

The Fall of Captain Sankara, or

Why You Can't Make Revolution without the Masses

His chest riddled with bullets, his Kalashnikov lying a few feet away in the dry dust of Ouagadougou, the Captain of the Burkina Faso "revolution," Thomas Sankara, was cut down in a palace coup on October 15, 1987. Several members of his military entourage and advisors lay dead at the scene of ambush beside him. Soldiers acting on behalf of rival ministers within the ruling National Council of the Revolution (CNR) he presided over hurriedly threw the bodies into a jeep and reappeared with shovels in the middle of the night to throw some dirt over them in a hastily-made common grave.

With Thomas Sankara died an "experiment" in radical reform that had raised the hopes of many in Africa and even elsewhere. Burki-

Thomas Sankara



na Faso was the most recent attempt to find an "independent path" to national liberation without a revolutionary war of the masses, without the leadership of a genuine proletarian political party, and without the science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought. The coup was the bloody denouement of a play whose ending, like those of the Greek tragedies, was written into the very form itself.

Sankara was by no means a revolutionary communist (and most of the time didn't pretend to be), but his militant, anti-imperialist posturing, his jaunty, confident style, his Ché Guevara military "look," and most of all his unorthodox attempt to "revolutionise" one of the world's poorest countries, captured the imagination of many African youth and intellectuals who followed his innovations closely, just as among them his death has become a subject of sharp controversy and has posed pointed questions: what kind of revolution was he leading, and was his path one that could liberate Africa?

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Burkina Faso, formerly known as Upper Volta, is a landlocked country whose northern border stretches through 3000 kilometres of the Sahel, a semi-arid region on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. It is located at the crossroads of routes that penetrated colonial Africa. Colonial conquest of Upper Volta dates back to a reign of terror in 1895, in which a French naval captain led his men through the cen-

tral plateau, killing people and animals, pillaging and burning villages. As part of the carving out of the French West African empire, its borders were altered regularly up until 1947. The vast majority of its population are rural, herders and peasant cultivators; its economy, never developed, was distorted and stagnated first by colonial plunder and further ravaged by repeated droughts and famine, bringing in their wake foreign "aid" from a host of Western imperialists and their parasitical representatives of the IMF, World Bank, the FAO, EEC, U.S. Peace Corps and so on.

The population is mainly Moslem and consists of numerous ethnic communities speaking over 60 languages and dialects. Ninety per cent of the eight million people live in the countryside, which is completely dominated by Ouagadougou, the capital. The city's population consists of a tiny modern working class, a fairly large number of government employees ranging from top-level bureaucrats to the lowest custodians, military personnel, artisans, employees of French concerns, and a small but rapacious class of merchants. The city is a creation of imperialism and a parasitic drain on the country as a whole.

In 1932 France actually administratively attached Upper Volta to the far richer coastal colony at its southern border, the Ivory Coast, making official its relationship as a gigantic reservoir of labour to work the Ivory plantations and fields. Today, *two million* Burkinabe con-

tinue to work in the Ivory Coast, and, as the desert advances, so does the southward migration.

France restored Upper Volta's "autonomy" in 1953 and subsequently granted formal independence in 1960 to a tiny comprador bourgeoisie, continuing its neocolonial presence under the rule of corrupt and staunchly loyal army officers who have been toppling each other ever since in a series of coups d'état, at times with the backing of the powerful civil servant trade unions. It was hardly shocking that Sankara's politically radical reign ended in the same abrupt manner. More importantly, the very means by which Sankara came to power and the very nature of the state power he took over is the fundamental reason he could not lead a thorough-going revolution.

Seizing Power from Above: The Left-wing Officer Corps

Sankara called his revolution a "peoples democratic revolution," the goal of which was to get the people to "assume power." In fact this concentrates much of the problem: political power was never seized from below, through people's war. Instead, emerging as the charismatic leader of a fiercely nationalist, anti-colonialist wing of the army, the radical young captain Sankara found himself Prime Minister in November 1982, when an army doctor commander, Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo, took over the presidency with the collaboration of the left-wing officers and unions. Sankara invited Libyan president Khadafi to Ouagadougou in April 1983 and was promptly arrested shortly after a French African Affairs official ar-



rived in town, worried over possible diplomatic realignments.¹ Youth demonstrated in Ouagadougou and Sankara's left-wing officer friends retreated to the elitist paramilitary camp in the southern Burkinabe town of Pô and planned a rebellion to get him reinstated.

On August 4, 1983, this column of future ministers marched into the capital city of Ouagadougou and took over the government, proclaiming the "revolution." This "left" coup relied on a totally bourgeois military line of tactically outmanoeuvring the temporarily disorganised alliance of right-wing and "moderate" forces within the neocolonial army; it was at best tentative and required hasty efforts to consolidate its urban social base among the radical left organisations which were influential in the urban petit bourgeois sectors, particularly in education and among civil servants, in order to hold onto state power. As Sankara put it candidly, "Without them we couldn't have won, they prepared the masses for us." And, somewhat surprisingly, "Our main support is from the organised workers" (by which he me-

ans, of course, the trade unions based on the civil servants in the capital!).²

Despite his sympathies for the plight of the peasants and undoubtedly genuine desires to improve their lives, Sankara did not rely on them and they never became his social base: his outlook and line coincided instead with that of the urban petite bourgeoisie, and from the beginning was one which could not liberate the vast majority of the toiling masses in Burkina Faso.

It is true that Sankara had gained some popularity, and the masses — although mainly bystanders — did not generally oppose him; he was confident that through time, he could win them to his revolution.

As for the sticky dilemma of shedding the army's neocolonial heritage, Sankara thought he could transform it into a people's army through "political education." "We want the army to melt into the people."

