

Understanding Geopolitics from a Historical Perspective: The Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983-1987

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Abstract

On March 5, 1983, The Republic of Upper Volta underwent a radical transformation through the Burkina Faso Revolution, led by Thomas Sankara, to strive towards social democracy and economy self-sufficiency. Since the nation gained its independence in 1960, Upper Volta experienced economic hardships due to the landlocked position on the continent, the dry climate impacting agriculture, along with government corruption at both state and local levels. The impaired economy influenced the nation's democratic process, resulting in a string of military coups and the establishment of military regimes. An unstable economy and corrupt government were plaguing the nation, and Captain Thomas Sankara sought to bring radical changes to Upper Volta. Thomas Sankara came to power in 1983 and renamed the country Burkina Faso (Land of the Upright Men). Sankara's goal was to abolish the feudal system and place agrarian policies to ensure food self-sufficiency. Sankara blamed the imperial system for Africa's economic woes and pushed the Burkinabe people to participate heavily in political affairs. The nation had yet to experience a presidential election, and Sankara emphasized popular participation policies to begin the democratic process. However, geopolitical and domestic factors played a part in hindering the revolution. Sankara's Marxist rhetoric put him at odds with the Western world.

As a consequence, the nation's history of political instability would come back to haunt the homeland when his closest ally Captain Blaise Compaore would assassinate Sankara. Scholars have discussed whether if Sankara's policies and tactics were disastrous, or if the French government sought to remove Sankara. This paper argues that geopolitics played a prominent role in influencing the abrupt halt of the revolution that resulted in the assassination of Thomas Sankara, and the establishment of an authoritarian government under Blaise Compaore.

Introduction

On March 5, 1983, The Republic of Upper Volta underwent a radical transformation through the Burkina Faso Revolution, led by Thomas Sankara, to strive towards social democracy and economic self-sufficiency. It would be the first significant reform in the history of Upper Volta, as the country would begin the process towards social justice, leaving behind their history of French colonialism redefined by a new name, Burkina Faso (Land of the Upright People). Many African countries since the 1960's have been impaired through the conflicting ideologies of capitalism and communism and caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between their former Western colonizers and the Soviet Union. Concerning West Africa, no moment was more crucial than the *balkanization* of French West Africa in 1958. The *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) was a strategy conceived by the French government in response to “anti-Imperial” and “pan-African” stances of the largest political party in French West Africa. The balkanization approach was to divide Franco-African federations into units too small to be economically viable and too weak politically to challenge former colonial powers.[1] To this day the African continent is plagued by this problem. The uneven and unequal distribution of land has limited resources and economic potentialities of these states.[2] Landlocked states were particularly affected by *balkanization*, especially states landlocked in the Sahara Desert; the dry climate limits crop production, and the landlocked position makes commerce quite tricky. Coastal states like the Ivory Coast and Cameroon, on the other hand, benefit from long distance trade since they have access to the Atlantic Ocean and have more extensive areas of land suitable for producing cash crops.

Africa has faced two concluding results due to *balkanization*: states with economic stability tend to have stable governments and strong ties with the Western world; situations with economic instability have resulted in the absence of democracy in unsteady statehoods. For example, political scientist John A. Wiseman's study on political volatility and political violence in Africa, reveals that in a 30-year span from 1960 to 1990, 23 political leaders have been tried and executed, 50 leaders have been murdered or assassinated, and 13 have died in prison.[3] These countries have fallen into a trend that stems from economic instability that ultimately leads to either, constant political violence, or authoritarian military regimes.

Political and economic instability would undoubtedly be the case for Burkina Faso. In 1960, the Republic of Upper Volta gained its independence following a sixty-three-year period under French Colonial rule. However, Upper Volta would experience economic hardships due to its landlocked position on the continent, along with government corruption on the state and local level. The

weakened economy would lead to the absence of democracy as the country would experience a string of military coups from 1966 to 1983.

Thomas Sankara became a renowned icon as he came into power in 1983, following a military takeover that resulted in the removal of President Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo and his political party, *l'Conseil de Salut du Peuple* (CSP). Sankara renamed the country to Burkina Faso (Land of the Upright Men). Sankara's goal was to strip power away from the traditional chiefs, who were appointed by French administrators during the colonial era, by abolishing the feudal system and property rights and enact new agrarian reform laws to nationalize all land.[4] Sankara's policies on land, healthcare, education, women's rights were his goals to build a democratic nation. However, geopolitical and domestic conflicts would play a role in hindering the Burkina Faso Revolution. Sankara's Marxist rhetoric put him at odds with the Western world, and the nation's history of military takeovers would come back to haunt Burkina Faso as Thomas Sankara would be assassinated in a military coup on October 15, 1987, and replaced by his closest captain, Blaise Compaore.[5]

Thomas Sankara and the Burkina Faso Revolution is significant because the movement still resonates in the Burkinabe people today. Thomas Sankara is referred to as the "African Che Guevara," because of his Marxist ideologies. However, the Burkina Faso Revolution separates itself from other Marxist-Leninist inspired movements in other African nations, such as Angola, Benin, Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The centralized authoritarian government models of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe inspired Afro-Marxist states.[6] Rather than controlling the Burkinabe population through means of a tyrannical government, Thomas Sankara sought popular support for the Burkina Faso Revolution. Unlike the violent revolutions that have taken place in Africa, The Burkina Faso Revolution was perhaps the least violent movement in Africa; it did not reach the level of violence as the Congo Crisis from 1960 to 1965, or the Rhodesian Bush War from 1964 to 1979.

