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Refugee Politics: Self-Organized 'Government' and Protests in the Agamé Refugee Camp (2005–13)

CLARA LECADÉ

*Institut Interdisciplinaire d'Anthropologie du Contemporain-Laboratoire d'Anthropologie
Urbanités Mondialisations, Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique-Ecole des
Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France, clara.lecaded@wanadoo.fr*

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This article examines the different forms of representation and participation set up by Togolese refugees as a means of organizing life in the Agamé camp in Benin between 2005 and 2013, and the wave of protests which accompanied their claims to statutory rights during that same period. The emergence of 'refugee politics' is considered not as an epiphenomenon, but as an aspiration that is found in numerous camp contexts, and which is indicative of the tensions brought about by the confrontation between refugees and humanitarian organizations. It is in fact a hybrid form of politics, at the crossroads between traditional political representation (electing a president, nominating representatives) and the categorization advocated by humanitarian organizations in an attempt to give an increased voice to vulnerable groups. Furthermore, self-organization by refugees and the instances of insubordination seen in the camps seem to be determining factors in the strategies employed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the organizations running the camps as regards setting them up, withdrawing from them and eventually dismantling them.

Keywords: Refugee camps, self-organization, politics, UNHCR

Introduction

'Councils', 'Commissions', 'Coordination', 'Committees', etc.—these are some of the names given to groupings put in place by refugees inside their camps. Such bodies provide the inmates with the opportunity for self-organization, participation and representation, interacting with international agencies, local and national authorities and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in charge of the administration and organization of the camps. This interaction is complex, difficult to clarify and occupies a grey area between the institutional framework of camp organization and its appropriation, misappropriation and sometimes subversion, by the refugees. The emergence of leaders,

elections, rivalry and internal battles is a major factor in understanding the politicization of these camps, not from the point of view of the institutional policies and humanitarian principles at the heart of their formation, but from that of the capacity of refugees for creating, within their camps, a political life of their own (Lecadet 2014).

The relationship between the life of refugees in camps and the political and legal systems on which normal life is based is ambiguous. As Elizabeth Holzer puts it, refugees are placed at the junction between international law, embodied by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s refugee status and the national law of the host country—a space where the reference to laws is constant but rarely efficient and where refugees also incorporate law as an universal abstract when forming and trying to express their demands (Holzer 2013). Given the status of victims by the UNHCR and the NGOs in charge of the camps, refugees appear to be entirely subject to unilateral aid regimes and the protection afforded by international organizations, but without the means to protest against such regimes (Walkup 1997). In so far as reports by the UNHCR and humanitarian organizations, as well as a whole range of academic literature, focus more on the critical analysis of the institutional mechanisms for protecting refugees and the motives for distributing aid (Harell-Bond 1986) than on their forms of protest, resistance and self-organization (Dusenge and Sibomana 2004; Agier 2008; Holzer 2012, 2013), refugees would appear to be mere apolitical¹ recipients of humanitarian aid.

For, depending on how one looks at them, camps may equally well be seen as the last place for politics as well as the first. In other words, they may be seen as spaces where, in the absence of the political representation provided to a greater or lesser extent in organized states, the impetus towards political life is nonetheless created. Politics is highly experimental here, in the sense that it gives its norms, its tools and its forms of power to a settlement that is not yet structured and which presents itself somehow like a space empty of politics, that has to be filled with refugees' aspirations, needs and anger. But camp politics may be said to be experimental, not only in the use of political tools and demands by refugees, but also as regards UNHCR governance, and to some extent the host states, which are often unprepared for, and uncomfortable with dealing with refugees. It thus creates configurations where all the parties involved are facing new challenges and have to confront precarious and potentially destabilizing situations.

The whole political spectrum is in evidence: from the most basic gatherings of refugees to demand improvements to their living conditions, through elections—demonstrating the appropriation of the rules of institutional politics—and movements against the NGOs, the representatives of international organizations and governments, and including the political, legal and administrative response by the UNHCR and country representatives to such mobilization. What kind of politics emerges among refugees inside their camps? How do their politics interact and even hybridize with the

humanitarian categories of representing the vulnerable promoted by the UNHCR and humanitarian organizations? Why do refugee politics appear to be both a fact incorporated by the UNHCR into its governance of camps, and a danger, a threat to their functioning?

The history of the Agamé camp² is emblematic of the complex issues raised by the question of the politicization of refugees in camps. Created by the UNHCR in 2005 to cope with the influx into Benin of Togolese refugees, after the repression following the election of Faure Gnassingbé in that year, this camp was eventually evacuated by the Benin authorities at the end of 2013 in order to put an end to the continued existence of the Togolese in a camp from which the UNHCR and humanitarian organizations had withdrawn several years previously. The Agamé camp was, from the start, a place of fierce debates amongst the refugees over representative structures which would allow them to interact with the representatives of the Benin administration and the UNHCR. From 2005 onwards, this desire for representation and participation led to the organization of the election of a president of the refugees by majority vote.

According to the refugees, in 2005, the camp was to become a utopian realization of the democracy that they had been refused in Togo, creating a kind of 'liminal community' as advocated by Victor Turner (Turner 2008). But the system of government which they put in place in the camp was rapidly undermined by alternative and more radical forms of protest, notably leading to the kidnapping for a day by certain refugees of the UNHCR representative in February 2006, in protest against the delay in carrying out the census which would grant them proper status. Some of the activists were arrested and tried. The link between the politicization of refugees and the very precarious situation in which they were held as regards their status further reinforced their protests against the UNHCR, which in 2007 signed a tripartite agreement with Togo and Benin. Abandoned by the UNHCR and the humanitarian organizations, whose repatriation policy had largely failed, the camp became, from 2008 onwards, the symbol of the determination of the refugees to continue to claim the legal status that had always been denied them.

