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## NEW BROOM IN BURKINA FASO?

**I**N LATE OCTOBER 2014, hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets of Burkina Faso, incensed by Blaise Compaoré's bid to change the constitution and seek a fifth presidential term.<sup>1</sup> Many of their placards displayed photographs of Thomas Sankara, Compaoré's revolutionary predecessor. Others simply read: 'Blaise, Get Out.' Pressure had been building all year among citizens of the impoverished West African state, and by October the mood had hardened. Compaoré clung on, sometimes defiant, sometimes pleading: suggesting reforms, appealing for stability, issuing reminders about the importance of the rule of law. The protests continued nonetheless. Police lined the streets. Many demonstrators were injured; at least thirty were killed.

A group called Balai Citoyen ('Citizens' Broom') played a key role in the protests. Balai was founded by prominent musicians: Smockey, a rapper, and the reggae artist Sams'K Le Jah, whose music helped to energize the mainly young crowd—60 per cent of Burkinabès are under 24. As well as Balai Citoyen, other social movements mobilized, among them the Mouvement Ça Suffit ('That's Enough'), along with trade unionists and established opposition politicians such as Zéphirin Diabré and Saran Sérémé, who had formerly been members of Compaoré's ruling party. Sérémé and her colleague Juliette Kongo organized a major women's protest in the capital Ouagadougou on 27 October. Thousands marched, holding wooden cooking spatulas and megaphones in the air. Eventually, on the 30th, a huge crowd—the opposition claimed it was a million strong—marched on the parliament building and breached its security cordon. Ordinary citizens sat in the chairs of the National Assembly. Compaoré's regime came to an end that day. After 27 years in power, Compaoré admitted defeat around noon on 31 October 2014.

The mobilization against Compaoré was one of the most important popular movements in Africa since the end of the Cold War, and its regional reverberations are likely to be felt for years to come. Although they have not attracted anything like the same attention in the Western media, the Burkinabè protests bear comparison with the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt—not just in their scale and militancy, but in their equivocal outcome: some of the old regime’s functionaries could soon be found at the head of Burkina Faso’s post-Compaoré government. The text that follows sets out to make sense of these events against the backdrop of modern Burkinabè history, with particular attention to the meaning attached to the language of ‘democratization’ today. The images of the revolt against Compaoré that reached an international audience showed a youthful popular uprising that articulated a palpable scepticism towards the existing, institutionalized modes of democracy in Burkina Faso, seeking to nurture alternative forms of participatory citizenship. Many concerns of the protagonists echoed those of an earlier anti-colonial period in African intellectual history. I will place this moment of popular resistance in context by giving a historical account of the Compaoré regime and the ways in which it sucked virtually all meaning from the procedural architecture of Burkinabè democracy, and by tracing the alternative traditions of dissent and protest on which the recent upheaval drew. Finally, what are the prospects for Burkinabè politics now, after an election in 2015 which suggested no real rupture with the past?

### *Upright land*

With a population of seventeen and a half million as of 2014, Burkina Faso covers 275,000 landlocked kilometres, and is surrounded by six West African countries: Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast. Apart from gold and agricultural land, it has relatively few exploitable resources, and remains one of the world’s poorest states. Eighty per cent of government expenditure is covered by international aid.<sup>2</sup> Ouagadougou, the largest city, has a population of one and a half million. According to UNESCO, almost three-quarters of the Burkinabè population still live in poverty; adult literacy is 36 per cent, and life expectancy

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Danouta Bagnoud for her comments on an earlier draft of this text.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso: With or Without Compaoré*, *Times of Uncertainty*, Africa Report no. 205, 22 July 2013, p. 25.



just 55 years. Remittances from migrant labourers working in Ivory Coast, where the Burkinabè are the largest overseas community, sustain many households.<sup>3</sup> The largest ethno-linguistic group, the Mossi, comprise almost half of the total population; the next largest group, the Fulani, account for 8.5 per cent, and there are more than sixty indigenous languages spoken in the country; French retains official status, however. Islam is the dominant religion, although Christian churches also have a significant foothold.

When French troops conquered the area known as Upper Volta in 1896, the colonizers grouped the villages into administrative areas called cantons, under the authority of *chefs de canton*; village chiefs were given the job of recruiting labour and collecting taxes.<sup>4</sup> White settlers in Ivory Coast depended heavily on labourers from Upper Volta: the chiefs

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the last census in 1998, there were 2.2 million Burkinabè nationals on Ivorian soil. Current estimates range between three and four million: International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso*, p. 21. The regional displacement of Burkinabè labour began under French colonialism, when Upper Volta was used as a pool for forced labour for infrastructural projects in other parts of French West Africa.

