Revolution and confrontational state-building in Africa: Case of Thomas Sankara's revolution in Burkina Faso (1983–1987)[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article re-examines Thomas Sankara's revolution in Burkina Faso (1983–1987) to explain why postcolonial revolutions in Africa, though morally compelling, rarely generate enduring institutions. Using process-tracing of speeches, policy documents, and secondary sources, it analyses the mechanisms that transformed a project of emancipation into political isolation and collapse. The study identifies two interlocking dynamics – ideological ambiguity and confrontational state-building – that shaped both the rise and the demise of the Sankarist regime. It argues that revolutionary governments in Africa operate within structural constraints that reward moral purity but penalise institutional compromise. Comparison with Ghana under Rawlings and Uganda under Museveni shows that revolutions endure when moral authority is translated into hybrid institutions able to negotiate legitimacy across social and cultural cleavages. By conceptualising African revolutions as state-building experiments under constraint, the article bridges debates on revolutionary politics, postcolonial governance, and indigenous legitimacy, offering a new theoretical lens for understanding the fragility of moral authority in African state formation.

Keywords

Burkina Faso; Thomas Sankara; revolution and state-building; postcolonial governance; African politics; ideological ambiguity.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a resurgence of military coups across the African continent, especially in the Central Sahel, where countries such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are witnesses to renewed militarism in politics. Still, military intervention in African politics is hardly something new. Across Africa, military-led coup, sometimes labeled as revolutions sought to rebuild the state, reject neocolonial dependency, and reclaim sovereignty (Bazemo 2023; Botchway & Traore 2023; Kumah-Abiwu 2023; Nyarko 2023). Yet most collapsed or turned authoritarian within a few years. Why do revolutionary projects that begin with moral conviction and popular legitimacy so often fail to institutionalise their gains?

This article addresses that question through a critical re-examination of Thomas Sankara's revolution in Burkina Faso (1983–1987). Frequently celebrated as a moral and developmental success, the Sankarist experiment remains less understood as a problem of governance. Using process tracing and comparative reflection, the article investigates the structural and strategic mechanisms that shaped the rise and collapse of the revolution. It argues that two interacting dynamics explain its fragility: ideological ambiguity, which enabled mobilisation but undermined coherence; confrontational politics, which alienated domestic and foreign allies.

The analysis situates the Burkinabè case within wider debates on state-building and revolutionary politics in Africa. It moves beyond personalist or moral readings of Sankara to reveal how postcolonial state weakness and confrontational revolutionary strategies intersected to produce political isolation. By comparing Sankara's approach to those of Jerry Rawlings in Ghana and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, the study highlights the institutional consequences of choosing rupture over accommodation.

The article contributes to African political studies in three ways: it reframes African revolutions as experiments in state formation rather than episodes of failure; it reintroduces indigenous

legitimacy as a core dimension of revolutionary success; and it offers a mechanism-based explanation linking ideology, strategy, and institutional fragility. Through this lens, Sankara's revolution is not merely a lost utopia but a window into the enduring dilemma of postcolonial governance in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNANCE AND ITS STRUCTURAL LIMITS

Revolutions in postcolonial Africa have often been understood as moral projects rather than institutional experiments (Harsh 2023; Zeilig 2017). They are remembered for their rhetoric of emancipation, their rejection of imperial domination, and their attempts to reclaim sovereignty through radical rupture (Bazemo 2023; Skinner 1988). Yet, while their leaders promised to rebuild the postcolonial state on new foundations, few succeeded in creating lasting institutions. The result is a paradox that continues to shape African politics: revolutionary legitimacy rarely translates into institutional durability. In this paper, I seek to unpack that paradox by drawing on comparative theories of revolution and state-building and situating the African experience within them.

Building on Goldstone's (1982) and Stinchcombe's (1999) insight that revolutions transform not only rulers but the very rules of governance, this article reconceptualises revolutionary politics in Africa as a mode of state formation under structural constraint. Goldstone's (1982) approach to revolution is structural, where the focus is on the state's structural vulnerability and complex crises. In this context, Goldstone contends that revolutions are caused by a conjuncture of factors, primarily internal breakdown and paralysis of centralised states resulting from conflict with powerful elites. When this breakdown coincides with widespread popular uprisings, the revolution occurs. Stinchcombe (1999) defined revolution as a rapid and unpredictable change in relative to power factions. The revolution ends when political uncertainty is reduced by building a stable government. The resulting government types include

conservatives' authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and democracy. Unlike liberal or technocratic state-building, which focuses on legal and institutional certainty (Stinchcombe 1999), revolutionary governance begins with rupture – its claim to legitimacy is moral and performative, not institutional. Yet in fragile postcolonial states, where authority is dispersed and legitimacy fragmented, such rupture carries profound risks. It mobilises mass enthusiasm but also deepens divisions, isolates leadership from key allies, and provokes countervailing coalitions.

To explain this process, I identify two interrelated mechanisms that shape the trajectory and fragility of revolutionary governance in Burkina Faso. The first is ideological ambiguity: revolutionary leaders often mobilise diverse constituencies by fusing Marxist, nationalist, Pan-African, and even traditional discourses. This pluralism enables initial unity but undermines coherence once power is attained. The second is confrontational state-building: revolutions frequently adopt strategies of rupture – purging elites, bypassing institutions, and confronting foreign powers – that consolidate authority in the short term while eroding legitimacy over time.

