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THE DEATH OF THOMAS SANKARA AND THE RECTIFICATION OF THE PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION IN BURKINA FASO

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Introduction—Ouagadougou the 'Ghost Town'

IT WAS just over three months after the military coup d'état which overthrew Captain Thomas Sankara as President of Burkina Faso had taken place, and all was still quiet on the streets of the capital Ouagadougou. The people of Burkina Faso, commonly known as the Burkinabè, maintained their silence or even indifference concerning the events which took place on Thursday 15 October 1987 when President Sankara was shot, along with thirteen others, just outside the *Conseil d'Entente*, the central parliament. The presidential post was immediately claimed and taken by Sankara's right-hand man and close colleague Captain Blaise Compaoré. He, while regretting the death of his grand frère, nevertheless proceeded to rate him a traitor to the 'Popular Revolution' which, ironically, Sankara had himself instigated on 4 August 1983. The Burkinabè are now experiencing the 'rectification of the revolution' which Compaoré promised as a justification for the ousting of the existing President. Now that a reasonable amount of time has elapsed since the change in regime in Ouaguadougou, it seems appropriate to make an assessment of the legacy of Thomas Sankara and of the progress of Compaoré's rectification process.

Apart from the token redistribution of uniforms in the armed forces, little has changed in poverty-stricken Burkina Faso. Still rated as the third poorest country in the world, it offers little promise to large scale agricultural development due to its geographical location in the dusty and barren waste-land of the Sahel.[1] Along with its neighbours Mali and Niger, Burkina Faso attracts virtually no foreign-backed industrial investment or development, and the few remaining aid organizations are not only low on funds, but also in morale.[2] At best, Ouagadougou resembles a small-scale Abidjan with an over-large diplomatic community and a minority of wealthy European (mostly French) ex-patriates who lead a life of tedious and isolated luxury. Unlike Abidjan, the prosperous and cosmopolitan capital of the Ivory Coast, Ouagadougou does not, due to its landlocked location, reap the financial benefits of a thriving international port. For this reason and

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1. The majority of the land in this area is of very poor quality and is mostly used for cattle grazing by nomad cattle herders of the Mossi tribe.

2. The main existing aid organization of this kind is US AID which, according to sources at the United States' Embassy in Ouagadougou, is planning to pull out within the next two years.

several others, such as the harsh climate and the political instability over the past twenty-eight years,[3] a considerable proportion of the Burkinabè male work force has emigrated to more prosperous neighbouring countries such as the Ivory Coast. This has been a sad but inevitable demographic tragedy which has given Burkina its deserted villages and Ouagadougou the appearance of a ghost town.

As an old French colony, Upper Volta (as the country was called before Sankara, as a symbolic gesture, changed its name to Burkina Faso in 1983[4]) plodded along under an economic system which not only drained its labour supply, but also left it with little chance of political stability. A West African version of tied-labour (the equivalent to European medieval feudalism) had been introduced in Upper Volta during the colonial era, as a result of which the indigenous population were forced through outstanding debts back home to work on plantations in the Ivory Coast or Ghana. Even after Upper Volta was granted its independence in 1961, and despite the efforts of Félix Houphouët-Boigny in the 1940s to put an end to this obvious exploitation,[5] this system of what the French call *salariés agricoles* in Ivorian coffee, banana and palm plantations continued and does so to the present day. As a result, there is a large number of Burkinabè in the Ivory Coast, mostly male and on the whole employed in rural plantations (now owned by Ivorians) or in Abidjan by an increasingly affluent middle class who require 'boys' or *gardiens*. Those with less luck walk the streets selling scrap or black market merchandise, but all these immigrants end up sending most of their CFA back to their families in Burkina Faso.[6]

Even in his childhood spent in Bobo-Dioulasso and in Ouagadougou, Thomas Sankara had come across the social injustice which was to become the immediate target for his 'Popular Revolution'. In his view it was the French colonials who had been directly responsible for the unfair social system, whereby the wealth of the country remained in the hands of the white rulers while the *indigènes* were victims of miserable poverty and economic repression. For Sankara, this poverty was essentially a consequence of two factors: firstly the alien status system brought over by the French, and, secondly, the forced-labour phenomenum which drained the country's work-force to the Ivory Coast and other more prosperous nations. Sankara

