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The legacies of Thomas Sankara: a revolutionary experience in retrospect

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A quarter century after the 15 October 1987 assassination of Thomas Sankara in a military coup, the late president of Burkina Faso remains a near-mythical hero for many young people in his country and across Africa. They idealise the image of a committed, self-sacrificing rebel, who during four years as leader of a small, impoverished Sahelian nation sought to improve the lives of ordinary people while at the same time projecting the country onto the international arena. Why has popular interest in Sankara persisted for so long, despite the collapse of his short-lived revolutionary venture? How is it that each anniversary of his death draws hundreds, if not thousands, to commemorations at his gravesite? This article offers some retrospective reflections and re-examines those features of Sankara's revolutionary era that still resonate with many citizens today, as well as those that have been left behind.

Keywords: Sankara; Burkina Faso; revolution; mobilisation; development

[Héritage de Thomas Sankara ; retour sur une expérience révolutionnaire.] Un quart de siècle après l'assassinat de Thomas Sankara le 15 octobre 1987 lors d'un coup d'état militaire, cet ancien président du Burkina Faso demeure un héro quasi mythique pour de nombreux jeunes dans son pays et à travers l'Afrique. Ils idéalisent l'image d'un rebelle engagé, plein d'abnégation, qui a cherché, pendant quatre ans à la tête d'une petite nation sahélienne pauvre, à améliorer le sort de gens ordinaires tout en projetant le pays sur la scène internationale. Pourquoi l'intérêt populaire pour Sankara a-t-il perduré si longtemps, malgré l'échec de son entreprise révolutionnaire de courte durée? Comment se fait-il que chaque anniversaire de sa mort amène des centaines, voire des milliers de personnes à venir sur sa tombe en commémoration. Cet article offre des réflexions rétrospectives et réexamine les caractéristiques de l'ère révolutionnaire de Sankara qui fait toujours sens pour de nombreux citoyens, comme pour les laissés pour compte.

Mots-clés : Sankara ; Burkina Faso ; révolution ; mobilisation ; développement

Two weeks before the end of 2011, an exceptionally turbulent year in Burkina Faso's political life, angry youths took over a main road in the Zogona neighbourhood of Ouagadougou, the capital. They played a football game in the street to symbolise their opposition to construction work for a hotel on land they were using as a sports field, the last open area in Zogona not already taken over for commercial development. As traffic backed up and riot police watched, the protesters chanted slogans to denounce their field's appropriation. Among them: '*malheur à ceux qui bâillonnent leur peuple*' (woe to those who stifle

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their people). There was no explicit mention of Thomas Sankara, who used that phrase decades earlier to denounce an authoritarian regime. However, the protesters knew well that most Burkinabè would understand the words' origin and significance. By directing the slogan at the municipal authorities, the youths likely intended it as a general warning, as well as a specific reminder that the field had initially been set aside for Zogona's youth in 1984, during Sankara's presidency. After the district mayor promised that half the land would be devoted to a new sports complex, the protesters agreed to lift their blockade (*L'Evènement*, No. 224, 25 December 2011).

A quarter century after his assassination, Sankara remains a notable political presence in his country. Each 15 October, on the anniversary of the 1987 coup that brought his death, admirers rally by his grave in Ouagadougou to commemorate their fallen hero. Sometimes the gatherings are relatively modest, almost ritual ceremonies. Sometimes, however, they have drawn tens of thousands and turned into exuberant protests against the regime of President Blaise Compaoré, the former captain who seized power in 1987. While the speakers are usually senior opposition figures or former comrades of Sankara, many in the crowd are young, too young to have had any direct experience of Sankara's revolutionary era. Beyond Burkina Faso's own borders – in other African countries, Europe and the Americas – radical intellectuals and young activists from time to time also gather to discuss Sankara's ideas and the lessons of the revolutionary effort that he led.

While open mention of Sankara was virtually taboo in Burkina Faso for years after his death, his name has since re-entered the country's mainstream. In 2000 he was officially rehabilitated and designated a national hero. Even before that, since the restoration of a multi-party system in the 1990s, a variety of parties identifying themselves as 'Sankarist' have fielded candidates in every election and since 2002 have elected a half dozen or so deputies to the National Assembly. In the 2005 presidential election, the head of the largest Sankarist party, Bénéwendé Sankara, a labour rights lawyer (but no relation of the late president), came in a far distant second. In the 2010 presidential poll he came in third, slightly behind the second-place finisher.[1] The electoral impact of these Sankarist parties – which together generally poll under 10% of the vote – is handicapped by their fragmentation and factionalism, as well as a public impression that some of their leaders may not be motivated entirely by revolutionary ideals.

More significantly, ideas from the Sankara era are often raised as alternative solutions during times of acute crisis. They are proposed not only by those who view themselves as followers of the Sankarist tradition, but also by liberals, nationalists and others exasperated with the country's affairs. During the popular protests that rocked the country after the December 1998 assassination of independent newspaper editor Norbert Zongo, anger over the prevalent impunity enjoyed by high-level officials for their rights abuses and corrupt dealings elicited calls for a return of the revolutionary courts of the Sankara era (Harsch 1999, 404). After the food price demonstrations that swept Burkina Faso, Senegal and other African countries in early 2008, the Senegal-based rapper Didier Awadi released a hard-hitting song, *Bang Bang/Woye,* and an accompanying series of videos linking hunger to the wide gaps between rich and poor, interspersing his lyrics with quotes from Sankara excoriating the capitalist and imperialist systems. When Burkina Faso erupted after the February 2011 beating death of a student in Koudougou and anti-government demonstrations roiled the country, popular reggae artist Sams'K Le Jah premiered a new song at a concert suggesting that Compaoré leave the presidency – and sang it while wearing a Sankara T-shirt. The repeated army mutinies of 2011, with their looting of merchants' shops and residential areas, led several commentators to cite

Sankara's adage that 'a soldier without political training is just a criminal with power' (*Bendré*, 27 April 2011; *Le Pays*, 7 June 2011).