<sup>4</sup> The region was dubbed 'Upper Volta' by the French because the three main tributaries of the Volta river—the Black (Mouhoun), Red (Nazinoun) and White (Nakambe) Voltas—flowed through it before continuing into modern-day Ghana.

served as ‘man-hunters of the administration’, in Frederick Cooper’s phrase.<sup>5</sup> The Mossi royalty had been the dominant power in the region before the French arrived, and their king, the Mogho Naba, was accorded special status by the colonists: it was at his behest that Ouagadougou became Upper Volta’s administrative capital in 1919. The Mogho Naba was treated as the representative of all the other chiefs in the region, and played an active role campaigning for Upper Volta to be granted separate territorial status, having previously been partitioned between Ivory Coast, Niger and French Sudan. This campaign bore fruit in 1947; consequently, when the Afrique Occidentale Française federation secured independence in 1960, Upper Volta became a separate state.<sup>6</sup>

Given the extent of chiefly collaboration with the French authorities, it was little surprise that the chiefs found themselves at odds with the country’s new rulers. In 1962, Maurice Yaméogo, Upper Volta’s first president, cancelled state payments to chiefs and forbade their replacement in case of death or removal from office; the following year, his government abolished the cantons, placing *chefs de canton* on the same level as the previously subordinate village chiefs.<sup>7</sup> Yaméogo, a former colonial official, belonged to the Voltaic branch of Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, a federation of parties in francophone West Africa that pressed for independence in the mid 1950s. Yaméogo’s party claimed a monopoly of power after decolonization, suppressing its rivals, but his administration provoked a popular backlash: in 1966, Yaméogo was replaced by the army chief of staff, Sangoulé Lamizana, after a bloodless coup. Lamizana steered the country back to civilian rule four years later, but remained president until 1980. His government could do little to address Upper Volta’s deep-rooted impoverishment, and became embroiled in a border conflict with Mali in 1974. Lamizana was displaced in turn by another coup in November 1980. The new administration of Saye Zerbo rested on an alliance between senior army officers, who had no interest in sweeping reform, and their radicalized junior counterparts, who wanted to launch a more ambitious

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt and Rebecca Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labour and Citizenship in Post-Emancipation Societies*, Chapel Hill, NC 2000, p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> By 1960, the AOF comprised Senegal, French Sudan (Mali), Ivory Coast, Dahomey, Upper Volta and Mauritania; Guinea had left in 1958.

<sup>7</sup> Benoît Beucher, ‘Le Mythe De L’“Empire Mossi”’, in Mathieu Hilgers and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, eds, *Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas du Burkina Faso*, Paris 2010.

programme of social transformation. The latter group included Thomas Sankara and his close ally, Blaise Compaoré: two men who would go on to dominate the country's politics for the next thirty years.

### *Sankara: myth and reality*

Sankara's posthumous reputation has soared in the quarter-century since his death, largely at the expense of his former comrade Compaoré. It is not difficult to see why the veneration of Sankara has taken on such proportions: he was a young and dynamic leader, whose personal asceticism and bold socialist policies in favour of the rural poor won him many supporters, and who died a martyr's death while still in his thirties. Sankara was hardly alone in espousing socialist politics in the Africa of the 1980s—there were ruling Marxist-Leninist parties in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Somalia, Congo and Benin—but he stood out as a charismatic and eloquent politician. How does his record in office stand up to scrutiny, and what are its legacies for Burkina Faso today?

Sankara became the president of Upper Volta in August 1983, having already served as prime minister, after a lengthy power struggle between conservative and radical factions within the army that had seen him placed under arrest twice.<sup>8</sup> The new president came from a family with a military tradition—his father served in the French army during WWII—and had entered the officers' academy at the age of seventeen. Having been sent to Madagascar for advanced training at the end of the 1960s, he witnessed a period of upheaval that culminated in the formation of a junta led by radical army officers. On his return to Upper Volta, Sankara distinguished himself as an effective military commander in the border conflict with Mali, but he also set about cultivating ties with other left-leaning officers, and with the plethora of Marxist-Leninist groups, pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese or pro-Albanian, that had emerged on the Voltaic political stage. In his ascension to power, Sankara relied on support from his fellow officers Compaoré, Henri Zongo and Jean-Baptiste Lingani, all of whom became key figures in the new regime.