What makes this an interesting topic is that the Burkina Faso Revolution takes place in the 1980's, during the later stages of the Cold War leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before Burkina Faso's transformation into a socialist state, the Republic of Upper Volta found itself economically in the shadows of Ivory Coast. Ivory Coast's economy relied on its agriculture and the exportation of cotton, coffee, and cocoa. Ivorian President Felix Houphouet-Boigny was perhaps the most powerful leader in West Africa due to the stability of the economy and the nation's close ties to the French government. Upper Volta, on the other hand, did not possess the amount of

cultivated land due to the dry climate, and the country heavily relied on foreign aid. Sankara's goal was to emphasize agriculture, rather than industrialism; industrialism was synonymous to imperialism. The dominant population would benefit from these agricultural and land reforms because 90 percent of the Burkinabe population lived in rural areas. Sankara would have to dismantle the feudal systems under the traditional rural chiefs and the trade unions in Ouagadougou. Thomas Sankara gained a majority approval rating on his policies, so how and why did the revolution fail?

Two assumptions are apparent when discussing the fall of Thomas Sankara and the Burkina Faso Revolution. First, Sankara's radical rhetoric during the Cold War era may allude that the French and Ivorian governments may have conspired to have Sankara assassinated. Secondly, Sankara's radical policies divided the nation, thus paving the way for the Compaore regime to take over. Regarding geopolitics, Burkina Faso had very little to offer to both Western and Eastern Blocs during the later stages of the Cold War due to its limited resources. However, let us note that the Ivorian government viewed Burkina Faso's radical transformation and Sankara's rising popularity in rural areas as a potential threat to Ivorian interests. Therefore, internal and external factors leading to the assassination of Sankara will need examination. This paper argues that geopolitics played a prominent role in influencing the abrupt halt of the revolution that resulted in the murder of Thomas Sankara and the establishment of an authoritarian government under Blaise Compaore.

Scholarly Discussion

Burkina Faso's past seems to get lost in West African history since the country is often generalized by a broader Francophilia lens that emphasizes the political career and achievements of Ivorian President Felix-Houphouet-Boigny. Scholars have said little about Upper Volta/Burkina Faso's economic struggles, and only a handful of them have written on the subject of the Burkina Faso Revolution; Ernest Harsch, Pierre Englebert, and Bruno Jaffre. The scholarly literature falls into two different camps: one camp suggests that Burkinabe society was unable to adapt to Sankara's radical policies, hence, leading to chaos in the nation's capital; the other camp suggests that the revolution was making progress and that foreign governments intervened with the democratic revolution.

Sociologist Ernest Harsch along with political scientists, Pierre Englebert, Guy Martin, and J. Tyler Dickovich have focused on the social environment of Burkina Faso and concentrate on the political and economic decisions placed by Thomas Sankara during his presidency from 1983-1987. *Thomas Sankara:*

An African Revolutionary, by Ernest Harsch, is referred to as the first English-language book that gives the historical account of Sankara's life from his upbringing in Upper Volta, through his military career. Harsch implies that the Sankara's assassination was the result of Cold War politics and that the French government was the culprits in the 1987 military coup.

Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa, by Pierre Englebert, discusses the economic and political climate of Upper Volta from the Yameogo administration to the Compaore regime. He argues that trade unions and laborers were at odds with Sankara's socialist policies. Although Sankara policies improved the lives of rural farmers, which made up of 90 percent of the population, the population in Ouagadougou had enough leverage to press a regime change, ousting Sankara.

Democratic Revolutionnaire, Conflicts Socio-Politiques et Pouvoir Militaire au Burkina Faso, by political scientist Guy Martin, breaks down Sankara's strategy of gaining support from laborers, peasants, and members of the educated class. Martin stresses that Sankara emphasized popular participation in the revolution. The process was expected to be lengthy because Sankara wanted to ensure that he implemented his policies slowly to the Burkinabe people. Also, Sankara wanted the people to continue the progress of the democratic revolution, should he be assassinated.

Local Politics: Radical Experiments in Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Uganda in the 1980's,^[7] by political scientist J. Tyler Dickovick examines the internal conflicts in Burkina Faso between the local chiefs and the Sankara Administration. Dickovick falls into the camp of scholars who suggest that Sankara's policies were self-inflicting. Although Sankara was able to gain a majority approval for his domestic plans, he was unable to fully enforce his landforms, which would strip land right away from the bourgeoisie and redistribute farmland among the peasants, because of the lack of support from local government officials, as well as members in the CDR.