Why this lasting legacy? Why do oppositional youths in Burkina Faso – and elsewhere in Africa – continue to raise Sankara and his ideas? Undoubtedly, much of the explanation lies in their dissatisfaction with the way things are today: hunger, poverty, widespread abuses and corruption, electoral 'democracies' that bring little real change, elites that incline more towards Western capitals than to their fellow citizens. For some across the region, singing Sankara's praises or wearing a T-shirt with his image can symbolise their alienation and defiance, a political–cultural expression comparable to the ubiquitous portraits of Che Guevara and Bob Marley. In Burkina Faso specifically, the message conveyed by brandishing Sankara's name or image is especially pointed. Not only was he a homegrown rebel, but the person seen as responsible for his martyrdom still sits in the presidential palace. What better way to visibly express rejection of the established order?

This article does not assess affairs in post-Sankara Burkina Faso (for which, see Englebert 1996; Otayek, Sawadogo and Guingané 1996; Harsch 1998, 1999, 2009; Hilgers and Mazzocchetti 2010). Nor does it analyse the activities of those who claim to be following in Sankara's footsteps, except to note how they have taken up some of his initiatives and ideas. Mainly, I look back at certain aspects of Burkina Faso's revolutionary experience and the role of its most celebrated leader. This effort is admittedly selective. Revolutions are complex affairs and always stimulate divergent reactions, from detractors and admirers alike. Even staunch partisans generally cannot agree on which features were most important, innovative or successful, which failed, which should be remembered or forgotten. These reflections also are inevitably coloured by the author's own particular research on Burkina Faso, during and since the revolution.[2]

An historic turning point

The singularity of the revolutionary experience of 1983–1987 can only be fully appreciated by keeping in mind the country's social and political conditions at the time. In the colonial era, Upper Volta, 'Haute-Volta' as it was named by the French authorities, was regarded as little more than a remote backwater, with few resources deemed worthy of exploitation, except as a labour reserve of young, able-bodied men. As a result, Upper Volta experienced far less investment, infrastructure development, market penetration or class stratification than did many African colonies in the coastal regions. Nor did the different peoples of the colony, or their elites, have much opportunity to develop an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1993) beyond their particular ethnic groups, since the colonial state scarcely reached outside a few main towns.

Upper Volta exhibited only limited opposition to colonial rule following the crushing of the last armed resistance to French conquest in 1916. The handful of nationalist or leftist figures who emerged were outmanoeuvred by more conservative forces. When France finally ceded sovereignty in 1960, it handed the reins to a politician, Maurice Yaméogo, who had actually opposed independence a year earlier. The trade unions and student movements were well organised and militant, however, and led an insurrection against Yaméogo in January 1966 (Guirma 1991). However, they were too weak to install a more popular government, and instead welcomed the army commander's seizure of power. It was the first of a succession of military takeovers, and trade union agitation played a role in undermining a couple of the subsequent regimes as well.

Since notable independence-era 'national heroes' were scarce, it is likely that the emergence of even a moderately progressive or nationalist leader would have left a prominent

mark in the history books. Yet Sankara was anything but moderate. Early on, the young army captain maintained secret contacts with several Marxist-inspired groupings and was especially close to a childhood friend, Soumane Touré, who was the leader of the most militant union federation. Sankara and other leftist officers gradually gained popularity among the military's junior ranks (Andriamirado 1987; Jaffré 2007).

In late 1981 a fragile military regime seeking to shore up its credibility brought Sankara in as minister of information. That move backfired. Sankara supported the local media in exposing high-level corruption, and when the regime turned more repressive, he resigned and publicly denounced it (using the famous phrase 'Woe to those who stifle their people'). Detention and house arrest followed. Yet another coup, this time partly reflecting the growing strength of younger left-leaning officers, brought Sankara back in January 1983 as prime minister. Again he used state office to agitate for change, including by supporting labour mobilisations, denouncing corruption, criticising the conservative sway of traditional chiefs and espousing anti-imperialist foreign policy positions. Alarm bells sounded in Paris, and the conservative senior officers in the regime were encouraged to mount an internal coup in May 1983 to depose and arrest Sankara and his closest colleagues.

That coup did not go as planned. Large demonstrations hit Ouagadougou, involving high school students, youths from the poor neighbourhoods and some trade unionists. Protesters cried 'Free Sankara!' and chanted slogans against France. Clandestine committees of civilians formed to oppose the coup and anti-government tracts circulated in the barracks. Most seriously, the paratrooper garrison in Pô remained under the control of Captain Compaoré, then a Sankara loyalist. A fragile stalemate set in between the two competing centres of military authority, Ouagadougou and Pô. Finally, on 4 August 1983, Compaoré led some 250 paratroopers to Ouagadougou to seize major installations, in coordination with Sankara, other military personnel and units of civilian supporters. By that evening Sankara was on the air to proclaim the overthrow of the government and the creation of a new National Council of the Revolution (CNR).

