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Sankara: daring to invent Africa's future

The president of Burkina Faso was brutally murdered 21 years ago: had he lived, the continent might have had a different fate

Sean Jacobs

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Twenty-one years ago today, armed men burst into the office of Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso, and murdered him and 12 of his aides in a violent coup d'état. In events that eerily paralleled those in the Congo 27 years earlier, the attackers cut up Sankara's body and buried his remains in a hastily prepared grave. The next day Sankara's deputy, Blaise Compaoré, declared himself president. Compaoré has ruled the country ever since and has both attempted to co-opt and distort Sankara's memory.

Burkina Faso is a very poor country in west Africa and hardly merited any mention outside that region until Sankara overthrew the country's corrupt military leadership in 1984. By this year, according to the UN human development report, life expectancy stood at 51 years, 23% of adults can read, three in every ten children are underweight for their age, and more than two-thirds of its 13.5 million people live on less than \$2 a day.

Like Patrice Lumumba – an earlier principled political leader who was a violent casualty of the cold war – Sankara proved to be a creative and unconventional politician. He wanted to chart a "third way," separate from the interests of the major powers (in his case, France, the Soviet Union and the United States). This, however, resulted in a complex legacy where those who

praise his social and economic reforms (see below) have a hard time squaring it with his often-undemocratic politics.

The recently released documentary film, Thomas Sankara: the Upright Man by the British filmmaker Robin Shuffield, details how Sankara made tactical blunders and underestimated the strength of his opponents. This might be why, unlike Lumumba among third world nationals or Nelson Mandela among western elites, people don't talk much of Sankara today, whether in Africa or in the west. One west African historian suggests he was a 1960s figure trapped in the politics of the 1980s.

In 1985, Sankara said of his political philosophy:

You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. We must dare to invent the future.

Sankara openly challenged both French hegemony in west Africa as well as his fellow military leaders (Sankara labelled them "criminals in power"). He called for the scrapping of Africa's debt to international banks and to their former colonial masters. His reforms were widespread. For one, in 1984 he changed the country's name from Upper Volta, the name it kept from colonialism, to Burkina Faso. The country's new name translates as "the land of the upright people".

Sankara preached economic self-reliance. He shunned World Bank loans and promoted local food and textile production. (There's a classic scene in Shuffield's documentary where he had the whole Burkina delegation to an OAU meeting decked out in local textiles and designs.) Women, the poor and the country's peasantry benefited mostly from the reforms. Sankara outlawed tribute payments and obligatory labour to village chiefs, abolished rural poll taxes, promoted gender equality in a very male-dominated society (including outlawing female circumcision and polygamy), instituted a massive immunisation programme, built railways and kick-started public housing construction. His administration aggressively pushed literacy programmes, tackled river blindness and embarked on an anti-corruption drive in the civil service.

He discouraged the luxuries that came with government office and encouraged others to do the same. He earned a small salary (\$450 a month), refused to have his picture displayed in public buildings, and forbade the uses of chauffeur-driven Mercedes and first class airline tickets by his ministers and senior civil servants.

But Sankara was also undemocratic. He banned trade unions and political parties, and put down protests (most significantly one by teachers in 1986). Many people were the victims of summary judgments by people's revolutionary tribunals, which sentenced "lazy workers," "counter-revolutionaries" and corrupt officials. Sankara himself would later admit on camera that the tribunals were often used as occasions to settle private scores.

By 1987, he was politically isolated. His enemies – a mix of the French political establishment (he had humiliated President François Mitterrand in public on a few occasions) and regional leaders (like Ivorian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny) – began to tire of him. Compaoré is widely suspected to have ordered Sankara's murder in order to do the French and regional dictators a favour. Though Compaoré publicly grieved for Sankara and promised to preserve his legacy, he quickly set about purging the government of Sankara supporters. In contrast to the cool reception given Sankara earlier, Compaoré was welcomed by western governments and funding agencies. Within three years, Compaoré had accepted a massive IMF loan and instituted a structural adjustment programme (largely seen as one of the major causes for the ongoing economic crises in Africa). Compaoré also reversed most of Sankara's reforms. (Not surprisingly this included the insistence that his portrait hang in all public places as well as buying himself a presidential jet.)

For the last 20 years, Burkina Faso's government has proved reluctant to investigate Sankara's death fully. It wants to "move on". And Compaoré is in a hurry to do so. Compaoré – whose regime has been implicated in the civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia – is having a makeover as a "democrat" and is now a key ally of the US. In November 2005, he was re-elected. That means Compaoré will have held power, uninterrupted, from 1987 to 2012. Sankara's short four-year reign – for all its faults – as Shuffield's film show, pointed briefly to the potential of different political futures for Africans.