Politics in the camp can thus be perceived as experimental from the point of view of both the refugees and the UNHCR forms of governance. In this specific space and time, customary state norms have to be reconfigured and transformed to adapt to situations of emergency and uncertainty. The politicization of refugees thus crystallizes the issues involved in the nature of the politics likely to emerge and to be tolerated by camp administrators, but also the limits which this politicization process imposes on the action of the UNHCR. While the UNHCR attempts to impose on the electoral models chosen by the refugees its own criteria for representation and participation, the emergence of the refugees' own form of politics shows that these camps are also places of experimentation and of the recomposition of politics in exile.

Refugee Politics as a Risk: The Implicit Strategy of the UNHCR?

The nature of the UNHCR's reaction to organization and political expression led by refugees in these camps remains unclear, in as much as the institution denies outright the very principle of the politicization of refugees. It was only the question of the militarization of camps that became, from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, a real political issue for the host countries, the countries from which the refugees came and for the UNHCR. With the famous expression 'Refugee-warrior', Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo underlined the contradiction embodied in the engagement of refugees—as defined in international law—in armed political activism through the use of the civilian masses in the camps for war-like ends; they showed that nearly all political activities in camps were being treated as matters of national security (Zolberg *et al.* 1989). They recognized to a certain extent the legitimacy of the refugees' right to political activism, whilst underlining the dilemma that this represented from the point of view of external aid (McConnachie 2012). With regard to situations in which camps had become a battle ground, a recruitment centre and a stake of war, the UNHCR produced a large amount of institutional literature. The militarization of refugee camps, although remaining a minor phenomenon among camps in Africa, as noted by Robert Muggah, generally led to the reinforcement of security measures on the ground (Muggah 2006), but also to the closing and re-siting of some camps, as was the case in Guinea at the request of the government which considered them to be bases for armed rebel groups from Liberia (Milner and Christoffersen 2006).

But, if the militarization of camps appears to be an exacerbated form of their politicization, the way in which refugees usually organize themselves and the effect of this on daily camp life seem barely to have been taken into account officially. While there is no official position, the very principles of UNHCR action and the processes of setting up and evacuating camps seem to have taken on board the risk posed by the growing organization of the refugees and the demands resulting from this. The treatment of any kind of political activity in refugee camps as a security matter by host states and consequently by the UNHCR has had some impact on the general strategy adopted by the international agency.

By stressing the temporary nature of camps in its practices, the UNHCR is setting out a deliberate policy of preventing the installation of long-term camps with their inevitable permanence and politicization, even though the refugees often set up the camp themselves prior to the intervention of the UNHCR (Van Damme 1999), and their politicization is a given which is well beyond the scope of humanitarian intervention.

The UNHCR's determined approach to repatriation is also aimed at promoting the dismantling of camps once the emergency period is over—often a debatable decision and one which is a major cause of dispute with refugees, as was shown by events in numerous camps in Sudan and Zaïre in the 1990s

when the refugees strongly opposed their repatriation or their transfer to other camps. In their study of self-organization amongst Rwandan refugees in the camps of eastern Zaïre between 1994 and 1996, Dusenge and Sibomana stress the action of the Rwandan NGO Collective, which defended the principle of self-organization in the camps and the establishment of representational structures for refugees.³ While the associations formed by the refugees multiplied,⁴ a huge campaign for the election of leaders was launched in 1995 in the camps of North and South Kivu. The electoral boundaries originally planned by the UNHCR were redrawn and the different zones were placed in the charge of elected refugees. The relative emancipation of the refugees compared with the framework set up by the UNHCR was supported by the NGOs in South Kivu, though it appeared to be an autonomous movement parallel to that in North Kivu, where this takeover immediately provoked the hostility of the organizations running the camps (Dusenge and Sibomana 2004). This was because the reorganization of camp space under the influence of refugee leaders was accompanied by an increase in freedom of expression in relation to politics and to the strategic choices made by the UNHCR. The creation of representative opportunities for the refugees went hand in hand with the increasing strength of their demands. Opposition to the repatriation envisaged by the UNHCR was a source of tension, while the refugees wanted to obtain 'the recognition by the UNHCR of refugee leaders capable of participating in the resolution of problems which concerned them' (Dusenge and Sibomana 2004: 30).

Political Experimentation amongst Refugees: The Choice of Political Means

There appears to be a particularly thin line between the aspiration for representation and participation and the emergence of protest, and this is a point of critical tension in the dramatic context of refugee camps. Elizabeth Holzer asks: 'What drives the host or humanitarian response to refugee protests? What leads refugees to protest rather than to other forms of civic debate?' (Holzer 2012: 260). Protests are indeed what generally materialize in the politics of refugees. Michel Agier emphasizes the idea of political scenes and moments to explain the emergence of the refugees as a political force, disrupting the order established by the UNHCR.

The question of the politicization of refugees often emerges when events make it visible to the outside world. This is when refugees leave the confined space of their camps and go to the capital of the country in which they find themselves. This mobilization inside large towns ensures them publicity which is in sharp contrast to their discreet, hidden and often forgotten existence in the camps. In Luanda, Angola, in 2002, representatives of refugees from Rwanda, Sudan, Congo-Brazzaville and DRC demonstrated outside the UNHCR offices, the Angolan parliament building and in the streets of the city, against their repatriation and to demand better living conditions (Agier 2008: 46). Refugees are seen outside the enclosed space of the camps in which

any protest is expected to submit completely to the procedures of aid distribution and camp administration. Demands, criticisms and claims, which develop in the shadows within the camps, are thus brought out into daylight. They bring onto the public scene a group of people who define themselves not only as refugees, but also as that 'wronged community' evoked by Jacques Rancière when describing the irruption onto the public scene of individuals or groups of individuals who become political activists through their revolt against an unjust regime⁵ (Rancière 2007). These demonstrations may seem paradoxical, however, as they are at one and the same time contesting the power of the UNHCR and calling for the strengthening of aid. The requests expressed by refugees are generally addressed to the UNHCR and, insofar as the organization can fulfil their demands, they are not to be interpreted as an attempt to substitute an order other than that of the UNHCR. In this sense, they are not revolutionary protests, but a call for a better dialogue between representatives of the refugees and the UNHCR authorities within camps.