3. This lack of political stability is not uncommon in post-independence West-Africa. See S. Decalo, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa*, (Yale University Press, New York, 1976).
4. This name in translation reads: 'land of people with integrity'.
5. Ivorian Félix Houphouët-Boigny was elected député of Haute Côte in 1945 which at the time included the southern part of Upper Volta as an annex to the Ivory Coast. Houphouët, as leader of the African Agricultural Union, managed to abolish forced labour which, up to then, had profited the colonials with a free labour supply. However, although the 'loi Houphouët' was passed in May 1946, the male work-force still continued to flow into the Ivorian plantations which provided better salaries than those in Upper Volta.
6. The average male Burkinabè immigrant in the Ivory Coast has left at least one wife back home and usually several children, all of which he is obliged to support financially. For more information concerning labour migration see: P. C. Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change*, (Penguin, London, 1976) Part 2. section 3 'The changing rural scene', pp. 92–101.

was to fight against these 'harsh realities of colonization'[7] right up to his death in 1987. Although having worked his way up through the ranks of the National Parachute regiment, and despite the fact that he had held the posts of both Minister for Information and of Prime Minister in previous governments, Sankara was an ardent Marxist revolutionary opposed to 'the abominable misery suffered by the people while the ruling classes enjoy a life of abusing luxury'.[8] It was for this reason that he instigated the 'Popular Revolution' of 3 August 1983.

Sankara—The Militant Revolutionary

Thomas Sankara was truly the first 'popular' national leader Burkina Faso had known since Maurice Yaméogo in the 1960s.[9] Hence the severe and brutal method by which he was ousted from power created a wave of surprised shock throughout francophone West Africa.[10] Immediately after the coup, the situation and the circumstances surrounding Sankara's death, or assassination as his supporters preferred to call it, were at first not clear. The day after the military coup there was an official communiqué broadcast on the state-run Burkinabè radio which declared in bold and simple terms that Sankara had been removed from the presidential post as a result of his 'treason' to the revolution and his 'dangerous personal ambitions'.[11] In neighbouring Ivory Coast the state-controlled press reported the facts with cold and brief precision, avoiding any form of critical editorial comment or opinion. For the Burkinabè immigrants in Abidjan, an estimated 30 per cent of the Ivorian population, this lack of informative coverage became a source of great disappointment. However, on the other side of the Sahara, the socialist French press and the liberal francophone African press were having a journalistic field-day. The left of centre Parisian daily *La Libération* and the pan-African weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique* were the biggest collaborators in the post-Sankara controversy created by the media, and, as a result, the latter was banned in the Ivory Coast in November 1987. Accusations were being fired in all directions: the

7. Quote from an interview with Sankara, November 1983, published in S. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, (Jeune Afrique, Paris, 1987).
8. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*.
9. In 1959 Maurice Yaméogo was elected President of the *Union Démocratique Voltaïque* (then linked to the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*) which was known as the UDV-RDA. This became the majority party in Upper Volta after independence was granted on 5 August 1960. Yaméogo was by then the popularly elected President of the Republic of Upper Volta, yet after independence, the UDV-RDA became a repressive regime and consequently all other parties were banned. Yaméogo was nevertheless re-elected in October 1965 but soon afterwards announced austere economic measures which led to his eventual downfall on 3 January 1966 during a coup led by Lieutenant-Colonal Sangoulé Lamizana, who then proceeded to become Head of State. Yaméogo, who had led Upper Volta to independence, was condemned to five years of hard labour.
10. Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings of Ghana declared a day of mourning the day after Sankara was killed. The most extreme reactions, however, came from the Congo and Angola which are under regimes similar to the one set up in Burkina in 1983.
11. *Fraternité Matin*, 17 October 1987.

