, but with a mission."⁴⁵

⁴³ 'Donors Pledge \$2.2bn to Help Central African Republic Recover'.

⁴⁴ Rebekka Fiedler, *The Contribution of the Interfaith Platform to the Reconciliation Process in the Central African Republic* (Geneva: Geneva Liaison Office of the Word Evangelical Alliance, 2014), pp. 13–14.

⁴⁵ Clár Ní Chonghaile, 'Central African Republic Still a Powder Keg, Warn Clerics Awarded Peace Prize', *The Guardian*, 21 August 2015, section Global development <<https://www.theguardian.com/global->

Even though the installment of the peacekeeping operation was one of the Interfaith Peace Platform's main goals, the three religious leaders did not quit their activities after the UN Security Council agreed on a deployment of UN troops. Rather, they intensified their efforts to enable reconciliation, restore social cohesion and dissociate religion from criminal acts.

As a result of the unspeakable atrocities many citizens had to witness, fear and suspicion led to a deep sense of distrust within the communities. The three clerics continued to hold workshops and seminars to lay bare the hidden reasons for the conflict - the almost complete absence of the state institutions in the hinterlands and the struggle for political influence. They aimed to raise consciousness in order to prevent the villagers from being manipulated and scapegoated.⁴⁶ When the country was on the brink of division in early 2015 the religious leaders launched an "inter-religious campaign for social cohesion." Apart from that, they organized a week of prayer and cultural dialogue as a conclusion of two month of sensitization the discussed topics. In Bangui stadium, they held a big religious ceremony attended by believers of various confessions training almost 400 religious leaders on promoting reconciliation in their communities. In co-operation with various organizations the Interfaith Peace Platform trained more than 1,300 community and religious leaders as ambassadors of social cohesion throughout CAR.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Interfaith Peace Platform did not only initiate sports, debates, and cultural events, but also visits to displaced people camps. They also promote "peace schools", where children belonging to different religions can attend, as well as mixed healthcare centers that treat everyone regardless of their religious or ethnic background.⁴⁸

"Our role as leaders is to be peace brokers, to create space for dialogue among communities. That's the objective of the forum where Muslims, Protestants and Catholics are seated around a table - to demonstrate that it is possible to live together", explains Nzapalainga regarding the main objective of organizing the events.

Even though Archbishop Nzapalainga, Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama have proved to be reliable partners in identifying lasting peacebuilding methods, at times they encountered a lack of trust in managing funds. Most of the means dedicated to capacity building through the platform is used for monitoring their work and often

development/2015/aug/21/central-african-republic-powder-keg-sergio-vieira-de-mello-prize-interfaith-peace-platform> [accessed 14 January 2017].

⁴⁶ Nestor Désiré Nongo Aziagbia Sma, *The Interfaith Peace Platform and the Role of Caritas in Humanitarian Assistance and Solidarity in Central African Republic* (Bossangoa: Diocese de Bossangoa, 2015).

⁴⁷ 'Secure, Empowered, Connected Communities', *Catholic Relief Services*, 2015 <<http://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/program-areas/justice-and-peacebuilding/secure-empowered-connected-communities>> [accessed 19 February 2017].

⁴⁸ Inés San Martín, 'Now a Cardinal, This African Prelate Was Already A "saint"', *Crux*, 2016 <<https://cruxnow.com/cardinals/2016/10/19/now-cardinal-african-prelate-already-saint/>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

not spent with proper consultation with the three clerics. This might have been the case with financial support provided by the European Union, Germany and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to the International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID).⁴⁹ Part of the reason for this was the donors' strong fixation on their own agendas.

Apart from intensified domestic efforts, the Interfaith Peace Platform decided to go to Rwanda to study the peace process of the country ravaged by the 1984 genocide. The three clerics' stay in Rwanda on 7 and 8 August 2015 was marked by a visit to the genocide memorial in Gisozi as well as the burial of almost 280,000 victims. The archbishop said that there are similarities between the Rwandan conflict and the crisis in CAR. He also warned, "In Rwanda, ethnicity has been manipulated. In my home country, we took religion as the 'entry window' to oppose people. If we are not paying attention, one day, a group will stand up and decide [to] wipe away another."⁵⁰