Although Sankara considered his leadership the "democratic representation of the people," in reality the struggle over political power was centred within the CNR



which gave representation to the major left currents and served as a vehicle for the four military bosses — Sankara, Blaise Compaoré, Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Henri Zongo — to try to arbitrate the political disputes and patch together a “unity” which would allow them to function and carry out a platform of reforms.

In fact if Sankara and his radical military friends could be judged on the basis of intentions and good ideas, their marks would not have been all failing. He wanted to help the peasant masses, to end the stifling weight of the chiefdoms in the countryside, to wipe out the corruption of government officials and the nest-feathering of the urban civil servants, to make women equal to men and lighten their burden, as well as to rapidly achieve the goal of two good meals per day and all the water the average peasant household needed; he wanted to rely on “ourselves” and not on the colonialists and imperialists to build up the economy and he hoped to develop African culture and forge strong alliances with other progressive African states. He wanted to be truly independent, was against any form of hegemonism or foreign domination and proclaimed common cause with “all the peoples of the world ready to help us in our struggle against injustice and tyranny.”

Relying on the Petite Bourgeoisie

The underlying political problem of Sankara’s conception of revolution was his failure to base himself on a correct class analysis and to embrace the only ideology that can liberate the oppressed — that of the proletariat, its science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought. Although he admitted he was influenced by and attracted to some aspects of Marxism-Leninism, he eclectically borrowed those ideas which corresponded to his radicalised petit-bourgeois class outlook — that of discontented lower officers in a neocolonial army — and combined them with others akin to pan-Africanism and tired old nationalism.

“There is no politics without

ideology. For us, ideologies provide light, ways of analysing things which allow you to discern the realities of society.... Human dignity, that is our ideology.” He believed in no mold other than the Burkinabe mold he was attempting to shape: “It’s a continual practice of Eurocentrism to always uncover spiritual fathers for Third World leaders.... Why do you want to put us in an ideological slot at any price, to classify us?... There can only be salvation for our people if we radically turn our backs on all the models the charlatans have tried to sell us for some 20 years.... We take from others what is dynamic and creative.”³

To fashion this Burkinabe model, Sankara took the battlecry from the Cubans: “Homeland or Death! We will conquer!” From Albania he borrowed the pick and rifle for the national symbol. He patterned his Committees to Defend the Revolution (CDR) after his closest ally, Ghana, which in turn had taken them from Cuba. Most of all he took a rich blend of modern revisionism from the Soviets and much of the failed African “socialism” they have spawned, to which he added some of the concepts and policies Mao Tsetung developed for revolution in colonial countries, although unfortunately not the scientific outlook of Mao Tsetung or his insistence on the need for a revolutionary war against imperialism and its allies.

The jumble of Sankara’s political views can be dissected into a number of competing trends and influences operating on the opposition political scene in Ouagadougou and Paris. The “leftist” political spectrum included, from the military, a “progressive” group of officers within the French and Moroccan-trained neocolonial army called the ROC (Communist Officers’ Regrouping), which was tightly linked to political organisations within the intellectual milieu. Among these were: the PAI (African Independence Party), pro-Soviet revisionists based among administrative cadre and the leading political force behind the mass organisation known as LIPAD (Patriotic League for Development); the

“pro-Chinese” (revisionist, pro-Deng Xiaoping) ULC-R (Union of Communist Struggles — Reconstructed) who were influential on the university campus, along with the pro-Albanian Voltaic Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR) which led the General Student Union and five civil servants unions; the strongest union association, the CSV (Voltaic Union Confederation); and some other Marxist and Trotskyist circles. Ministerial posts were divided amongst these left forces, except for the pro-Albanians, who were the loyal opposition — until Albania came out in support of Sankara and suggested they follow suit.

While the debate in the government and the leftist circles went on, the very practical problem remained that the imperialists had never been ousted from Burkina Faso and that, from its inception, Sankara’s revolution had been waged and developed from the top in a way that did not and could not (despite its rhetoric) rely on the conscious struggle of the masses of people and was not able to formulate a truly revolutionary programme based on their class interests — one which would not only promise but in practice set in motion a New Democratic revolution to break the neocolonial and semifeudal shackles and bring about the conditions necessary for going over to the second stage of a proletarian socialist revolution. This process alone is able to transform the distorted and backward relations of production into non-exploitative ones and unleash fully the potential of the peasantry and other revolutionary masses.

Sankara’s Programme

Sankara’s ruling military circle issued a “Political Orientation Speech” in October 1983 which was a mixture of nationalist, pan-Africanist and socialist notions nourishing a programme of reforms.

From the beginning Sankara was caught in the dilemma that the support for the “revolution” was almost exclusively centred among those urban-based sections of the

population who themselves enjoyed a more comfortable position relative to the huge impoverished peasantry. At the same time, it was clear that even Sankara's reformist programme could not be implemented without at least diminishing the extreme burden that financing the state apparatus (and especially the salaries of government employees which up to 1983 ate up over 75 % of the budget) represented for the regime.

Sankara led a battle against corruption, as he fined offenders and brought them to be tried before People's Tribunals. He cut civil servants' salaries by 20-30 %, did away with housing rebates, automatic bank loans and lucrative sideline investments, imposed heavy taxation ("contributions") including the twelfth month of pay, and periodically sent civil servants to the fields to participate in national projects and "combat petit bourgeois tendencies." Government workers were required to wear suits made out of locally grown cotton and were no longer allowed to eat imported fruits and vegetables. Sankara set an example himself by drawing very little pay, declaring all his possessions in front of a fraud board, and ordered the government Mercedes Benzes to be replaced with simple Renaults.

