



Burkina Faso: Thomas Sankara's revolutionary legacy lives on

December 9, 2009

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Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary leader of the West African nation Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987, was killed in the belief that it could extinguish the example he set for African youth and progressive forces across the continent. This idea could not have been more wrong.

One week before his October 15, 1987 assassination, in a speech marking the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Argentinean-born revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Sankara declared: "Ideas cannot be killed, ideas never die."

History is replete with martyrs whose ideas and actions have survived the passage time to inspire future generations. That is why 22 years after his death, Sankara continues to guide those who are struggling to end the domination of their continent and the enslavement of its people.

Sankara's great popularity is in part a reflection of Africans' disillusionment with corrupt leaders incapable of meeting the basic needs of their people, and who take their marching orders from Western capital and institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

His popularity is rooted in the profound sincerity of his commitment to serving his people and devotion to the cause of the emancipation of all African people.

Visionary

Above all, Sankara's ongoing popularity is due to the ideas and values he embodied. If Sankara arouses as much fervour today as he did more than two decades ago, it is because he embodied and defended causes that resonate today among the world's oppressed.

Most of the causes he defended are still at the heart of the struggle for the economic, social and political emancipation of the world's oppressed.

Sankara was an environmentalist ahead of his time in a so-called "poor" country that was supposed to have other more pressing priorities.

Sankara was one of the first heads of state to condemn female genital mutilation, a position that reflected his unwavering commitment to the struggle against all forms of discrimination against women.

In his famous October 2, 1983 speech, he said: "We cannot transform society while maintaining domination and discrimination against women who constitute over half of the population."

Sankara's unrelenting struggle against corruption, long before the World Bank and IMF picked up the issue, made him an enemy of all corrupt presidents on the continent and of the international capitalist mafia — for whom corruption is a tool for conquering markets and pillaging the resources of the global South.

Sankara rejected the inevitability of "poverty", and was one of the first proponents of food security. He achieved the spectacular feat of making his country food self-sufficient within four years, through sensible agricultural policy and, above all, the mobilisation of the Burkinabe peasantry.

He understood that a country that could not feed itself ran the risk of losing its independence.

In July 1987, Sankara called on African countries to form a powerful front against their continent's illegitimate and immoral debt and to collectively refuse to pay it.

He understood before others that debt was a form of modern enslavement for Africa; a big cause of poverty.

Sankara famously said: "If we do not pay the debt, our lenders will not die. However, if we do pay it, we will die ..."

Sankara was the first African head of state to denounce the United Nations Security Council's right of veto over all UN decisions and to condemn the hypocrisy that characterised international relations.

Today, all of these ideas have become self-evident truths and are at the heart of popular resistance movements.

Supporting popular struggles

Among the great causes championed by Sankara was his unwavering support for all popular revolutionary struggles and resistance movements against imperialist domination and colonial oppression.

In his October 4, 1984 speech to the UN General Assembly, Sankara said: "Our revolution in Burkina Faso is open to the suffering of all peoples. It also draws its inspiration from the experiences of peoples since the dawn of humanity."

These struggles inspired Sankara in his desire to profoundly transform the economic and social structures in his country, as well as the mentalities forged over centuries of foreign domination and oppression.

Sankara was one of the first heads of state to support the struggle of the Saharawi people of Western Sahara against Moroccan occupation. He expressed the solidarity of the Burkinabes with the struggle of the Kanak people of Kanaky, or New Caledonia, in the South Pacific against French colonialism.

During a trip to New York, he went to Harlem to express his support for the anti-racist struggle of African-Americans.

The Burkinabe Revolution Sankara led showed its unwavering support and solidarity for all people resisting US policies of imperialist aggression. At the UN General Assembly — in the belly of the beast — Sankara forcefully condemned the United States' illegal blockade and permanent aggression against the Cuban people.

In this same forum, he condemned Washington's unconditional support for Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people.