Some in the media and political detractors saw the uniforms of Sankara and his fellow officers and quickly labelled the takeover a 'coup' and the government a 'military regime'. Unlike the country's previous military interventions, however, the 1983 takeover was conducted with the direct collaboration of several leftist civilian groups, whose leaders also filled prominent government posts. The CNR and cabinet were hybrid military–civilian formations, although the greatest influence was wielded by Sankara, Compaoré, Captain Henri Zongo and Commander Jean-Baptiste Lingani, the four 'historic' leaders of the August 1983 seizure of power.[3]

Whether the experience led by Sankara's CNR could be characterised as a 'revolution' is debatable. By definitions that focus on turnovers in a political system (Tilly 1978, 1995), it was. Yet it clearly did not entail the kind of deep-going economic and social transformations that marked the 'great revolutions' of France, Russia or China, or even those that resulted from Africa's anti-colonial insurrections (Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique) or the overthrow of the feudal monarchy in Ethiopia. And while Sankara and his colleagues drew on the country's traditions of popular agitation and often sought to spur popular mobilisation, the latter had serious limits, so that much of the initiative for change came largely from the the CNR, thus to some extent resembling a 'revolution from above' (Trimberger 1978). Yet whatever label one might apply, it was evident to many contemporary observers that the CNR brought more political, economic, social and cultural changes in its four short years to the country than had occurred in the previous quarter century.

Ideology

For many outside observers – and citizens of the country itself – it was not easy to pin down the outlook of the leadership. Sankara and his colleagues called theirs a 'democratic and popular revolution'. This led some academic analysts to apply the label 'populist' (Beinen 1985; Martin 1987). They sometimes did so by pairing Sankara with Ghana's Jerry Rawlings, another young officer who in his early years in power did seem to fit the populist characterisation. Some media commentators also tagged Sankara as a follower of Muammar el-Qaddafi. During one visit to Libya, Qaddafi apparently did press Sankara to adopt his 'Green Book' approach, but Sankara replied: 'We are not exactly political virgins. Your experience interests us, but we want to live our own' (Andriamirado 1987, 58).

Sankara readily identified himself as Marxist, although he took care not to impose that label on the revolutionary process itself. The influence of Marxist ideas is evident throughout his speeches, especially the famous 'Political orientation speech' of October 1983, which provided a detailed analysis of class forces and the strategy for allying with some while opposing others (Prairie 2007, 76–109).[4] In his address to the UN General Assembly he cited the inspiration of the French Revolution, Paris Commune and Russian Revolution (Prairie 2007, 165). For the editors of *Thomas Sankara speaks*, the most extensive collection of his works, this ideological orientation is the defining element of his political legacy: 'Sankara stood out among the leaders of struggles for national liberation in Africa in the last half of the twentieth century because he was a communist' (Prairie 2007, 11).

Much has changed since Sankara's death. The Berlin Wall has fallen, the Soviet Union has disappeared and many self-professed communists around the world have either jettisoned their former beliefs or been thrown onto the defensive. In Burkina Faso, those of Sankara's former colleagues who sided with Compaoré's coup soon moved rightward; if they still identify with the left at all, they tend to call themselves 'social democrats'. More tellingly, hardly any of the Sankarist leaders in Burkina Faso today draw attention to their hero's communist beliefs. The largest of the Sankarist groups, the *Union pour la renaissance/Parti sankariste* (UNIR/PS), often speaks in general terms about the need to struggle for democracy and justice and against 'exploitation in all its forms' (UNIR/PS 2009, 2012). Norbert Tiendrébéogo, leader of the *Front des forces sociales*, another Sankarist party, has gone so far as to deny that Sankara was ever a Marxist (*Sidwaya*, 17 October 2007) and has argued that 'Sankarism defines itself as a political current born of democratic socialism', with an endogenous and pragmatic character (*Sidwaya*, 9 March 2012).

Other facets of Sankara's ideological outlook have retained somewhat greater favour, both within Burkina Faso and among radical activists elsewhere. His pronouncements against imperialism and in support of liberation movements – from Southern Africa to the Western Sahara, from Central America to New Caledonia – are frequently remembered. So is his staunch stand against Africa's growing foreign debt and his (unsuccessful) call on other African leaders to collectively refuse to pay. Most famously, many recall, Sankara transgressed diplomatic niceties by criticising some of France's foreign policy positions directly to a visiting President François Mitterrand, provoking the latter's half-joking rebuke: 'This is a somewhat troublesome man, President Sankara' (Sankara and Mitterrand 1986). By earning the enmity of various Western powers and their local allies, Sankara's determination to speak out against imperialist domination simultaneously elicited cheers from many champions of genuine independence for Africa. Sankara's frequent calls for building pan-African unity, not simply at the top, but especially among the continent's peoples, also left a lasting impression. Commented Burundian activist David Gakunzi in

his preface to the first French-language collection of Sankara's speeches, 'Profoundly Burkinabè, Sankara was also profoundly pan-Africanist, internationalist and attached to the struggles of the Third World' (Gakunzi 1991, 14).

Sankara's strong stance against corruption and high living by government officials reflected another side of his outlook. In such a poor country, frugality and integrity were the new watchwords. Public trials sent scores of dignitaries to jail for corruption or fraud. Sitting government ministers had to drive small and inexpensive Renaults or Peugeots. Sankara kept his own children in public schools and rebuffed relatives who sought state jobs. Twenty-five years after Sankara's death, Maxime Nikièma, a leading figure in the Réseau national de lutte anti-corruption (Ren-lac), the main civil anti-corruption organisation, noted that under the CNR – unlike today – there was a 'strong political will' to combat corruption (*Sidwaya*, 15 October 2012). With corruption, theft and nepotism so prevalent across Africa, Sankara's anti-corruption campaigns and personal example have drawn wide attention. In South Africa, for example, a Black Consciousness-inspired group has drawn explicitly on Sankara's ideas to demand that President Jacob Zuma and other leaders of the ruling African National Congress give up their mansions and live by the same standards as the majority of the people (September National Imbizo 2012).

