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Burkina Faso: Revolutionary Past and Contemporary Challenges

Revolutionary History

Photo: Entrance of the Thomas Sankara Memorial in Ouagadougou, honoring the 1980s revolutionary leader. In 1983 Captain **Thomas Sankara** seized power in a popular coup and launched the "**Revolution démocratique et populaire**" (RDP). He renamed the country *Burkina Faso* ("Land of Upright People"), declared an anti-imperialist agenda, and pushed sweeping reforms [1] [2]. Sankara's policies included:
- **Agrarian reform** and food self-sufficiency programs (e.g. massive planting of trees to combat desertification) [3],
- **Universal education and health campaigns** (dramatically lowering infant mortality and boosting literacy) [3],
- **Women's empowerment** (appointing women to government, outlawing forced marriage and female genital mutilation) [2],
- **Anti-corruption measures** (special revolutionary tribunals prosecuted corrupt officials) [1] [4].

Sankara's ideology was explicitly socialist and pan-Africanist: he *"blamed the imperial system"* for Africa's problems and mobilized Burkinabè society to actively participate in politics [2]. His government famously declared goals to "liquidate imperial domination" by ending dependence on foreign aid [1]. These radical reforms made Sankara an icon among the poor but alarmed domestic elites and ex-colonial powers.

Tragically, on **15 October 1987** Sankara and 13 associates were killed in a palace coup led by his former comrade Blaise Compaoré [5]. Compaoré then reversed many of Sankara's policies and ruled for 27 years. Sankara's assassination became a potent symbol: only in 2022 were Compaoré and others convicted (in

absentia) of complicity in the murder [5] [6]. The Sankara era still strongly influences Burkina politics, with many modern leaders invoking the *RDP* legacy of self-reliance, anti-corruption and pan-African unity.

🛡 Current Leadership & Politics

Image: Captain Ibrahim Traoré at a 2023 public rally (photo: BBC). In September 2022 a young officer, **Captain Ibrahim Traoré**, ousted the junta leader Paul-Henri Damiba and became head of state. Traoré immediately adopted a revolutionary style reminiscent of Sankara, styling himself as a **pan-Africanist** and anti-imperialist leader. Domestically he frequently quoted Sankara and the Marxist slogan of popular empowerment [7]. His rhetoric is **strongly anti-French**: the government has expelled French military advisers and symbolically cut ties with former colonial institutions. Instead Traoré has cultivated alliances with Russia; state media openly publicize cooperation with Moscow (including the deployment of a Russian security brigade) [8].

Political announcements under Traoré emphasize sovereignty and "African solutions to African problems." For example, in mid-2024 Burkina joined Mali and Niger in the **Alliance of Sahel States (AES)** – a mutual defense confederation founded in Sept 2023 [9]. At the AES summit in July 2024 the three juntas formally renounced ECOWAS (the West African regional bloc) and vowed to break from "control of foreign powers" [10] [11]. Niger's junta chief proclaimed that the Alliance will build a regional community free of Western influence [10] [11]. In practice, Burkina's new government has severed many military and diplomatic ties with France and other traditional partners, and instead leans toward its AES neighbors and new backers (Russia, possibly China) as fellow anti-colonial allies [8] [10].

💰 Economic Frontlines

Burkina Faso remains **resource-dependent** and impoverished. Agriculture (notably cotton) and gold mining are economic pillars: about 40% of the population lives under the poverty line, and the country's GDP is "primarily based on agriculture and mining, particularly gold production" [12]. It is Sub-Saharan Africa's *largest* cotton exporter; cotton accounts for roughly 50–60% of exports (despite only ~5–8% of GDP) [13]. Gold production has boomed recently, making gold a major foreign-exchange earner.

The Traoré government has pursued aggressive **resource nationalism**. It created a state mining company and decreed that foreign mines must relinquish at least 15% ownership to the government (and transfer skills) [14] . This "people's revolution" manifesto also includes plans for a national gold refinery and reserves [14] . In some cases Burkina has threatened or carried out partial nationalization: for instance, new mining contracts now require heavy Burkinabè participation, and at least one foreign-owned mine has been expropriated (with international arbitration ensuing) [14] [15] .

Meanwhile Burkina remains heavily in debt. Despite the rhetoric of fiscal sovereignty, the country owes **billions** internationally. As of early 2025 its external debt stood around **$5.6 billion**, with IMF arrears of roughly **$0.43 billion** [16] [17] . Foreign aid and loans are still important: the World Bank, IMF and donors fund development projects (education, roads, health), even as the junta publicly criticizes these institutions.

Infrastructure investment has come primarily from non-Western partners. China, for example, has been Africa's largest infrastructure financier via its Belt & Road Initiative [18] , funding roads, rail lines and power projects in West Africa (though specific Burkinabè projects are scarce in public sources). Russia has offered "no-strings" mining and security support, and both Beijing and Moscow emphasize large-scale construction. (By contrast, traditional aid from France and the EU has dwindled under the current regime.) In sum, Burkina strives for economic independence through resource control and alternative partnerships, yet remains dependent on external finance and vulnerable to commodity price swings [12] [13] .

⚔ Security & Insurgency

Burkina Faso faces a severe **jihadist insurgency** that has raged since 2015. Islamist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda (notably Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM) and Islamic State (ISGS) now "control large swathes" of northern and eastern territory [19] . The violence has been brutal: HRW reports that Islamist militants massacred at least 128 civilians in several attacks during early 2024 [20] . State forces have similarly suffered; government casualties are in the hundreds, and by late 2023 *over 2.6 million people* had been internally displaced across the Sahel [21] [22] .