During his four years in office, Sankara abolished tribute payments and compulsory labour services owed to village chiefs and nationalized all land, giving rural labourers direct access to the soil without chiefly

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Harsch, *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*, Athens, OH 2014, pp. 38–51.

mediation. Food self-sufficiency being a priority, he increased the price that the government paid to farmers for basic crops. In the face of serious budget limitations, Sankara's government mobilized groups of citizens and army units to sink wells and plant thousands of trees in order to combat desertification. He launched mass literacy campaigns in local languages, as well as a programme that vaccinated over three million children against polio, measles and meningitis in just over a fortnight.<sup>9</sup> River blindness was eliminated. The infant mortality rate decreased from 208 for every thousand live births at the beginning of the decade to 145 in 1985.<sup>10</sup> Sankara passed laws granting women the same economic and civil rights as men, appointed several female ministers to his cabinet, and outlawed polygamy, forced marriage and genital cutting. Famously, he slashed government salaries, including his own, and sold off the government fleet of Mercedes cars, driving himself around in a Renault 5 instead. Civil-service pay fell by 40 per cent in real terms under Sankara's rule; in contrast, per capita spending on health-care rose by 42 per cent and on education by 26 per cent.<sup>11</sup> To symbolize the break with the past, Upper Volta was renamed Burkina Faso—'land of upright men'—in 1984.

Sankara was no democrat. He had come to power in a military coup, and was unforgiving towards those he considered to be counter-revolutionaries. His government banned political parties and trade unions, and fired striking teachers. Seven people linked to a plot to overthrow him were executed in 1984. The CDRs (Comités de Défense de la Révolution), which had been set up to mobilize the population behind Sankara's revolutionary agenda, were widely accused of abuses against those who got in their way. Naturally, the president was unpopular with those whose privileges he attacked, especially the chiefs, whose role he denounced as feudal, 'retrograde and obscurantist'.<sup>12</sup> Overseas, too,

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<sup>9</sup> Elliott Skinner, 'Sankara and the Burkinabè Revolution: Charisma and Power, Local and External Dimensions', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Sankara, *Women's Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle*, New York 1990, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Guy Martin, 'Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso', *Issue*, vol. 15, 1987; Harsch, *Thomas Sankara*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Larlé Naaba Tigré, 'Le rôle des chefs traditionnels dans le passage à la modernité', in Claude-Hélène Perrot and François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, eds, *Le Retour Des Rois*, Paris 2003. One Burkinabè who was interviewed at the time gave a sense of

many bristled: Sankara was highly critical of the Bretton Woods institutions, and also of the French. He tried to get Burkina Faso's donors to co-operate with one another and to fund parts of his programme. The donors, more used to dictating conditions themselves, boycotted his regime—although they would come back for Compaoré.

Sankara's optic was international: he thought the Burkinabè struggle was one shared by peoples throughout the world, and that Burkina Faso's domestic situation could not be understood without reference to the global system.<sup>13</sup> Articulating a classic *tiermondisme* long after its heyday, in a speech before the UN General Assembly he lauded the 'special relationship of solidarity uniting the three continents of Asia, Latin America, and Africa in a single struggle against the same political traffickers, the same economic exploiters'.<sup>14</sup> The Reagan administration had asked to see his UN speech in advance, and insisted that certain passages be deleted; when Sankara refused, and declared his solidarity with the Palestinians and with the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, he was denied permission to visit Atlanta at the invitation of its African-American mayor Andrew Young.<sup>15</sup> He also attacked Mitterrand for his complicity with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The times were hardly propitious for Sankara's brand of politics. The global debt crisis had shifted the balance of economic forces decisively against post-colonial states in Africa and Asia; China had abandoned its commitment to support revolutionary governments in the Third World, while the Soviet Union was soon to embark on its own retreat from such engagements. Closer to home, Sankara had a solid relationship

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the trouble Sankara would encounter in trying to uproot chiefly privileges: 'Many people respect the Mogho Naba, but I believe that Sankara was right to oblige him to pay his electric bills. After all, if it is not he who pays, then it would be the people who must pay for him, and they do not believe that this is good. We young people cannot live like our parents. Even in the countryside, people do not agree to give their sisters as presents to the Mogho as they did in the past.' Skinner, 'Sankara and the Burkinabè Revolution', p. 450.

<sup>13</sup> Sankara's vision of international solidarity echoed political and intellectual themes from Frantz Fanon, Mamadou Dia, Léopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah and W. E. B. Du Bois.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Prairie, ed., *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983–1987*, New York 2007, p. 156.