Other reforms included housing construction, a mass vaccination programme (called the "commando approach") in which three million children were immunised against common killer diseases in 15 days, and mass literacy campaigns modeled after those in Nicaragua and Cuba. He brought women into the government, and drew up extensive proposals hitting at their social oppression, including to abolish forced marriage, dowries, sale of young girls, polygamy and the sexually mutilating practice of excision (clitorectomy). To break down old and oppressive traditions, men were supposed to go to the market once a week. In the countryside Sankara encouraged a fight against desertification by launching a tree-planting campaign in which every ceremony of birth, death or marriage was celebrated by the planting of trees. There were also

campaigns to prevent brush fires, stop the roaming of cattle, and to channel the meager Voltaic river waters for hydro-electric power and irrigation.

The army was reorganised, eliminating or throwing out the old right-wing elements and reducing the number of leading officers. The 8,000 soldiers were to be turned into "development activists," participating in agriculture and national construction. In 1984, on the first anniversary of the "revolution," Sankara changed the name of the country to Burkina (Moré word meaning a free person) Faso (the Dioura term for homeland): the "land of the upright men."

But all of these measures could only be *quantitative* and relatively minor adjustments which left intact the basic parasitic relation between the state apparatus and the population and between the capital and the countryside. All they did was to anger the very strata on which the regime relied.

Semifeudal, Imperialist-distorted Agriculture

Over 90 % of the active Burkinabe population is engaged in agriculture as peasants — herders and cultivators. It is an extremely primitive and backward agriculture. Most of the arable land is used for subsistence farming and, except for the south, is relatively infertile and difficult to cultivate. The rudimentary tools and cultivation methods, including extensive farming, the problem of nomadism and insufficient fertilisers and pesticides all contribute to low yields. The grain harvest per hectare is only 540 kilograms, compared to 4883 kg/hectare in France!⁴ Added to this are difficult and erratic climatic conditions, the most serious of which is the 30 % decrease in rainfall over the past 20 years.

In the semi-arid conditions of the Sahel, which stretches through the northern regions, shrubs are disappearing and, with the generalised problem of deforestation, soil depletion, erosion and non-rotation of fields, as well as severe shortages of water and lack of widespread irrigation, the desertification is advanc-

ing. Numerous studies have shown that "desertification" is neither an act of God nor simply the result of climatic chance, but rather is largely man-made and has a great deal to do with imperialist relations.

Although some areas have shown the capacity to produce more, such as the grain-belt around Dédougou in the west, the lack of roads and refrigeration together with an economy geared toward producing for export has prompted some peasants to shift more to cotton and non-perishables. Capital investment has gone only into cotton cultivation developed by the colonialists in the fertile southern region, using up a disproportionate share of available inputs and experts.

Agricultural products make up 90 % of all exports, principally cotton and beef, supplemented by *karité* nut butter, peanuts and off-season fruits and vegetables destined primarily to the surrounding countries and France. Per capita income is just over \$200. Other food growing is largely for direct consumption and exchange and sale on the local market, often at the mercy of the exploitative merchant class that buys and resells grain in low seasons at high profit. Millet, sorghum and corn are the main subsistence crops. A few homemade products such as *karité* butter for oils and soaps, and the local beer, called *dolo*, allow for a slight money exchange that women can use to buy a few essentials, sharpen or repair their tools or buy a piece of chalk if they have a child in school. In the twenty years since independence, literacy had been raised from 5 % to only 16 %, and it had remained below 6 % in the countryside, with twice as many boys as girls allowed to go to school. As in many neocolonial situations, the "educated" either went to the cities or to neighbouring countries to find suitable jobs, since a weak national treasury could not continually hire new civil servants, and few now wanted to return to the grinding poverty and grueling labour of peasant life.

Life is hard; the very basic problems of sufficient food and drinking water remain major obstacles in the countryside. Because of a traditional tribal division of labour

in most of the many different ethnic groups, women are responsible for the entire material needs of their children as well as those children given to her by the lineage chief until the age of seven, forming in many cases a closed community. In a typical day, it is she (and her daughters at an early age) who must walk 10-15 kilometres for water, gather wood and keep a fire burning, walk with hoe, supplies and a nursing baby to plant her fields (the worst land and furthest from home) before returning to pound millet, clean house and prepare a large evening meal. In the evening she goes again for water and spends much of the night brewing beer from millet or sorghum, which can be sold on the local market. Life expectancy is 44 years, but only 35 for women. The imperialists rank Burkina Faso as the ninth poorest country in the world.⁵

This situation, which Sankara inherited and tried to reform, is similar to the other neocolonial carcasses the Western imperialists have created in Africa, and despite the stream of philanthropic aid rhetoric about the miseries of the Third World which spews from the IMF and World Bank, the greatest misery of Burkina Faso is imperialism itself. Existing side by side with old semi-feudal class relations are the relations between oppressed and oppressor nations: peasants barely able to feed themselves, hoeing the limited good soil to grow green beans for sale in Paris during the winter months; herders raising cattle for export to other African countries, while beef is not a big part of the Burkinake diet; a stagnant, non-diversified economy, whose central budget had for decades been run by France and its transnationals.

The French imperialists carved out a clear-cut division of labour for its West African colonies: Congo and Chad grew cotton; Senegal, peanuts; Gabon, wood. In addition to being cannonfodder for European and colonial wars, hundreds of thousands of Upper Volta's people were sent into forced labour on French-owned coffee and cocoa plantations in the Ivory Coast. Burkina's backwardness suits imperialism and that has been a critical factor in its development.