The impact of the Interfaith Peace Platform as "opinion-leaders" cannot be denied.⁵¹ The three clerics describe their role as a "sentinel – seeing the danger coming so the people were alerted. Men and women have said that us speaking out means that even if the chaos happened, the worst was avoided."⁵² However, their commitment comes at a high personal cost. In September 2015, Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou barely escaped an assassination attempt. An angry mob of Muslim youths, who sought to revenge the killing of a Muslim taxi driver, was looking for Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou in his house which is located at the Elim Church compound in Bangui. The pastor, however, left a few minutes before they arrived at the compound. When the attackers learned he was not present, they threatened his older son, looted all the valuables in the house and set it on fire. The mob moved on to other houses in the compound where they shot randomly and killed two people. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou's family was not physically harmed and found shelter in another safe place.⁵³ When his ailing daughter died in January in 2014, he could not be with her as he was travelling in Europe at the time. Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou faces difficult questions. "It seemed like criminal negligence to be away", he said. "But today, my family and all of the other Central Africans still living understand", he continued. When Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou was arrested as a punishment

⁴⁹ Nestor Désiré Nongo Aziagbia Sma.

⁵⁰ 'CAR President Names Country's First Ever Muslim Prime Minister'.

⁵¹ Andreas Mehler, 'Central Africa', in *Africa Yearbook Volume 12: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in 2015*, ed. by Jon Abbink and others (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 185–256 (p. 205).

⁵² 'Religious Leaders CAR Lauded with Four Freedoms Award', *Cordaid*, 2016 <<https://www.cordaid.org/en/news/religious-leaders-car-lauded-four-freedoms-award/?emailaddress>> [accessed 15 January 2017].

⁵³ Illia Djadi, 'Top Pastor Escapes Death amidst Renewed Violence in CAR', *World Watch Monitor*, 2015 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/09/4035895/>> [accessed 16 January 2017].

for comments he made concerning the government in a sermon in August 2013, Archbishop Nzapalainga showed solidarity by also choosing to be held in detention with the pastor. He asked for a sleeping mat and emphasized that he was determined to keep Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou company even if it meant being in prison for months. But Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou was soon released after the Minister of Interior advocated for him. Not only he but also the other members of the Interfaith Peace Platform had to overcome many hardships which, however, brought them together even closer. Archbishop Nzapalainga protected Imam Oumar Kobine Layama's life and his family when they were forced to leave their home in December 2013 after threats by anti-Balaka rebels. He was given refuge at the Parish St. Paul and lived with his family for more than five month with the Catholic cleric.⁵⁴

These dramatic events provide examples of deep friendship beyond religious lines and lived out sacrificially. The power of their message of reconciliation and peace becomes tangible for other Central Africans through actions such as these. Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou concludes, "All of us rejoice about the fact that God has inspired all of us to unite to confront these difficulties. And now we see the fruits. Peace is coming back. Central Africans live in unity. Muslims and Christians are rstarting to live together with non-Muslims and non-Christians. [...] [In] the midst of adversity we can be brave warriors for peace. Again, we rejoice that we stood up and that our hardships were not in vain."⁵⁵

2.2 Bangui Forum

The Brookings Institution referred to it as "an important step toward fostering national cohesion"⁵⁶ and Africa Confidential called it "essential if the country is to have a future."⁵⁷ The Bangui Forum in April 2015 brought together 700 politicians, armed groups and representatives from civil society. A major outcome of the forum was the agreement signed by ten factions of Séléka and anti-Balaka, that all combatants put down their arms. According to the agreement, combatants who cannot be charged with committing war crimes should be employed in state

⁵⁴ Illia Djadi, 'Peace Prize Awarded to Central African Republic Top Clerics', *World Watch Monitor*, 2014 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/11/3497508/>> [accessed 17 January 2017].

⁵⁵ Pax Press Agency, *Sergio Vieira de Mello Award 2015 to Interfaith Peace Platform of Central African Republic*, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r1fTLzBhiM>> [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁵⁶ Amy Copley and Amadou Sy, 'Five Takeaways from the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation in the Central African Republic', *Brookings Institution*, 2015 <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2015/05/15/five-takeaways-from-the-bangui-forum-for-national-reconciliation-in-the-central-african-republic/>> [accessed 19 January 2017].

⁵⁷ 'Reconciliation for Beginners'.

security institutions. Moreover, the elections were postponed and the mandate of the transitional government was extended. Apart from that, the armed groups committed to release 6,000 to 10,000 child soldiers within their ranks. On 14 May 2015, the first step was taken when more than 300 children were released in Bambari.

Efforts were also made to revive CAR's economic development that had suffered greatly from the continuous instability. The mining and agriculture sectors were highlighted in particular. Amongst other requests, it was proposed to lift the sanctions on diamonds under the Kimberly Process and to distribute tools, seeds and other agricultural goods.