Burkinabe Revolution's successes

Sankara came to power in a military coup d'etat on August 4, 1983, but his revolution was nonetheless a profoundly popular one.

For Sankara, political power was a tool for liberating his country from foreign domination, and above all liberating his people from the multiple forms of economic, social, political and cultural domination.

In a October 2, 1983 speech, he explained that these goals would be achieved through the destruction of the neocolonial state and the transformation of all socioeconomic structures and institutions inherited from colonialism, including the army.

These transformations should lead to the transfer of power to the people, he said. "The goal of this revolution is to exercise power by the people."

This fundamental objective could be achieved only by mobilising the people.

Sankara said: "I think the most important thing is to bring the people to a point where they have self-confidence, and understand that they can, at last ... be the authors of their own wellbeing."

To a great extent, the Burkinabe Revolution was an original experiment in profound social, economic, political and ideological transformation. It was a bold attempt at endogenous (internal) development through popular mobilisation.

This required extraordinary efforts to raise consciousness and mobilise the masses in the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) and other revolutionary structures.

Despite some of the excesses of the CDRs and the other revolutionary structures, there is no doubt that one of the main objectives of the revolution under Sankara was to create the possibility for the people to speak and express themselves freely, and in so doing build their self-confidence.

Weaknesses and mistakes

As in all human endeavours, the Burkinabe Revolution had its ups and downs. Despite its incontestable achievements, the revolution also had its weaknesses that ultimately undermined the cohesion of the leadership.

These stoked opposition among segments of the population that initially supported it, such as the intellectual middle classes.

One of the weaknesses related to the fact that the social forces that had a stake in its success — peasants and workers — may not have had the ideological tools to enable them to better understand and support the pace of revolutionary change.

Another weakness lay in the difficulty of building a solid and durable coalition between Sankara and his comrades on the one hand, and the political parties representing the intellectual middle classes on the other.

This undoubtedly explains some of the mistakes made by the revolution's leadership that alienated portions of the population and worsened the contradictions within the leadership when difficulties accumulated.

Perhaps, to some extent, activism took the place of the more patient work required to educate the masses so that social and ideological obstacles to popular mobilisation could be overcome.

Sabotage by enemies working in the shadows and the country's relative isolation in the sub-region put the final nail in the coffin.

Sankara's revolutionary government was overthrown, and Sankara killed, in an October 15, 1987 military coup.

Lessons

The Burkinabe Revolution was the last big push for popular and democratic emancipation on the African continent. Neither the end of apartheid in South Africa, nor SWAPO's victory in Namibia, brought the same kind of significant economic and social transformation.

The revolution was a bold experiment in endogenous development, with the construction of infrastructure (such as dams, railways, schools and roads) through

the intense mobilisation of the masses powered by the principle of self-reliance.

Sankara denounced so-called foreign "aid", which he said "produced nothing more than disorganisation and enslavement".

He refused to listen to the World Bank and IMF, "charlatans trying to sell development models that have all failed".

Sankara showed that "poverty" did not have to translate into a loss of dignity or sovereignty.

The Burkinabe Revolution can also teach some negative lessons, such as the difficulty of building a sustainable relationship between the army and progressive intellectuals.

Another lesson relates to the destiny of military coups: can a coup d'etat truly serve as the basis for sustainable revolutionary change or is it condemned to be a flash in the pan?

African revolutionary forces must study the lessons from this experience to better pursue future struggles.

The ideas and principles that guided the Burkinabe Revolution did not vanish with Sankara's assassination. They will continue to guide African popular struggles and resistance movements until foreign domination has been vanquished and Africans have recovered their sovereignty.

The best way to honour Sankara's memory is to continue his fight and promote the values he embodied.

Just as Che's blood has fed the sacred ground of the Americas where worthy successors of the legendary revolutionary are now taking root and pursuing the dreams of Simon Bolivar and other South American heroes, the sacrifice of Sankara and his predecessors will produce other Sankaras who will one day realise the dream of an independent, united and prosperous Africa that is the master of its own destiny.

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