<sup>15</sup> Harsch, *Thomas Sankara*, pp. 113–5.

with the Ghanaian leader Jerry Rawlings, but faced growing hostility from other regional players, notably the veteran Ivorian dictator Félix Houphouët-Boigny.<sup>16</sup> He was also becoming isolated on the domestic front, having clashed with the unions and the civilian left as well as the traditional Burkinabè elites. A few months before his death, Sankara spoke discerningly of his friendship with Compaoré: ‘The day you hear that he is planning to stage a coup against me, don’t bother wasting your time trying to stop him, it’ll be too late for that.’<sup>17</sup> On the afternoon of 15 October 1987, Sankara and his advisers were gunned down by soldiers at a meeting in Ouagadougou. A radio broadcast announcing Sankara’s death denounced him as a ‘renegade’, a ‘traitor to the revolution’ and a ‘paranoid misogynist’, and claimed that he had been planning to eliminate his rivals in a bloody coup. A few weeks later, Compaoré dismissed his old friend in blunt terms: ‘His success in the international press had so spoiled him that he found it dishonourable to pull back. He preferred to get rid of us. He played the game. He lost.’<sup>18</sup>

Though he had alienated crucial sectors of the population by the time he was killed, Sankara is today remembered as a hero by many Burkinabès. His good looks and early death have contributed to this public image, along with the experience of the Compaoré years; but Sankara’s track record, while clearly authoritarian, also revealed a commitment to action on behalf of the rural poor. Sankara was a strong iconographic presence in the 2014 uprising, although this did not imply unthinking celebration. ‘Of course Sankara made mistakes’, says Smockey, whose own music

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<sup>16</sup> Blaise Compaoré, by now serving as Sankara’s defence minister, had married Houphouët-Boigny’s adoptive daughter in 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Wilkins, ‘The Death of Thomas Sankara and the Rectification of the People’s Revolution in Burkina Faso’, *African Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 352, July 1989, p. 380.

<sup>18</sup> Skinner, ‘Sankara and the Burkinabè Revolution’, p. 455. By 2012, while Compaoré would permit himself some sage reflections on the Sankara revolution—‘closed, totalitarian regimes that eradicate liberty never end well’—he was keen to shrug off any direct responsibility for the assassination: ‘The investigation into Thomas’s death has been inconclusive, in a context, at that time, of a state of emergency. Such unresolved cases are not unique to Burkina Faso.’ Marwane Ben Yahmed, ‘Blaise Compaoré: “Je n’ai pas changé”’, *Jeune Afrique*, 15 October 2012. In November 2014, weeks after Compaoré was toppled, the interim government started a fresh investigation and Sankara’s body was exhumed. In December 2015, Burkina Faso issued an international arrest warrant for Compaoré, on charges of complicity with Sankara’s murder.

often alludes to ‘Le Capitaine’; from the Sankarist heritage, they take only what is useful, he insists.<sup>19</sup> As the journalist Norbert Zongo wrote, for all of Sankara’s faults, at least ‘we must admit to ourselves that the majority of those involved really did try to think about the lives of the most wretched in our society.’<sup>20</sup> The same could not be said for Compaoré.

### *Rectification*

When he came to power, Compaoré launched a project of ‘rectification’, overturning the policies that Sankara had enacted and appeasing some of the social constituencies with whom he had clashed. Where his predecessor had nationalized the land, centralized decision-making and sought to dissolve the infrastructure of chieftainship, Compaoré privatized and decentralized, rehabilitating the chiefs, as he realized they could perform the same role for his regime that they had historically performed for the French. A customary tenure system was established in which a *chef de terre* would act as the custodian of community land and distribute it among households as needed. With agriculture playing such an important role in the Burkinabè economy, and competition for scarce farmland so intense, this was—and remains—a powerful function to be assigned to the chiefs, granting them huge social influence. Over the next quarter-century, they would play a central part in Burkinabè politics, mobilizing the vote for Compaoré at election time; he made sure to reward their loyalty.<sup>21</sup> Chiefs were also directly involved in punitive violence against those who dared to criticize the regime.<sup>22</sup> Compaoré’s carefully cultivated image outside Burkina Faso as a modernizer thus rested on the foundation of a ‘neo-traditionalist discourse’ at home, as the Burkinabè historian Magloire Somé has argued.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Author interview, 8 November 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Zongo in Christopher Wise, ed., *The Desert Shore: Literatures of the Sahel*, London 2001, p. 169.