The role of religious leaders was highlighted when the forum's participants discussed the establishment of mechanisms of justice such as a truth and reconciliation commission as well as local peace committees. The influence of community and religious leaders in the villages remains strong as the state's resources and capacities to reach out to them remains comparatively low.⁵⁸

Even though the Bangui Forum received much attention for its tangible outcomes, its greatest strength was the composition of its participants. The UN Security Council recommended the grassroots-manner in which the discussions were conducted as well as focusing on the inclusion of women. In comparison to national peace committees in the past – five since 1980 – the



Rev. Nicolas Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, and Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga at the Bangui Forum (Photo: World Watch Monitor)

Bangui Forum did not only summon political elites but provided a platform to the concerns of the Central African citizens as well.⁵⁹ Imam Layama Kobine emphasized that in the previous forums consultations on grassroots level never took place. In that sense, the victims of the conflict of the warring political elites did not have the chance to express their view before. “We got together to speak with one voice saying that if the population was not consulted, the religious platform would withdraw from the forum“,⁶⁰ said the imam explaining their key role in speaking up on behalf of the Central African citizens. Through an inclusive

preparatory process, it was possible to allow the population to take ownership of the forum.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Amy Copley and Amadou Sy.

⁵⁹ ‘Security Council Welcomes Central African Republic National Forum, Urges Implementation of Peace Pact’, *UN News Centre*, 2015 <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50878#.WIAGtZLpZL8>> [accessed 19 January 2017].

⁶⁰ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, *Interview*, 2016.

⁶¹ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama.

The religious platform was at the center of this preparatory process. Rev. Nicolas Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou was chosen to be vice-chair of the preparatory committee acting as the religious representative. He described his mandate as crucial to ensure that “the notions of truth, dialogue, and reconciliation would be the center of the debates to avoid political distortion or manipulation.”⁶² The Interfaith Peace Platform’s role during the forum shows how their influence has grown within their own nation. Their advice and participation was an integral part of the political component of the peace process.

2.3 Papal visit

Pope Francis’ visit to CAR was in many aspects historical. For the first time, he went to a war zone. His trip to the country had therefore been in doubt almost up to the last minute before departure. According to a Vatican newspaper he told the pilot of his plane, “I want to go to Central Africa and if you’re not able to take me, give me a parachute.” The riskiest part of his time in CAR was his visit to the mosque in Bangui’s PK5 area, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood surrounded by Christian militia. He explained that his visit to CAR would have been incomplete without meeting the Muslim community as well. On his way to the mosque, thousands stood at the roadsides cheering for him.⁶³ In his speech in front of the Cathedral of Bangui he called the city “the spiritual capital of the world” emphasizing the significance of events happening in the country that had been dubbed “forgotten”.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ His message of reconciliation was simple but powerful, calling on all conflicting factions to put down their weapons and instead arm themselves with “justice, love, mercy, and authentic peace.”⁶⁶ He encouraged the country’s youth to stay in the country rather than to flee to Europe and to resist hatred with love.⁶⁷ Pope Francis took the first hours of his visit to CAR on 29 November 2016 to encourage the around 4,000 displaced people who found shelter in Bangui’s Saint Sauveur

⁶² Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou, *Interview*, 2016.

⁶³ Harriet Sherwood and Margaux Benn, ‘Pope Francis Visits Besieged Mosque in Central African Republic’, *The Guardian*, 30 November 2015, section World news <<https://www.the-guardian.com/world/2015/nov/30/pope-francis-mosque-central-african-republic>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

⁶⁴ Rome Reports, *Pope Opens the Jubilee of Mercy in the CAR: ‘Bangui Is the Spiritual Capital of the World’*, 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckNj3OwaJkg>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

⁶⁵ Paula Dear and Samuel Hauenstein Swan, ‘Displaced and Forgotten in Central African Republic’, *Aljazeera*, 2016 <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/07/displaced-forgotten-central-african-republic-160717113644108.html>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

⁶⁶ Harriet Sherwood and Margaux Benn.