Together, these mechanisms explain why revolutionary regimes in Burkina Faso and in Africa in general often collapse despite their transformative ambitions. They underscore a broader pattern in postcolonial governance: moral authority and institutional weakness coexist at the heart of revolutionary politics. By theorising these dynamics, I advance a mechanism-based framework that bridges three literatures often studied separately – revolutionary theory, postcolonial state-building, and indigenous legitimacy. In doing so, it moves beyond biographical or moral narratives of Thomas Sankara to situate the Burkinabè revolution within a comparative theory of institutional fragility in Africa.

Ideological ambiguity: Mobilising unity, producing fragility

Revolutionary movements seldom emerge from coherent ideological foundations. As Goldstone (1982) and O'Kane (2015) note, they arise from overlapping grievances rather than from doctrinal consensus. In postcolonial Africa, this ambiguity proved both strategic and perilous. Movements such as those led by Nkrumah and Rawlings in Ghana, Mengistu in Ethiopia, or Sankara in Burkina Faso drew legitimacy from a fluid mix of Marxism–Leninism, nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and moral anti-imperialism. This eclecticism broadened the revolutionary coalition but at the expense of institutional and programmatic clarity.

During the mobilisational phase, ideological ambiguity allowed revolutionary elites to appeal simultaneously to internationalist ideals and local grievances. Yet once in power, the same plurality of meanings generated confusion, factionalism, and competing claims to revolutionary authenticity. As Burns (1996) argued in the Iranian revolutionary context, ideological breadth that sustains mobilisation can obstruct consolidation. In Africa, this was especially acute because revolutions unfolded in fragile states with shallow bureaucracies. Competing Marxist and nationalist factions, as in the Burkinabè case, were less signs of disunity than symptoms of structural incoherence: without institutional mechanisms to mediate ideological disputes, fragmentation became inevitable.

By foregrounding ideological ambiguity as a mechanism rather than a background condition, this article adds a critical dimension to the study of African revolutions. It suggests that failure does not stem from false consciousness or betrayal of ideals, but from the institutional impossibility of reconciling multiple ideological grammars within weak postcolonial states.

Confrontational State-building: Rupture as strategy and constraint

If ideological ambiguity fractured revolutionary movements from within, confrontational politics undermined them from without. Revolutionary governments across Africa often sought

legitimacy through rupture – purging the *ancien régime*, dismantling traditional authority, and defying external powers. Such strategies consolidated charisma and moral authority, but they also narrowed the social base of the revolution. As Stinchcombe (1999) observed, revolutions frequently substitute coercion for coalition, creating brittle regimes sustained by moral zeal rather than institutional compromise.

In the African context, this confrontational logic was sharpened by the postcolonial state's dual fragility – internally fragmented and externally dependent. Nation-building efforts were challenged from the outset by colonial-era borders that cut across linguistic, ethnic, and cultural lines (Emerson 2017; Dorman 2019). Military institutions, descended directly from colonial armies, retained structural imbalances and recruitment biases that fuelled instability. The first coup in post-independence Africa occurred on 13 January 1963 in Togo, when demobilised veterans, excluded from the national army by President Sylvanus Olympio, staged a mutiny that led to his assassination (Gutteridge 2023). Similar ruptures followed: in Nigeria, the January 1966 coup targeted senior Yoruba and Northern leaders, while in Ghana, Nkrumah was overthrown by military officers in February 1966 (Gutteridge 2023). In each case, military rule was justified as a last-ditch effort to rescue the state from dysfunction. Yet rather than leading to democratic restoration, it often entrenched authoritarianism.

The fragility of postcolonial states – characterised by weak institutions and fractured social foundations – posed enduring challenges to political stability. Efforts to reconcile competing interests within arbitrarily drawn borders were often undermined by inherited administrative deficiencies and legitimacy deficits (Gutteridge 2023). For revolutionary movements, this structural weakness made state-building particularly fraught. While revolutions promised renewal, they frequently struggled to balance rupture with reconstruction. As a result, moments of radical consolidation were followed by long-term isolation and institutional fragility.

Sankara's revolution epitomised this pattern. His revolutionary project sought to discipline and control unions, marginalise traditional chiefs, and reject the tutelage of France and international financial institutions. These moves projected autonomy and moral clarity, but provoked resistance from nearly all corners of society. The regime's refusal to negotiate with entrenched actors weakened its coalition base and deepened its political isolation.

The article introduces the concept of confrontational state-building to describe this dynamic. It denotes a form of revolutionary governance that seeks to construct legitimacy through moral purity and coercive transformation rather than negotiated inclusion. This concept extends the literature on postcolonial state formation (Herbst 2000; Boone 2014; Nyarko 2023) by highlighting how moral absolutism – an ethical strength – can become an institutional weakness in revolutionary settings.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

Analytical strategy

This study adopts a qualitative process-tracing approach to uncover the mechanisms linking revolutionary strategy to institutional fragility in postcolonial Africa. Process tracing allows for the identification of causal sequences and critical junctures through which ideas, decisions, and structural constraints interact over time (George and Bennett, 2005; Beach, 2017). It is particularly suited for historical cases where multiple interdependent factors – ideological, institutional, and international – shaped political outcomes. The aim is not statistical generalisation but analytical inference: to explain how a specific constellation of factors produced regime collapse and what this reveals about the limits of revolutionary governance in similar contexts.