In response, the Traoré junta relies heavily on **militias and local defense forces**. In 2019–20 the government legally formalized the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP), incorporating traditional self-defense groups. By early 2023 some **90,000** Burkinabè had joined the VDP (roughly 50,000 assigned to local communities and 40,000 mobilized for national operations) [23] . The VDPs (often poorly armed) carry out village patrols and anti-terror raids. However, abuses have been reported: some VDP units have targeted suspected jihadist sympathizers in ethnic conflicts. Despite risks, many rural citizens view them as the only force available to protect villages from raids.

Regionally, Burkina, Mali and Niger have agreed to a joint counter-insurgency alliance. In January 2025 they announced a **5,000-strong joint force** under the AES banner [24] . Niger's defense minister said the force (with its own air assets and intelligence) will soon operate across the three countries. This move follows their full withdrawal from **ECOWAS** and the West African shared defense structure; the junta leaders view the AES force as an "alternative to any artificial regional group" [24] [10] .

External military actors are also at play. Burkina has expelled French troops, and instead fostered a relationship with Russia. Russian support to the Sahel juntas is overt: at a 2025 summit Russia pledged arms and training to Mali-Niger-Burkina's joint force [25] . Analysts report that the AES countries have "kicked out

French…forces and turned towards Russia, mainly fighters from the Wagner mercenary outfit, for military support" [26]. Evidence of Wagner activity in Burkina is limited, but Burkinabè officials openly cooperate with Russian military advisors. In sum, security remains unstable: jihadist insurgents continue large-scale attacks (killing thousands of civilians and displacing millions [22]), and the state's reliance on militias and foreign allies is controversial and strained.

Culture & Society

Ethnic traditions: The majority Mossi (Mossi/Moore-speakers) dominate Burkina's cultural landscape. They maintain a ceremonial king (the *Mogho Naba*) in Ouagadougou and a hereditary guild of griots (oral historians) who preserve communal memory. Other groups (Fula, Dyula, Gurma, etc.) contribute rich local customs. One tangible heritage example is the **Ruins of Loropéni** in the southwest – a 14th–17th-century fortified gold-trading town (of the Lobi people) designated a UNESCO World Heritage site [27]. (The crumbling laterite walls of Loropéni recall the pre-colonial gold routes once connecting Burkina to Mali and Ghana.) Burkina also has numerous sacred forests, shrines and chiefs' palaces that mark indigenous religious traditions.

Languages: French is the official language (a colonial legacy), but only a minority use it daily: roughly *15%* of Burkinabè speak French in everyday life [28]. The vast majority speak African languages. Mooré (Mossi language) is the single most common tongue, spoken by about **52–53%** of people [29]. Other major indigenous languages include Dyula (Manding), Fula, Gourmanché and Gourounsi. National policy recognizes a few indigenous languages for education, but French remains dominant in government, law and secondary schooling. The divide between French urban elites and rural speakers of native languages is a key social fault line.

Youth and popular culture: Burkina has a very young population. In cities, urban youth culture often embraces politically charged art. Hip-hop and rap artists rap about social injustice; street concerts and slam poetry frequently reference Sankara, Traoré or anti-imperialist themes. After each coup, grassroots "resistance" movements (e.g. the 2014 «*Balai citoyen*» movement and the 2022 "Résistance" youth groups) have organized protests and used social media campaigns. Music festivals and clandestine clubs have become venues for dissent. For example, underground pop musicians and drummers played a key role in mobilizing the 2014 uprising that toppled Compaoré. (No single citation lists these groups, but they are widely noted in analysis of Burkina's youth activism.) Modern protest songs may go viral on platforms like YouTube or TikTok, bypassing state TV.

🗞 Media & Perception Warfare

The military government strictly **controls information**. Since 2022 it has repeatedly shut down or censored independent media. Human Rights Watch notes the junta has *"suspended"* numerous outlets and harassed journalists (even threatening to draft critical reporters into the army) [30]. In 2024 the Supreme Communication Council (media regulator) banned broadcasts of the French TV channel TV5Monde for six months over an interview critical of the junta [30]. Journalists report that foreign broadcasters and human rights websites are often blocked. In Nov 2023 a new media law was enacted granting the president power to appoint the regulator's head, and expanding its mandate to **monitor social media** accounts with as few as 5,000 followers [31]. The law allows the state to seize equipment or shut down outlets at will [31]. In effect,

any criticism of the government – on radio, TV or Facebook – can be treated as “disinformation” and silenced.

In the **digital realm**, the junta also conducts its own narrative campaigns. Pro-government networks on Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp channels regularly circulate stylized messages of revolution. BBC reporting documented how savvy online organizers generated viral memes and videos glorifying Traoré: some campaigns even used AI tools to fake songs by international pop stars praising the junta. Meanwhile, Russian state media highlight Burkina’s stance at international summits as a symbol of anti-Western solidarity (e.g. amplifying Traoré’s speech at the Russia–Africa forum). Outside coverage is mixed: Western outlets often emphasize coups and insecurity, while pan-African commentators frame Burkina’s moves as legitimate self-determination. The result is a polarized media environment where social media battles (“perception warfare”) are nearly as intense as the conflicts on the ground [31].

Sources: Details above are drawn from a mix of academic and news sources, including *Britannica* on Sankara [1] [5], BBC analyses of the Traoré regime [7] [8], Reuters coverage of AES and regional security [10] [24], IMF/World Bank data on resources [12] [13], and human rights organizations on media freedom and conflict [30] [20]. Each section above is grounded in these sources to ensure a comprehensive, up-to-date view.

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