As pointed out earlier, one of Burkina's Faso's most important and striking particularities is its relationship with the Ivory Coast to the south. The two million Burkinabe who work there represent 60% of young men between 18 and 35 in Burkina Faso, that is, an enormous percent of the country's most precious resource, the labouring masses. Their revenues are an important source of income for peasant families. The subsistence agriculture in Burkina Faso is the reverse side of the coin of plantation agriculture in the Ivory Coast, with its need for cheap labour. To oversee this reservoir in Upper Volta as well as its relatively minor investments in cotton as a cash export, France propped up a bureaucrat bourgeoisie, maintained its colonial army and delivered sustenance (not-developmental) level aid.

Spreading the Revolution to the Burkinabe Countryside

In his Political Orientation Speech Sankara vowed to wage "a sharp struggle against nature... and against imperialist domination of our agriculture." He was intent on giving priority to developing the countryside, "by giving the slogan of food self-sufficiency its true meaning, too worn-out from being repeated without conviction." In 1984 he nationalised the land, and took away the administrative and financial privileges of the traditional chiefs. He condemned the "exploiters of the people disguised as village chiefs." To reach their agricultural goals, the CNR prepared a 15-month Plan for Popular Development (PPD) in order to lay the basis for the first five year plan from 1985 to 1990.

The PPD aimed to first move towards economic autonomy and then independence through a number of state-financed projects that would build a basic infrastructure and respond to the most pressing needs of the urban and rural masses. This included drilling wells, building small earth dams, reservoirs, and irrigation projects and developing market gardening throughout the 30 provinces. Bigger "national interest" projects requiring massive investment and nation-



wide mobilisation were the hydro-electric dam at Kompienga, the irrigation dam at Bagré and the Ouagadougou-Tambao railway.

The main political vehicle created by the ruling CNR to carry out its policies at all levels and in all sectors of society was the Committees to Defend the Revolution, "mass organisations allowing the people to exercise its democratic power" and to actively participate in building up the country. Their duties were to politically educate the masses and involve them in the revolutionary changes, to organise collective national interest work projects, and "militarily defend the revolution against internal and external enemies of the revolution through military training" of CDR activists.

Set up in the more than 7000 Burkinabe villages plus every major school, factory, neighborhood and administrative unit in the urban areas, the CDRs became the new authorities, and thus the political struggle within the regime which had never been settled with the seizure of the presidential palace was reproduced within the CDRs. Old right-wing elements and parties out



building schools and dispensaries, digging ditches and fixing up the marketplace, to conducting reading and writing classes, in addition to carrying out PPD objectives. In the countryside the CDRs took charge of community services and played a big role in watching over grain sales, preventing the merchants from charging double the official price of millet, which, as a leader of the CDRs put it, would have meant that some peasants starved to death. Hating the old chief structures, the youth naturally came into sharp conflict with these authorities they had displaced, a clash especially concentrated in the collecting of taxes, formerly the duty of the chief, who took a share. Later this tax was eliminated, which proved to be one of the biggest blows to the old order. Although the CDRs were set up to be the real links to the masses, at least one observer lamented that the peasants themselves often remained under the chiefs' thumbs, especially in Mossi country, and in the CDR-chieftdom rivalry, no one defended the peasants' interests.⁶

Agrarian Reform vs. Agrarian Revolution

The experience in Burkina Faso is above all another painful illustration that there is no half-stepping about severing from imperialism if liberation is the goal. Sankara targeted imperialism as the number one enemy. He argued passionately for attaining self-reliance in food production and for a planned independent national economy. But the CNR's economic programme prevented them from

even getting close to leading the Burkinabe to stand on their own feet and attain their righteous goal of feeding themselves. Just as Sankara and friends did not rely on the struggle of the masses to wage a people's war to overthrow imperialism and reaction in order to seize power, neither did they fundamentally *rely* on the masses of *peasants* to transform the economic base of society in their own revolutionary interests and wage a struggle in the superstructure to break down tradition and its backward hold on social relations. This is a complicated question, but the agrarian reform was not able to mobilise the masses because it was not based on thoroughly rupturing with precapitalist modes of production that in fact dominate the Burkinabe countryside and weigh like an anchor on the social relations.

Correctly analysing the peasantry as the class having "paid the greatest debt in terms of imperialist domination and exploitation," and as the "principal force," the Political Orientation Speech incorrectly implies that the introduction of the capitalist mode of production has transformed or done away with precapitalist modes. Actually, the old and new forms of exploitation have become intertwined. Furthermore, although production was slightly boosted, especially in the already capitalist-developed cotton sector, how does this end imperialist exploitation of the peasants when the relations between the neo-colonialist machine "that must be destroyed" and imperialism have not changed? Increased productivity for whose benefit? The state's?

of power, plus deposed chieftains, infiltrated them, and rival leftist tendencies vied for leadership to control various areas. In the cities, this took on the added contradiction of the union officials competing with the CDRs, which, initially at least, took over their social base. At a certain point this grew into open political conflict, as the teacher and civil servant unions contested the CDRs' power and refused to be subordinated to them.

The CDRs were in the main staffed by energetic and enthusiastic young supporters of the new regime, armed with a lot of freedom to go out and set in motion the changes they thought necessary. At the beginning, they were literally armed to defend the revolution, until "too many incidents of abuse" brought the end of this policy. In political terms, they replaced the rank and file of a ruling political party and in this context really represented the formation of a new class of petty officials.

Unquestionably this youthful initiative launched many wide-ranging and worthwhile projects, from

That is, a growing urban bureaucrat bourgeoisie totally dependent upon imperialism, along with a parasitical merchant class?