The analysis combines archival, textual, and secondary sources. Primary materials include Thomas Sankara's speeches, government communiqués, and the 1983 Policy Orientation

Address (*French: Discours d'Orientation Politique – DOP*[3]*)*, which collectively outline the ideological foundations of the revolution. These are complemented by contemporary newspaper archives and statements from political actors, providing insights into evolving domestic alliances and foreign relations. Secondary sources – scholarly works including Harsch (2013), Otayek (2013), and Dickovick (2009) – help contextualise events and triangulate interpretations. This multi-source strategy strengthens internal validity and ensures a balanced reconstruction of the revolutionary trajectory from 1983 to 1987.

The process-tracing analysis proceeds through three phases: First, mobilisation and ideological synthesis: The formation of the revolutionary coalition and its discursive foundations; early signs of ideological ambiguity. Second, institutional experimentation and confrontation: The consolidation of CDRs, centralisation of authority, and growing conflict with unions, traditional elites, and external partners. Third, strategic isolation and collapse: The erosion of domestic coalitions, external isolation, and intra-elite conflict culminating in Sankara's assassination.

By examining the mechanisms operating across these stages, the analysis moves beyond leadership-centred explanations to identify the structural and strategic dynamics that render revolutionary governance unstable.

Case selection: Burkina Faso as a critical case

Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara constitutes a paradigmatic case of revolutionary governance in postcolonial Africa. It combined radical ideological vision, extensive mobilisation, and a deliberate attempt to restructure both the state and society. The regime's brevity and abrupt collapse make it analytically valuable: it enables observation of the full

[3] The DOP can be assessed through the following link: https://www.sig.gov.bf/fileadmin/user_upload/DOP_-_Discours_d_orientation_politique_2_octobre_1983_CNR_.pdf

revolutionary cycle – from mass mobilisation and moral renewal to institutional breakdown – within a condensed historical timeframe (four years). Moreover, the Burkinabè case illuminates broader structural dynamics common to African revolutions, including the tension between moral charisma and institutional weakness, and between anti-imperialist ideals and external dependency.

From a comparative standpoint, Burkina Faso also represents a `most-likely' case for revolutionary success. Unlike many contemporaneous regimes, Sankara's government enjoyed genuine popular legitimacy, moral authority, and coherent reformist ambition. Its failure, therefore, cannot be explained by lack of public support or ideological confusion alone. Analysing why such a promising revolution collapsed reveals the deeper structural obstacles that confront revolutionary state-building across Africa.

This study approaches the Sankarist revolution not as an isolated episode but as an analytical window into postcolonial state formation. As a Burkinabè researcher, my perspective is informed by both proximity and critical distance: while recognising the enduring moral significance of Sankara's project, the analysis resists romanticisation and focuses instead on the institutional logic of its failure.

The methodological contribution lies in combining process tracing with interpretive reconstruction of revolutionary legitimacy. This dual lens – causal and cultural – enables a richer understanding of how moral authority interacts with institutional weakness. By situating the Burkinabè revolution within broader African and comparative frameworks, the study offers both empirical depth and theoretical reach, demonstrating how a single case can illuminate a general pattern of postcolonial revolutionary fragility.

IDEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY AND INTRA-LEFT FRAGMENTATION: BURKINA FASO

When Thomas Sankara seized power on 4 August 1983, his revolution was born less from a unified ideology than from a coalition of disillusioned actors – junior officers, Marxist intellectuals, student leaders, and trade unionists – united by rejection of corruption and neocolonial dependence. In the Policy Orientation Address (Discours d'orientation Politique – DOP, 2 October 1983), the revolutionaries clearly defined their aims:

The triumph of the August Revolution is not only the result of the revolutionary coup imposed on the sacrosanct reactionary alliance of May 17, 1983. It is the culmination of the struggle of the Voltaic people against their long-time enemies. It is a victory over international imperialism and its national allies. A victory over the retrograde, obscurantist and dark forces. A victory over all the enemies of the people who have plotted plots and intrigues behind his back[4].

From Maurice Yaméogo, Burkina Faso's first president, to Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo, its last before the revolution, the revolutionary elite regarded these leaders as `*retrograde, obscurantist, and dark forces*' who had long collaborated with `*international imperialism*' as its `*national allies*' – actors who, in their view, had deprived the Voltaic people of genuine independence and self-determination. The coalition that seized power on 4 August 1983 sought to dismantle these entrenched structures of domination.

The events of 4 August 1983, as documented by journalist Mohamed Maïga[5], reveal a tense and fragmented political atmosphere in Ouagadougou. Multiple factions – military and political

[4] *Discours d'Orientation Politique*, 2 October 1983, pp. 3–4. Author's translation from the original French: *`Le triomphe de la révolution d'août n'est pas seulement le résultat du coup de force révolutionnaire imposé à l'alliance sacro-sainte réactionnaire du 17 mai 1983. Il est l'aboutissement de la lutte du peuple voltaïque sur ses ennemis de toujours. C'est une victoire sur l'impérialisme international et ses alliés nationaux. Une victoire sur les forces rétrogrades, obscurantistes et ténébreuses. Une victoire sur tous les ennemis du peuple qui ont tramé complots et intrigues derrière son dos.'*

[5] Mohamed Maïga, `La nuit du 4 août,' *ThomasSankara.net*, August 15, 1983, https://www.thomassankara.net/nuit-4-aout-mohamed-maiga-15-aout-1983/ : `Thus, on Thursday, August 4, military trucks, leaving the capital, delivered large quantities of weapons recently supplied by France after agreements signed by... Michel Kafando! They were to return on the 5th, loaded with heavily armed men to physically eliminate Thomas Sankara, his former Boukari co-prisoner Jean-Baptiste Lingani, Captain Henri Zongo and other soldiers known for their progressive views.'

