From the hope of democracy through the ballot box to the reality of democracy through Kalashnikovs in Africa

Introduction

This contribution is based on the previous experiences of a professional life spent in contact with Africa, whether these experiences are operational or result from the author's last functions as a general officer, turned towards the analysis of crisis situations and strategic intelligence. The positions defended are therefore strictly personal and do not echo those of the Ministry of Defense or the French government.

Where does the importance of military power on the African continent and the role that the armed forces have played or play in the daily functioning of the State come from? The question makes sense when one notes that it has been in the news almost continuously since independence in the early 1960s.

The monopoly of the legitimate use of force is a fundamental regalian prerogative of the armed forces. The temptation is strong to divert the use of force to categorical, partisan, dictatorial or even personal ends, when sometimes even the mixing of genres is not the rule. There is no need for sophisticated arguments to demonstrate this. The facts, including the most recent ones, are still too often taken for granted.

On March 22, 2012, in Bamako, a military coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré, who had been democratically elected in 2007 after a consultation held without "exaggerated" fraud. Since then, the replacement of the junta by a civilian transitional government has not, unfortunately, brought the demonstration into question, and the current conflict has some of its roots in this.

The institutional model inherited mainly from a common political system set up at independence by the former colonial power, partly explains the importance of the armed forces. The second reason is a consequence of the previous one. As holders of the legitimate use of force, the "people-at-arms " take on a variety of functions and claim to be in the exclusive service of the country, in the name of an ethic of which they alone are the guardians. The weight of traditional cultural, ethnic, tribal and family factors in relation to national sentiment is a third reason. Finally, the continent is in the grip of economic difficulties, which the global crisis has only served to underline more strongly, leaving the field open for armed force to bring its powers to bear.

Some avenues for long-term change will serve as an opening for further reflection. However, the problem of transformation involves several antinomic aspects intrinsically linked to the divergent logics of action of the actors involved. One of the keys to success probably lies in a return to the "original" mission of the armed forces: the defense of the land and, from now on, in a much more significant way, also the defense of citizens.

I-   THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST, A DETERMINING FACTOR

Even today, more than fifty years after the majority of the former French, Belgian and even British colonies gained independence, African armies are still struggling to limit their role to state or human security. There are many reasons for this.

The institutional legacy

The political system put in place at independence was essentially modelled on the colonial model. In the French-speaking world, the first presidents, all of whom came from the French and Belgian political classes or from colonial civil society, inherited the centralizing model that was bequeathed to them and reproduced it more or less. Each one, according to the specificities of his "country", added, in

good faith, arbitrarily or in relation to the obligations of the social group from which he came, constitutional articles and decrees that strengthened his powers and ensured them in the long term, or on the contrary, subtracted those that were likely to limit them. The regime is characterized by a hypertrophy or quasi-dictatorship of executive power, concentrated in the hands of the president. The atrophy of legislative power is reflected in the existence of parliaments with no real powers, the creation of single parties and the control or even suppression of "hard-line" opponents, made jealous and vindictive by the economic underdevelopment of the population and, in turn, by the access to wealth of the leaders in power. The judiciary obeys the prosecutor's office, which, like the government, is generally appointed according to criteria dominated by ethnicity, loyalty to the incumbent president and a hypothetical, if fragile, balance of power between allies. The British colonial model, different as it may have been, nevertheless perpetuated the model of the Westphalian state and its regal monopolies and does not contradict the arguments developed.

Aggravating factors

Social factors have a significant amplifying influence. As plural as it may be, the social and political organization of Sub-Saharan Africa, transcending the artificial borders of the Congress of Berlin and the languages thus imposed by colonization, has common characteristics and invariants, among which are often the primacy and prestige of the chief, generally from the lineage and rarely elected, as well as his irrevocability, as long as he is alive or is not deposed by force. In addition, these cultural or "societal" codes and customary norms, which are not compatible with international standards of "democratic" good governance, as well as the prevalence of ethnic, tribal and family factors over "Western-style" national sentiment, constitute an additional set of obstacles to overcome. The state struggles to exist outside its urban and administrative centres, where it relies on the visible instruments of "Western-style" power (army, police, prefects and various uniforms).

 Finally, since the continent has hardly managed to take off economically, under an international financial infusion that is more and more meagre, it is a reservoir of opportunities for corruption, embezzlement of all kinds, clientelism and nepotism, all too often inherent to the dominant ethnicity. These elements provide a unique theatre for armed force to exert a disproportionate influence or - and - to impose itself as an indispensable component of government by taking power "at the end of the Kalashnikov.