At a conference in March 1984 when the government decided to nationalise all the land, redistribute it according to family needs and carry out an agrarian reform which would "break the old feudal relations of production... by the poor and middle peasants themselves... abolish the old landed property... bring forward large-scale agricultural production..." these became mere incantations rather than reality because they were not part of a genuine New Democratic Revolution — and neither the *old* class relation between the exploiter imperialist countries and the oppressed nation of Burkina Faso nor the relations between exploited and exploiter in the countryside had been destroyed.

The system of land ownership and class relations in Upper Volta and similar African countries deserves further study and differ in important respects from feudalism and semifeudalism as it has appeared classically in Asia or Europe. Land ownership in Upper Volta was linked to tribal hierarchical organisation, described by many sources as "feudal or semifeudal" because in the past an exploitative *corvée* system was in operation, that is, free work plus certain favours exacted by the chief from peasants who worked the land, which was held by the tribe and "belonged" to the ancestral lineage but was "managed" by the chiefs. This was accompanied by a corresponding tribal superstructure that reinforced patriarchy, polygamy, and tribal hierarchy. Ranking among the most oppressive of tribal powers was the practice of the aristocratic chiefs of ruling by "giving away women." The more loyal the vassal, the more women he would receive, although the chief could take them back if he had some account to settle. Peasants handed their daughters over to the chief for redistribution down the lineages and their daughters' daughters in turn had to be returned, so that he had a constant supply. This is not ancient history. The court harems of the Mossi emperor on the eve of the revolution in 1983 had 350 women,

not counting women slaves.

Dispossessing the tribal authorities of their formal political and economic powers did not dispense with them as a force, and the old customs tended to persist. (Some found it advantageous to integrate into the CDR leadership, but many plotted their revenge.) For example, even after popular assemblies were set up in every village, the peasants often continued to elect their old masters to higher councils. Despite the outlawing of the tribal practice of giving gifts to the "spiritual" masters, who paralleled the chiefs and guaranteed fertility and good harvests, peasants often devised a way to offer their goats or cows at night or out of sight of the CDRs. Another even starker example cited in Jean Ziegler's recently published book, *La Victoire des Vaincus*, described the long lines of *bellahs*, or slaves of the *Tamachek* tribe, waiting to take back grain for their masters, and at first refused by the CDRs who said that servitude had been abolished. The *bellahs* replied, "Don't give us a hard time. You are here for two weeks, but the *Tamacheks* will be here forever!"⁷

Although none of these incidents is surprising, and Sankara himself was aware of the continued hold of tradition on the peasants, he tended to see the tribal rites and powers as only "cultural" customs that the peasants would let go of, rather than that these powerful superstructural domains are the reflection of real, material social relations, still existing, even if they coexist with capitalist or imperialist ones.

The purpose of a proletarian-led agrarian *revolution* among the peasantry is precisely to shatter the old ownership system, to uproot the feudal (or semi-feudal) backward superstructure and to carry out "land to the tiller," distributing land by head. (This policy of distributing land per person and not per family, not incidentally, deals a major blow to old patriarchal property relations, as suddenly women own land too, and in the case of divorce and other changes, she can participate on a more equal footing.) Making the producers independent owners of their land is an important part of liberating them from precapitalist modes of production. Building a

solid foundation for a national economy can only be based on the *destruction* of these old relations and not by adapting or reforming them.

This stage represents the *bourgeois* revolution, because land reform doesn't go beyond capitalism. But at the same time, it provides the necessary prerequisite for any real and genuine advance to the socialist revolution: "The new type of democratic revolution clears the way for capitalism on the one hand and creates the prerequisites for socialism on the other," as Mao Tsetung put it. Only after the destruction of precapitalist modes can the question of which road in agriculture will liberate the peasantry — capitalism or socialism — come to the fore. Based on the initiative, knowledge and revolutionary enthusiasm of the peasants themselves, step-by-step cooperative forms can be developed, such as mutual aid, work teams and eventually cooperatives, as the advantages become clear to the poor peasants.

The proletariat is against phony "cooperation" not based on the destruction of the old feudal structures and relations. Such efforts only disguise and eventually incorporate the old relations. In fact, in Burkina Faso it proved impossible to go over even to a state capitalist form (the declared but non-existent state farms) on the basis of semifeudal agriculture and without breaking with imperialism.

The other major front of the New Democratic Revolution, and one which is inseparably linked to carrying out the agrarian revolution as well, is the necessity of rupturing with imperialism and thus building up an independent and self-reliant national economy. In a country where feeding the population and solving the water shortage are immediate priorities, industry — *light* industry — would be built up essentially to serve agriculture, with modest equipment such as pumps, wells and tools, instead of producing for export or developing resources unnecessary for these primary goals. This means de-emphasising the city and not supporting a top-heavy state, and certainly not basing one's survival on imperialist aid.

Various forms of cooperativisation were tried to get the villagers to produce more, or rather they were imposed, something Mao warns strictly against. Since village associations were not initiatives of the masses themselves, the peasants saw little reason to take part, except ironically in some cases where they banded together on a bourgeois basis to form them when they realised it was a means of obtaining bank loans and credit! Premature cooperatives, for their part, were artificial, as the same 1984 agriculture conference report put it, and tended to be taken over by bureaucrats, landowners, merchants or salaried soldiers, "who weren't afraid of pillaging the cooperative's resources because the only thing they risked was being sent to another village where they could start doing it again...."