– competed to seize power, not out of shared ideological vision, but as a matter of survival. According to Maïga, the revolutionary left acted pre-emptively, aware that a right-wing military coup was planned for the following day, 5 August. This counter-coup aimed to reassert conservative control and eliminate key figures of the progressive military coalition, including Thomas Sankara, Jean-Baptiste Lingani, and Captain Henri Zongo.

French involvement, or at least complicity, loomed in the background. Maïga reports that military trucks left the capital on 4 August to collect arms recently supplied by France under agreements signed by Michel Kafando, then a figure associated with the conservative bloc. These same vehicles were scheduled to return the next day, carrying heavily armed forces tasked with neutralising the left-wing officers. In this context, the 4 August coup was not merely a domestic power shift but a struggle over national sovereignty. It marked, symbolically and strategically, a rupture with what Sankara's camp saw as `international imperialism' embodied in foreign interference and neocolonial alliances.

The coup's success, therefore, represented more than the triumph of a radical political current; it also precluded a return to externally backed military rule. By acting first, the revolutionary coalition seized the initiative and framed the revolution as both anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist – a foundational moment that would define the ethos of the Sankarist regime.

The heterogeneity of actors involved in the revolution – military officers, leftist militants, civil servants, and students – reflected a broad and deep reservoir of discontent with the ruling elites (Maïga, 1983), evidenced by the repeated ruptures and resistance movements of the preceding decades: the 1966 uprising that overthrew Yaméogo, the 1980 coup against Lamizana, the 1982 removal of Zerbo, and the unrest that culminated in the 1983 insurrection.

This diversity was a source of strength. It enabled the new National Council of the Revolution (CNR) to present itself as a popular, moral, and anti-imperialist movement transcending

traditional cleavages. Yet it also meant that the revolution's ideological foundations were plural, unstable, and often contradictory. The absence of a coherent doctrinal framework transformed ideological diversity into strategic ambiguity – a resource for mobilisation that later became a liability for governance.

The Fusion of ideological currents

The early revolutionary discourse combined Marxist-Leninist class analysis, Pan-African solidarity, and a strong moral nationalism rooted in notions of self-reliance and integrity. Sankara's *Discours d'orientation politique* (2 October 1983) declared the revolution `anti-imperialist, democratic, and popular,' positioning it against both domestic privilege and international dependency. However, these ideological references were never reconciled into a consistent political programme. For the military wing of the revolution – Sankara, Blaise Compaoré, Henri Zongo, and Jean-Baptiste Lingani – Marxism was primarily an ethical vocabulary to justify anti-elite mobilisation and centralised discipline. For civilian Marxists in the African Independence Party *(Parti Africain de l'Indépendance, PAI)* and its mass organisation, the Patriotic League for Development *(Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement, LIPAD)*, this signalled a revolutionary orthodoxy of class leadership and party primacy.

This divergence was latent during the first year of the revolution, when charismatic leadership and shared enthusiasm masked deeper tensions. The absence of a formal vanguard party[6] allowed Sankara to mediate among factions, but it also deprived the regime of a mechanism for ideological arbitration. The revolutionary narrative – `La Patrie ou la Mort, Nous Vaincrons!' (Homeland or Death, We Will Conquer!) – offered a unifying slogan rather than a governing blueprint.

[6] This was one of the critics of LIPAD: `His criticisms [LIPAD] were about too much personalization of power, a certain improvisation because of too much voluntarism, the lack of political debates **within the CNR, whose exact composition is not known**, the too great place given to the military.' (Frégeat 1985).

Fragmentation within the revolutionary left and limits of revolutionary pluralism

Over time, ideological consensus within the Burkinabè revolution began to erode. The CNR initially drew support from a broad coalition of leftist groups, but these alliances proved fragile. In 1984, the alliance with PAI-LIPAD collapsed after its leaders were accused of sectarianism, purged, and imprisoned. The Revolutionary Communist Party of Upper Volta (Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire Voltaïque, PCRV), inspired by the Albanian model of Marxism-Leninism, denounced the revolution as `praetorian' and rejected military-led governance, opting to remain outside the process altogether (Jaffré 2007).

Other factions pursued diverging strategic visions. The Union of Communist Struggles (Reconstituted) (Union de Luttes Communistes – Réconstruite, ULC-R), influenced by Maoist doctrine, emphasised rural mobilisation and peasant leadership. The Burkinabè Communist Union (Union Communiste Burkinabè, UCB), by contrast, aligned more closely with the military leadership and became the de facto ideological partner of the Sankarist elite (Some 1990; Otayek 2013).

This fragmentation of the revolutionary left reflected a broader structural dilemma of revolutionary governance in Africa: the absence of institutionalised mechanisms to manage ideological pluralism. Strategic disagreements – such as whether to prioritise national liberation or proceed directly to socialism – exposed deep divides not reducible to personal rivalries. Rather, they revealed the structural impossibility of sustaining multiple revolutionary logics within a fragile postcolonial state. As Goldstone (1982) argues, successful revolutions require the integration of diverse political actors into a shared institutional framework. In Burkina Faso, however, ideological ambiguity – so effective during the seizure of power – became a liability during consolidation, fuelling factionalism and undermining the coherence of the revolutionary project.