The conversation among these scholars seems to suggest three scenarios regarding Thomas Sankara and the Burkina Faso Revolution. Pierre Englebert represents the view that Thomas Sankara was in a "catch-22" due to Burkina Faso's backlash from the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie, and the lack of influence in West Africa; Sankara openly criticized French president Francois Mitterrand, Ivorian President Felix Houphouet-Boigny, and went to war with Mali over border disputes. Examining these sources, it would appear that Sankara's fall was inevitable. However, Ernest Harsch and Guy Martin suggest that Sankara knew that the problems in Burkina Faso were complex and

hoped to establish the democratization process to put a halt to the establishment of the single party, military oligarchy. Harsch believes that the spirit of the revolution continues to live on in West Africa. J. Tyler Dickovich implies that Sankara's failure was due to his miscalculations, by putting too much of an emphasis on the rural population, and neglected the urban community and trade unions, suggesting that the chaos and unrest in Ouagadougou played a significant role in the removal of Sankara.

Methodology

Thomas Sankara and the Burkina Faso Revolution is a subject that continues to be studied by researchers. The Burkina Faso Revolution subject is being studied overwhelmingly in the field of political science. However, historians haven't explored it. Blaise Compaore's twenty-seven-year rule has played a significant role in the availability of government documents and newspaper articles because he was known for censoring the press and persecuting journalists. Some sources for this project are primary sources within secondary sources, such as *Democratie Revolutionnaire, Conflicts Socio-Politiques et Pouvoir Militaire Au Burkina Faso*, by political scientist Guy Martin. This secondary source contains statements made by Thomas Sankara during his presidency regarding the democratic revolution.

The primary sources for this project are speeches that cover Thomas Sankara's vision and goals of the Burkina Faso Revolution, and interviews that include the events surrounding Sankara's assassination. The Sankara speeches used for this project are from, *Thomas Sankara Speaks The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-1987*, which were translated into English by editor Michel Prairie. Other sources required translation for this project such as the Ernest Nongma Ouedraogo interview with *l'Courier Confidential*, and the Blaise Compaore interview with newsweekly magazine, *Jeune Afrique*. These interviews were obtained from French news archives, in which I was able to translate these French interviews into English.

Historical Background

Except for current Burkinabe president Roch Marc Christian Kabore, elected on November 29, 2015, the Republic of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso has never had a head of state elected to office. Conspirators had deposed Presidents Maurice Yameogo, Sangoule Zamizana, Saye Zerbo, Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo, Thomas Sankara, and Blaise Compaore; Sankara was the only president assassinated. Before Sankara's rise to power, all Voltaic presidents had been conservatives who aligned their policies with the Western world and

maintained strong ties with the French government.[8] Unlike to their neighbors to the south, Ivorian president Felix Houphouet-Boigny never faced massive resistance or opposition and was able to serve his presidential term until his death in 1993.

Following the removal of Maurice Yameogo, Colonel Lamizana would make the military very popular because it ousted a despised president. Lamizana would open some military schools seen as potential national institutes that would discipline the corrupt bureaucracy and counter the influence of the traditional chiefs; traditional chiefs were randomly appointed by the French government in which race and economic status did not play a role in establishing chiefs.[9] The establishment of military culture also provided a way for young men leave the feudal systems in rural areas and go through military training in Madagascar. This culture would inspire young men such as Thomas Sankara, Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo, Blaise Compaore, Henri Zongo, Jean-Baptiste Lingani, and Gilbert Diendere. It was in the military where Thomas Sankara read the works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engel and advance his political education through discussion.[10]

Although the military provided an escape for young men, it did so at the cost of democracy. Lamizana's rule was stable and quite lenient. However, his administration did very little to address the country's severe social and economic problems, and developments were minimal at best.[11] The nation had issues with funding for schools, agrarian projects, laborers, and trade unions. Political movements and protests were on the rise in Ouagadougou, and President Lamizana lost legal control over the nation. In 1980, a coup led by Colonel Saye Zerbo and the *Military Committee for the Enhancement of National Progress* overthrew Colonel Lamizana.

The military coup led by Colonel Zerbo would provide no relief for the people of Upper Volta. The literacy rate would remain at an all-time low, the lack of agrarian development would impair the nation's food source and cash crops, Ivory Coast continued to have leverage over the transportation of imports and exports since a single rail-line connected Ouagadougou to the ports of Abidjan. This lack of progress would immediately call for another military takeover to overthrow Saye Zerbo, followed by another army takeover to topple Major Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo in 1983. Thomas Sankara and the CNR would gain control of Burkina Faso in 1983, thus starting the Burkina Faso Revolution to bring out radical change to improve the social and economic well-being of the nation. From 1960 to 1983 Upper Volta was virtually overlooked in the realm of geopolitics, and the country did not become a concern until Thomas Sankara came into power.