Some Self-Reliance and Some Dependence

In 1983, France provided 40 % of Upper Volta's budget, some \$70 million. There were also some 3500 French personnel operating in various capacities there. Most of the aid pumped in through French organisations has gone to technical assistance and rural development as well as gold mining. Despite a "Volta-isation" of the economy after independence, French trade and food enterprises (breweries, edible oils, flour milling and sugar refineries), textile and others (tobacco, shoes, etc.) managed to hold onto a firm position and continued to receive extremely favourable treatment through the first years of the "revolution." In 1986 when the Burkinabe government decided to renew exorbitant fiscal advantages to the IVOLCY company (a "Voltaic" cycle firm, subsidiary of the French transnational CFAO) to the detriment of the local Burkinabe cycle producers, these national bourgeois were of course outraged.

This coincided with an overall policy of importing all kinds of consumer items, industrial and food products, although luxuries were almost entirely suppressed, to the displeasure of the vultures in the merchant class — those linked to highly structured European monop-

olies and the long-time traders from the Middle East, common throughout West Africa, both of whom use the network of small traditional merchants in the street and countryside. But measures such as importing tomato concentrate when a tomato processing plant near Bobo Dioulasso broke down, instead of fixing it, obviously worked in their favour.

Another form of dependence can be seen in the small industrial sector. Essentially French companies (80 % French capital) dating from colonial days have been developed in the name of cutting down on imports. In reality, by importing oily acids to make oils and soaps, they compete with and displace artisan products made from *karité*; or by importing equipment to manufacture soft drinks and European beer produced at 5000 times the cost of a hectolitre of *dolo* produced locally from sorghum, this imperialist-sponsored activity fails to make use of local raw materials, reduces greatly the number of people employed, means capital investment is being put up for *beer* of all things, and destroys important albeit meager peasant incomes while encouraging no other secondary economic activity except bars and liquor sales! As long as the government gave these companies tax breaks, peasants could buy the more prestigious bubbly beer instead of the homemade variety when they have a little change at harvest time.⁸

In addition to aid from the Western imperialist countries (the U.S., West Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, and of course France), the World Bank, IMF, EEC and other intergovernmental channels have helped keep Upper Volta afloat, enough to begin and not finish many "agricultural development" projects, just enough to keep massive starvation from developing, and to keep solid control over that country's future and assure its non-development, unlike some other raw materials-rich and strategic countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa.

The IMF advocated the policy of "free trade," that is, the policy of ruining the peasants through cheaper grain imports, thus making Burkina Faso more dependent. Very often this destructive "aid" went for

such obvious absurdities as comfortable office buildings for World Bank representatives, or paying for the \$42 million FAO granted to construction projects where fully one-third of the budget was absorbed by necessities such as generators to run air conditioners for the Italian advisors, who refused to hire Burkinabe peasants to help.⁹ After the drought of 1984-85, aid arrived too late and sank grain prices for the following year — i.e., it didn't help feed the population when needed, and ruined the local market when it did come... an accident?¹⁰

At the outset of the revolution, in his Political Orientation Speech, Sankara vehemently denounced "imperialism, which in all its forms, tries to exploit us with so-called aid, which are only means of alienation...." More truthful were his eclectic pleas in an interview at the time of his visit to the UN in autumn, 1984: "We could use and we need aid from developed nations, but such aid is not so generous or forthcoming in these times. France helps, U.S. aid is ridiculously small, especially when you see the wealth and prosperity of that country. We have to be careful also about aid because we cannot accept it at the risk of our independence. And in the final analysis, we know we have to depend on ourselves."¹¹

Three days after his first major speech on foreign policy in October 1983, in which Sankara supported Nicaragua, the Salvadoran struggle and the Polisario in the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, and denounced the American invasion of Grenada, Reagan's special envoy strode into his office with a diplomatic note from the U.S. government that threatened to "reexamine assistance and cooperation agreements" if Burkina continued to meddle in Central American affairs, about which, the note concluded, "it knows nothing."¹²

The dilemma Sankara faced was forging an "anti-imperialist" path within an inherited bourgeois state apparatus totally dependent on imperialist aid and subject to imperialist relations between oppressor and oppressed. An impossible task. So, rather than treating foreign aid as a reflection of this relationship, his

government tried to reform it; this was expressed perfectly by the National Secretary-General of the CDRs: "They used aid for Mercedes; we are using it for shovels, picks and wheelbarrows...."

In fact, although Sankara promised with the People's Development Programme (PPD) to aim for many small accomplishments which would "turn Burkina Faso into a vast field....," he actually gave prominence (as the Soviets often do in such countries) to pumping massive investment into a few big splashy construction projects which he thought would attract aid donors and earn him needed prestige and confidence. Most became embarrassing fiascos, such as the Sourou Irrigation project, which was designed to build a dam on the Black Volta River, so as to allow two grain harvests a year. Sankara emptied the state coffers in order to finish (with French bulldozers) before the important first anniversary celebration of the revolution, on August 4, 1984. The structure was completed on time, the waters were gathered and channeled, but then not a cent was left for irrigation equipment to make use of the water, which evaporated. Instead of expanding the land and relying on the people to devise and make use of inexpensive means to irrigate, the project ended up draining the treasury and *reducing* available farming land.¹³

An example of an industrial project totally unnecessary for developing the Burkina economy on an independent basis was the Tambao railway in the north, which called on the people to carry out a "Battle of the rails" and construct 300 kilometres of track in order to get out the country's unexploited manganese, gold and bauxite reserves. After 35 kilometres had been laid the money for rails ran out. When the World Bank refused to help finish the job because the project was too expensive, it was abandoned.

Non-Aligned Dependence

France was more than irritated by Sankara's rise to power, particularly his international stance, because Burkina Faso has always been an important crossroads of the French

sphere of influence in West Africa. (Burkina was never the heart of French superprofits in its West African empire, though they have managed well, given the difficult climatic conditions and their decision not to develop the productive forces.) In any case, France was never in any danger of leaving, though it had to endure stinging barbs from time to time, while, as *Le Monde* of 17 October 1987 put it, French policy was one of "not discouraging revolutionaries who dilute their wine." On the other side was Sankara, throwing barbs right and left about the imperialist pyromaniacs who burn down our forests, his hand stuck out stubbornly for more money.