Ivorian President and 'wise man' Houphouët-Boigny was accused of setting up the coup and financing it, while Blaise Compaoré was labelled a liar, a murderer and a puppet of Houphouët. The new regime in Ouagadougou responded by attacking the foreign press dubbing it a 'threat to national security'.[12] Compaoré himself pointed out, during a press conference two days after the death of Sankara, that the latter had a charismatic and popular image which in the past had led the foreign press to idolize him with an alarming degree of distortion.[13] In other words, Thomas Sankara provided good media coverage and the circumstances surrounding his death proved to be the most controversial since the times of Lumumba in the Congo.[14]

At this point in the proceedings it is necessary to explain the myth that surrounded Thomas Sankara. This was partly created by his remarkable career in the National Parachute Regiment and later in his official ministerial government posts in the Zerbo and Ouedraogo administrations (1980–83). Sankara started his military career at the age of nineteen as a cadet at the *Pyrtanée Militaire de Kadiogo* in Ouagadougou. At the age of twenty he had already started training at the officer school in Madagascar from where he moved on to the famous Parachute Training centre in Pau, France. During his officer cadetship he had shone out as an excellent student, both in the classroom and on the sports field. After having completed his military training at Pau, Sankara could boast the best education a young African soldier would ever be likely to obtain. Yet when it came to political ideology, at this stage in his life, Sankara could only claim ignorance. His political education was to come later, at a time when his country began its long stage of instability in which military coup followed military coup and corruption dug in deep.

In 1966, the first of a long line of coups d'état gave Lieutenant-Colonel Lamizana power in Ouagadougou. As a result of this bloodless coup, Maurice Yaméogo, Upper Volta's first President since independence, was toppled. In 1972, while Sankara underwent training to become an army officer in Madagascar, there was a communist-led revolution in Antsirabe, the capital.[15] Sankara, however, was not involved in either of these two events, and it was only after his period of study in Paris that the young lieutenant first saw his country's problems from a political rather than a military perspective. Paris in the late sixties was the hive of radical political thought, and, although the May 1968 revolution had ultimately failed, the ideas of Mao, Marx and Lenin were still very influential among Parisian

12. *Fraternité Matin*, 19 October 1987.
13. See, generally, E. P. Skinner, 'Sankara and the Burkinabé revolution', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, **26** (1988), pp. 437–440.
14. For more information on the media reaction to Sankara's death, see: M. Wilkins, *Coup d'état au Burkina Faso: Une comparaison de la réaction de la presse ivorienne et française aux événements du 15 octobre 1987*, (University of Bristol, French Department dissertations, 1988) pp. 9–13.
15. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, pp. 23–25.

students, especially those from the ex-colonies. Sankara was to come across Marxism and Leninism through his ever-increasing associations with several groups of African radical student organizations such as the *Organisation Communiste Voltaïque* (OCV). After two years of radical political exposure, Sankara had changed into a young military officer who had no intention of remaining 'a soldier without a political ideology, and therefore a criminal in power'.[16] He had not only discovered a new Marxist philosophy which he saw applicable to Upper Volta, but also a long string of political contacts. After his return to Ouagadougou in 1974, he was to participate in the meetings of several left-wing political organizations, including the leading trade unions, where he was to make even more contacts.[17] Since all political opposition had been banned by Lamizana, these revolutionary groups circulated their pamphlets clandestinely. Ouaguadougou was at the time brimming with activists and opponents of Lamizana's military regime, which, although it had started off as an attempt to rid Upper Volta of Yaméogo's state of corruption and nepotism, finally ended up falling prey to both these aspects. The African historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo and other militants including the trade union leaders Joseph Ouedraogo and Joseph Conombo were key activists in the anti-government cells such as the *Regroupement des Officiers Communistes* (ROC). Taking into account the tense situation at the time, it was clear that Sankara did not, as it has often been stated, 'come across politics and military discussion for the first time when he came into power—it did not happen suddenly, nor was it an accident'.[18]

From Lieutenant to President

By 1974, Lamizana had complete control of Upper Volta and ruled with the iron fist of a military dictator. He was, however, to lose this control quite suddenly as a result of another coup in 1980 led by Colonel Saye Zerbo who had been Lamizana's Head of State. It was nevertheless during Lamizana's stint in power that Thomas Sankara had been directly involved in an event which was to leave a deep mark on him, namely the 1974 war between Upper Volta and Mali, or, as it became known, 'The First War of the Poor'.[19] The bone of contention was a tiny strip of land on the southern border between the two countries, which, although claimed by both Ouagadougou and Bamako, in reality was of little use to either.

16. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 27.
17. There has always been a strong link between the lower ranks of the army and the trade unions in Upper Volta. This was partly the reason why Yaméogo was toppled in 1966 and also the main factor in explaining the emergence of a left-wing military in Burkina Faso. See Decalo, *Coups and Army rule in Africa*, pp. 28–29.
18. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 30.
19. This war lasted from December 1974 to January 1975. When Sankara was President (1983–87) the 'Second War of the Poor' took place from December 1985 to January 1986. In both cases, it was the Ivorian President Houphouët-Boigny who was largely responsible for arranging the cease-fire and peace settlements that ended the wars.

Lieutenant Sankara was sent to the front line, an order which he obeyed reluctantly for he remained personally opposed to what he saw as a futile war: 'I have to admit that my soul was in a state of torment', he claimed once in an interview, 'both the people of Mali and of Upper Volta were involved in a pointless and unjust battle . . . I was opposed to the political and human necessity of this war'.[20] Sankara and his colleague Henri Zongo had no desire to 'Eat the Malians', a battle-cry forced onto the army by Lamizana's propaganda. This was the beginning of a new breed of army officers who, after this lamentable frontier dispute had ended in stalemate, decided to 'one day do something'.[21]

Henri Zongo was to become one of the four men in power when the *Conseil National de la Révolution* (CNR) was established in 1983 as the new revolutionary parliament and policy-making body. Blaise Compaoré, Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Thomas Sankara were the other three leading members of this radical left-wing military junta. Compaoré was later to talk of the CNR with a certain degree of scepticism, exposing its initial naive principles and lack of political coordination: 'In those days we were no more than a group of petty bourgeois with all the weaknesses and without any political education . . .'[22] In 1978 Compaoré and Sankara met for the first time in Morocco where they both realized that there was more to poverty than the result of a country's lack of development; it was also a consequence of social injustice created initially by colonialism and later perpetuated by the ruling classes. The two officers were to meet again at the Commando Training Centre in Pô, a small provincial outpost 147 kilometres south of Ouagadougou. It was here that they put their new ideas into action by the setting up of a small 'Popular Republic' within the Training Centre. Sankara and Compaoré became inseperable friends who told each other everything. Even before the initiation of the revolution in 1983, the two officers from the Parachute Regiment were so close that they were often thought of as brothers. Sankara was to claim a few months before his death that he valued his friendship with Blaise more than any other thing: 'I was lucky to have someone who I could trust completely. The day you hear that he [Compaoré] is planning to stage a coup against me, don't bother wasting your time trying to stop him, it'll be too late for that . . .'[23] These words were uncannily prophetic as the events which took place on 15 October 1987 were later to demonstrate.

After the 7 November 1982 coup led by Gabriel Somé Yorian, then Army Chief of Staff, which ousted Colonel Saye Zerbo, there was a period of

20. Quotes from interview with Sankara, May 1986. Published in Andriamirado, S. *Sankara le Rebelle*.
21. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 32.
22. Quote from interview with Compaoré, November 1983. Published in Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*.
23. Quote from an interview with Sankara and published in *Africa International*, 18 November 1987, p. 15.

complete confusion in Upper Volta. The *Conseil de Salut du Peuple* (CSP) was finally set up and Dr Commander Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo became both President and Head of State as a safety precaution. Sankara, who had served as Minister of Information for the Saye Zerbo administration, had proved himself to be both a dedicated and morally upright politician. He had gained huge popularity among the masses, especially after he resigned from the Zerbo government following a dispute concerning radio censorship, or, as he claimed later, due to 'differences in opinion' between himself and the President.[24] On 10 January 1983 Sankara was subsequently appointed Prime Minister by the CSP. As yet his support came from the young officers of the army who were of a more radical political line than President Ouedraogo who, after all, was no more than a puppet of the high-ranking and reactionary military élite. Splits soon emerged between rival fractions as Sankara's supporters asked, firstly, that all political power be handed over to the civilians and, secondly, that, if the former could not be achieved, a 'revolution' should be set in motion. Sankara had proved himself to be a self-assured politician whose main purpose was to eradicate corruption and absenteeism within the ruling bodies. Ouedraogo became more and more dominated by the military which despised and distrusted Sankara's new-found popularity. Tension in Ouagadougou built up during the following months until Sankara was imprisoned on 17 May 1983 along with several other young officers charged with treason. On hearing the trumped-up charges, Compaoré immediately returned to Pô and demanded that Sankara be set free. From the Training Centre where over 500 highly-trained and loyal troops were stationed, Compaoré organized the take-over which eventually led to the 5 August 1983 coup and the start of the Popular Revolution. As a result of Sankara's large following amongst the young workers, students and *lycéens*, not to mention the 'prostitutes, civil servants and hooligans',[25] when the wheels of revolution were set in motion, the Ouagalais went out onto the streets in huge numbers. However, the most important and, politically, the most invaluable support came from the official left and the many branches of the trade unions which had been wooed by Sankara since his return from France in the mid-seventies.[26]

