

Search for truth

Who assassinated Burkina Faso's revolutionary President Sankara?

President Thomas Sankara was assassinated in Burkina Faso on 15 October 1987. Twenty years later, his murderers remain in power and continue to reverse his revolutionary changes. **Koni Benson** and **Mukoma Wa Ngugi** interviewed **Aziz Fall**, coordinator of the International Justice Campaign for Sankara who has received ongoing death threats. He has coordinated 22 lawyers from such places as France, Senegal, Canada and Togo to assist in uncovering the truth behind Sankara's assassination.

INTRODUCTION

After the 1983 popular uprising in what was still called the Upper Volta, Thomas Sankara, a pilot in the air force, was appointed president of the new revolutionary government by his close friend, Blaise Compaoré.

Sankara renamed the country Burkina Faso, meaning "land of upright people", and embarked on a revolution inspired by Ghana and Cuba. He fought to liberate Africa from ongoing colonialism in the form of international financial institutions, deepening poverty, war and the pillage of resources.

As president of Burkina Faso from 1983 until he was assassinated in 1987, he led one of the most creative and radical post-colonial revolutions. He is known for his strong stand against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), rejection of inherited colonial and neo-colonial debts, a vision of Pan-African self-sufficiency, environmental reforestation initiatives to slow the desertification of the Sahara and to solve famine, land reform, vast improvements in

health and education, and women's liberation.

Sankara was clear about the need to emancipate women from sexism and patriarchy. Justice, he believed, could not exist when half the population lived in fear at home and in public. Sankara argued that when regressive aspects of culture, such as sexism or female circumcision, interfered with the cause for freedom, they had to be eradicated.

He was committed to fighting corruption, serving as a modest example, refusing to live a life of luxury and reining in any tendencies by those in his government towards ostentatious consumption. When asked why he did not want his portrait hung in public places, as was the norm for other African leaders, Sankara said: "There are seven million Thomas Sankaras."

In 1987 he was shot with about 12 of his colleagues. His successor, Blaise Compaoré has, for the past 20 years, publicly applauded Sankara, while actively betraying what he stood for. Under Compaoré, a

handful have become richer and the majority poorer. A United Nations judgement considers that the refusal to conduct an investigation into the death of Thomas Sankara, the lack of official recognition of his place of burial and the failure to correct the death certificate constitute inhuman treatment of his wife and sons, in breach of article 7 of the UN Covenant.

The late 1980s saw salaries of civil servants, which were reduced under Sankara, increased and the special tax that forced them to contribute to health and education projects scrapped.

In the 1990s, Compaoré signed a structural adjustment package with the IMF, which included privatisation and market liberalisation. His regime was involved in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean crises and wars which generated tremendous wealth for those in power, while millions of ordinary people's lives were lost and damaged.

Today, life expectancy is 47.9 years, adult literacy is 21.8% and Burkina Faso is ranked the third



Mariam Sankara returns to Burkina Faso after 20 years for the anniversary of Sankara's death



President Thomas Sankara

poorest country in the world. About 80% of its 13 million people living on less than US\$2 a day.

Ten years ago in 1997 the Group for Research and Initiative for the Liberation of Africa (GRILA) launched the International Justice for Sankara Campaign to strategically use political activism and the law to challenge the way Sankara's revolution was suppressed.

INTERVIEW WITH AZIZ FALL

Can you tell us the nature of the death threats? What do they say and do you have any idea where they are coming from? Is it one person or several people?

I've received four death threats since December 2006. Three letters in bubble envelopes left in the mailbox at my front door. The first one was simple and said "stop or be stopped". The second was similar but didn't mention my name, and the third was a little more explicit, mentioning my name, asking me "to commit suicide or face execution". I filed a complaint with the police in March 2007.

Then, in April, after the screening of a film on Thomas Sankara in Montreal, a young Burkinabé journalist, Sam Kah, who appeared in the film, received a threat, according to the organising committee of the Thomas Sankara 20th anniversary commemorations. The committee had invited both of us to their activities which took place in October this year. Following the threat against Sam Kah, I decided to tell the committee

members about my own death threats, which I had previously hidden from them because I was worried it would have a demobilising effect.

They issued a press release concerning the threats against the two of us. A couple of days later, I received another threat, this time by phone. A man with a strange accent warned me that neither the police nor my lawyers would be able to protect me, and that since I still didn't understand, my family would be targeted first, then me.

We don't know exactly who is behind these threats. But we have good evidence that a Frenchman and two Africans have something to hide, because they have been caught in a number of lies and contradictions. The police and CSIS, Canada's spy agency, are still investigating. That's all I can say at this point.

Can you talk about the International Campaign for Justice for Sankara (ICJS) and GRILA (Group for Research and Institute for the Liberation of Africa)? How does the United Nations judgement affect the search for justice on behalf of Sankara?