But demonstrations and protests are also to be seen within refugee camps. In 1976, the representatives of Ethiopian refugees from the Wad el Heleiw camp in Sudan sent several petitions to the UNHCR in protest against the decision of the Sudanese authorities to transfer them to camps further from the border with Ethiopia (Karadawi 1999: 121). Michel Agier reported the boycott of food distribution as well as the strike by refugees employed by the NGOs in the Dadaab camp in Kenya in 2000, and the blockade in August 2003 of the main road through the Boreah camp in the forests of Guinea by a group of women from Sierra Leone demanding the provision of tarpaulins by the UNHCR following flooding in their living quarters after the rains (Agier 2008: 226, 229). Elizabeth Holzer stresses the criminalization by the UNHCR of the food boycott in the Buduburam camp in 2008 (Holzer 2012: 274). Her position is that the radicalization of forms of protest is increased by the institutional weakness of the UNHCR, which remains unable to face the wide range of political expression coming from refugees inside camps.

Camp protests and claims indeed have rules and content that are different from those governing public spaces in liberal states, caught as they are between the administration of the UNHCR and that of the host country. If one reads across these acts of protest both inside and outside refugee camps, the calls for action and group demands seem to be common to very diverse camps. These common protests could provide the basis of a critical reading of UNHCR policy if one were to consider the claims and demands of the refugees. These demonstrations, varying from the expression of a simple claim to acts of outright rebellion, reflect the diverse preoccupations at the heart of camp life; they are concerned with the most basic aspects of camp organization—the quality and quantity of food rations, the materials used for shelter—but also with the protection afforded by the UNHCR and with that most crucial of all questions: the decision to keep refugees in their camp or to repatriate them. Even though the refugees may be divided amongst

themselves as to the nature of their claims and the choice of action to be taken, such demonstrations are a collective response to the grip of the 'humanitarian government' (Agier 2008) ruling the camps. Often reduced to the status of 'incidents' by the camp administrators, these demonstrations generally appear in the internal administrative reports in each camp, but are not publicized in the official UNHCR reports which very rarely pick them up. The general aspiration to political representation and participation inside refugee camps remains something of a blind spot.

As Oliver-Smith (1991) puts it, however, in the case of refugees opposing the resettlement involved in development programmes, resistance to state politics and national organizations can lead to new forms of political empowerment. Elizabeth Holzer reflects the general meaning of politics at stake in the political structure and protests of refugees inside the Buduburam refugee camp: 'refugee camps might serve as a particularly strong platform for "associational democracy", a participatory reform intended to bring civil society organization into the decision-making structure of governments' (Holzer 2012: 275). And she points out that it may be the impossibility of a fair dialogue between refugees and camps administrators which is one of the reasons for the increasing radicalization of protests inside camps: 'Whether one reacts to the unrelenting scarcities, violence and instability of humanitarian crises with a makeshift authoritarianism or a renewed commitment to innovative participatory democracy is also a choice' (Holzer 2012: 275).

This tension, but also interdependence, between refugee politics and humanitarian governance is a key point for analysing both the forms of politics put in place by refugees within the camps and the limits and the challenges they pose to humanitarian intervention.

The Creation of Camps in Benin and Early Protests

Thousands of Togolese fled the repression which followed the election of President Faure Gnassingbé on 25 April 2005. This vote, intended to legitimize the military coup by the son of General Gnassingbé Eyadéma, whose death in February 2005 ended a 38-year rule, was marked by massive irregularities and denounced by the opposition. In the hours and days which followed, demonstrations by the opposition in the main towns in Togo were subject to bloody repression, and militias supporting the newly elected president went from house to house in pursuit of opposition members and their families.⁶ Those who fled to neighbouring Ghana or Benin were mainly linked to opposition parties and were part of an ongoing political exile dating from the 1990s with the outbreak and subsequent repression of a movement in opposition to the dictatorship of Eyadéma.

The creation of camps in nearby Benin thus began prior to 2005. Opened on 22 October 1999 by the UNHCR, the Kpomassé camp began receiving Togolese refugees fleeing the dictatorship. The protest which developed in the

camp faced the intransigence of the UNHCR. Women on the site organized a strike on 3 June 2003, stopping work in order to go to the UNHCR offices in Cotonou to protest against the poverty of camp conditions and against the violence of which they were the victims. On 23 July 2003, several of these women were imprisoned, then released thanks to the intervention of the Benin League for Human Rights and Amnesty International.⁷ M. Godet, the regional representative of the UNHCR who was personally involved in preventing the movement from becoming widespread, was recalled to UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, and replaced. The start of a camp protest and the political structuring of refugees immediately raised fears amongst the UNHCR and the Benin authorities. The 'office of Togolese refugees in the Kpomassé camp', the representative body from which protests were organized, was a threat to the mechanisms and the rhetoric of protection and aid. The UNHCR feared the spread of such centres of protest and their impact within both camp organization and the social and political life of the host country. The continued failure to recognize the legal status of Togolese refugees in Benin further fuelled their anger and the need for political organization. The difficulties faced by the UNHCR in closing the Kpomassé camp, despite a programme of resettlement in other host countries set in train in 2008 and involving about 450 of the 800 people within the camp,⁸ only seemed to foreshadow the problems that faced the organization confronted, on the opening of the Agamé camp, by a far more militant movement. The more politics became part of the camps, the faster the UNHCR tried to extinguish these centres of potential revolt.