Pan-Africanist, anti-imperialist, communist, anti-corruption crusader, the labels all appeared to fit Sankara to varying degrees and at various times. Those who cite him today tend to highlight whatever facet seems most appropriate for the occasion.

Nation building

Sankara from time to time talked about the need for 'patriotism' to defend, build and modernise his country. Yet he generally avoided calls to nationalism in the narrow sense of the term. There was little in the old, 'neo-colonial' state of Upper Volta worth rallying around. The revolutionary effort certainly was unfolding within particular borders, but Sankara repeatedly insisted that it also was part of a wider regional, continental and global struggle.

Still, the process of change unleashed under Sankara saw more efforts at nation building than were ever before attempted, or even projected. This was a core element of the revolutionary agenda: trying to forge a semblance of nationhood from among the disparate peoples of the territory once known as Upper Volta, while simultaneously seeking to challenge the narrow parameters of external domination bequeathed by the colonial past. As someone grounded in the methods of Marxist analysis, Sankara understood well that the character and possibilities of the revolution were largely determined by existing realities, the 'objective conditions'. The revolution, Sankara acknowledged, was occurring 'in a backward, agricultural country where the weight of tradition and ideology emanating from a feudal-type social organisation weighs very heavily on the popular masses', and where there was not yet 'an organized working class, conscious of its historic mission' (Prairie 2007, 40). Building socialism, while seen as a desirable future, was clearly not on the immediate agenda. Given Upper Volta's extreme state of underdevelopment, more basic tasks took precedence.

On the first anniversary of the 1983 takeover Sankara's CNR renamed their state 'Burkina Faso', which roughly translates as 'land of the upright people'. By drawing the name from two different indigenous languages (and taking the 'bè' suffix in 'Burkinabè' from yet a third), the government affirmed the African identity of the new state it was trying to fashion, a state that sought to draw its legitimacy not from a colonial geographical designation but from the diverse peoples who live in it. This effort to tap indigenous culture was consciously pan-territorial. Historically, the Mossi had tended to dominate, given their

numbers (about half the population), their geographical concentration (in the centre, around the capital) and the weight of the Mossi kingdom within the colonial state. Sankara's government followed a more inclusive approach. The CNR had numerous Mossi in it, but also Bobo, Gourounsi, Peulh and others. Sankara himself was from a marginal and low-status sub-group known as the Silmi–Mossi (of mixed Mossi and Peulh ancestry).

Television news was no longer delivered only in French, but also in Mooré and occasionally other languages. Because very few Burkinabè had access to television, radio remained the main means of communication, and it used 11 indigenous languages. An adult literacy campaign launched in 1986 was conducted in nine. Major rallies and conferences frequently featured dance and musical performances by troupes from different ethnic groups. A declaration of a prize jury at one cultural festival affirmed that while individual works might be in competition, the cultures themselves would not be, since 'each culture has its own value. . .This festival is an occasion for our different nationalities to discover themselves, to make themselves known, and to mutually enrich themselves, for the birth of a genuinely national culture' (*Carrefour africain*, 29 December 1984).

During the revolutionary era, many citizens acquired a strong sense of pride in their African identity and in the cultural richness of their country. Years after the CNR's demise, significant sectors of the population, including leading figures who were politically hostile to the Sankara government, seem to readily accept their identification as citizens of Burkina Faso, as Burkinabè.

Economic and social reorientation

In seeking to build a national economy based more on domestic markets and interests, the Sankara government faced a paradoxical situation. Since much of the economy was still dominated by subsistence agriculture and there was very little industry of any kind, Burkina Faso was not as deeply enmeshed in external market relations as some of its neighbours, thus posing fewer impediments to major policy reorientations. Yet because the productive forces were so rudimentary, the country had few resources of its own to draw on.

In rather sweeping terms, the government's five-year plan proclaimed the ultimate goal to be nothing less than an 'independent, self-sufficient and planned national economy at the service of a democratic and popular society' (Ministère de la planification 1985, i). The state was to play the central role, since no other force, including the minuscule private sector, could mobilise the capital required for building essential infrastructure and stimulating productive activities. True, the government still drew on foreign aid. Yet while overall aid levels stayed steady in real terms between 1984 and 1987, much of it was tied to specific projects that were already under way. France, the largest donor, halted all general budgetary support after 1983, as did the World Bank after 1984 (Zagré 1994, 164, 176).

New state investments therefore could be financed only by seriously economising on existing operations. Civil service salaries were frozen and government ministers had to give up allowances. Successive budgets spent much more on health, education and other social programmes and allotted significantly greater investment to infrastructure and productive projects.

Most striking was an overall shift away from the cities and towards the countryside. The government provided poor farmers and livestock herders with more extensive public services, productive inputs, price incentives, marketing assistance, irrigation, environmental protection and other support. In the five-year plan, 71% of investments in the productive sectors was allocated to agriculture, livestock, fisheries, wildlife and forests (Ministère de la planification 1985, 269).

Villagers also benefited from greater access to health and education. By January 1986 more than 7460 primary health posts had been established, roughly one for each village. Some 2 million children had been vaccinated against the major childhood diseases, and about 36,000 villagers were taught basic literacy (Novicki 1986; *Sidwaya*, 27 January 1986). These initiatives were part of a broader drive to expand social services. Between 1983 and 1987, public health spending increased by 27% and education expenditures by 42% (Savadogo and Wetta 1992, 60). Important new initiatives were also taken in other areas vital to social welfare, including housing, transport, child assistance, job-creation, water and family planning (Jaffré 1989, 79–98).