The Fight Against Imperialism: the Road to Social Democracy and Economic Self-Sufficiency, 1983-1987

When discussing the Burkina Faso Revolution and its goals, it is vital to understand Thomas Sankara's political stance during the Cold War era, and the goals of his reform policies. When he came to power on October 4, 1983, following the removal of Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo, Sankara and the CNR pushed for agrarian reforms by stripping land away from the traditional chiefs by abolishing private property; this would certainly cause problems with Western nations such as the United States. The U.S. had the external power and intelligence operatives to infiltrate and overthrow radical governments and replace them with anti-communist dictatorships. Thomas Sankara's speech to the Thirty-ninth session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on October 4, 1984, discussed the role that Burkina Faso would play in the geopolitical world. He explained that despite going under radical reconstruction, will choose not to align with the United States or the Soviet Union, but instead align with Third world countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. Sankara had also discussed in a March 17, 1985 interview with Ernest Harsch on the impact imperialism had on Burkina Faso, and how the nation will have to push to recover from imperial policies that left the country impoverished. Sankara was known for being vocal and calling out imperialism and the capitalistic system. However, in this interview, Sankara makes it clear that the general public of Western nations are not the enemy, but rather, the imperialistic system.

On October 4, 1987, Sankara delivered a speech to the Thirty-ninth Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, published as a pamphlet by the Permanent Mission of Burkina Faso. The speech is titled "Freedom Must be Conquered," in which Sankara addressed the political stance of Burkina Faso and the role it will play in the Cold War era:

"... to express the views of my people concerning the problems on the agenda-consisting of the tragic web of events that are painfully cracking the foundations of our world at the end of the twentieth century. A world in which humanity has been transformed into a circus... A world in which nations, eluding international law, command groups of outlaws who, guns in hand, live by plunder and organize sordid trafficking." [12]

Sankara was speaking of the external pressures that Burkina Faso, and other African countries, faced when establishing reform policies that did not align with the political interests of the United States and its allies. [13] Should an African country develop Marxist inspired procedures and lean towards

Communism, Western intelligence agencies such as the CIA would send funds and weapons to a rebel faction to overthrow the radical government. The United States and Western European governments were also willing to support oppressive dictatorships as long as they would denounce communism.[14] Sankara announced that Burkina Faso would not ally with the Western Allies nor the Soviet Union. Instead, he wanted to form a tricontinental partnership between Africa, Asia, and South America to fight against political traffickers and economic exploiters.[15]

Sankara's "Freedom Must be Conquered" speech was to make it clear to the General Assembly of the United Nations that Burkina Faso desired to carry out its reform policies without interference from the foreign governments such as the United States and France. Sankara eventually stripped property rights from the provincial chiefs, making rural areas property of the state. This first significant step toward strengthening the nation's agricultural sector was essential. Before the Burkina Faso Revolution, the grain market was controlled by private traders, who sought to make a profit on exporting cash crops out of Burkina Faso. The CNR put an end to the private trade in the grain market and established a government program that would localize the distribution of grain at a local level, so rural communities would not have to depend on imported cereals, wheat, and rice from Ivory Coast. Policies on food self-sufficiency were also put in place to end the dependency on Ivorian plantations — Burkina Faso's rural income depended on remittance from Burkinabe men working on Ivorian plantations. Also, Ivory Coast was often the middleman in transporting commodities in and out of Burkina Faso since the country was landlocked and had a single rail-line that connected Ouagadougou to the ports of Abidjan.[17] Ultimately, Thomas Sankara chose to focus on agriculture over industrialism because industrialization was synonymous to imperialism.

Although France no longer had colonial domain over Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara was quite vocal about the neocolonial/imperialistic nature of the West. In a March 17, 1985, interview with the *Intercontinental Press*, Thomas Sankara discussed with Ernest Harsch about the impact that Western education had on the class structure in Burkina Faso. Class structure in Burkina Faso was listed as followed: the working class, the petty bourgeoisie, the peasant class, and the marginalized urban working class. The working class and peasant class supported Sankara's policies, while the petty bourgeoisie and urban working class posed as threats to the revolutionary movement.[18] Sankara stated that "the greatest difficulty facing the revolution was the neocolonial way of thinking; France left the country with certain habits in which upper-class elites would not want to give up their

privileges and accept the minimum of social justice.”[19] African historian A. Adu Boahen gives an African perspective on colonialism and discusses the lasting effects colonialism had on the African continent. The points that Boahen makes are in harmony with Sankara’s claims about Africa’s current state. First of all, because colonial education was inadequate, it resulted in widespread illiteracy that continues to plague present-day Africa. Second, colonial education had taken a portion of Africans and put them in a more prestige class that was separate from the dominant population.[20] Boahen also notes that colonial education diffused French culture throughout Western Africa. Sankara was critical against Africans who were dependent and content with French culture. There was an apparent divide among West Africans. There are those who embraced the lasting impressions of colonialism, and those who did not benefit from the system. Although the petty bourgeoisie was much smaller in size compared to peasant class, the petty bourgeoisie had political leverage over the rural population because of the educated class-maintained ties with French administrators. As long as the petty bourgeoisie stood, they would continue to pose a threat to Sankara’s revolution.