Faure Gnassingbé's accession to power brought the number of Togolese refugees to 38,221, divided between Ghana (15,000) and Benin (23,221) in July 2005.⁹ The Agamé camp was opened by the UNHCR on 30 April 2005 on the site of a palm grove, near the village of Agamé in the Lokossa region in the south-west of Benin. The camp at Comé, which was smaller, was created a little earlier. A large number of the refugees who arrived at the Agamé camp (there were 5,940 of them in 2005) had a militant past or had been involved with the opposition parties in Togo. This experience in militancy, as well as precedents set by the Kpomassé camp in terms of structure and protest, explains the rapidity with which the refugees set up political organization within the camp.

Shortly after the camp opened, the Togolese asked to be able to choose those who would take their demands to the camp authorities (UNHCR, the Benin state, NGOs). They wanted to set up 'the democratic ideal which had been refused them in Togo'.¹⁰ The international NGO, Plan, encouraged them in this, whereas the Red Cross and UNHCR representatives in the camp regarded this desire for organization with suspicion, for the establishment of leadership within the camps turned out to be a chaotic process. Depending upon the context, the election of a chairman (Agier 2008: 235) or street and village leaders (Turner 2010) has been described as the fruit of long battles over the question of the titles to be given to these representatives

as well as of their legitimacy. Even then, these roles remained relatively unstable given the possible objections of the official camp administration and of the refugees themselves. The official function of elected representatives was to be a point of contact between the refugees, the UNHCR and the NGOs, by putting forward their grievances, averting and resolving potential conflicts between certain refugees or groups of refugees and the administrator and security forces in the camps. The existence of a political hierarchy amongst the refugees themselves was, however, symptomatic of political allegiances and rivalries which were beyond the intervention of the UNHCR.

The illegitimacy and non-representational nature of the first coordinating committee were denounced in a demonstration inside the Agamé camp on 12 August 2005, when the refugees also complained about the comments made by a female Benin UNHCR employee in a Togolese newspaper *Forum de la semaine*, in which she associated the refugees fleeing the post-electoral repression with economic refugees trying to get to Europe at any cost. The refugees demanded the dismantling of the coordinating committee that had been imposed on them and the election of an organization based on the wishes of the people, as well as the resignation of the UNHCR employee, which took place a few days later. It would be as a result of a long process that the election of a president would be held in the camp.

Representation, Participation and Election in the Agamé Camp: The Hybridization of Refugee Politics

The plan to elect a president of the refugees was in all respects a copy of electoral processes in democratic states. The way in which the organization of the refugees followed established electoral models showed that the politicization of camps cannot be reduced to the level of mere protest, but equally involves the creation of an appropriate political structure. As this structure does not fall within the traditional scope of institutions and is not politically normalized, refugees are usually denied the forms of representation they choose for themselves. At Agamé, an electoral commission defined the criteria for the validation of candidates and the way in which the ballot would be carried out. Each candidate handed in an application to the commission, which then ruled on his or her admissibility. The names of the candidates were published and the electoral campaign began:

the electoral commission posted a list of the different offices, from the president to the counsellors¹¹, the commission gave them at least a week to campaign in the camp, which was so enormous that the candidates each had others helping them in their campaign.¹²

Each candidate put forward a manifesto responding to the main needs and demands within the camp. The campaign ended at midnight on the day before voting, which took place in the school created by the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF). The ballot papers bore the name of the candidate and of the members of his government. Voting ended at 6 pm. The electoral commission emptied out the ballot boxes and counted up on a blackboard the number of votes received by each of the candidates, and the results were announced around 8 pm. The elected candidate and the members of his 'government' were then immediately presented to the camp administrators.

The task of the coordinating committee and its president would then be to act as liaison between the refugees, the UNHCR and the NGO, by stating their grievances, and preventing or ruling on any conflicts that arose between individual refugees or groups of refugees and the administrator and police in the camp. On 23 September 2005, the first president of Agamé, M. Maossi, was elected. He was a secondary education inspector from the Atakpamé region of Togo and his mandate was for six months, which could be extended in subsequent elections to a year, and he could stand again only once after that. The office of the coordinating committee was at the entrance to the camp, facing that of the administrator, and was staffed daily. People came to express their grievances and their needs. The members of the office met daily at first, and then weekly; they were also called together for a general meeting when there was an event or information of significance to communicate. The administrative and political lay-out of the camp evolved: organized into 12 zones, made up of 72 districts for about 11,000 people in 2005, the camp had in 2012 54 districts, managed by district chiefs, elected in 'local' ballots organized annually by the coordinating committee of each district. These ballots are different from the election of the coordinating committee: 'as not everyone can write...the candidates stand there and you line up behind them, where they can't see you'.¹³

As provocative as the expression may sound, it was a 'refugee government' that was put in place, in that the camp was a paradoxical place for the refugees to achieve their political project and find forms of self-governance that were useful for dialogue with the humanitarian organizations, but which also reflected a deeper political aspiration. This dimension of camp life, the adoption of a proper representational structure and the election of a president 'by universal suffrage' by all the camp residents of voting age (18 years old) played a significant role in the accounts given by refugees and in the numerous letters addressed to the Benin authorities and to the media from 2005 onwards denouncing the insecurity of their living conditions and setting out their appeals and claims:

That organisation and that ambition for democracy which they had not found at home, mobilised the refugees who demanded a universally accepted democratic election to choose those who were to represent them to the partners. This was a first in the life of camp refugees.¹⁴

It was a matter of collective pride, as much as a platform for expressing demands. This organization allowed group claims to be made: the Muslim

collective managed to create a mosque, despite the orders of the UNHCR prohibiting any religious expression in the camp, and several commissions were created which increased the representation of women, young people and the elderly.