When he first came to power in 1983, Sankara established himself as no ordinary Head of State. Indeed, at the age of thirty, he was the youngest President in the African continent and one who, at the same time, had shown himself to be a simple and pragmatic man with populist principles and, most importantly, without any illusions of grandeur. He had always shown a

24. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, pp. 51–59.
25. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 70.
26. The main trade union organization, the *Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement*, (LIPAD), which is allied to the *Parti Africain de l'Indépendence* (PAI), had many links with Sankara while he had been Prime Minister. For a comprehensive explanation of the various factions of the left in Upper Volta between 1975 and 1983, see Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 71.

strong dislike of the external manifestations of political power, so much so that he donated all the Mercedes and Chevrolets owned by top civil servants and government officials to the National Lottery, and the money acquired, although not much in terms of national budget deficit, was nevertheless used on public spending. Sankara himself drove a Renault 5. They may seem petty changes and hardly worth a mention, but obvious shows of luxury can result in a feeling of resentment among the proletariat towards those in power. Symbolic gestures such as the above immediately caught the media's eye, and also the interest of other black African countries such as Ghana, the Congo and Angola. These countries, revolutionary themselves, saw in Sankara a new kind of spokesman for the 'African stand against poverty and corruption, and against Western domination'.[27]

Yet it took a lot more than a car exchange to convince the people of Burkina Faso that the new military regime (which went under the title of *Front Populaire*, a loosely-based coalition of left-wing parties including the communists and trade unions) was truly what it claimed to be, that is, a regime committed to the 'return of the country to its state of independence and liberty, and to give the people back their dignity'.[28] Sankara became a very popular speaker in public, something which gave him instant media stardom and a reputation as being a dynamic revolutionary in the mould of Ché Guevarra. Certainly he was never to be seen in anything but his camouflage uniform, red beret and loaded revolver at his side. His speeches were always passionate and forceful, though sometimes tending towards the revolutionary cliché: 'The Burkinabè revolution will provide a method of combating hunger, thirst and ignorance, but most of all, it will fight against the forces of neo-colonialism and imperialist domination'.[29] Nevertheless, such statements proved overwhelmingly to win the hearts of the *jeunesse* not only in Burkina Faso, but also in other countries which were under foreign influence such as the Ivory Coast. Sankara became a saviour-figure among the politically-aware youth, the university students and immigrants in Europe as a result of his pride in his country and race: 'After Nicaragua, revolutionary romanticism had moved itself to Burkina Faso, to the land of Thomas Sankara, the young Captain who asserts the black man's dignity and helps the poor once again to lift up their heads'.[30] On a more personal point, Sankara continued to play electric guitar in a band and eat each day in the army mess with Compaoré. He was undoubtedly out to prove a point which he considered to be at the heart of Burkina Faso's political problems: the responsibility for social justice lay in the hands of those in power just as much as with the people.

27. *Afrique Elite*, 20 November 1987, p. 15.
28. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 143.
29. Speech given by Sankara, Ouagadougou 1984, published in: Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 143.
30. *Afrique Elite*, 20 November 1987, p. 16.