Thomas Sankara and the *Conseil National de la Revolution* party sought to mobilize the Burkinabe people through volunteer policies rather than establish reform policies by military force. The administration was already facing a backlash from the petty bourgeoisie and the urban working class, so Sankara found it necessary not to apprehend his political opponents aggressively. The goal was to send a message to Burkinabe people that they were the foundation of the Revolution and not the government. The CNR constituted that “The official organization of the people in the exercise of revolutionary power. It is the instrument that the people have forged to make themselves truly sovereign of their destiny and thus to extend their control in all areas of society.”[21] Because women were a significant demographic in the rural areas of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara championed for women rights by banning prostitution, and appointing women to key positions in the CNR; A quarter of Sankara’s minister posts selected were women.[22] The question of how could the Burkina Faso Revolution been a real revolution if it ignored the rights and welfare of women. It was necessary for Sankara and the revolutionary movement to establish a functioning society that could provide for itself economically and to function in a politically sound manner by getting involved heavily in politics. Sankara said in an August 4, 1987 interview with Havana Radio:

“Democracy is the people, with all their strength and potential. Ballot boxes and an electoral apparatus in and of themselves don’t signify the existence of democracy... Democracy can’t be conceived without total power rest in the

hands of the people-economic, military, political, social, and cultural power.”[23]

The ideas of economic self-sufficiency and social democracy are interchangeable because one cannot survive without the other. The purpose of Sankara’s policies on regulating the grain market was to ensure that the Burkinabe economy would not be at the mercy of international traders and merchants. For two decades since the nation gained its independence, no man held more power in West Africa than Ivorian President Felix-Houphouet-Boigny. Ivory Coast had been the most prosperous nation, regarding agriculture, and was able to receive a hefty profit by exporting cash crops through capital trade with the Western world; especially with its former colonizer, France. Sankara believed that to achieve economic dependency, Burkina Faso would have to break away with the traditional West African influences of Felix-Houphouet-Boigny. Although the results of Sankara’s agricultural policies fell short of African Standards, the production of cereal, cotton and sesame production gradually increased from 1983-1987; cereal production increased from 1,100 to 1,638 metric tons, sesame producer price increased from 7 to 95 CFA/kg, and sesame produce price increased from 96 to 175 CFA/kg.[24]

Furthermore, Thomas Sankara had to be very precise when discussing the goals of the revolution in the presence of an international audience. Underdeveloped nations existed in the vortex of the Cold War power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The World had already experienced major Cold War conflicts in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and was currently witnessing the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980’s. Western interventions also influenced plots to remove leaders from power such as Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah. Also, Burkina Faso itself has had a history of presidents forcefully removed from power by their military, so the possibility of Western governments influencing a plot for Sankara’s removal was extremely high. Burkina Faso had very little to offer to Western nations, as well as the Soviet Union, due to its limited resources. However, it appears that France and Ivory Coast perceived Sankara as a potential threat as he began to mobilize the masses. Although already deemed a Marxist, Sankara had to be careful with his words as they described the goals of the revolution discussing the previous decades of underdevelopment of Burkina Faso. Sankara also compared the Burkina Faso Revolution with the American Revolution, and how the American colonies revolted against the British Empire.[25] In the final statement of Sankara’s March 17, 1985 interview, he mentions that the American people should not be seen as the

enemy, as he had witnessed the poverty in Harlem in his visit to the United States in October of 1984.[26] Thomas Sankara's enemy was not a specific country, it was the worldwide imperialist system, and he told Harsch that he wanted to denounce any evils and causes of the generalized distrust toward the American people.[27]

The Collapse of the Revolution, 1987

The assassination of Thomas Sankara is an event that shook Burkina Faso and remains a controversial subject in geopolitics today. Information on the killing has been scarce, partly because the French, Ivorian, and other foreign governments have not declassified any documents about the coup. Since the removal of Blaise Compaore on October 31, 2014, more people are speaking out and identifying those who were responsible for Sankara's death now that Compaore is living in exile in Ivory Coast. At the time of the assassination, many eyewitness accounts were given by anonymous sources, fearing that they would be arrested and imprisoned by Compaore and the *Congres pour la Democratie et le Progres*. Compaore was never hesitant to go after his political opponents; in 1998 Compaore called for the assassination of Norbert Zongo, editor of the *L'Independant*, to prevent Zongo from publishing a story of a murder committed by Compaore's brother.[28] How did Burkina Faso go through this polarizing change from the charismatic Thomas Sankara, to the oppressive dictatorship of Blaise Compaore? The causes of the end of the revolution are twofold based on geopolitics and dysfunction within the CNR.