The camp was no longer only under the rules of the 'humanitarian government' (Agier 2008). The formation of a refugee government and of a de facto counter power runs counter to the idea of the camps as just biopolitical spaces, governed by humanitarian logic alone. But how can we characterize the politics that the refugees were experiencing? The refugees certainly still had to deal with the constraints of the humanitarian regime and take into account the categories shaped by its structure. Whether it was an explicit structure or not is difficult to clarify in this context, but the fact is that, besides the election of a president, self-organized refugees created various commissions representing the categories of population considered as vulnerable according to the classification of the UNHCR and the NGOs.

Refugee politics is therefore in many ways a hybrid product of the appropriation of the methods of liberal, democratic states and humanitarian logic. The 'politics' of the refugees thus mixes the vertical dimension of power, based on the election of leaders, with horizontal forms of representation based on criteria defined by the institutions in charge of the refugees and the humanitarian organizations dealing with the protection of the vulnerable. This hybrid political system thus borrows from the logical, vertical structure of political institutions while also putting into practice the language of humanitarianism. The political structure for refugees within camps therefore rarely manages to free itself entirely from the control of the UNHCR, however. In other contexts, some elections are quite simply cancelled by the official camp administration, and the chosen leaders are replaced by personalities who seem to be less hostile. Through pressure and direct intervention, the UNHCR representatives can try to defuse the leadership by imposing criteria such as parity (Turner 2010: 53) or the representation of vulnerable groups in ways chosen by the refugees.

From the Refugee Uprising to the Withdrawal of the UNHCR: The Continuity of the Camp

The installation of a political hierarchy within the camps seems to have two main functions: one representative and 'pragmatic', which aims to find spokespersons best placed to represent the interests of the refugees to the organizations running the camps; and a political, representative function with the more general purpose of questioning as necessary the decisions of the UNHCR and the host country, while also concerning itself with internal political struggles amongst the refugees themselves. Political loyalties prior to exile persist among refugees; the camps provide continuity but also room for the transformation and recomposition of leadership and previous political allegiances (Dusenge and Sibomana 2004; Turner 2010). But, while these

allegiances may be linked to existing political parties, the organizational forms they take within the camps do not correspond to the standard definition of established politics. They are an informal response. Within the camps, structure is provided by low-key gatherings, power systems that are occasionally tolerated, influential and often illicit or clandestine networks, all operating under the shadow, the protection and the surveillance of the UNHCR and the NGOs. In other words, scenes of revolt or insubordination are not chance or random events—they spring from a more or less formal structure of groups of refugees.¹⁵

From their arrival in the Agamé camp in 2005, the Togolese refugees had been waiting for a census which would enable them to benefit from refugee status. The political organization of the camp provided a basis for protest, but this movement in part overwhelmed the coordinating committee, whose role in the various forms of insurrection which shook the camp from 2006 onwards is difficult to establish. The initial plan to elect spokesmen to represent the interests of the refugees to the authorities managing the camp gave way to traditional political games with their tensions, debates and dissent. Recognized as the legitimate mouthpiece of the refugees by the authorities controlling the camp, the role of the coordinating committee became at that point somewhat unclear. On 15 February 2006, when Rafik Saidi, UNHCR chief officer for the region, announced that for technical reasons the census of the Agamé camp had to be delayed yet again, the refugees invaded the offices of the coordinating committee and detained the UNHCR representative. Jonathan Ahonsu,¹⁶ president of the coordinating committee in 2008 and 2009, tells how 'there were people who quickly organized themselves, pushed the coordinating committee aside, threatening it even, and overpowered the UNHCR representative'.¹⁷ The revolt was a protest against the interminable wait imposed on the refugees by the UNHCR, but was also an attack on their 'government', criticized for its powerlessness:

From time to time there are people who have simply had enough, who can no longer put up with those sometimes very unfair conditions, and they cry out, they go to see the Red Cross, the camp administrator, sometimes the soldiers. When that happens, the coordinating committee cannot control them. They think they have to go further, that the coordinating committee simply cannot defend their interests properly.¹⁸

The refugees thus had not only to stand up to the UNHCR on the question of their status, but also to face up to their own internal disputes. While refugee politics was showing the limits of humanitarian governance (Li 2007), the refugee government was experiencing its own limits with the recourse to violence by some refugees.

The border between Togo and Benin is porous. The camp was not only a refuge, and from 2005 onwards old scores were settled with increasing frequency on both sides of the border. The refugees began to be haunted by the belief that agents of the Rally of the Togolese People (RPT)¹⁹ had infiltrated

the camp in order to cause chaos, thereby damaging the image of the refugees with the UNHCR and the Benin authorities. The existence in Benin of camps for Togolese refugees from the post-electoral crisis was a source of tension and bitter negotiations between the two countries, Benin being suspected of harbouring the Togolese political opposition. The Togolese in Benin were caught between the two, and there was very limited tolerance of the camp, seen above all as a centre of political agitation. In a communiqué of 24 April 2006, signed by 'The Togolese refugees in Benin' in Agamé,²⁰ the refugees denounced their harassment by the Benin authorities who warned them against any interference in the Benin presidential election campaign.