⁶⁷ Rome Reports, *Pope to Central African Republic Youths: Love Your Enemies and You Will Be Victorious*, 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iBhc0TLUVA&t=15s>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

church.⁶⁸ He preached forgiveness, emphasizing that “regardless of ethnicity, social status, we are all brothers.”⁶⁹

As early as March 2014 the Interfaith Peace Platform was invited to meet with Pope Francis in the Vatican. The pope encouraged them to remain united and promised them to bring up the Central African conflict in his audience of U.S. President Barack Obama. The pontiff confirmed his commitment and friendship with his visit in CAR, declaring himself a “pilgrim of peace and an apostle of hope” for the country.⁷⁰ During his two-day stay in CAR he met with three religious leaders of the country to honor their relentless efforts, encourage them, and strengthen his friendship with them.⁷¹ He comforted Rev. Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou by expressing his “closeness and solidarity” with him as his family was threatened and his home destroyed.⁷² The pope reinforced the importance of unity beyond religious lines and spoke at a gathering of the Evangelical churches in CAR that came together at the Evangelical School of Theology (in French FATEB) in Bangui. He pleaded for a deeper sense of community explaining what he calls the “ecumenism of blood”, meaning that “God makes no distinctions between those who suffer. [...] All our communities suffer indiscriminately as a result of injustice and the blind hatred unleashed by the devil.”⁷³ Pope Francis’ message did not only resonate with the leader of the Evangelical Alliance in CAR,⁷⁴ but the leader of the Central African Islamic Council also appreciated the visit of the pontiff. Imam Oumar Layama Kobine described the pope’s encouragement as the most valuable words in his life, when he greeted him simply saying “Imam, take heart. Peace will come.”⁷⁵

The pope’s appreciation for the peacebuilding efforts of the “three saints of Bangui”⁷⁶ finds expression in his decision on 9 October 2016 to elevate Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga to

⁶⁸ Philip Pullella and Joe Bavier, ‘Under Tightest Security, Pope Urges Peace in Central Africa’, *Reuters*, 29 November 2015 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-africa-idUSKBN0TI06R20151129>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

⁶⁹ Illia Djadi, ‘CAR: Pope Francis Calls for Unity between Catholics and Protestants’, *World Watch Monitor*, 2015 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/12/4139539/>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷⁰ Harriet Sherwood, ‘Pope Francis Promises to Be “Apostle of Hope” on Central African Republic Visit’, *The Guardian*, 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/29/pope-francis-arrives-central-african-republic-historic-war-zone-visit>> [accessed 22 January 2017].

⁷¹ Illia Djadi, ‘Pope in Africa Says Conflict “feeds on Fear, Mistrust and Despair”’, *World Watch Monitor*, 2015 <<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/11/4125858/>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷² Illia Djadi, ‘CAR’.

⁷³ ‘What Pope Francis Told the Central African Republic’s Evangelical Seminary’, *Christianity Today*, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/december/pope-francis-central-african-republic-evangelical-seminary.html>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷⁴ ‘What Pope Francis Told the Central African Republic’s Evangelical Seminary’.

⁷⁵ Roosevelt Foundation, ‘Drie Geestelijken CAR, Laureaat Freedom of Worship Four Freedoms Awards 2016’, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eB5FqobKN8>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷⁶ Rémy Ourdan, ‘Centrafrique: Les trois saints de Bangui’, *Le Monde*, 27 December 2013 <http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/12/27/centrafrique-les-trois-saints-de-bangui_4340625_3212.html> [accessed 5 January 2017].

the rank of cardinal.⁷⁷ Being 49 years old, Nzapalainga will be one of the youngest of the College of Cardinals. The nomination of the Central African archbishop is an unprecedented event in the country whose national language Sango did not even have a word for “cardinal”.⁷⁸ Imam Oumar Layama Kobine praised the pope’s decision saying that Dieudonné Nzapalainga’s appointment honored the whole country and boosted the work of the Interfaith Peace Platform.⁷⁹ The continuing upholding of the friendship between the Central African clerics and the pontiff was key to enabling what was called the pope’s “landmark visit” that tangibly soothed tensions between the warring groups.^{80 81}

3 International implications

The extraordinary peacebuilding efforts of the “three saints of Bangui” did not go unnoticed - on the contrary; it has received increasing international attention over the past two years.⁸²

On 13 November 2014 in Washington DC, the Search For Common Grounds (SFCG) awarded them an international NGO for pursuing conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga laid out their commitment to building peace in his acceptance speech declaring, “For many years, Muslims and Christians lived in harmony and in the respect of each other’s beliefs. When politicians wanted to use the religion fibres to divide the people, whether to maintain power or to conquer it, we stood up as if we are a single man to say ‘no’ to this war and ‘yes’ to peace.”