One of the funnier episodes of this nature was the diplomatic "incident" between Sankara and French President François Mitterrand at a state dinner in Ouagadougou in November 1986. Sankara invited his "Socialist" guest to make his acts conform to his words, accused France of doing nothing to end the Iran-Iraq war or the regional wars in Chad and Sahara, and denounced him for receiving the bandit Savimbi (UNITA leader in Angola) and the South African murderer Pieter Botha on French soil. Raising his glass to Franco-Burkinabe friendship, Mitterrand retorted: "Captain Sankara has the cutting edge of youth, but it cuts too sharply. If you need us, you'll let us know. And if you don't, we can pass it up."¹⁴

In truth, politically and otherwise, France pursued attempts to "rehabilitate" the situation: the Socialists sent a hefty shipment of arms to President Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo as early as May 1983, the moment Sankara was arrested, to prevent his return to office. A year later the Socialist government refused to receive the number two military man, Blaise Compaoré, to renegotiate French aid, as a protest against the regime's recent execution of seven coup-plotters.

Further, there were recurrent rumors that the three-day border war with Mali in 1985 over a thin strip of land called the Agacher, in which some 300 people were killed, was instigated on behalf of France, which had just renewed and

strengthened ties with Malian president Moussa Traoré, in part forcing the question of what military support Sankara really had.¹⁵

Then there was the coup d'état in October 1987 — at Sankara's expense — and no more kidding around. More than one informed source pointed to evidence that it had been "run from abroad by remote control" through the cosy connections between Ivory Coast president Houphouët Boigny, one of the top contenders for official West African valet for French imperialism, and Captain Blaise Compaoré, Sankara's successor, who has promised tighter cooperation with Paris as part of his "rectification" program. Compaoré's wife, a Franco-Ivoirian, is the goddaughter of the Ivoirian head of state. As the French newsweekly, *Le Nouvel Observateur* put it, Blaise has "excellent references, in short," and, "without the active assistance of the Ivory Coast no putsch is possible."¹⁶

Sankara had boycotted attempts to create a French Commonwealth and repeatedly denounced the "Balkanisation" of Africa at Non-Aligned summits and Organisation of African Unity (OAU) meetings. He refused to attend the Franco-African summits of 1984 and 1985, calling them "organisational shackles inherited from the colonial epoch," and held his own summit with Khadafi instead.

How much to make of the Libya-Burkina connection? The two had frequent exchanges, but what counted were the arms that Libya supplied: Soviet tanks, rocket launchers, and especially Kalashnikov rifles, all of which supplemented the maintenance-level military stock provided by the French, considerably upped Burkina's operational potential and helped the "reorganisation" of the neocolonial army. On the diplomatic level, Sankara is said to have politely refused to join Khadafi's perennial proposal to "merge their two countries," and some sources even say his attempts to build unity between Arab and Black Africa switched more towards cooperation with Algeria after Khadafi refused

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Sankara official state honors on one of his visits to Tripoli. In addition, he carried out the first state visit to the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic with this aim.

Sankara's tightest links were in fact with J.J. Rawlings' similarly military-coup-inspired regime in Ghana. The two formed a mutual defense treaty as of November 1983 and even carried out joint military manoeuvres. This alliance seemed to upset loyal French friends like Gabon and Ivory Coast and, in regional terms, the possibility of a pro-Soviet axis running from Tripoli to Ouagadougou to Accra was not a pleasing prospect to French or Western imperialism as a whole.

Sankara traveled to Cuba and the Soviet Union, but said he was not pitting Moscow against Paris. He displayed a contradictory attitude towards the Soviet Union and the East bloc, and within his circle and those supporting him the struggle was often sharp over this question. The Soviet connection represented a temptation in hopes of decreasing dependence on France, but this very same dependence locked the state into a certain orbit.

Soviet aid was, as is often the case in Africa, funneled through other pro-Soviet "non-aligned" regimes. Cuba, so uniquely qualified in the non-staples cash crop department, with many years experience as a Soviet neocolony, offered to help Burkina Faso build up its sugar industry. Ghana and Cuba helped construct an airport runway, Libya gave some \$10 million, and other aid came from Angola, Mozambique, Romania and North Korea, which sent iron and cement to build popular theatres in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso.

On the other hand, Sankara announced that Soviet troops should leave Afghanistan and he favoured maintaining diplomatic ties with Albania.

China, for its part, donated some 100 wells as part of the campaign to reduce water shortages. They also gave several million dollars used to construct an "August 4th Stadium,"

and some hospitals. Despite all this "friendly aid" from non-Western sources, Sankara avoided mixing up what he called the struggle for independence from French neocolonialism with "skin reactions." To friends who were surprised at his rapid dispatch of a contingent to Jacques Chirac's side when the "right" regained a parliamentary majority in March 1986 in France, assuring him of Burkina's intentions, Sankara jokingly remarked, "Even if Jean-Marie Le Pen came to power one day in Paris we'd send a delegation and keep our relations with France"!¹⁷ (Le Pen is the head of the neofascist National Front in France.)