Sankara's self-imposed image of being 'a man of the people' meant that he had to go beyond the rhetoric of his impassioned speeches and face the very real economic problems of Burkina Faso head on. He went about this in various ways. First of all he aimed to rid the country of sterile bureaucracy and corruption, especially amongst government officials. After only three months in office, Sankara instigated his battle against corruption within the civil service by first of all readjusting salaries so that all ministers and public servants earned the same wage of FCFA 192,500 (£480), and, so as not to appear to reap any unrewarded benefits of his post, Sankara allotted himself the same monthly sum. In an attempt to serve as an example of the Popular Front's slogan 'vivre au niveau du pays réel', Sankara led more or less the same life-style as he had done before he became President (except that he lived in the Presidential Palace). His popular style went against any notion of bribes or black market economics, and, as a result, all imported goods were stringently checked by the *Comités de la Defense de la Révolution* (CDRs) which acted as a kind of revolutionary customs and excise body.[31]

Sankara's uncoventional policies, even though they often had a very serious Marxist basis, served to give him constant publicity in the foreign media. For example, when he made jogging and aerobics compulsory twice a week for all civil servants, his passion for physical exercise clearly manifested itself on a national level. Other passions and personal concerns were soon to follow, for instance his views on women and their role in the new revolutionary society. In a true Marxist fashion, women, Sankara believed, were an important part of the revolution; the time had come to challenge head on the unjust attitudes and prejudices which had set themselves in African society due to an antiquated tradition of male domination and exploitation of womankind: 'Women are exploited like dairy cows in our society; they are made to bear children, give milk, work themselves to the bone and then provide a source of pleasure for their husbands. When they become old, they are simply replaced by other dairy cows'.[32] As fifty-two per cent of Burkina Faso's population consists of women in such dreary conditions, the impact of such a feminist stand by the President was understandably considerable. In this case, as in many others, Sankara made sure that his words were put into actions.[33] 'L'homme au marché, au ménage et

31. As a form of protection for the revolution Sankara set up the CDRs which were commissioned to exercise 'revolutionary power whenever it was required' (Sakara, 11 September 1983). The CDRs were in fact a kind of revolutionary militia which at first served to educate their members in Marxist philosophy and maintain a high level of support for the revolution. However, as the initial fervour of the revolution passed away, they realized that they had the opportunity to abuse the power which had been invested in them, and they often did. For more information consult Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 44.
32. Andriamirado, *Sankara le Rebelle*, p. 44.
33. Sankara's quest for social justice and 'living within one's means' often went hand-in-hand. An example of this was his motto 'Deux repas et dix litres d'eau par jour' which he promoted as the minimum target requirement for any Burkinabè revolutionary. This target was attained after one year of Sankara's leadership.

au foyer' was one of the many national campaigns set up by the President in order to bring about a greater realization among the male section of Burkina Faso that the time of sexual equality had come. Prostitution was banned and polygamy was greatly discouraged; Sankara himself had an escort of women motorcycle guards and appointed five women to ministerial posts in his government. Yet this proved to be too little to alter the conservative attitudes of many Burkinabè males, for it is not easy to change life-long traditions which are also deeply embedded in the national psyche.

The promotion of women provoked some discontent among certain prominent male members of Burkinabè society, yet this concern was minimal when compared to the anger caused when the Mossi were demoted. The major ethnic group of Burkina Faso, which had maintained a rigid hierarchical structure, was seen by Sankara to perpetuate national division and 'colonial tribalism'. This demotion was only achieved by Sankara after he had confined the Moro Naba, the Mossi's chief, to his decrepid palace in Ouagadougou, along with his eighty odd concubines, and forbade him to hold court. Village chiefs also lost their decision-making role to the CDRs. However, both the championing of the woman's cause and the blantant lack of respect for Burkina Faso's largest ethnic group was to cost Sankara dearly.

While Sankara based his popularity among the people, the left-wing organizations which formed the Marxist 'think-tank' of the Popular Front were being left in the cold. What is more, once in office, the new President set about a series of reforms which for some, principally the ultra-left and the trade unions, did not go far enough. Extremist policies such as an obligatory fifty per cent Building Tax did not win the support of either the people or the radical left.[34] Nor did the imprisonment of over one thousand *lycéens* for striking in 1985. All this, coupled with his intention to abolish certain political groups such as the Bukinabè Communist Union (UCB) and the Union for Communist Struggle (UCL), in turn served to isolate Sankara

in the south.[35] Nevertheless, while the peasants slowly saw an increase in their living standards as a result of increased agricultural investment and rural projects, the long-term problem of foreign debt still needed solving if the economy of the country intended to regain its former strength.