Sergio Vieira de Mello, UN Secretary General representative, was killed in the bombing of the UN compound in Bagdad on 19 August 2003. In his memory, his wife founded the Sergio de Mello Foundation that every two years awards an individual, a group or organization for unique efforts in promoting reconciliation and building peace in conflict areas. “The Interfaith Peace Platform serves as a model much needed in other countries in conflict and shows that prevention

⁷⁷ Inés San Martín.

⁷⁸ ‘First Cardinal from the Central African Republic: “We Don’t Even Have a Word for “Cardinal”’, *Rome Reports*, 2016 <<http://www.romereports.com/2016/11/26/first-cardinal-from-the-central-african-republic-we-don-t-even-have-a-word-for-cardinal->> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷⁹ Inés San Martín.

⁸⁰ ‘Central African Republic Swears in New President’, *Aljazeera*, 2016 <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/central-african-republic-swears-president-160330153430559.html>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁸¹ Clár Ní Chonghaile, “The Central African Republic Must Be Built from Scratch”, *The Guardian*, 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/12/central-african-republic-must-be-built-from-scratch-francois-hollande-country-divided>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁸² Rémy Ourdan.

and dialogue are the key for solving refugee and displacement crises”,⁸³ said Laurent Vieira de Mello, president of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation. The religious leaders were accordingly awarded on 19 August 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland. In an interview before the ceremony Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyamémé-Gbangou comments on receiving the award, “Now we see the fruits. Peace is coming back. Muslims and Christians are starting to live together with non-Muslim and non-Christian communities. Today our efforts are recognized by the award and confirm that in the midst of adversities we can be brave warriors for peace. So again we rejoice that we stood up and that our hardships were not in vain”.⁸⁴

On 21 April 2016, the three religious leaders also were given one of the Four Freedom Awards by the Roosevelt Foundation in Middelburg, The Netherlands. The award reminds of the four freedoms stipulated by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyamémé-Gbangou, and Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga were honored with the Freedom of Worship Award.⁸⁵ Among the other laureates was also German Chancellor Angela Merkel who received the International Four Freedoms Award.⁸⁶ “Our differences are our hidden wealth. That invites us to look beyond communitarianism, to have a bigger vision.”⁸⁷ The archbishop’s words reminded the audience of the treasure of friendship looking beyond discrepancies. The imam remarked that the Interfaith Peace Platform sees the award as an encouragement and at the same time as an opportunity to share their experience with other religious leaders in the world to work for freedom of worship where they are.⁸⁸

4 Suggested exemplary conclusions

How is the work of the Interfaith Peace Platform fitting into the bigger picture of promoting peace on a national level and could their efforts even give an impulse in other countries that suffer from a similar crisis? Following Thomas Hobbes and other scholars from the emergence period of nation states, a government’s primary task is to ensure their citizens’ security. When

⁸³ Anne-Willem Bijleveld and Christiane Berthiaume, ‘Press Release: Sergio Vieira de Mello Award 2015 Goes to CAR Interfaith Peace Platform’, *Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation*, 2015.

⁸⁴ Pax Press Agency.

⁸⁵ ‘Religious Leaders CAR Lauded with Four Freedoms Award’, *Cordaid*, 2016 <<https://www.cordaid.org/en/news/religious-leaders-car-lauded-four-freedoms-award/>> [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁸⁶ ‘Laureates since 1982 - Four Freedoms Awards’, *Roosevelt Four Freedoms* <<http://www.fourfreedoms.nl/en/laureates.htm>> [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁸⁷ RT Deutsch, *Live: Bundeskanzlerin Merkel Wird Mit Dem „Four Freedoms Award“ Ausgezeichnet*, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v85mPAWf3-A>> [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁸⁸ RT Deutsch.

the state fails to fulfil this obligation and violence increases to a point that the population cannot rely on its protection anymore, each community within a nation sees itself confronted with the necessity of self-defense.⁸⁹ In CAR, where state authority was almost non-existent beyond the capital Bangui,⁹⁰ the social fabric of the nation tore apart along ethno-religious lines.