The institutional consequences of ambiguity

The revolution's governing structures reflected this incoherence. The *Committees for the Defence of the Revolution* (CDRs) and the *Revolutionary Popular Tribunals* (Tribunaux Populaires de la Revolution - TPRs) were created simultaneously as instruments of participation and of surveillance. Each embodied a different conception of the revolution: the CDRs expressed Sankara's populist vision of civic mobilisation, while the TPRs reflected the Marxist-Leninist impulse to purify the state through class justice. The TPR aimed to educate the population, to dismantle all the mechanisms that have allowed so much misappropriation in the past (Frégeat 1985). However, without a clear hierarchy or legal delimitation, these institutions frequently clashed, eroding both coherence and legitimacy.

By 1985, the proliferation of ideological labels – `democratic and popular,' `national and patriotic,' `socialist and revolutionary' – illustrated what Jaffré (2007) called `a confusion of the vocabularies of the revolution' (`*une confusion des vocabulaires de la revolution')*. In practice, ideological ambiguity translated into administrative instability and conflicting lines of authority between military and civilian actors. The CNR's inability to transform moral enthusiasm into institutional routine marked the first step toward political isolation.

This first mechanism – ideological ambiguity – helps explain why a revolution with broad moral appeal could not evolve into a coherent state project. The problem was not the absence of ideas, but the excess of them: too many discourses competing for primacy within an under-institutionalised state. As Burns (1996) noted, revolutions are `coalitions of conviction without consensus.' In Burkina Faso, this meant that ideological pluralism, unmediated by stable institutions, produced fragmentation and mistrust. The ensuing divisions within the revolutionary camp laid the foundation for the confrontational politics that would later characterise Sankara's governance.

DOMESTIC CONFRONTATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL ISOLATION

If ideological ambiguity fractured the revolutionary camp from within, confrontation consolidated its authority from above – at least temporarily. As the unifying fervour of 1983 waned, the Sankara regime turned increasingly to coercive and moralistic methods to enforce unity, discipline dissent, and signal autonomy. This transition reflected a broader pattern in African revolutionary politics: when institutional weakness prevents negotiation, power is asserted through rupture and coercion (Gurr 2015).

From moral renewal to political discipline

Sankara's leadership style was built on moral conviction. His speeches denounced corruption, laziness, and dependency as symptoms of colonial subjugation. He embodied a politics of virtue, using personal austerity and rhetorical discipline to model the `new man' of the revolution. Yet moral renewal soon required enforcement. The CDRs, initially envisioned as grassroots organs of popular power, evolved into instruments of surveillance and discipline. `The objective of this revolution,' Sankara proclaimed in the 02 October 1983 DOP, `is to make the people assume power. This is why the first act of the revolution, after the Proclamation of 4 August, was the appeal to the people for the creation of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution.' Their mandate extended from civic mobilisation to local governance, public morality, and economic participation.

By 1986, Sankara openly acknowledged the excesses committed in the name of revolutionary vigilance. During a national meeting of CDR delegates, he condemned abuses:

> Some CDRs have done execrable, unspeakable things... But since 'unspeakable' is not revolutionary, everything must be said. Indeed, CDRs took advantage of the patrol to loot. Well, we will now hunt

them down like thieves and we will simply shoot them. Let me be clear! If we have weapons, it is to defend the people[7]. (Speech of 4 April 1986, p. 7)

Initially designed as participatory organs, the CDRs and the TPRs blurred the boundary between civic engagement and coercive control (Harsch 2013, Otayek 2013). While they reaffirmed the revolution's ethical mission, they also reinforced a hierarchical distinction between the virtuous and the deviant, between the revolutionary and the counter-revolutionary.

This evolution had ambivalent consequences. On one hand, it sustained a disciplined revolutionary ethos and provided channels for public denunciation. On the other hand, it transformed citizens from participants in collective transformation into objects of moral correction. The participatory spirit that had energised the revolution in 1983 gave way to a disciplinary state logic that narrowed the regime's social coalition and sowed seeds of alienation.

Conflict with Unions and Traditional Authority

Two pillars of Burkinabè society – trade unions and customary chieftaincies – became early casualties of this confrontational turn. Unions, historically the nucleus of left-wing activism, resisted their subordination to the CDRs (Kabeya 1987). When strikes and protests erupted in 1984–85, the government responded with arrests, dismissals, and the dissolution of several union federations (Frégeat 1985; Jaffré 2007). Sankara's insistence on revolutionary unity left little room for independent organisation. What had begun as a movement of popular empowerment gradually alienated the very actors capable of sustaining its legitimacy.

[7]Author's translation from the original French: `*Certains CDR ont fait des choses exécrables, indicibles… Mais comme 'indicible' n'est pas révolutionnaire, il faut tout dire. En effet, des CDR ont profité de la patrouille pour piller. Eh bien, nous les pourchasserons désormais comme des voleurs et nous les abattrons purement et simplement. Que cela soit clair ! Si nous avons des armes, c'est pour défendre le peuple.'* (Discours du 4 avril 1986, p.7). The speech can be assessed through the link: https://www.thomassankara.net/wp-content/uploads/2005/09/abut_de_pouvoir_doit_etre_etranger_aux_cdr.pdf

Relations with traditional leaders were even more fraught. The revolution depicted chiefs as `feudal' remnants, obstacles to equality and progress. Subsidies and privileges were withdrawn, land tenure was reformed, and the chiefs' judicial authority was curtailed (Jaffré 1989, 2007; Dickovick 2009). These policies resonated with Marxist critiques of pre-capitalist domination but ignored the enduring symbolic authority of the *Mogho Naba* and local lineage chiefs (Wilkins 1989; Guirma 1991). By attempting to replace centuries-old systems of moral legitimacy with politicised CDRs, the regime eroded its rural base. What appeared as social emancipation from above was often experienced locally as political dispossession.