For all of his revolutionary measures (public spending had increased by 120 per cent over the first three years of Sankara's leadership), he had not succeeded in eliminating Burkina Faso's major problem: poverty. Foreign debt which in 1987 stood at FCFA 350 billion (£7 billion) still remained at the same figure despite four years of revolution which had introduced desperate economic policies and a radical redistribution of wealth. Moreover, as the world's third poorest country, radical and effective foreign policy initiatives were required in order to promote much-needed international investment. While neighbouring Ivory Coast had managed to do this through direct, though some may say over-dependent, financial and commercial links with France and other Western powers, Burkina Faso seemed to have no intention of expanding its already feeble international links. Sankara proved to be far too stubborn and proud to betray his Marxist-inspired revolution of the Burkinabè people. He was in no way to ape the capitalist policies of Houphouët-Boigny: the two leaders were as far apart politically as they were in age.[36]

Sankara's refusal to 'submit' to what he saw as 'imperialist domination' in the form of international capital and industry led to the eventual isolation of the already dwindling international community in Ouagadougou. Though he had managed to build up a strong and respected reputation as a no-nonsense African leader in the international circuit, his out-spokenness and controversial condemnations of other world leaders such as President Mitterand of France, whom he called a 'racist' after the official visit in 1985 of President Botha to Paris, made him unpopular in Western diplomatic circles. Added to this was Sankara's obsession with autarky, which as a viable economic system in an underdeveloped country was destined to failure. A growing tendency to eliminate those who opposed his policies, with the aid of loyal members of the CDRs, led to much discontent among the political opposition. After four years of 'pouvoir collégial' in which Sankara, Compaoré and Lingani had held a strong grip over the directions taken by the 1983 revolution, suspicions amongst each other had begun to emerge. This ultimately led to the 15 October 1987 coup and the death of Sankara. These tensions were not only caused by the alienation process described above, but also by the economic failures of Sankara's reforms and

35. The money to pay for the agricultural project which amounted to FCFA 600 million (£3 million) came from a reserve fund which had been destined to provide a salary increase for high-ranking civil servants. See also Skinner, 'Sankara and the Burkinabé revolution, p. 444.

36. Wilkins, *Coup d'état au Burkina Faso*, pp. 11–12 for more details on the relationship between the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso.

personal differences in opinion which led to accusations of megalomania and the creation of a cult of personality. After the 15 October 1987 coup, it was claimed that: '. . . his [Sankara's] very dominating personality, his charisma, his desire for stardom and his manipulative talents drove him progressively to gain personal power'.[37] It was also said that Sankara had been plotting to execute certain numbers of his political adversaries, including top ministers and Compaoré himself on the same evening that the coup took place.[38]

Compaoré and the Rectification

The validity of Compaoré's claim has so far not been proved. It is widely believed that there were various other motivations for the 1987 coup, but nonetheless, Compaoré is not a popular figure today and his days seem numbered.[39] On the streets of Ouaguadougou Sankara has become a taboo name; he barely gets a whisper in the markets where T-shirts imprinted with Compaoré's portrait are now sold. Yet for five years Sankara had become a household name throughout the entire country; he had been admired by the Burkinabè as well as by other African nations because of his passionate aspirations to rid the country of its ills: namely corruption, bureaucratic nepotism and the sterile and anachronistic tribalism of the Mossi. These measures were to provoke the resurfacing of the old conflicts which were already inherent in the Burkinabè long before the 1983 revolution had taken shape. The parasitic 'national bourgeiosie',[40] a social vestige of post-colonial Africa made up of francophone and educated *assimilés*, was bound to react unfavourably to its demotion. The politicial left, on the other hand, once in power had the opportunity to make the most of its diverse sub-groupings and, although all were supposedly represented in the homogenous *Front Populaire*, they were certainly not all in agreement with the strong grip which the four major members of the CNR, and especially Sankara, had acquired. Subsequently, the President, as head of the CNR, was to take most of the blame and was suspected of wanting to create yet another one-party repressive state with himself as the single figure-head. Sankara denied this accusation claiming that he only wished to unify the numerous splinter-groups into one big and more efficient party. Nevertheless, the original think-tank of Marxist-Leninist *idéologues* was eventually shunned by Sankara and the CNR, and in time, as well as feeling ostracized from any decision-making, they also felt that the revolution had lost its course as it no