The government welcomed whatever external aid it could get. However, Planning Minister Youssouf Ouédraogo insisted that such aid would no longer be the 'determining factor' in the government's priorities (author's interview, Ouagadougou, 15 March 1985). The CNR also explicitly rejected the programmes of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, largely because of their neoliberal policy prescriptions. Reflecting a view of Sankara as a committed opponent of neoliberalism, academics and activists argued at an international symposium in Ouagadougou on the twentieth anniversary of his death that Sankara could be considered a precursor of 'altermondialisation', that is, of those who today champion alternatives to capitalist globalisation (*Le Pays*, 15 October 2007; *Sidwaya*, 15 October 2007). Others focused on Sankara's various initiatives to integrate environmental protection into economic development strategies (*Sidwaya*, 16 October 2007), years before the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio popularised such a linkage.

Popular mobilisation

A particularly notable feature of the Sankara government's approach to development was its reliance on social mobilisations and local self-help projects. The basic concept of community self-help had deep social roots. Even though customary ties and obligations had weakened, notions of social solidarity, communal work, reciprocity and the general welfare still had some vitality. The country had various village assemblies, farmers' groups, cooperatives, youth associations and other civil organisations. The largest peasants' association, the *Union de fédérations des groupements naam* (UFGN), relied heavily on the tradition of *naam* collective work groups, in which young men and women mobilised for community and cooperative agricultural activities (Ouédraogo 1990). While not formally linking to such groups, the Sankara government saw the utility of drawing on their ideas and practices.

Its main vehicles were the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). In response to a call by Sankara in his first radio broadcast, people in Ouagadougou's poorer neighbourhoods began setting up the first CDRs on an ad hoc basis, with leaders chosen by direct, open election. The CDRs spread within several months from the main urban centres throughout the country, to most of the approximately 7000 villages.

The CDRs' first collective labour mobilisations involved cleaning school and hospital courtyards, graveling roads, building mini-dams and even starting construction on schools, community centres, theatres and other facilities. They elicited a ready and sometimes enthusiastic response from villagers and urban poor, since the projects were of immediate benefit to local communities and there was at least an element of consultation in their selection, with proposals often raised during public general assemblies.

There were some tensions between the CDRs and civil groups independent of the state, especially the trade unions concentrated in the main cities. However, relations between the committees and civil associations were generally less conflictual in rural areas. Contrary to analyses that portrayed Sankara's CNR as bent on stamping out all centres of independent

activity and establishing totalitarian control of most social and political life (Otayek 1989, 4; Banégas 1993; Englebert 1996, 58), the mobilisations of the defence committees coincided with an overall expansion in associational life. The UFGN, for example, was able to spread beyond its original base in Yatenga to 15 provinces, with a spectacular rise in total membership from 5120 to 151,910 between 1983 and 1987 (*Carrefour africain*, 15 May 1987; Koumba 1990, 6). Overall, 166 new civil associations were established in that same period, comparable to the number created during the previous five years (Diawara 1996, 239).

The CDRs themselves had a popular character. They involved many people, especially among the poor, who previously had never taken part in any political or associational activity. With few other means of expression available to them – in societies where traditional power relations accorded formal authority to elders and family patriarchs and denied younger age-sets any real say over basic life decisions – youths especially flocked to the CDRs. Lower castes or those of other subordinate status also found in the CDRs new opportunities to assert themselves. For example, among the semi-nomadic Peulh of the Liptaako region, the lower-ranking Rimaybe (a category originally descended from non-Peulh war captives, slaves and vassals) were 'very satisfied with the revolution of Sankara', in part because they saw a chance to advance their standing against the aristocratic Rimbe (Bovin 1990, 35). Such inclusiveness often alarmed socially conservative Burkinabè – especially traditional chiefs and elders in the countryside – but it also infused the committees with the vitally that made many of their mobilisational activities so effective.

Women's advancement

To a lesser extent, women also found avenues for advancement through the CDRs. They tended to be most active in community self-help mobilisations, and rarely in other activities, although a quota system for elections to the CDR bureaus ensured that at least a few women rose to leadership positions.

From the outset, Sankara emphasised the emancipation of women as one of his central social and political goals – a rarity for any president in Africa at the time. In his political orientation speech, women's advancement featured second in a list of national priorities, after reform of the army but before economic reconstruction. This was more than just rhetoric. Specific 'pro-women' measures were built into many programmes, from literacy classes targeted toward women, to the establishment of primary health units in each village, to support for women's cooperatives and market associations. A new family code set a minimum age for marriage, established divorce by mutual consent, recognised a widow's right to inherit and prohibited the bride-price. Vigorous public campaigns were launched against female genital mutilation, forced marriage and polygamy. Progress in such areas was painfully slow, however, and remains a serious challenge for women in Burkina Faso today.

At a time when hardly any women reached high political positions in Africa, Sankara named several to cabinet posts, including as ministers of the budget, family affairs, culture and health. Though more of a gesture than a genuine shift between the genders, such appointments nonetheless sent a strong signal of encouragement to women at all levels. In September 1985 the *Union des femmes du Burkina* (UFB) was set up by the CDR national secretariat. Local UFB bureaus were elected by general assemblies of women, but the chairperson, initially, was the female CDR bureau member responsible for women's mobilisation (*Sidwaya*, 23 September 1985). The UFB was not independent,

and members sometimes were relegated to stereotypical female roles such as preparing meals for CDR conferences. Gradually, however, the women's union acquired a more distinct profile – only to disappear a couple of years after the 1987 coup.