From 1983 to 1987 the rural community benefited from Sankara's reform policies that focused on government spending on education, health, and social services.[29] However, there was conflict within the CNR on government spending. Sankara wanted to concentrate on schooling in rural areas to increase literacy rates, so rural peasants can mobilize effectively and get involved in politics. Some members of the CNR felt that too much money fed rural communities and that the party should focus on issues plaguing urban workers and trade unions.[30] Certain factions within the party felt that Burkina Faso was becoming too isolated and that Sankara should be less harsh on Mossi chiefs as well as Ivorian President Felix-Houphouet-Boigny, and start looking to trade with neighboring countries for economic stability.[31] The nation-state was doing better than it was in past decades. However, Burkina Faso was still one of the poorest countries in the World. There was another issue within the CNR as then-Minister of Justice, Blaise Compaore, was living a lavish lifestyle with his wife Chantal Compaore and was receiving expensive gifts from Felix-Houphouet-Boigny; Chantal was also

the niece and adopted daughter of Ivorian President Felix-Houphouët-Boigny.[32] Sankara called out CNR officials who were living lavish lifestyles while “leading” the revolution and demanded that they make their assets public; this did not sit well with many government officials.

On October 15, 1987, a militant group stormed the *Conseil de l'Entente* and opened fire on Sankara and twelve of his bodyguards. Everyone in Ouagadougou knew what had happened when they heard the loud gunshots coming from the *Conseil de l'Entente*, and suspected that an assassin killed their President. It was the CNR's worst kept secret that Blaise Compaore plotted Sankara's assassination. However, Compaore denied the allegations that he had anything to do with the murder. In a November 4, 1987 interview, Blaise Compaore told *Jeune Afrique*, that his men discovered that Sankara was planning to assassinate him along with top officials Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Henri Zongo.[33] The four men (Sankara, Compaore, Lingani, and Zongo) were very close friends who served in the military under Presidents Sangoule Lamizana and Saye Zerbo, and they also served in cabinet position under President Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo. Compaore stated in the interview:

“[Sankara] is dead, and that's a shame indeed. We Africans are very sensitive to death. This is why even those who would hate him are somewhat in dismay. I am very sad myself because the death of Thomas was not [essential] for solving the serious problems facing our revolution.”[34]

Blaise Compaore said that had he known that his men were going to go after Sankara, he would have told them to stand down because of his friendship with Sankara. Ultimately, Compaore did not condemn his men, adding that Sankara was the first to exchange gunfire and emptied his magazine before being shot and killed.[35]

Based on Compaore's testimony in the interview, it would appear that there was no malicious intent to have Sankara assassinated. Compaore mentioned that Africans are very sensitive to death, and this claim may hold weight due to actions that had taken place to previous administrations. For instance, the nation's first president Maurice Yameogo was exiled and took refuge in Ivory Coast in 1966, and president's Sangoule Lamizana, Saye Zerbo, and Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo were arrested and charged with government corruption; Thomas Sankara would eventually pardon Zerbo and Ouedraogo. No political leader faced the death penalty, and the nation was able to avoid violent conflicts during political transitions. What had taken place at the *Conseil de l'Entente* on the night of October 15, 1987, was an incident that was so sporadic, that it practically shook all of Burkina Faso. Furthermore, this

interview indicates that the Compaore's men and that the massacre was officially an avoidable mishap and the courts didn't file charges.

Blaise Compaore makes a final note in the interview, that his political camp was strong and that Sankara began to lose control of the nation.[36] Compaore was implying on the clash between the *Comites de Defense de la Revolution* and trade unions. The CDR made up of young men, Marxists, and Pan-Africanists from rural areas; the organization's role was to carry out Sankara's reform policies and mobilize rural Burkina Faso. However, the CDR was challenging to control as the committee expanded. The group used thug tactics such as intimidation, torture, and embezzlement against traditional chiefs and trade unions. Sankara condemned the actions of the CDR. However, he needed the CDR to continue to operate and carry out his policies.[37] The effects of the CDR also tainted the image of Sankara and the revolution on the geopolitical scale, as Sankara's government had characteristics of a totalitarian regime.

Ivory Coast played a prominent role in trade in West Africa, and the Port of Abidjan was one of the most important sites of business in French West Africa. Ivory Coast still had leverage over trade and commerce during the mid-1980s. By no surprise, Ivory Coast was concerned over the actions of the CDR on Burkinabe trade unions, because it posed as a nuisance in the transportation of goods between the two countries. Political Scientists Guy Martin mentions that the actions of the CDR caused neighboring Francophone nations to act as watchdogs for France and Western allies.[38]

An interview with former Minister of Security, Ernest Nongma Ouedraogo, conducted by *L' Courier Confidential*, reveals that Thomas Sankara was under constant threat while he was president of Burkina Faso. Ouedraogo notes that there had been so many assassinations attempts before October 15, 1987, that counting them was rendered futile. He did confirm that there was a case of a failed assassination attempt, where the perpetrators were tried and executed.[39]

Ouedraogo states that the Ministry of Security received several notifications from Congo that Anglophone countries such as Liberia and Francophone countries such as Ivory Coast targeted Burkina Faso.[40] Although there is no evidence that the French government played a direct role in Sankara's assassination, Ernest Harsch notes that French Intelligence key player, Jaques Foccart, traveled and networked with African governments, and was known to be hostile to Sankara and may have collaborated with other nations and factions within the CNR to remove Sankara.[41]The press in the United States

quickly reported Sankara's death as an assassination by Blaise Compaore even though anti-communist governments in Africa, as well as the West, targeted Thomas Sankara.