Disconnection from indigenous legitimacy: The forgotten dimension

The disconnection from indigenous legitimacy lies in the uneasy relationship between imported revolutionary ideology and indigenous political culture. Classic theories of revolution, largely derived from European or Asian experiences, assume a secular social order in which legitimacy flows from ideology or performance. Many pre-colonial African societies, however, retain hybrid systems where authority is moral and spiritual as much as institutional (Diop 1959, 1960, 1967; Karlström 1996). By re-centring indigenous legitimacy in the analysis of revolutionary politics, this study bridges African political philosophy and comparative state-building. It echoes Wa Thiong'o's (1998) call to `decolonise the mind' by grounding transformation in local moral universes. The failure of many African revolutions, therefore, reflects not ideological excess but cultural disconnection – the inability to root modern transformation in historical forms of authority.

These domestic confrontations reveal the logic of what this article terms confrontational state-building. In contexts of weak institutions and fragile legitimacy, revolutions may attempt to generate cohesion through moral absolutism and coercive purification rather than negotiation and compromise. Such strategies yield short-term consolidation – discipline, visibility, ideological clarity – but erode the broad coalitions required for endurance. The Burkinabè

experience illustrates how moral purity, when converted into governing practice, transforms a unifying principle into a source of isolation.

CONFRONTATIONAL FOREIGN POLICY AND STRATEGIC ISOLATION

Revolutionary governments, especially in postcolonial Africa, have often viewed foreign policy as an extension of domestic transformation. In this sense, Thomas Sankara's diplomacy was not a supplement to his revolution but its moral and ideological frontier. By rejecting dependence on external aid and denouncing neocolonial domination, Sankara sought to project the revolution's ethics of autonomy onto the international stage. Yet, as with domestic politics, his confrontational approach – defined by moral absolutism and rhetorical defiance – produced strategic isolation. The regime's collapse in 1987 cannot be understood without recognising the cumulative pressures generated by this external stance.

Revolutionary diplomacy as moral performance

Sankara's foreign policy was grounded in the conviction that political sovereignty required economic self-reliance (Sawadogo and Wetta 1992). He viewed foreign aid as a continuation of colonial subjugation and declared that `he who feeds you controls you.' His administration reduced dependency on international donors, cut ministerial privileges, and launched national production campaigns symbolised by the local textile *Faso Dan Fani* (Sawadogo & Wetta 1992).

In global forums, Sankara emerged as a voice of uncompromising integrity. Sankara's confrontation extended beyond domestic boundaries. Internationally, he redefined Burkina Faso's foreign policy around self-reliance and anti-imperialism. His 04 October 1984 United Nations address and the 29 July 1987 Organisation of African Unity (OUA) speech against

debt repayment symbolised Africa's moral defiance of global injustice[8]. In his OAU speech, Sankara directly challenged the legitimacy of Africa's external debt burden, framing it as a continuation of colonial subjugation. As he declared: `It was the colonizers who indebted Africa to the donors, their brothers and cousins. We are strangers to debt. So we can't pay it[9]' (Thomassankara.net 2016).

These interventions resonated across the continent, earning admiration from African youth and radical intellectuals alike. However, revolutionary diplomacy also became performative – a theatre of moral defiance rather than pragmatic strategy. Burkina Faso's economic base remained fragile, with limited export revenues and growing fiscal constraints. The withdrawal/reduction of Western assistance, coupled with the reluctance of socialist allies to fill the gap, exposed the regime's structural vulnerability. Moral self-reliance could not compensate for material scarcity.

Confrontation with France and the West

Relations with France, the former colonial power, deteriorated rapidly. Sankara's introduction of visa reciprocity, criticism of French military presence in Africa (Jaffré 2007), and support for anti-imperialist movements challenged the foundations of *Françafrique*. In the broader Western camp, Sankara's alignment with radical Third World movements – his support for Nicaragua's Sandinistas, for the Polisario Front, and for anti-apartheid struggles – reinforced perceptions of hostility (UN speech, 04 October 1984). During the late Cold War, such positions provoked unease among Western governments already wary of Marxist-Leninist

[8] In his 1984 UN speech, Sankara "Let us therefore put an end to the arrogance of the great who lose no opportunity to question the rights of peoples."["Que cesse donc l'arrogance des grands qui ne perdent aucune occasion pour remettre en cause le droit des peuples."] (in Thomassankara.net, 17 June 2016, https://www.thomassankara.net/discours-de-sankara-devant-lassemblee-generale-de-lonu-le-4-octobre-1984-texte-integral/)

[9] Ce sont les colonisateurs qui endettaient l'Afrique auprès des bailleurs de fond, leurs frères et cousins. Nous sommes étrangers à la dette. Nous ne pouvons donc pas la payer. (in Thomassankara.net, July 2016, https://www.thomassankara.net/il-faut-annuler-la-dette-29-juillet-1987-sommet-de-loua-addis-abeba/)

rhetoric (Ganser 2007). The United States, engaged in the rollback of leftist movements worldwide, viewed the Burkinabè experiment with suspicion. The absence of powerful allies left the revolution geopolitically exposed, reliant on the goodwill of volatile partners.