In this generally troubled environment, the military has always represented the body of the state on which the executive could apparently rely. Along with the flag, the Constitution and the national anthem, the army is the symbol of the independent and sovereign state and the guarantor of its freedom in a world where the confrontation between the great powers, which was ideological in the past and is now economic, is still being played out in indirect moves on the African continent. Trained in Western schools and, for some before the end of the Cold War, in communist military academies, the cadres feel they are the custodians of a civic sense based on "generic " patriotic values transmitted in these schools, but abstracted on the continent. In fact, the absence of a strong national feeling and the "fabrication" of non-legitimate elites set up at the time of independence created a vacuum that the military was tempted to fill. With meagre budgets, in search of vague or ill-defined regalian missions, the armies nevertheless remain a hierarchical, relatively disciplined entity which, according to the model of the dominant state, still has a monopoly on the "legitimate" use of force, including in its national space. From then on, subject to the various antagonistic pressures noted in the preceding paragraphs, "people-at-arms" become instruments of power in the hands of regimes that want to retain power, but also too often come from within their ranks. With strength and impunity guaranteed

by the possession of high-performance equipment and the ammunition to use it, the presidential guards and other so-called elite units pampered by the regime are threatened by the dual protectionist and authoritarian drift of praetorian cohorts, with the frequent corollary of the temptation to intrude into the daily functioning of the state.

Regular armies are not spared these abuses because, in addition to these particular characteristics, there are more concrete considerations of an economic nature. The material or in-kind benefits of command compensate for insignificant salaries. They hardly encourage people to leave for a miserable retirement, which also means relegation to oblivion or the eviction of the clan that holds and distributes the prebends. The bottleneck in the upper ranks of the hierarchy is then inescapable, though often partisan, locking the most competent young cadres into subordinate functions or ranks in proportion to their membership of the right group or their real or apparent loyalty to the upper hierarchy and the regime.

Recreating the societal model in protective units that isolate them from civil society and its problems, sometimes as users, sometimes as hostages of the armed forces, depending on the circumstances, the heads of state naturally find it difficult to initiate, or refuse, a change that would often mean their removal from office. In fact, as a refuge, an instrument of power or an arbitrator, armies are a barrier.

II-   CONCRETE EXAMPLES

The text was reread in January 2013, when French troops intervened in the country. Three French-speaking countries from the same colonial empire deliberately structure and limit the discussion: Côte d'Ivoire (RCI), Chad, Central African Republic (CAR). Many others, particularly in recent times, are likely to support the argument without much research. While the political-economic and military issues are the main differences, in this case they confirm that the diversity of causes produces similar effects.

The political framework

Long cited as a model of successful political transition, the RCI experienced a period of remarkable calm under the firm but respectful leadership of President Houphouët-Boigny, and then after his death, albeit to a lesser extent, with his successor, President Konan Bédié. The head of state appoints people to government positions while respecting the balance of forms, but also ensures that the "traditional" duties of clientelism are met. Ivorianness" is thus an integrating concept, supposed to serve as a cement for national unity, even if it is not without many ulterior motives.

In contrast, Chad appears to be at the opposite end of the spectrum in every respect. Its political history is a long succession of military or armed coups. Initially "fratricidal" between the Sara of the south in 1975-1979, they continued between the Toubou and Zaghawa of the north until 1990, with no shortage of attempts to overthrow the current president, Idriss Deby Itno, over the past 20 years. The head of state relies on his troops - his "warlords? "to maintain power. The demands of a certain clan allegiance are a permanent threat. The rebel advance to the gates of Bangui in January 2013 is a sad illustration of this.

As for the CAR, its political history is shaped mainly by alternating civilian and military regimes. For fourteen years, starting with the "Saint-Sylvestre" coup de force (December 31, 1965), the country was in the hands of General, then Marshal and finally Emperor Bokassa. Since 1979, failed and successful military coups have punctuated the life of the head of state, who is hostage to the only armed structure that guarantees his survival, or to his former militias.9

The place of the army

General Guéï's coup d'état, December 24. A term used by Ivorian administrations to designate the uniformed bodies of the state.

In the RCI, the armed forces and gendarmerie appeared until 1999 as successes of ethnic integration. The "corps habillés " did not appear to follow a political agenda, seemed subordinate to civilian power and accessible to reform.