On October 17, 1987, the Associated Press reported on the coup d'état and the assassination of Thomas Sankara. The Associated Press reported:

“In Washington, the State Department said the United States did not plan any immediate action that would constitute recognition of the new Government. In case of coups, a State Department spokeswoman said, or ‘abrupt Government changes,’ the United States closely monitors the situation but generally refrains from signing agreements of any kind with the new leader.”[42]

The New York Times reported two weeks later on October 24, 2017, that no Africa leader had sent a public message to Blaise Compaore, and that although this was the fourth coup in the past seven years, it was poorly received.[43] James Brooks of the New York Times wrote the article titled, “A Friendship Dies in a Bloody Coup,” which discussed Sankara's charisma and popularity among the Burkinabe people and his revolution against poverty and corruption. Condemned by the Head of State of Ghana, Jerry Rawlings, Republic of Congo President Denis Sassou Nguesso, and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who perceive what Blaise Compaore and the coup did as a treasonous act.[44] This press release reveals the complexity of geopolitics. While nations such as Ghana, Uganda, and Congo were in opposition of the new Burkinabe government, this transition in government power restored Ivorian-Burkinabe relations under the Houphouet-Boigny administration.[45] After the 2014 coup, Blaise Compaore was granted asylum by current Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and continues to reside in Ivory Coast today.

The Cold War played an external factor that caused a divide in the CNR. Burkina Faso was not alone in this battle as many African countries had to focus on economic models and the consequences of choosing sides during the Cold War.[46] In the case of Burkina Faso, although Sankara decided not to align with neither the United States nor the Soviets, they quickly became enemies with their African neighbors who chose to align with Western nations. In response to geopolitical pressures, the CNR experienced in-house fighting as a radical faction of the party thought Sankara was too passive on political opponents; Sankara negotiated government transition with ousted President Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo to avoid bloodshed, in which Ouedraogo was pardoned and continued to work as a medical doctor in

Ouagadougou.[47] A more conservative faction of the CNR felt that cutting ties with its neighbors was very risky because Burkina Faso's economic gains were minimal. Another wing carried on the corruption from the previous administration in which Sankara told journalists that he was launching a purification process by forming an anti-corruption commission.[48] Thomas Sankara felt that crime within the CNR was the most substantial threat to the Burkina Faso Revolution. He emphasized education and political participation because he thought that he was nothing more significant than the Revolution. He desired that the Burkinabe people would take action and continue the revolution should he be removed from power or assassinated.[49]

Conclusion

The Burkina Faso Revolution is the story of an impoverished nation's struggle to gain control of its destiny through the means of a self-sufficient economy and a democratic political system. It was the most tumultuous era in the nation's history as an independent state. The state was unable to divorce itself from its militant past as factions in the CNR restored the old ways of establishing new leadership; by overthrowing its predecessor. Upper Volta/Burkina Faso's social trends were the result of the nation's limited natural resources. With a large portion of the population living in impoverished rural areas, a military culture became an escape for young men. The military gained enough power and influence to overthrow the government, thus forming a single-party military government. When Thomas Sankara came into rule following the removal of Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo, building a democratic system was a top priority. However, a democratic revolution could not take place if the country remained impoverished.

For the first time in its history, Burkina Faso had a leader that publicly addressed the issues that plagued the nation. Leaders before Sankara had consistently separated themselves from the rural peasants. Hence, Sankara's popularity grew when he spoke charismatically to the people about the future of Burkina Faso. The African world could not escape Cold War politics and remained relevant to the power struggle between pro and anti-communist governments. Likewise, external pressures infiltrated the CNR leading to the in-house fighting that broke the council into opposing factions. Although Thomas Sankara fought to keep his promises regarding radical policies, members of the CNR appeared to have abandoned revolutionary principals, and eventually caved-in to the influence of foreign governments.

Thomas Sankara still resonates as an iconic figure in Burkina Faso as well as the African continent, because Burkina Faso was in a better position than it

was before 1983, the people were freer before the authoritarian rule of Blaise Compaore. Nevertheless, Burkina Faso was a country that didn't suffer from catastrophes such as civil wars, purges, and genocide. It was a country that was always in the shadows of Ivory Coast because it could not live up to the prosperity of the Ivorian economy, and the state did not become a major concern on an international level until Thomas Sankara came to power with a vision to radically transform Burkina Faso into a self-sufficient, social democracy.

End Notes

[1] Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 80.

[2] A. Adu Boahen. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 96.

[3] John A. Wiseman. "Leadership and Personal Danger in African Politics," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 657-660: 659

[4] Ernest Harsch. *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014), 97.