Sankara's widow, Mariam Sankara, and her two sons never abandoned their call to the international community to take action to bring his assassins to justice. Ten years ago, GRILA, an internationalist and pan-Africanist group, answered that call by creating an international campaign with a twofold strategy involving a political component and a legal one. I had the honour of

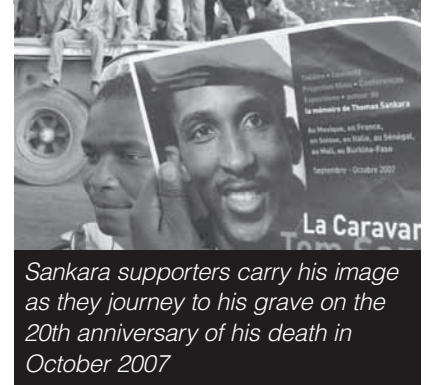
coordinating a team of 22 lawyers, which put together a case for a full investigation into the murder of President Sankara and a dozen of his colleagues.

The government of Burkina Faso, under the presidency of Blaise Compaoré, along with a highly compromised judicial system, blocked all efforts by the Campaign to bring the case to court. After exhausting all possible legal recourse within the country, the Campaign brought the case before the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Just over one year ago, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled in favour of the ICJS, and demanded that the government of Burkina Faso take action to shed light on the circumstances of Sankara's death.

This was a world first, and certainly a legal precedent in Africa, creating a breach in the cycles of impunity that characterises the political life of the continent. There is also a link between the Sankara case and the trial of Charles Taylor, the former Liberian head of state, who plotted with Compaoré in the assassination of Sankara. We expect the final UN judgement to be announced later this year and really hope that it will represent a major step forward in the global struggle against impunity.

What were some of Sankara's main achievements?

Sankara tried to put into practice most of the key elements of our own philosophy; among other things, the destruction of all forms of racism and ethnocentrism, with the Bambaata summit and the anti-



Sankara supporters carry his image as they journey to his grave on the 20th anniversary of his death in October 2007

apartheid struggle. The respect of collective and human rights. The struggle against regimes allied with imperialist interests. A balance between rural and urban incomes, food self-sufficiency and the fulfilment of basic needs.

A key issue for Sankara was the political, economic and social emancipation of women and the transformation of sexist mentalities. That particular aspect was crucial in a very traditional society where sexism was so entrenched. Men were invited to go to the market once a week, women were appointed to key state positions, and civic rights and the constitution granted women important advantages.

While there were mistakes and contradictions due to the weakness of his alliances, Sankara was steadfast in focusing on other key issues as well, issues that are still cornerstones to our own work, namely, popular and civic participation, popular democracy and the promotion and empowerment of Africa's youth. Sankara promoted self-reliant, ecologically sustainable development, and the emergence of regional pan-africanist states that were politically and economically accountable to their citizens, as evidenced by his attempts to unite with Ghana.

Compaoré has recently amended the constitution so that he can run for a third term which means he will have been in power from 1987 to 2012. A very common phenomenon in Africa indeed. It's a pity, but history will judge. Killing your comrades and opponents and tailoring the constitution to fit your needs is

nothing new. Even if the population is frightened, and busy surviving the harsh conditions of unequal development, there is no doubt that one day it will rise up against this.

How do the people of Burkina Faso regard Sankara today? Is he still part of the political imagination?

In general, people have a lot of admiration for him despite the regime's anti-Sankara propaganda and intimidation. The teenage generation doesn't know him well, and many may just know him as an icon.

However, it is heartening that at the African social forum in Bamako, Sankara was chosen as a leading model. As my comrade Ameth Lô wrote, "The Sankarist alternative remains. It is a pan-Africanist socialist alternative, focused uniquely on meeting the needs of the African masses, impoverished by decades of structural adjustment programmes that had no results other than to ensure continued payments to shameless creditors for the so-called debt that's not only immoral – since a third of the initial debt has been repaid – but also because the borrowed funds were never injected into the economic and social fabric of these countries."

How does Sankara challenge the idea of revolution today? What is his legacy? What is his continuing relevance in this age of globalisation?

I think that GRILA is living proof of that legacy, and that the struggle that is at stake, in this process of so-called African union and various attempts at integration, has to consider what we are still advocating, namely: democracy and progressive strategies that focus on

self-reliant and popular development.

Africa should rely more on its own forces, within a socialist and pan-Africanist perspective, and develop strong ties with other third world countries. This form of development entails subordinating external demands to internal needs. A consciousness that is increasingly homogenised by the dominant values of today's globalised world system, however, is incapable of envisaging such a path. It appears to me that as long as the contradictions of capitalism deepen, and societies continue to be destroyed by the capitalist way of life and production, we have no choice but to invent more progressive and internationalist paths in order to tackle the barbarism of globalisation and the forces that dominate it. LB

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