In Chad, which had been at war since 1970, the regular army, initially commanded and composed of men from the South, disbanded in 1979. Since then, a two-tiered army has been fighting an internal and external enemy with varying intensity depending on the situation at the time. Almost ethnically homogeneous units make up the first circle around the president and in combat, while a clever mix of southerners and northerners locks up the positions of responsibility, creating a double divide.

Since the removal of Emperor Bokassa from power in 1979, the Central African army has been the subject of several attempts at reform, or even a complete re-foundation. They have all ended in disappointing results for a variety of reasons, both internal and external to the institution.

III-   IDENTICAL CONSEQUENCES

There are several common features that underline the difficulty of bringing the military into line and explain their disproportionate place in the political landscape. They are in fact both an illustration and a confirmation of the factors and arguments identified above. The first common point is that the government in each of these three examples is the result of a coup de force, "institutional" in the case of one, if one accepts the highly contentious conditions of the October 2000 elections in the RCI and the massive support of the international community for those of 2011, and "legalized" later by the ballot box in the case of the other two.

Moreover, in all cases, the army or armed guerrillas play or have played a pivotal role, whether they initially felt they had been duped in the RCI with General Guéï or whether they were the main actors in the coups de force, which has since been verified in the three countries mentioned. Claiming to embody the integrity of the state, supposedly the guarantor of its internal and external independence as well as of its proper functioning, the army frees itself from the rules of the rule of law, and makes and breaks governments according to the threats its leaders believe the military institution or the country to be prey to. Each attempt to bring the country back into line is therefore seen in terms of a complex, multi-faceted reading of the situation - ethnic, social, economic, political - which varies from country to country but leads to a common refusal of change.

In fact, as an instrument of power, a political actor, an economic refuge or an arbiter of tensions, armies occupy an undue place or act as a barrier.

IV-   FUTURE PROSPECTS

Before addressing these few reflections, it is necessary to agree on the "desired goal". Too often, the actions taken have remained targeted and sectoral, focusing on modifying an institution - the army - and its structures, rather than reviewing its place within the functioning of the State. They have not been successful, because they have directly affected categories of personnel or challenged individual or collective interests and privileges. However, a few avenues are emerging or exist, but they are complex and therefore difficult to implement.

Coordination of actors is essential. However simple it may be to state, the task remains particularly delicate to achieve. Legal bodies, norms and socio-political codes differ significantly depending on

whether they are derived from German-Roman law or Anglo-Saxon common law, tracing the contours of a highly centralized or, on the contrary, delegated, or even federal institutional model. The multiplicity of national or international actors, political, economic, donors, members of civil society, and the different approaches obviously require increased coordination between countries, agencies, regional, international or global organizations, which all too often have different, if not divergent, goals and agendas. This is undoubtedly the main difficulty.

Conclusion

Examples of a return to some form of good governance and, at the very least, of armies in the barracks in their rightful place, exist but are as few as they are fragile and reversible. For a Senegal cited as a model, other states remain to be consolidated or simply out of the game. Sierra Leone reminds us that ethnic and economic constraints - notions of clan and family obligations, of a parallel economy - which can be crossed endlessly with individual behavioural logics - nepotism, clientelism, corruption, trafficking, appropriation of resources or wealth - remain alive. Mali, for its part, emphasizes the lines of conflict between the two countries. Mali highlights the cultural, ethnic and sometimes religious divides between nomadic and sedentary societies. Nigeria and Uganda also stigmatize the monopoly long exercised by the armed forces over the daily functioning of the state. As for the DRC, where the absence of a legitimate and above all recognized state authority has recently allowed armed gangs to sadly illustrate themselves in the east of the country, there is little reason for optimism despite the involvement of the international community.

The awareness of the existence of common values and interests, and the willingness of individuals and civil society to be actors in their own future, nevertheless opens doors and provides reasons for hope. The involvement of the armed forces in the protection, economic development and well-being of their fellow citizens is in this context a prerequisite to any progress. In the same way - and perhaps above all - the need to take into account the legitimate rights of the troops to a decent life and pay and to a career based on merit and not on belonging to the right clan, and the clear definition of the missions devolved to the military, will be the indispensable guarantee of the maintenance of the armed force within the limits that should be set by civilian institutions. Finally, the union of donors on common and global programs transcending partisan or particular interests will be the only way to "shuffle the cards and change the deal".