37. Blaise Compaoré in *Fraternité Matin*, 19 October 1987.
38. *Le Monde*, 17 October 1987; *La Libération*, 19 October 1987.
39. In a letter dated 4 December 1988 from a United States diplomat it is said that: 'Blaise is heading for trouble. He doesn't have much of a following right now, not that he really had it before. It appears that each month new rumours reach us about coups. We thought we had one coming down on October 15th but it was only dissatisfaction with an investigation concerning the dissapearance of 20 kilos of gold'.
40. See Franz Fanon, *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* (Editions Seuil, Paris, 1960) for a similar interpretation of social politics in post-colonial Africa.

longer relied on the ideology of the civilian left-wing. Sankara, while never forgetting the role of the army in the revolution,[41] lost the loyalty of the civilian left who in turn supported Compaoré, Zongo and Lingani. By the first few months of 1987, the President had left himself isolated in his own political camp.

Campaoré, in order to stay in power, is now trying not to make the same fatal mistake. In order to appease both the left-wing factions and the Mossi elders, he is inevitably having to tread on rather unsure ground: traditional customs dating back hundreds of years must be respected, but at the same time so must the political climate inherited from Sankara's Popular Revolution. As the memory of the former President now fades, the ruling oligarchy headed by Compaoré must view Sankara's death as a blessing in disguise. The Moro Naba is again holding court with a Mossi prince as its President.[42] As for the CNR, the process of rectification of the revolution has begun at a slow and prudent pace. Compaoré is making sure that no sections of the Burkinabè nation are left out as he realizes that his position as President relies solely on the whims of the people, the army and the trade unions. Sankara, according to some Western journalists and observers, had ultimately failed in this respect, for the Burkinabè were not always quite sure what to make of him: '. . . There is a certain ambivalence: despite his high ideals, Sankara appears to have been too progressive for the peasants he stubbornly championed'.[43] Compaoré does not promote any far-reaching radical reforms in the Sankara mould as he knows this is bound to upset one faction of the left or another. He has the support of the *idéologues* in the Marxist camp at the moment, but lacks the loyalty and trust both of the people and the press who believe that he is no more than a puppet of the military (like Ouedraogo had been in the early 1980s), and of the communists,[44] who accuse him of turning a blind eye to corruption. Some journalists, especially Sennen Andriamirado of *Jeune Afrique*, would go so far as to label Campaoré a Houphouët clone. This unfounded accusation was later to be taken up by the French press who commented on the links between Compaoré's wife Chantal (*a métisse* and niece of Houphouët) and the Ivorian president.[45] Already there are signs that Sankara's principles are being abandoned: Compaoré now favours expensive new French suits to the camouflage uniform, and the black market is once again thriving on the streets of Ouagadougou. He also now owns and drives an Alpha Romeo

41. This aspect was emphasized during Sankara's first press conference, published in *Carrefour Africain*, 2 September 1983: 'Revolutionaries are everywhere: the army is part of the people of this country; a part which understands the very contradictions of the people. We have taken the power out of the barracks . . . It is not a matter of the military taking over one day and then handing back power the next. It is a matter of the military living with the people, suffering with them and struggling with them at all times'.
42. G. Bourke 'Burkina Faso's Revolution loses its way', *The Independent*, 4 August 1988.
43. G. Bourke 'Burkina Faso's Revolution loses its way'.
44. *Jeune Afrique*, 28 October, 4 November 1987.
45. *L'Evénement du Jeudi*, 22–28 October 1987.

which was a gift from Colonel Qaddafi who, supposedly, was one of Sankara's staunchest allies. The gift was flown in after the 15 October 1987 coup and, it is said, has caused Compaoré much embarrassment.[46]

In July 1987, the International Monetary Fund was called in so that Burkina Faso's dire economy could receive a foreign-backed boost. Sankara had always believed that such a move would spell an end to the Popular Revolution. In March 1989 the eyes of the world were focused on Burkina Faso as *Comic Relief* donated millions of pounds of aid to combat hunger and disease in the depressed rural regions of the nation.[47] While Compaoré continues to try and gain the support of those whom the former President had managed to alienate, the Popular Front appears to have lost control of the revolution and the clock seems to be turning back instead of forwards. With the recent floods of rain, plagues of locusts and suspicious wanderings of dictators such as Qaddafi, the countries of the Sahel are now undergoing a period of disasterous poverty and political vulnerability.