The priority for the UNHCR in Togo and in Benin was to return the refugees to Togo. This was a major political issue for the Togolese government who was anxious to restore its image in the eyes of the international community after the unanimous condemnation of the coup by Faure Gnassingbé of the conditions of his election to the presidency and of the repression which followed this. The highly publicized launch of a national reconciliation policy was presented as an appeasement measure. Shortly after his election, Faure Gnassingbé created a High Commission for Repatriation and Humanitarian Action (HCRAH), to arrange the return of the Togolese refugees in Benin and Ghana. But the creation of this commission, which collected not only aid, but also information on the exiles, did nothing to dissipate the refugees' fears. Despite the solemn statement made on 2 July 2005 by the prime minister, Edem Kodjo, in favour of this return and in spite of the guarantees given in terms of aid and security, the Togolese continued to flee throughout 2005, fearing reprisals. The signing of a global political agreement with the mediation of the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, on 20 August 2006, and the creation of committees for the reception, support and reintegration of those returning to Togo, meant that repatriation could begin. This was, however, on a very limited basis. According to HCRAH statistics, around 3,000 refugees returned to Togo in 2006; 6,000 remained in Agamé. The politicization of the refugees within the camp increased the power struggles between the refugees, the UNHCR and the Benin authorities. Despite the signing on 3 April 2007 of a tripartite agreement between the UNHCR, Togo and Benin on the voluntary repatriation of Togolese refugees in Benin, the programme barely began. In 2008, the UNHCR decided on the official closure of the Agamé camp and the withdrawal of humanitarian aid. As a result, almost all of the NGOs represented on the site from its inception withdrew their support.²¹

In 2008, the refugees thus found themselves almost running the camp alone, despite the continued presence of the police and an administrator, both attached to the Benin ministry of the interior. Their principal demand remained the awarding of refugee status. Each year, the Benin authorities issued provisional residence permits, the benefits of which were a far cry from those attached to refugee status.²² The coordinating committee lobbied the authorities for refugee status, but the disputes in the camp encouraged a

multiplicity of claims. In *The Camp*, the film-maker Jean-Frédéric de Hasque showed the slogans which a man was printing with a stencil on T-shirts which he then put out to dry on a washing line: ‘Utopian integration! We must be resettled—UNHCR, help us—Say no to government plots against refugees.’ The demand for resettlement elsewhere²³ by some of the refugees finally broke the apparent unity of the coordinating committee. In 2011, the issuing of provisional residence permits for the third year running led to a split at the heart of the coordinating committee between those in favour of the award of refugee status by the UNHCR and those who, tired of waiting in vain, had taken a more radical stance and were demanding resettlement. For some, the coordinating committee had never been so close to reaching an agreement on refugee status. This radicalization of a group of about 200 people, with a spokesman since March/April 2011, further fed the suspicion that infiltrators into the camp were leading this protest in order to split the unity of the refugees and reduce their credibility with the Benin authorities. For a month, the group held regular demonstrations in the main thoroughfares of the camp, ‘which annoyed the others’,²⁴ carrying placards saying ‘SOS UNHCR. Resettlement elsewhere!’ and, on several occasions, they went to Cotonou to demonstrate outside the UNHCR offices. Their protests were widely reported in the press and reinforced the Agamé camp’s reputation for agitation. The Benin authorities used the split to go back on their promise to issue refugee status, on the pretext that they had to wait until ‘the camp calms down and becomes more peaceful’. These tensions were among the last expressions of the politicization of the camp and of the demand for the denied status on the part of all those for whom the camp remained, in spite of everything, the last place of safety where they could still assert and insist upon their refugee status.²⁵ On 10 October 2013, when the Benin police arrived to remove them and began to destroy one by one all the homes in the camp, it was the end of the camp and of the refugees’ hopes of seeing any response from the authorities to their claims.²⁶

The UNHCR Facing Refugee Politics: From Paternalism to Criminalization

It follows that it would be naïve to try to dissociate the politicization of refugees from its interaction with UNHCR policy. The response of the UNHCR to the process of self-organization reveals divergences between the electoral methods that the refugees try to set out for themselves and the UNHCR’s interpretation of the concepts of participation and representation.

Dusenge and Sibonama refer to the brutal reaction of camp administrations to the self-organization of Rwandan refugees in the North and South Kivu camps in Zaïre: but moving spirits in civilian society were labelled as intimidators and hostage takers. The Zaïre government even went so far as to arrest certain members of the Rwandan civilian society in exile and deported them to Kinshasa (Dusenge and Sibomana 2004: 30). The criminalization of political activities by refugees in Zaïre is consistent with Simon Turner’s

analysis that refugees are, according to the logic of the UNHCR's point of view, imprisoned in two mutually exclusive situations—either they have the status of victims as granted to them in international law and they accept the rules and regulations of the camp, or they become trouble makers (Turner 2010, 2014) from the moment that they disturb the established set-up within the camp by the nature of their political organization.

The fact that, for the UNHCR, these two positive and negative situations—one at the heart of humanitarian order, the other running counter to it—are mutually exclusive plays a part in its attempt to depoliticize the camps. Simon Turner shows that, in the Hutu refugee camp in Lukole in Tanzania, faced with the central role of 'street leaders', 'village leaders' and the opposition of those sympathizing with the two main Burundian parties in the economy and political topography of the camp, the UNHCR tried to dismiss certain leaders, played on the rivalry between the two parties which polarized the political life of the camp and used both a wait-and-see policy and interventionism to deal with such political activities. Simon Turner shows above all that the UNHCR tries to impose its own vision of their capacity for action on the organizational systems chosen by the refugees in the fight against their supposed dependence on humanitarian aid (Kibreab 1993; Turner 2010: 48). Using empowerment and community development programmes, the UNHCR tries to limit and outlaw the refugees' chosen patterns of self-organization by promoting criteria and values that encourage 'a sense of community'. It tries to reinforce the refugee community through humanitarian and paternalistic gestures. It tolerates the establishment of leaders on condition that they are apolitical and help to reinforce the unity of the community, which is conceived of as an entity separate from the partisan interests of the individuals and groups of which it is composed. Simon Turner shows that the UNHCR thus defends community as an abstract concept, foreign to the reality of the politicization of the camp by the refugees and to the antagonism found within it. Thus UNHCR policy is both defensive and paternalistic at the same time.