North, Wallis and Weingast's book *Violence and Social Orders* would describe CAR as a country to be a natural state. Natural states deal with the occurrence of violence by forming dominant coalitions which possess special privileges. The access to these privileges is kept limited however. By doing so, the elites provide the incentives to cooperate rather than fight each other. Without well-organized government, some individuals in the natural state specialize in violence, while all individuals insist on their rights by force of weapons. All nonmilitary elites manage access to key functions like religion, justice, production, education or trade. Since their rents and their positions depend on the maintenance of the coalition, all elites support this cause in order to avoid violence, disorder, and the loss of rents. Therefore, peace in natural states depends on the balance of interests within the rent-seeking process. Natural states are stable, yet not static. External blows as well as internal changes can destabilize the dominant coalition. Under former President Bozizé nepotism reached worrying levels: more than 20 members of parliament belonged to his direct family, including his wife, his sons and cousins.⁹¹ If the influence of military elites grows and they demand a larger share of privileges the upsurge of violence - including civil wars - becomes likely. In CAR, long before the crisis began, resentment grew amongst the people living in the hinterlands who felt that President Bozizé would only govern in favor of the citizens in the capital and the Christian majority.

The book *Violence and Social Orders* contrasts natural states to open access societies which enable every citizen to form organizations for an overall increase of rents. This implies a move toward impersonal elite arrangements. The transition of a natural state to an open access society is possible when institutional arrangements develop and the elite decides that it is in their interest to extend impersonal open elite access. North, Wallis and Weingast identify three conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to create an open access society: rule of law for the elites, lasting public and private elite organizations (including the state itself), and consolidated

⁸⁹ Chaim Kaufmann, 'Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars', *International Security*, 20.4 (1996), 136–75 (p. 147).

⁹⁰ 'United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic: MINUSCA Background', *United Nations* <<http://www.un.org/en/peace-keeping/missions/mi-nusca/background.shtml>> [accessed 25 January 2017].

⁹¹ Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: Peacebuilding without Peace', 2011 <<http://africanarguments.org/2011/08/26/central-african-republic-peacebuilding-without-peace/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

control of the military.⁹² These elements are summed up in what in previous centuries came to be known as a social contract. To connect the two theoretical concepts, one could say that for a country to move from a natural state to an open access society the creation of such a contract is crucial.

The most prominent representatives of the social contract theory are Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Even though their ideas vary significantly, all three have one basic assumption in common: individuals must lay down some of their personal rights and submit to a higher authority in order to benefit from greater freedom and protection. Experiencing the turmoil of war personally, Hobbes had a rather pessimistic perception of human nature. Still, he believed that peace was possible if unconstrained egoistic competition could be brought to a halt by an all-powerful state. The main motive for creating a social contract is in his view a person's security that can only be ensured by submitting individual rights to the sovereign who in return will protect the lives of its citizens. For Locke, a social contract was not only needed for mere protection of a person's life, but also for the forming of standards applied by a common judge. His main task is the settling of disputes in a way that ensures the preservation of individual property rights as well as the rights of others. Since Hobbes and Locke are mainly concerned with using social contract theory as a justification for certain political values (security and private property), they were less interested in explaining how collective intentions are formed out of individual interests. They suggest a combination of rationality and fear of authority to be sufficient. Rousseau, however, argues that consensus cannot only be built on rational calculation, but is formed through complex social processes and involves both heart and mind. According to his definition the general will is more than the sum of individual wills. Consensus needs to be built - and this is not only an intellectual task but a question of social, political, and organizational transformation.⁹³ CAR's Interfaith Peace Platform has been working toward this societal transformation that is a prerequisite for the creation of a social contract.

Like some other states in Africa the Central African Republic is multiethnic and plunged into a civil war. As it stands after four years from the beginning of the conflict, CAR is on its way to regaining political and economic stability. Of course, it stands to reason to what degree it is possible to compare states. Nevertheless, it is worth examining reasons for the differently evolving crisis.

⁹² Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 18–26.

⁹³ Philip H. Jos, 'Social Contract Theory: Implications for Professional Ethics', *American Review of Public Administration*, 36.2 (2006), 139–55 (pp. 139–51).

This paper suggests, that national peacebuilding efforts between the conflicting parties in CAR were the key factor in countering turmoil. Even though some local peacebuilding efforts have been made in for instance South Sudan, they would not reach the same impact as in its neighboring country.⁹⁴ In CAR, transformation was first and foremost expressed in strengthening social cohesion as the prerequisite for any other societal, political, and economic change. The contribution of the Interfaith Peace Platform in this process has been remarkable and received not only national, but also international recognition. When examining their work, several key factors for their success become apparent:

1. Addressing the root causes

The Interfaith Peace Platform never ceased to emphasize that the nature of the conflict is not religious and that the crisis cannot be ended unless its actual root causes are addressed.⁹⁵ When a society is shattered along ethnic or religious lines, it is up to the leaders to point out misperceptions and redefine the actual problem. Poor governance, impunity, and corruption are widely seen as the root causes for CAR's instability.⁹⁶ The three religious leaders continue to highlight that "suspicion and fear as well as a deep-seated desire for truth and justice" grew when the national government was unable to provide these. This environment was used by "militia and political leaders with an interest in perpetuating instability to use religion as a tool for further dividing and manipulating the Central African People."⁹⁷

2. Grassroots-approach and national ownership

In the history of international aid and peacekeeping efforts it has become all too obvious: the influence of foreign support in establishing security and promoting economic and political development is limited. One of the main reasons for the effectiveness of the work of the Interfaith Peace Platform is its concept of national ownership. This became especially evident when the organization of the Bangui Forum was possible in 2015. The forum's success was largely attributed to its inclusive approach. While many of CAR's national peace forums in the past remained fruitless, the gathering in 2015 was internationally praised for being held in a

⁹⁴ 'Peacebuilding from Below: The Role of Local Civil Society in South Sudan', *Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative*, 2016 <<http://www.inclusivepeace.org/content/peacebuilding-below-role-local-civil-society-south-sudan>> [accessed 6 March 2017].

⁹⁵ Rebekka Fiedler.

⁹⁶ Alexis Arieff and Tomas F. Husted, *The Central African Republic: Background and U.S. Policy* (Congressional Research Service, 2016), p. 7.

⁹⁷ University of Oxford, *Religious Leaders Unite to Disarm Hearts and Minds*, Forced Migration Review: Forced Migration Review <<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/fmr-48-religious-leaders-unite-disarm-hearts-and-minds>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

grassroots-manner. The Interfaith Peace Platform at that point had already been working since December 2012 and successfully enforced the consultation of the population in the preparatory process and functioned as its mouthpiece during the forum.

3. Multiplication

In order to enable profound societal change, renewed thinking has to gain a grip on large parts of the population. The three religious leaders therefore aimed their efforts particularly at training communities and religious leaders in numerous villages throughout the country. This was possible as they gained trust after years of serving as heads of their respective religious community. But even though they could have tried to only operate from the authority on the basis of their position, they chose to go beyond exhortatory speeches and also exerted themselves by travelling unsafe regions of the country to personally address the communities. It was their example of showing deep friendship beyond religious lines that especially gave credibility to their message of reconciliation.

4. Value-oriented work

Even though the three clerics do not share the same religion, they agree on similar core values. When asked for advice for countries in similar situations like CAR, Imam Oumar Layama Kobine emphasizes the importance of order, love, fraternity and the protection of human rights to build an environment for people to live in peace.⁹⁸ To establish lasting peace in a region in turmoil it is necessary for the warring parties to agree on certain values that they want to abide by. The example of the Interfaith Peace Platform provides an example of how religion can serve as a tool to identify those values. The idea of each person's responsibility for their own acts before God is crucial for a deep commitment to shared principles. The three religious leaders summarize this as follows: "Religion can serve as a powerful tool for transforming hearts and minds and uniting people in a common cause of peaceful reconciliation. We have launched a national campaign for social cohesion bringing together thousands of Muslims and Christians in demonstrations of solidarity, we have trained hundreds of religious leaders, civil society and government official and armed groups' representatives to become ambassadors of peaceful coexistence. Many of those leaders have subsequently led their constituent communities to the same process. In a country where churches and mosques have more legitimacy than the national

⁹⁸ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama.

government and reach deep into the hearts of people, where government resources are limited, religious institutions are uniquely positioned to respond to humanitarian needs.”⁹⁹

5. Raising international awareness

Even though the security level in the hinterlands of CAR still needs to be improved significantly, the country would be at a very different stage, if the UN peacekeeping force would not have been deployed. The UN Security Council’s decision to create MINUSCA and replace MISCA would have been unlikely without the clerics’ pledge in New York. The fact that CAR has oftentimes been overlooked by the international community made the Interfaith Peace Platform’s endeavors to raise awareness even more significant. Another example of the importance of their activities abroad is the contact they established with Pope Francis during their very first visit to the Vatican in March 2014. This was the basis for the pope’s groundbreaking visit to the Central African country and it brought about a tangible easing of tensions. The various awards bear witness to their successful international engagement on behalf of their home country.

The example of the Interfaith Peace Platform’s work in CAR can be an inspiration for other crisis-ridden countries.