Democratising power?

When Sankara and his fellow revolutionaries seized power in 1983, one of their first acts was to ban the established political parties, seen as instruments of the old elites. Although a variety of small, leftist groups were permitted to operate openly – so long as they supported the CNR – no plans for representative elections to a national legislature or similar body were ever contemplated. Instead, the Sankara government advanced notions akin to those of participatory democracy. As with the social mobilisations, the CDRs were regarded as the main vehicles for introducing elements of popular participation.

According to Sankara, one of the CDRs' main goals was to 'democratize power', so that they could act as 'representatives of revolutionary power in the villages, the urban neighbourhoods, and the workplaces' (Prairie 2007, 94, 96). At the local level – and only there – the CDRs were relatively democratic structures, with bureau members directly elected in open general assemblies. Above these local committees, however, was a hierarchy of command capped by an appointed National General Secretariat, headed by two military officers. The secretariat, according to the CDR statutes, had the authority to dismiss 'faltering' CDR bureaus, within a framework that subordinated lower bodies to higher ones (CNR 1984, 10–27). The CDR general secretary, Capt. Pierre Ouédraogo, justified this subordination on the grounds that it could be 'extremely dangerous to give all the power to the masses right away, when some of them do not even understand what the revolution is' (author's interview, Ouagadougou, 15 March 1985). So decision-making remained essentially top-down.

It was projected, however, that the more representative aspects of the CDRs would gradually be scaled up through a pyramid-type structure. After a 1984–1985 territorial reorganisation, each of the 300 departments was managed by a council selected by the village and town CDRs within that department, but headed by a government-appointed prefect. The mayors of 29 urban communes were similarly chosen by the CDRs in those towns, although Ouagadougou's mayor was named by the government. In early 1987 the authorities began laying the groundwork for representative councils for the 30 provinces, with members chosen by lower-ranking CDRs, although the provincial high commissioners would remain government appointees (*Sidwaya*, 17 and 20 February 1987). Would these developments have provided opportunities for transmitting ideas and grievances from the local level upwards, rather than simply making implementation of government initiatives more effective? The limited nature of initiatives from below and the central authorities' tendency to dismiss ideas that did not fit their revolutionary schema suggested that expressions of genuine democratic participation would have been constrained. In any case, before such opportunities could even be tested, the process was ended by the 1987 military coup.

Subsequently, the Compaoré regime – under pressure from both its citizenry and new donor preferences for liberal democratic trappings – drafted a new constitution in 1991 that shifted the country towards a multi-party electoral system. Although the new language of rights and liberal democracy tended to mask the perpetuation of a de facto party-state that repeatedly re-elected the same ruling elite (Loada, 1996, 2010), the political opposition, moderate and radical alike, has adopted the same language of electoral democracy, rights and rule of law. For their part, the Sankarist parties from time to time recall elements of participatory democracy from the Sankara era, but they also affirm their support for the

country's current constitutional order. However badly that system may function in practice in Burkina Faso, these parties accept it as the guiding model for democratic engagement today.

Abuses and repression

Although the CDRs could be credited with some accomplishments, their image, in historical memory, is largely sullied. What people tend to remember most were the many and repeated abuses carried out by young – and sometimes armed – CDR militants. In reminiscences of the revolutionary era, even people who are generally favourable to Sankara's initiatives often see the CDRs as a sad and sorry exception.

Some CDR leaders operated in a commandist fashion, relying more on directives than persuasion. Armed patrols by undisciplined youths in the defence committees' vigilance brigades engaged in shakedowns, extortion and armed robbery. Although charged with unmasking corrupt state functionaries, some activists themselves embezzled funds and broke into homes to collect 'taxes' and 'contributions'. A few were hauled before the People's Revolutionary Courts, which opened special dockets devoted to 'gangster CDRs' (*Sidwaya*, 3 December 1985).

The first national CDR conference in March–April 1986 featured many frank and sharp criticisms. CDR cadres were warned not to engage in 'vendettas and vandalism'. 'Inexcusable and revolting' actions by some CDRs had given a poor image to the revolution and contributed to 'the demobilisation of the masses' (Secrétariat général national des CDR 1986, 62, 93). Sankara, in the closing address, was especially scathing. Some CDR leaders

> set themselves up as veritable despots in the local districts, in the villages, and in the provinces... Reigning and holding sway like warlords... The CDR office must not be a locale of torturers but the complete opposite: an office where you find people who lead, who organize, who mobilize, who educate, and who struggle as revolutionaries. (Prairie 2007, 281–285)

There were subsequent campaigns to clean up the CDRs, and their security functions were downgraded. However, the basic problem lay not just with some inexperienced and uncontrolled local activists; it came from higher up. While the CNR's various initiatives elicited some support, they also stirred resentment, passive insubordination and at times outright resistance (Banégas 1993). This led the authorities to place greater emphasis on coercion and to react in excessively repressive ways to overt challenges.

As often happens with governments that come in through armed force, key officials of the overthrown regime – and several of its predecessors – were immediately detained. Scores were tried before People's Revolutionary Courts on charges of corruption, embezzlement, misuse of public funds and other economic infractions, and sentenced to prison terms and monetary penalties. There was solid evidence that many probably were guilty of the charges, but the trials nevertheless had strong political connotations.[5] Many other public employees were summarily dismissed from their jobs because of their previous political affiliations.