If refugees were experimenting with new ways of making politics in the basic environment of the camp, the UNHCR was to some extent not much more prepared for such confrontation. In this sense, refugee political and representational aspiration in camps has certainly had an impact on UNHCR policy. The refugees' need for representation has been indeed partly accepted by the UNHCR, which chooses negotiators and employees amongst those whose influence or supposed ability as a representative carries weight within the camps (Fresia 2008). The UNHCR seems ready to welcome some forms of leadership and political organization amongst the refugees as long as it defines the criteria and controls the conditions for this. But the recognition of leaders and the employment of refugees by NGOs and in security jobs, while indications of their status as negotiators and partners with the administration, reinforce still further the denial of the political reality within the camps. These leaders are often rejected by the refugees, who

have no say in their selection, and who suspect such appointments of favouring certain individuals rather than furthering the interests of them all. The opaqueness of this system reinforces inequality amongst the refugees as they struggle to put in place elections which are free from interference by influential individuals. Even if it is inegalitarian and unjust, however, this way of dealing with individuals is politically less risky than recognizing the refugees' own methods of selecting representatives. If the intention of the UNHCR is to defuse the risk of conflict, which can rapidly degenerate and become uncontrollable, the underlying political question is how to move from the protection of refugees by unilateral intervention to a management system shared between refugees and the UNHCR within each camp. The UNHCR has little to say on such questions, understating the importance of revolts which take place every now and again, and putting them in the same category as minor incidents, isolated cases and action by agitators from minority groups. But is this not also an experimental area for the UNHCR?

If the UNHCR has no real policy on organizational possibilities and political action amongst refugees, it is up to the administrators to evaluate the impact of politicization on their management of the camps. There is thus a conflict between the political activity of the refugees, and the UNHCR which is anxious to avoid any extreme events either inside or outside the camps, but which is also conscious of the refugees' need for organization in their dealings with camp managers. In an internal memo sent on 21 August 2011 entitled 'Report on the New Committee Crisis in the Making',²⁷ the administrator of the Avépozo camp, 15 kilometres from Lomé in Togo, which was opened in April 2011 to accommodate the pro-Gbagbo partisans fleeing the post-electoral crisis in Ivory Coast, underlined the difficulties involved in the emergence of a committee which the inhabitants of the camp demanded to elect themselves:

In the light of the foregoing, we note the disruption to our work when the committee considers itself above the camp administration... Various evening meetings are being held in the camp without the administration having been notified, and yesterday, Saturday, between 7pm and 10pm, a meeting at which the new committee was introduced in the presence of the previous members almost got out of hand after certain refugees refused to accept the new committee. There were violent shouts of '*we're going to burn the camp down! SEREY has betrayed us!!!*'

In the opinion of this camp manager, the UNHCR should be part of and supervise the election process with the refugees. Their activities should not, he writes, interfere with those of the UNHCR and the NGOs. The UNHCR eventually intervened in the results of the elections organized by refugees by imposing a representational model based on vulnerable groups. In order to stop the emergence of leaders by vote, the UNHCR insisted on the creation of commissions representing women, old people, children and the disabled, and established criteria for representation and participation within the camp

based on compassion and vulnerability. The replacement of electoral systems with humanitarian categories as forms of representation allowed within the camps shows the small room for manoeuvre which the UNHCR feels it has in relation to the inevitable process of politicization. How can an aid regime be maintained when the refugees show that they are not prepared to be simply passive recipients? The UNHCR has to face up to this paradox if it is to maintain its control over the creation and closure of camps.

This coexistence and this tension between the politics of the refugees and the policies of the UNHCR exist, at least as an aspiration, in numerous camp contexts. It is in the camps that refugees find the last vestiges of their desire for a base in exile, of political ambition and of the acquisition of rights. But, in the end, the extreme politicization of certain camps can accelerate the rate of withdrawal and disengagement of the UNHCR. The acts of rebellion by Togolese refugees which took place in the Kpomassé and Agamé camps in Benin over several years from 2000 onwards were of benefit to the repatriation policies devised by the UNHCR, Benin and Togo. While some of the refugees remained actively opposed to these measures, the UNHCR partly withdrew from one camp which had its own political structure, refused to be evacuated and in the end became autonomous. The self-organization of refugees may thus mean the end of the rationale for camps as initially set up by the UNHCR. This progression towards autonomy is a characteristic of those areas which continue to survive in a state of self-government based on the institutional forms of the camp, and reminds us that, both before and after the intervention of the UNHCR, independent camps were the way in which refugees originally gathered together in exile (Van Damme 1999; Agier 2008: 66; Gale 2008).

Conclusion

The self-organization of refugees within camps appears as a major point of critical tension between the political aspiration for participation and representation among refugees and the humanitarian regime. It shows their insubordination in relation to the administration imposed by the UNHCR, and equally the overlap between their political organization and humanitarian concerns. The structural nature of their politicization, the challenges and limitations that this imposes upon the actions of the UNHCR and the organizations in charge of the camps, and also the direct and indirect responses to this phenomenon by the various institutions shed light on the prevalent meaning of politics in refugee camps. Even though the politicization of refugee camps remains something of a blind spot in UNHCR policy, it would appear that the organization has for a long time accepted it in practice and that a certain number of its strategies as regards the creation, transfer and closing of camps, and the repatriation of refugees to their countries of origin or elsewhere, are conditioned by it. Another possibility for the UNHCR, faced as it is with the refugees' desire to organize themselves and

to be represented within the camps, is to intervene in the choices they make and to impose on their systems of representation humanitarian criteria such as taking into account vulnerable groups, or better representation for women. Thus, in certain cases, the UNHCR tries to put in place its own participation and representation criteria in order to weaken the leaders and the vertical power structure which is likely to rival its own as well as that of the national authorities and the NGOs running the camps. But the self-organization of the refugees and the forms of protest they bring about also appear between the lines as a factor in the withdrawal and disengagement of the UNHCR in the administration of camps. The unilateral regime of protection and aid collides with the process of politicization. The concept of refugee and the very camp area itself are becoming freed from the limits of the legal existence and the humanitarian and political intervention on which they are based or which have for a time restricted them. Therefore, the politicization of camps seems to be a fact which is beyond the reach of those responsible for humanitarian and political intervention, as can be seen in the case of camps set up independently or those that survive in spite of the withdrawal of the institutions in charge, and which seem emblematic of the refugees' ability to escape the laws and logistics of the international regime on which the status of refugee is legally and politically based. This experimental politics emerging from liminal situations could be defined, in the wake of Michel Foucault (1994), as marginal politics.