Uneasy alliances in the Global South

Sankara's efforts to cultivate South–South solidarity also met limits (Skinner 1988; Jaffré 2007). Although initially cordial with Libya, Sankara's insistence on national autonomy led to deteriorating relations with Gaddafi, as he refused to trade political loyalty for financial aid (Jaffré 2007). Ties with Cuba remained cordial but largely symbolic, constrained by distance and limited resources. Within West Africa, the revolution's ideological intransigence alienated potential partners. Côte d'Ivoire's Félix Houphouët-Boigny denounced Sankara as a destabilising influence, while conservative regimes in Togo and Niger regarded his revolutionary rhetoric as a threat to regional order (Skinner 1988, Jaffré 2007). As Kumah-Abiwu (2023) notes, Sankara's diplomatic strategy marked a radical break from the compliant foreign policy posture of many African states, but also led to diplomatic isolation.

This external hostility interacted with domestic fragility. As foreign aid declined and trade relations strained, economic shortages intensified public discontent. External isolation thus reinforced internal vulnerability, narrowing the regime's capacity to absorb dissent or negotiate with opponents.

Strategic costs of confrontational diplomacy

Sankara's confrontational foreign policy carried significant strategic costs. His regime emerged at the height of the Cold War, a period marked by concerted efforts from the United States and its allies to suppress Marxist movements across Europe and the Global South (Ganser 2007). The assassinations of figures such as Patrice Lumumba in Congo and Ruben Um Nyobè in Cameroon exemplify the broader pattern of foreign-backed repression against anti-imperialist

leaders (Nouzille 2015). As Mylonas and Vogli (2024) argue, the survival of revolutionary regimes often hinges on their ability to frame their agendas within the contours of the prevailing international order. In this regard, Sankara's refusal to engage in strategic alignment rendered his revolution particularly susceptible to geopolitical isolation and covert destabilisation.

The paradox of Sankara's diplomacy lies in its simultaneous symbolic triumph and strategic failure. Internationally, Burkina Faso emerged as a powerful emblem of African dignity, pan-Africanism, and radical autonomy. Yet diplomatically and economically, the revolution lacked the institutional foundations necessary to sustain its moral defiance. From a realist perspective, it overestimated the influence of ethical appeal while underestimating the structural constraints imposed by global economic dependency.

On 15 October 1987, when Sankara was assassinated, the revolution stood isolated – without reliable allies, with alienated unions, and with traditional elites turned adversaries. Its international marginalisation mirrored its internal estrangement. The same moral clarity that inspired admiration abroad had, paradoxically, deprived it of the pragmatic alliances necessary for survival.

The strategic isolation completes the causal chain linking ideology, confrontation, and collapse. Revolutionary purity, when pursued without strategic adaptation, generates not liberation but vulnerability. In Burkina Faso, the external realm reproduced the domestic logic of confrontation: defiance of dependency became defiance of diplomacy. By transforming foreign policy into moral performance, the regime affirmed its integrity but undermined its security.

More broadly, the Burkinabè case illustrates a recurring pattern in postcolonial Africa: revolutionary states, in seeking to assert autonomy within a global order structured by inequality, confront an impossible dilemma between moral principle and pragmatic survival.

The collapse of Sankara's regime thus reflected not personal failure but structural constraint – a microcosm of the postcolonial predicament itself.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: DIVERGENT PATHS OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNANCE

The trajectory of Thomas Sankara's revolution becomes clearer when viewed alongside two other African experiments in radical transformation: Jerry Rawlings's Ghana (1981–2000) and Yoweri Museveni's Uganda (1986–present). Each leader emerged from crisis, invoked popular renewal, and sought to reconstruct the state through revolutionary legitimacy. Yet their outcomes diverged sharply. While Burkina Faso's revolution collapsed within four years, Ghana and Uganda consolidated hybrid regimes that outlived their revolutionary moment. Comparing these experiences highlights the conditions under which revolutionary governance in Africa either institutionalises or implodes.

Rawlings's Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) initially mirrored Sankara's radicalism. Both mobilised Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, condemned corruption, and preached self-reliance. But by 1984, Rawlings confronted the limits of confrontation. Facing economic crisis and international isolation, he shifted from moral denunciation to pragmatic inclusion – reinstating trade unions, co-opting traditional leaders through the creation of District Assemblies, and embracing IMF-backed reforms. The result was an uneasy synthesis of revolutionary ethos and bureaucratic pragmatism. Ghana's revolution survived by diluting its purity: compromise became strategy, not betrayal (Haynes 2022).

Museveni's National Resistance Movement followed a different but related path (Dickovick 2009). Emerging from civil war, it framed its `no-party democracy' as an inclusive alternative to sectarian politics. Resistance Councils incorporated traditional chiefs and local elders, blurring boundaries between revolutionary and customary authority. Over time, the councils

evolved into local governments, anchoring the regime's legitimacy in hybrid institutions. Museveni, unlike Sankara, treated revolution as a process of gradual re-embedding rather than rupture. His success and longevity lay less in ideological coherence than in adaptive coalition-building. Unlike Burkina Faso, Uganda forged strong strategic ties with the United States, positioning itself as a key military ally in the region. This alignment secured external support and enhanced regime durability. However, as Ba (2017) notes, the Ugandan regime gradually evolved into a highly repressive, authoritarian, and corruption-prone state. In contrast to Burkina Faso's confrontational rupture, Uganda exemplified an accommodationist path – sacrificing ideological purity for geopolitical security.