Against Apartheid and Women's Oppression

Attention was paid, by friends and by the Sankara government alike, to building up the capital of Ouagadougou as an important African centre for political, cultural and sports events. It became a magnet for artists and intellectuals, a Mecca for social democratic and revisionist leaders around the world, from Yasser Arafat to Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega. Reggae concerts were held in the new stadium, and the Panafrican Film Festival of Ouagadougou became *the* cultural event of Black Africa, pulling together artists and a broad public participation. The regime encouraged its reputation as a sort of anti-apartheid centre, organising a number of forums and demonstrations. In Sankara's fight to popularise women's "liberation," a women's rock group was formed, the "Doves of Peace."

The question of women's oppression in itself would be enough to seal the fate of the Burkina path, particularly as it had advertised that the liberation of women and revolution go together, raising a lot of false hopes and sharp opposition. For just as Sankara and Co handled the basic class contradictions in Burkina Faso — with a very militant, left-sounding phraseology which was very "right" (economist and unachievable) in essence and that never relied on the masses and their strug-

gle — they approached the woman question in the same revisionist way. As one woman put it, "It seems that the revolution is for men and women in the cities, not for us." Their view of liberation through economic production recognised the oppressive relations between men and women (hard to ignore or avoid the widespread consequences of women still being traded as a commodity, worked to an early death, voiceless in arranged marriages and political affairs, sexually mutilated to ensure male domination) but, because their approach to the rural revolution did not aim at dissolving all the old relations of production, they were unable to surmount the inevitable challenges actually posed in order to unleash the masses of women, and were stymied by such phenomena as women who defended polygamy because it was a way to share the excruciatingly heavy work load, to allow them to space out eternal pregnancies "for the lineage" and to get a little rest. Since the regime was incapable of carrying out a proletarian policy of resolving the woman question as part of unleashing women (and men) to uproot the old reactionary relations between people, they were reduced to making decrees proclaiming women's rights (which in the absence of real transformations could only remain as empty as India's "outlawing" of the caste system) and combine them with a "practical programme" which amounted to making the liberation of women *dependent* on first increasing the number of ploughs and wells, for example. In fact, this view is another version of the "theory of the productive forces" common to revisionists of different stripes who see the increase in the productive forces, and not the revolutionary struggle of the masses, as the key to advancing society.

Sankara's Overthrow

The urban sectors which had supported Sankara's efforts began to grow increasingly disillusioned with his programme. In particular, they were less and less willing to tolerate his reform measures that cut into

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their comforts (as meager as these might seem alongside those in wealthy countries).

Civil servants and others stopped participating regularly in political meetings and rural voluntary labour, and many intellectuals left in search of higher-paying jobs in neighboring states.

Parallel to this, political infighting within the CNR itself was escalating and the left organisations had realigned to take advantage of the erosion of Sankara's support. The unions began to flex their muscles, backed by at least a couple of members of Sankara's close ruling military circle. After a strike in the spring of 1984 he had laid off 1200 teachers, replacing them with CDR instructors, and throwing the LIPAD minister out of the government on accusations of pushing Burkina into the Soviets' arms and manipulating the CDRs.

On the first of May, 1987, after the four biggest union confederations presented a common demand for a return to "democratic freedoms," 30 leaders of salaried civil servants were arrested, including the head of the pro-Soviet LIPAD; one faction even reportedly wanted to execute him. The so-called moderate pro-Chinese revisionist ULC were also evicted from the government. Increasingly a split within the CNR broke out, with the unions and the CDRs more or less on opposing sides.

Sankara had proposed enlarging the CNR and forming a single party to try to unify the fast splitting revolutionary groups and hold them together. Within the army, many of the leading military figures, including Blaise Compaoré, preferred a front to a single party. Through increasing tensions and manipulations, coup plans were being laid. Despite Sankara's continuing popularity, particularly among the youth and students, the more he tried to put his "independent" stamp on the course of events as he tacked through the sea of reformist squabbles, hoping some unified

revolutionary tendency might eventually emerge, the more the thin non-proletarian base he had built his revolution on began to crumble underneath him.

* * *

When he took over the presidency Compaoré dissolved the CNR, formed a Popular Front and promised to reinstate the fired teachers, carrying out a "rectification," but keeping the goals of the revolution. The official line coming out of Ouagadougou is that Sankara was an isolated man, autocratic and trying to silence much of the voice of the left who helped him into power. While it is probable that Compaoré might find it useful to continue to mouth "leftist" slogans, his criminal ascension to power put a brutal end to the Burkina Faso experience and a return to a more "sober" recognition of the reality of neocolonialism.

Any genuine revolutionary regime confronting the mammoth task of uprooting the old oppressive relations in Burkina will face extremely difficult obstacles. Since Sankara's downfall, the bourgeois press has gloated at his inability to hold on as the "troublemaker" in French West Africa. The problem is not so much that Captain Sankara failed, but that his "revolution" *could only* fail.

Sankara tried to mobilise but could not *rely* on the peasantry, which has to be the bedrock and main base of support for any real revolutionary transformation in a country like Burkina Faso. He wanted to break out of the clutches of imperialism but stood at the head of a reactionary state apparatus that had been created by the imperialists themselves. The fact that he was shot down by the very neocolonial army in which he served shows once again, as if the proletariat had need of another such lesson, that there is no substitute for the destruction of the state apparatus by the revolutionary masses.

Sankara's relatively painless seizure of power in 1983 actually left the old state power and the old social system essentially intact. Despite this, the Western imperialists were not indifferent to this attempt to

deviate from the traditional neocolonial path, and their overall necessities in today's world accelerated their political and financial manipulations to normalise the script, after tolerating a brief flirtation with African social-democracy.

The playing out of this scenario, at the price of a tightened grip on the oppressed, strengthens the verdict that no social class other than the proletariat can represent their genuinely *revolutionary* interests and no shortcuts are available to liberation from imperialism from the difficult and demanding road of people's war and the conscious struggle of the masses. □

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