5 Résumé

As highlighted earlier, Makhtar Diop, World Bank Vice President for the Africa Region, suggests that CAR has the potential to “become a post-conflict reconstruction success story.”

¹⁰⁰ Even though the positive developments cannot be one-dimensionally traced back to the work of the Interfaith Peace Platform, their influence on the country’s progress since December 2012 must not be underestimated. They have set an example by forging genuine friendships between different religions and successfully teaching key leaders from various spheres of society so that the reach of their message has increased significantly. Rather than separating them, their beliefs and the values they derive from them have united them because “faith dominates fear” as Imam Oumar Kobine Layama described it.¹⁰¹ The message of reconciliation has become their flagship. Even though the country slowly returns to peace, many hurdles must still be overcome to create

⁹⁹ University of Oxford.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Donors Pledge \$2.2bn to Help Central African Republic Recover’.

¹⁰¹ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama.

lasting stability. The imbalance between the development of the capital and the hinterlands needs to be tackled to avoid another power struggle. The national government could organize powerful symbolic gestures, such as celebrating the national day in the north east where ex-Seleka fighters come from. Other ideas would be to increase the time that members of parliament spend in their constituencies or to establish resident ministers, meaning they are required to live in the provinces they represent. Touadéra's proposed decentralization policy lines up with the recommendations of the Bangui Forum, but the state has so far lacked the capacities to implement them.¹⁰² The imbalance between the capital and the periphery is particularly reflected in the unequal security situation. The population is currently safely in around sixty percent of CAR's territory, while some cities in the hinterland remain under fire.¹⁰³ Another challenge is the lack of investment in the education sector over the last years. The youth today is less educated than its parents which makes them more prone to mobilization by armed groups and manipulation by political elites. Touadéra's administration needs to find ways to disarm former combatants that have dispersed into rural banditry and he needs to identify strategies to tackle impunity. He will also have to address the question of how to reintegrate the thousands of refugees in neighboring countries as well as the numerous internally displaced people that make up around one fifth of the population.

But, as the non-government organization Crisis Group emphasizes, there is no doubt that „the solutions must come from within the country and have strong national ownership.”¹⁰⁴ Rev. Guerekoyame-Gbangou as chairman of the Interfaith Peace Platform underlines the importance of this concept. He therefore welcomed the appointment of a prosecutor for a Special Criminal Court on 15 February 2017. A month earlier, a UN commission had stated that all warring parties in CAR had committed crimes against humanity – including murder, rape, and the use of child soldiers. The appointed candidate, Toussaint Mukimapa, comes from neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and displays a move toward an African-based system of justice. Rev. Guerekoyame-Gbangou stresses that “Africans should take responsibility. It's not only Europe or the West that can come and do justice to us. Africans should be able to judge African affairs because there are Africans who used to carry out justice in the framework of traditional justice.”¹⁰⁵ Understanding the necessity of international support, but taking on national ownership has been the guiding principle of the Interfaith Peace Platform's commitment to peace in their country. Their tireless efforts in bringing the message of

¹⁰² 'Central African Republic'.

¹⁰³ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama.

¹⁰⁴ Thibaud Lesueur.

¹⁰⁵ 'CAR'.

reconciliation not only to Bangui's neighborhoods but also to isolated parts of the country is now bearing fruit. After the country's population suffered greatly from the crisis that started roughly four years ago, there are glimmers of hope. The Central African people are beginning to trust and each other and are slowly forging friendships. For the first time, citizens have a democratically elected president and parliament. Despite entrenched poverty and the country's fragile economic state, CAR's public finances are no longer in acute crisis. International flights to Kenya have been resumed and roads have been reopened. These signs suggest a slow transformation of the situation.¹⁰⁶ The three clergymen from Bangui are paving the way for peace to gradually be restored. Creating greater social cohesion is the prerequisite of establishing rule of law for the elites, lasting public organizations and it paves the way for agreeing on a lasting social contract. In March 2017, the UN Independent Expert on Human Rights in CAR, Marie-Thérèse Keita Bocoum, underlined what the Interfaith Peace Platform pointed out since the beginning of the conflict: "[Its] roots are primarily ethnic far before they were religious."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ World Bank, 'The Central African Republic: Hope for a War-Torn Country', 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCBRrSXta7Y>> [accessed 4 March 2017].

¹⁰⁷ 'Le Conseil Des Droits de L'homme Se Penche Sur La Situation Des Droits de L'homme En République Centrafricaine et Au Mali', *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 2017 <<http://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21421&LangID=F>> [accessed 2 April 2017].

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