This contrast reveals a broader pattern: strategic accommodation with domestic and international forces has been essential for regime survival in postcolonial Africa. In Ghana, Jerry Rawlings gradually steered his revolutionary project toward democratic consolidation, while in Uganda, Yoweri Museveni entrenched authoritarian control – both through negotiated alignments with key internal constituencies and external patrons. These trajectories stand in stark contrast to Sankara's Burkina Faso, where the refusal to compromise – with unions, traditional authorities, or foreign powers – produced moral distinction but political isolation. Unlike Rawlings and Museveni, who channelled revolutionary legitimacy into institutional adaptation, Sankara upheld ideological purity as both method and objective. This divergence reinforces the central argument of this study: revolutionary endurance in Africa is less a function of ideological consistency than of the capacity to negotiate legitimacy within inherited institutional and geopolitical constraints.

In comparative terms, Burkina Faso represents the `pure type' of confrontational state-building, while Ghana and Uganda exemplify adaptive or accommodative variants. The outcomes suggest a trade-off between moral clarity and institutional endurance. Confrontational

revolutions achieve symbolic integrity but collapse under isolation; accommodative revolutions sacrifice purity but construct mechanisms of persistence.

This comparison advances three broader insights for the study of African politics. First, it reframes revolutions as experiments in state-building under structural constraint, rather than as transient moral episodes. Second, it identifies legitimacy negotiation – not ideological radicalism – as the decisive variable in revolutionary durability. Third, it shows that indigenous political cultures are not obstacles to modernisation but potential foundations for stable transformation when incorporated rather than suppressed.

Through this comparative lens, Sankara's failure appears less as a personal tragedy than as the logical culmination of a structural dilemma confronting all postcolonial revolutions: how to reconcile emancipation through rupture with governance through institution.

CONCLUSION: REVOLUTION, MORALITY, AND THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONS

This article set out to explain why postcolonial revolutions in Africa, despite their moral and popular appeal, so often fail to produce enduring institutions. Using Thomas Sankara's revolution in Burkina Faso (1983–1987) as a paradigmatic case, it traced the mechanisms through which moral authority, ideological zeal, and structural fragility combined to generate political isolation and collapse. The analysis has argued that revolutionary regimes in Africa are constrained by two interacting dynamics: ideological ambiguity, which sustains mobilisation but undermines coherence, and confrontational state-building, which substitutes moral purity for coalition-building.

Through process tracing, the study revealed how these mechanisms unfolded sequentially in Burkina Faso: ideological plurality fostered early unity but later fragmentation; confrontation with unions and chiefs consolidated control yet eroded legitimacy; and international defiance, while morally resonant, led to strategic isolation. The revolution's downfall thus stemmed not

from the absence of vision but from the contradiction between ethical ambition and institutional capacity.

The Burkinabè experience invites a rethinking of how scholars approach African revolutions. Too often, they are portrayed as moral narratives – either heroic or tragic – or as brief developmental experiments interrupted by betrayal. This article suggests an alternative reading: revolutions are state-building projects constrained by postcolonial conditions of weakness and fragmentation. Their fragility lies not in their ideals but in the institutional environments into which those ideals are projected. In contexts where bureaucratic structures are thin and legitimacy is contested, rupture becomes self-defeating.

This interpretation moves the debate beyond leadership or ideology. Sankara's charisma and moral rectitude, however exceptional, could not offset the structural constraints of a state still negotiating its foundations. The revolution's reliance on moral authority, unaccompanied by mechanisms of inclusion, transformed ethical clarity into political rigidity. In this sense, Sankara's tragedy was structural, not personal: he embodied the aspirations of a postcolonial generation seeking sovereignty without dependency, but he governed within an order that made such autonomy nearly impossible.

The comparative discussion of Ghana and Uganda underscores this point. Where Rawlings and Museveni translated revolutionary legitimacy into hybrid institutions, Sankara sought to preserve revolutionary authenticity. Their divergent paths confirm that revolutionary endurance depends on the ability to negotiate legitimacy rather than to enforce purity. Accommodation may appear ideologically impure, yet it often provides the institutional elasticity necessary for survival.

This insight contributes to three broader debates in African political studies: First, it reframes revolutions as laboratories of state formation, highlighting how moral and institutional logics

collide in postcolonial contexts. Second, it foregrounds indigenous legitimacy – often dismissed as traditional or pre-modern – as a vital resource for sustainable governance. Third, it proposes confrontational state-building as a conceptual bridge linking the study of revolutionary politics and state fragility, demonstrating how moral absolutism, while politically galvanising, undermines long-term stability.

Beyond its analytical value, the Sankarist experience continues to shape political imagination across Africa. The image of the young, incorruptible leader who sought to rebuild the nation from below remains a moral benchmark for leadership. Yet his revolution also warns of the limits of moral politics when detached from institutional pragmatism. The dream of total emancipation through rupture must reckon with the necessity of inclusion, negotiation, and compromise.

Seen through this lens, Sankara's legacy is neither failure nor martyrdom alone. It is a mirror reflecting the broader dilemma of postcolonial Africa: the struggle to reconcile ethical sovereignty with structural dependence, revolutionary ambition with institutional fragility. His experiment reveals that the power to inspire and the capacity to endure are not synonymous.

Ultimately, the lesson of the Burkinabè revolution is not that radical transformation is impossible, but that it must be anchored in both moral and institutional foundations. Revolutions that neglect either dimension – ethics without institutions or institutions without ethics – remain incomplete. Sankara's revolution achieved the first but lacked the second. Its fall reminds us that the challenge of African state-building lies not merely in overthrowing unjust orders but in creating legitimate, inclusive, and resilient ones.

In reinterpreting Sankara's project as a case of revolution without institution, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how postcolonial states wrestle with the paradox of

emancipation: that the pursuit of liberation through purity may, paradoxically, reproduce the very fragility it seeks to overcome.

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