1. This 'supposition' is a result of both the UNHCR's desire to make the camps truly apolitical recipients of humanitarian aid and the evidence of a large amount of research which concentrates on the institutional arrangements put in place by the UNHCR and/or certain governments, obscuring the social and political organization by the refugees themselves within the camps.
2. My encounter with Agamé was initially unexpected, as I was carrying out a survey on the Togolese Expelled Migrants Association (Association Togolaise des Expulsés) in 2012 in Sokodé, north of Togo. The association, created in 2008, aimed to give a voice and associative power to Togolese most of whom had been expelled from Europe (in large proportion from Germany, a former colonial power in Togo). One of its members had been living in the Agamé refugee camp in Benin from 2005 until his return to Togo in 2011. He had been hired as a Red Cross employee during his stay in the camp and was the president for Muslim refugees in the camp. He introduced me to the rules of the camp's political life and, as a former NGO employee, he was particularly aware of the tense and complex relationship between the representatives of the humanitarian regime and the refugees. He was able to establish contact between me and his former co-refugees, and I therefore left for Benin and was able to enter the camp. I was presented as a friend to the Benin administrator staying at the gate of the camp. I carried out extensive interviews with past and present political leaders in the camp, which allowed me an approach to the camp that was mostly based on the narratives of refugees, and which would be complemented by a collection of documents

- produced by the refugees from 2005 onwards to publicize their demands on the internet and in local newspapers.
3. Cf. Charter of the Rwandan NGO Collective, signed in Goma on 4 July 1994 by 21 members.
 4. Women played a prominent part in the formation of these associations, as was also the case in a series of protests led by a group called 'Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns' ('Concerned Women') that took place in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana in 2007–08 (Holzer 2012). Holzer analyses the gendered nature of protests within the camp, as it would have been much more difficult for men, immediately labelled as 'rebels', to mobilize in the same way.
 5. This unjust regime may be that imposed by the camp authorities, even if it is based on a degree of legal exemption from national legislation.
 6. On three separate occasions in 2005, the International Federation for Human Rights (IFHR) sent observer missions into the camps of Comé and Agamé, which collected numerous depositions relating to crimes and violence in the post-electoral crisis. Report no. 433 published in November 2005 entitled 'Togo: Report on the Togolese Crisis, the Existence of Justice Remains' mentions the Togolese refugees' initial apprehension when talking to the IFHR investigators, whom they suspected to be in the pay of Gnassingbé.
 7. Elizabeth Holzer analyses the gendered nature of the camp protests—the women undergoing less harsh repression than men in the same situation (Holzer 2012). See also Dusenge and Sibomana (2004) on the role of women in the multiplication of associations and the political structuring in the South and North Kivu camps in the 1990s.
 8. Cf. internet link: <http://www.bj.one.un.org/spip.php?article374>.
 9. Before the presidential election, there were 5,800 in Benin (UNHCR source), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/472896fe0.pdf>.
 10. Interview with a refugee in Agamé camp, August 2012.
 11. The president would have, for example, a counsellor for health, for education, for the distribution of food.
 12. Interview cited earlier.
 13. Extract of an interview carried out in the Agamé camp with Jonathan Ahonsu, 31 August 2012.
 14. 'Cri d'alarme des togolais réfugiés au Bénin'—text published on 24 April 2006 by Togolese refugees in Benin—letter, url: http://infostogo.de/itsite/ta06/article_it512.htm.
 15. A history of demonstrations and insurrections against subjection within the camps is still to be written and documented. It would surely show insubordination and disobedience to be a phenomenon as intrinsic to the camps as the order imposed by the UNHCR and the NGOs.
 16. This man, an agronomist by training, was a militant in the Comité d'Action pour le Renouveau (CAR) at the time of the presidential election in 2005.
 17. Extract from an interview carried out in the Agamé camp with Jonathan Ahonsu, 31 August 2012.
 18. *Idem*.
 19. Founded on 30 August 1969 by General Eyadéma, the RPT was the only party on which the regimes of the Eyadéma, father and son, based their political power, in spite of the advent of a multiparty system in 1991. It was dissolved on 14 April 2012 and was reformed under the name of the Union for the Republic (UNIR).

20. 'Cri d'alarme des réfugiés togolais au Bénin', http://infostogo.de/itsite/ta06/article_it512.htm.
21. UNHCR help for refugees was reduced from 2007 onwards, notably as far as medical aid was concerned. The school created by UNICEF was abandoned at the same time.
22. Notably the issuing of a passport and exemption from university fees for students.
23. This was one of the three main options under UNHCR policy, along with integration in the host country and repatriation, but actually only involved a tiny fraction of the refugees.
24. Extract from an interview with M Banga in the Agamé camp, 31 August 2012.
25. Many men stayed in the camp so that it would not become empty and thus be evacuated, while their families lived in Cotonou.
26. Internet link: <http://www.no-vox.org/spip.php?article307>.
27. This internal document was presented to me during an interview at the UNHCR headquarters in Lomé, Togo, 27 August 2012. Emphasis in original.

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