

A Review of Four Books on the Sankarist Movement

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Sankara le rebelle by Sennen Andriamirado Paris, Jeune Afrique Livres, 1987. Pp. 237. F50.00.

Thomas Sankara: un nouveau pouvoir africain by Jean-Philippe Rapp and Jean Ziegler
Lausanne and Paris, Pierre-Marcel Favre/ABC, 1986. Pp. 176. F90.00.

Burkina Faso: processus de la révolution by BABOu Paulin Bamouni Paris, L'Harmattan, 1986. Pp. 190. F90.00.

La Révolution burkinabé by Pierre Englebert Paris, L'Harmattan, 1986. Pp. 264. F 130.00.

The populist revolution that was begun in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) after the military *coup d'état* of 4 August 1983 led by a small group of junior army officers — Thomas Sankara, Blaise Compaoré, Jean-Baptiste Lingani, and Henri Zongo — unquestionably raised great hopes for radical political change in West Africa among the African masses and sections of the 'leftist' intelligentsia in the continent and elsewhere. But these expectations for measures of socialist transformation in a region hitherto characterised by political apathy and economic stagnation were dealt a crushing blow on 15 October 1987, when Compaoré seized power in another coup, in which Sankara and 13 of his associates were brutally murdered. The Burkinabé revolutionary process, as well as the meteoric rise to power of its youthful, charismatic, and extremely popular leader, have recently been the object of a number of sympathetic studies, including four interesting books in French.

Sankara le rebelle and *Thomas Sankara : un nouveau pouvoir africain* are primarily historical and biographical in their approach. Sennen Andriamirado (a Malagasy journalist with *Jeune Afrique*), Jean-Philippe Rapp (a journalist with the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation), and Jean Ziegler (a Swiss scholar and friend of many third-world revolutions) frankly admit their favourable predisposition towards the charismatic and fascinating personality of Sankara, whose ideals they basically share. Thus, while Andriamirado intends to 'write about certain African ideals and a certain type of African leadership which generate hope' (p. 9), Rapp and Ziegler seek to 'understand the dialectics which have produced a Sankara' (p. 10). The image that emerges from their two publications is that of a dedicated, sincere, and generous leader whose main objective was to do away with the injustices of neo-colonialism in order to create a new era of moral integrity, socio-economic justice, and political equity, in which all Burkinabé would live in tune with the popular masses (the 'actual country'). In the process, the main outline of Sankara's political philosophy emerges as a rigorous, powerful, and mobilising ideology.

These authors do not avoid the pitfalls inherent in such hagiographie exercises, and tend to gloss over the deficiencies of their hero and the inadequacies of his policies. However, although Ziegler's contribution is rather too anecdotal and devoid of any analytical depth, Rapp's interviews and Andriamirado's account shed new light on Sankara's multi-faceted personality and offer valuable insights into the origins, ideological basis, early achievements, and 'infantile disorders' of the Burkinabé revolution.

As such, they provide a useful background against which to assess its subsequent achievements, mounting difficulties, and future prospects.

Burkina Faso: processus de la révolution provides a detailed and interesting account of what happened after independence. An information specialist and adviser to Sankara, Babou Bamouni analyses the historical and political background to the 1983 coup in terms of civilian-military conflict and class struggle. He thus portrays the ‘democratic and popular’ Burkinabé revolution as an essentially nationalist phenomenon, i.e. the logical outcome of years of popular struggles against colonial and neo-colonial oppression. He then proceeds to outline the role in the revolutionary process of each social class — workers, peasantry, *lumpenproletariat*, and petty bourgeoisie — being of the firm conviction that all the progressive elements in the country should unite within a ‘communist party’ led by the working class, the only truly revolutionary class in society. Unfortunately, Bamouni’s rigidly orthodox Marxist-Leninist approach results in an unimaginative and stereotyped analysis far removed from any observable social reality (for instance, the almost non-existent Burkinabé proletariat can hardly constitute a significant ‘revolutionary vanguard’). Following the untimely death of its author in the bloody October 1987 coup, this publication may be viewed as the political manifesto of a faction of the revolutionary forces which is now totally marginalised, but which might well resurface in future.

La Révolution Burkinabé is a detailed, carefully argued, and at times critical analysis by a Belgian political scientist who, as explained in the preface, ‘readily admits his sympathy for Burkina Faso, its Revolution and Head of State’ (p. 5). We are provided, first of all, with a lucid and revealing account of the complex and ambiguous civilian-military relationship in Burkinabé politics. Thus, Pierre Englebert convincingly maintains that the army progressively gained control over the state apparatus, the political process, and even the internal social dynamics to such an extent that significant structural changes could only be initiated from within its ranks. Indeed, according to the author, the army could be regarded as ‘the main channel through which the revolutionary forces had gained access to power’ (p. 88). While the post-August 1983 leaders were careful to present themselves as members of a broadly-based popular regime, the fact remains that the military continued strictly to control the process of socio-political change in the country.

Englebert skilfully unravels the complex patterns of intra-leftist political struggles and of civilian-military competition over control of the state and its institutions. His account of the limited extent to which democratic participation became a reality for the members of the *Comités pour la défense de la révolution* is particularly revealing, because debates within the new political structure were strictly controlled, with decisions coming from above being practically imposed on the base. Thus, according to Englebert, the regime’s progressive mobilisation of all major age, sex, and occupational groups — women, youth, elders, and peasants — within national institutions, clearly foreshadowed dangerous totalitarian tendencies. He suggests that one of the main threats to the Burkinabé revolution came from the increasing concentration of

power within the hands of the ‘P.F.’ (President of Faso). Indeed, as Englebert so presciently remarks:

Contrary to his own wishes, President Sankara has in fact a quasi-monopoly of political power. This state of affairs is in contradiction with the objective of popular participation and dangerously links the fate of the Revolution to that of Thomas Sankara as a person (p. 208).

Although Sankara himself had warned that ‘if you kill Sankara today, tomorrow twenty Sankara will reappear’ (Andriamirado, p. 226), recent press reports on the Compaoré régime seem to indicate that the Burkinabé revolution may well have died with Sankara — see, for example, *West Africa* (London), 10–16 October 1988, pp. 1883–5.

While the studies by Andriamirado and Rapp and Ziégler offer valuable insights into Sankara’s personality and certain aspects of the Burkinabé revolution, Bamouni enables us to view it from within, through the eyes of one of its main protagonists. While the latter focuses on the ideological foundations, inner logics, and concrete tasks of the revolution, Englebert provides us with a fascinating analysis of its internal dynamics in what may be one of the best studies on Burkinabé politics to date. Ultimately, all four books nicely complement each other and, taken together, provide an overall picture which enables us better to understand the underlying causes of the dramatic October 1987 *dénouement* and the subsequent process of ‘rectification’ initiated by the Compaoré régime.

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