Very early, relations between the CNR and a number of the trade unions soured, in part because of the political leanings of some union leaders. In fact, on the very day of the 4 August 1983 revolution, the CNR was repudiated by a congress of the main primary school teachers' union, which had backed a previous military regime. In March 1984 security forces arrested several of the union's leaders, prompting a three-day strike that was observed by many teachers around the country. The CNR retaliated by firing about 1300

strikers (Kabeya-Muase 1989, 198–201; Sandwidi 1996). The action was shocking to many Burkinabè. Decades later, Issa Tiendrébéogo, a minister of higher education under Sankara, still considered the teachers' firing to have been a 'serious error' (*L'Observateur Paalga*, 9 October 2007).

The government's conflict with the unions deepened in 1984 after one of the CNR's key civilian components, the *Ligue patriotique pour le développement* (Lipad) – affiliated with the Soviet-inclined *Parti africaine pour l'indépendance* (PAI) – was evicted from both the CNR and the cabinet. One of Lipad's best-known leaders, Soumane Touré, also headed a sizeable union federation and the following year it joined with another bloc of dissident unions. Touré and other unionists were repeatedly detained.

The next two years, 1986 and 1987, brought some shifts in the Sankara government's approach. On both the political and social fronts, there was an evident effort to ease tensions. Several imprisoned officials of previous governments were freed. Several hundred of the teachers fired after the 1984 strike were reinstated. In August 1987, Sankara sent a memorandum to all cabinet ministers asking them to examine ways to reintegrate more dismissed teachers, as well as civil servants who had been fired for political reasons (Jaffré 2007, 246).

Leadership rifts

While such efforts were under way to ease up on lower-level civil servants, Sankara simultaneously escalated the fight against corruption at the top. By 1987, many officials of previous regimes had already been tried, but now attention turned towards *current* officeholders. A new People's Commission for the Prevention of Corruption began public hearings at which Sankara and other high officials were obliged to publicly declare their own and their families' assets and incomes (the Sankara family's assets were quite modest). At the last cabinet meeting the day before the coup, Sankara pushed for adoption of a code of conduct for everyone holding high state office (Somé 1990, 65–68). Ernest Nongma Ouédraogo, a cousin of Sankara who was then interior minister, later recalled that Compaoré, already 'not very enthusiastic about the struggle against corruption', was additionally unhappy that he had to publicly declare his assets. According to Ouédraogo, Compaoré was subsequently 'reproached for having hidden certain properties of his wife, such as a massive gold clock given to her by President Houphouët-Boigny' of Côte d'Ivoire, in whose family she was raised (author's interview, Ouagadougou, 4 March 1999).

Besides the unease of Compaoré and others over the anti-corruption drive, serious divergences emerged over leadership issues, including on the use of repression. A few of those differences were expressed publicly at the time, but many came out only after the 1987 coup as several former members of the CNR and others provided accounts of the leadership rifts that contributed to it. With the exception of Martens' (1989) apologia for the coup, most accounts (Andriamirado 1989; Jaffré 1989; Somé 1990) contradict the justifications put forward by Compaoré's supporters. Those supporters sought to portray Sankara as an autocrat who wanted to rule alone and was against unification of the revolutionary political organisations.

From his public statements, Sankara clearly did have misgivings about a simple merger of the existing groups. The latter for the most part were very small, with a base only in the student movement, among academics and within sectors of the officer corps. Most of their members, moreover, had been politically educated through the writings of Mao or Enver Hoxha of Albania. With Joseph Stalin also featuring among their pantheon of heroes, many exhibited a very dogmatic, intolerant approach and had a 'forced march' view of

revolutionary change. The military officers among them (most notably within the *Union communiste burkinabè*) brought an additional measure of commandism into the mix.

While not free of commandist inclinations himself, Sankara seemed to push in a somewhat different direction during his last year or so, sometimes in explicitly anti-Stalinist language. He remarked to one journalist that Stalin had 'killed Leninism' by suppressing the soviets and elevating the secret police (Andriamirado 1989, 115). In a 1986 speech, he warned against creating a political vanguard through a simple amalgamation of existing organisations, which could lead to a 'nomenklatura of untouchable dignitaries' (*Sidwaya*, 7 August 1986), using the Russian word for a Soviet-style list of state positions reserved for party appointees. And in a major address in August 1987, he sharply rejected any form of organisation that would be monolithic and politically paralysing. What Burkina Faso needed instead was a unity that would be 'a manifold, varied, and enriching expression of many different ideas and diverse activities, ideas and activities that are rich with a thousand nuances'. While the revolution, he said, 'means repression of the exploiters, of our enemies, it must mean only persuasion for the masses – persuasion to take on a conscious and determined commitment' (Prairie 2007, 397).

Sankara's ideas about widening the CNR's political base were closely connected to his moves to ease political tensions more broadly. Besides suggesting that the CNR reach out to the many activists who were not affiliated with any of the organised left groups, Sankara hinted at a rapprochement with Lipad. However, any direct overtures to the latter were short-circuited in May 1987 when members of a CDR in Ouagadougou arrested several prominent unionists, including Soumane Touré, on accusations of planning anti-government demonstrations. That CDR openly called for their execution. Leaders of all but one of the leftist groups in the CNR backed the call for Touré to be put to death, but Sankara's 'intervention was decisive in saving Soumane Touré's life' (Somé 1990, 89–90). Presidential aide Frédéric Kiemdé, who was to die with Sankara in the coup, said the day before that Sankara was against the unionists' detention because it had 'done damage to the revolution' (private conversation, 14 October 1987, Ouagadougou). Sankara pressed for their release, and although Touré himself remained in detention, several were let go. At a CNR meeting in early October, Sankara announced that nearly 90 political detainees would soon be freed (Andriamirado 1989, 88). Because of his conciliatory stance, Sankara told a group of foreign journalists a week later, 'There's now a campaign against me. I'm accused of being a sentimentalist' (author's notes, 10 October 1987, Ouagadougou).