[5] Prior to 2015 Upper Volta/Burkina Faso has never had a Head of State elected through the democratic process; every Head of State assumed the role through military power. With the democratic process was absent from Upper Volta, the Head of State had no incentive to make or keep promises since he was safe from being voted out of office. By the time Sankara took power in Burkina Faso, the nation had already arrested former presidents Sangoule Lamizana, Saye Zerbo and Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo on corruption charges.

[6] Guy Martin. "Democratie Revolutionnaire, Conflicts Socio-Politiques et Pouvoir Militaire Au Burkina Faso, 1983-1988." *Labour, Capital and Society/ Travail, Capital et Societe* 23, no. 1(1990): 3868: 41.

[7] Dickovick, Tyler J. "Revolutionizing Local Politics? Radical Experiments in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Uganda in the 1980s," in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 36, No. 122, Against One-Dimensional Africa (Dec., 2009), pp. 519-537. 532.

[8] Pierre Englebort. *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 108.

[9] Ernest Harsch. *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*, 24.

[10] *Ibid.*, 28.

[11] *Ibid.*, 36.

[12] Thomas Sankara. "Freedom Must be Conquered," in *Thomas Sankara Speaks*. Edited by Michel Prairie (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 155.

[13] Gianluigi Rossi. "Africa Facing the End of the Cold War," in *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (235) (Luglio-Settembre (1992) pp. 384-392, 387.

[14] *Ibid.*, 387.

[15] Thomas Sankara. "Freedom Must be Conquered," in *Thomas Sankara Speaks*. Edited by Michel Prairie (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 156.

[17] Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff. *French West Africa*. (George Allen Unwin Ltd, 1958), 173.

[18] Guy Martin. "Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 15 (1987), pp. 77-90, 79.

[19] Thomas Sankara, "We must fight imperialism Together" in *Thomas Sankara Speaks*. Edited by Michel Prairie (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988), 177.

[20] A. Adu Boahen. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. 107.

[21] Guy Martin. "Democratie Revolutionnaire, Conflicts Socio-Politiques Et Militaire Au Burkina Faso, 1983-1988," in *Labour, Capital and Society/Travail, Capital, Et Societe*, Vol.23, No. 1(1990), 38-68, 48.

[22] Elliot Skinner. "Sankara and the Burkinabe evolution: Charisma and Power, Local and External Dimensions," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, no.3 (1988): 437-455, 444.

[23] Thomas Sankara, "We Can Count on Cuba: Interview with Radio Havana: August 4, 1987," in *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-1987*. Edited by Michael Prairie (New York: Pathfinder, 1988) 385.

[24] Ernest Harsch. *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest, and Revolution*. 75

[25] Thomas Sankara. "We Must Fight Imperialism Together," from *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-1987*, 187.

[26] *Ibid.*, 188.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Sten Hagberg. "Enough is Enough: An Ethnography of the Struggle Against Impunity in Burkina Faso," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2002, Vol.40(2), pp.217-246, 219.

[29] Ernest Harsch. *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest and Revolution*, 73.

[30] *Ibid.*, 101.

[31] Wilkins, Michael. "The Death of Thomas Sankara and the Rectification of the People's Revolution in Burkina Faso," in *African Affairs*, Vol. 88, No, 352 (Jul. 1989) pp. 375-388, 376.

[32] Harsch. *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest and Revolution*, 102.

[33] Blaise Compaore. "Blaise Compaore Justifie l'Assassinat de Thomas Sankara." Interview with *Jeune Afrique*, November 1987.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Pierre Englebert. *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa*. 59.

[38] Guy Martin. "Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso" in *A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 15 (1987), pp. 77-90. 87.

[39] Ernest Nongma Ouedraogo. Interview with Harve D' Africk. *Courrier Continental*, No.44 of October 10, 2013.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Harsch. *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*. 130.

[42] “Deposed Leader of Burkina Faso is Executed with 12 Aides,” *Associated Press*. October 17, 1987.

[43] James Brooks, “A Friend Dies in a Bloody Coup,” from *New York Times*. October 17, 1987.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Although Ivory Coast was economically and politically stable under President Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the country faced political turmoil following his death in 1993. A political feud was highlighted between former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara and President of the National Assembly, Henri Konan Bedie. Bedie would resume the role of the presidency as political discourse continued throughout the 1990s, leading up to his removal in the 1999 Ivorian coup d’etat. The political landscape in Ivory Coast has not fully recovered since the death of Houphouet-Boigny; President Robert Guei was murdered during the Ivorian Civil War in 2002, and President Laurent Gbagbo was arrested for crimes against humanity in 2011. Former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara is currently the President of Ivory Coast.

[46] Majumdar, Margaret A. *Postcoloniality: The French Dimension* (New York; Oxford:

Berghahn Books, 2007) 196.

[47] Harsch. *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*. 50

[48] Harsch. *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest, and Revolution*. 102

[49] Guy Martin. “Democratie Revolutionnaire, Conflicts Socio-Politiques et Pouvoir Militaire Au Burkina Faso, 1983-1988. 66.

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