That campaign culminated in the coup and Sankara's assassination. While the immediate initiative appears to have come from senior Burkinabè military officers, many suspect they had direct encouragement and support from France, Côte d'Ivoire and other foreign powers alarmed by the Sankara regime's anti-imperialist policies.[6]

On domestic issues, those within the CNR and officer corps who favoured a harder, more repressive course, won out. To justify their action, they then blamed many of the shortcomings of the previous four years on Sankara alone. They simultaneously sought to take credit for the revolution's achievements – although it was not long before they abandoned even the pretence of continuing the revolution.

'Dare to invent the future'

In the immediate wake of the coup, there was a frequent reproach levelled against Sankara: that he was a hopeless utopian who failed to heed his country's objective limitations and thereby overreached. Some saw this as a trait typical of charismatic leaders (Skinner 1988). They may be great visionaries, but they often have difficulty grasping the routine,

bureaucratic procedures deemed necessary for consolidation. A number of Sankara's own supporters complained that he tended to announce sweeping initiatives without fully considering how they might be implemented.

Sankara's declarations certainly were full of far-reaching goals and grand visions. This was, after all, a revolutionary endeavour, not an attempt at incremental reform. Sankara also expressed great impatience with those who insisted that a poor country – or people who are poor – should not set their sights too high. He was fond of saying: 'That which man can imagine, he can achieve' (*Sidwaya*, 27 August 1986). Or as he told a Swiss journalist:

> You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. . .[I]t comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. . . We must dare to invent the future. (Prairie 2007, 232)

Yet Sankara's quest was not utopian. In the four years he was president, he demonstrated repeatedly that initiatives that once were unimaginable could at least be set into motion. He did so by convincing many ordinary people that *they* had the capacity to act. He had exceptional skills as an orator and was able to reach audiences with colourful and inventive turns of phrase, sharp wit and clear intelligence. His words were reinforced by a personal demeanour that projected sincerity, openness and humility, often conveyed through gestures as simple as riding a bicycle through the streets, playing football in shorts and jersey or mingling with villagers in a relaxed manner.

Sankara also communicated his messages through symbolic, even theatrical measures. To demystify high state functions, central government budgets were formulated in mass public assemblies and executives of state enterprises were subjected to public grillings. Civil servants were often required to wear traditionally designed and woven Faso dan Fani outfits instead of Western-style suits, both to boost indigenous culture and create a domestic market for clothes made from local cotton. On International Women's Day men were encouraged to go to market in place of their wives or to plant trees in their honour. Such measures could not always be enforced – and sometimes elicited derision – but many conveyed basic ideas that were long remembered.

Some of the outcomes of popular inspiration could be quite remarkable. In September 1984 the Sankara government announced that it would mount a commando-style campaign to vaccinate most children against the key childhood killers (measles, meningitis and yellow fever) within just two weeks. External donors warned that it could not be done, and urged a more cautious pace. Yet the government persisted, using the state media to publicise the campaign and the CDRs to mobilise local health workers and village activists to carry it out. By the end of the two weeks, some two million children had been vaccinated, raising the rate of immunisation against the three diseases from just 11–19% of all children to 60–75%. As a result, the usual epidemics of measles and meningitis did not take place the following year, preventing anywhere between 18,000 and 50,000 child deaths (Harrison 1987, 169–170).

As such examples illustrate, Sankara was not only able to convince others to share his dream, but also to realise that their own hard work and commitment could transform the dream into reality. Concluded Boureima Ouédraogo, editor of the Burkinabè fortnightly *Le Reporter*: 'Sankara certainly was not an angel or saint. He was a man, with his faults and qualities.' If Sankara continues to stir emulation, 'it is above all because he succeeded in getting an entire generation of Africans to dream' (Ouédraogo 2010).

Note on contributor

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Notes

1. Arba Diallo, who came in second in 2010 with 8.2% of the vote (against Bénéwendé Sankara's 6.3%), did not style himself a Sankarist, although he had been the foreign minister in Sankara's first cabinet (1983–1984) and then served the Sankara government in several ambassadorial postings.
2. As a journalist and academic, the author has studied Burkina Faso since the mid 1980s, visiting the country three times during the revolution and twice since then. He met with Sankara on a half-dozen occasions, the last time four days before his death, and conducted an interview that appears in the collection *Thomas Sankara speaks*. Most recently he wrote a biographical sketch of Sankara for the *Dictionary of African biography* (Harsch 2012).
3. Neither Zongo nor Lingani appear to have actively participated in Compaoré's 1987 coup, although they did acquiesce to it. Both were executed in late 1989 on charges of plotting against Compaoré.
4. Extracts were also published in the *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 32, April 1985, pp. 48–55.
5. The revolutionary courts were abolished within a couple years after the coup. A number of their judgments were subsequently reversed, in some cases because the rulings were faulty, but certainly also for political reasons, to gain support for the Compaoré government among elements of the old political elites.
6. To this day, many of the details of the coup remain unclear, including whether Compaoré personally ordered Sankara's death and to what extent France or other foreign powers were implicated. Andriamirado (1989) provides a detailed examination of the forces involved in the coup, while Jaffré (2009) gives a reasoned overview of what is known so far about the coup and Sankara's assassination, including the possible involvement of external forces.

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