<sup>21</sup> Magloire Somé, ‘Les chefferies moosé dans la vie politique du Burkina Faso depuis 1945’, in Claude-Hélène Perrot and François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, eds, *Le Retour Des Rois*, Paris 2003, p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Sten Hagberg, ‘Traditional Chieftancy, Party Politics, and Political Violence in Burkina Faso’, in Lars Buur and Helene Maria Kyed, eds, *State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa*, New York 2007, p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> Chiefly power remains an important factor in Burkinabè politics, in spite of Compaoré’s departure: the current Mogho Naba played a mediating role after the uprising, and hosted Balai Citoyen activists at his central Ouagadougou palace, so that they could receive his advice and ‘blessings’.

Compaoré needed the chiefs to help boost his electoral support after he began moving towards a multi-party system under pressure from Paris. In 1990, as the Cold War ended, Mitterrand had linked development aid to democratization. The following year, Compaoré inaugurated Burkina Faso's Fourth Republic with a constitutional referendum: he was the only candidate in a subsequent presidential election and was returned with 86 per cent of the vote, on a turn-out of just 25 per cent. The President organized a party of his loyalists and hangers-on, the ODP–MT: in a token nod to Compaoré's leftist background, the acronym stood for Organisation pour la Démocratie Populaire–Mouvement du Travail (Organization for People's Democracy–Movement of Labour), though some acerbically suggested that it really meant 'Office de distribution du pain—mange et tais-toi' ('Office for the distribution of bread—eat and shut up'). In 1996, the ODP–MT absorbed a dozen of its rivals to form the Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès (CDP)—itself unofficially known as the 'Congrès pour la distribution des postes'.<sup>24</sup> Compaoré would be re-elected on three further occasions: in 1998, he received 88 per cent of the vote; in 2005 and 2010, 80 per cent. During the 2005 election, Compaoré spent more on his campaign than the other eleven candidates put together, even splashing out on a hot-air balloon emblazoned with his portrait. Then as before, there were widespread complaints of fraud, with three-quarters of the population illiterate, and 13 per cent of ballots spoiled. Some voters had been told they were taking part in a test to identify the incumbent.<sup>25</sup> But foreign observers applauded the lack of violence, and La Francophonie, the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) all endorsed the outcome. In an open letter to Compaoré, Chirac praised the 'dynamism' of his campaign and expressed his hope for 'the enrichment, with your help, of the strong and amicable partnership that unites our two countries'.<sup>26</sup>

'Democratization' went hand-in-hand with IMF-driven liberalization and deregulation of the economy, for which Compaoré received much praise from Western donors. Sankara had refused to deal with the IMF,

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<sup>24</sup> Ernest Harsch, 'Burkina Faso in the Winds of Liberalization', *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 78, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> 'Disbelief Suspended', *Africa Confidential*, 18 November 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Chirac, 'Lettre de félicitations de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, à M. Blaise Compaoré, Président du Burkina Faso, pour sa réélection', 16 November 2005.

believing their lending conditions would prove fatal for his radical agenda, but Compaoré had no such inhibitions: the first loan agreement was signed in 1991. Liberalization and privatization proceeded apace, while social expenditure was pared back; the maternal mortality rate for women registered at health clinics rose from 350 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 492 in 1995.<sup>27</sup> Burkina Faso became one of Africa's leading aid recipients, and was the second African country to sign up to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. Consistently high growth rates during the 1990s and 2000s brought no reduction in poverty. Rather, Compaoré and his clan built an empire that dominated the Burkinabè economy, with stakes in agriculture, construction and mining, not to mention development projects and state bodies such as customs and public utilities.<sup>28</sup> Compaoré did little to restructure an export-oriented economy which had first taken shape in the colonial era. Burkina Faso remained highly vulnerable to fluctuations in gold and cotton prices, and to the caprices of foreign investors and US trade policy.

The Burkinabè President was a firm ally of Paris and Washington, allowing them to use his country's territory for surveillance missions in the Sahara, and liked to play the role of international statesman, helping to mediate in crises all over West Africa on behalf of ECOWAS.<sup>29</sup> Ersatz democratization, economic orthodoxy and security cooperation helped to buy Compaoré friends on the international stage. At home, he could not expect such an easy ride, and acted accordingly. Sankara's former comrades Henri Zongo and Jean-Baptiste Lingani had joined Compaoré's junta after the 1987 coup; when they complained about the 'right-wing drift' of his administration, the President had them shot.<sup>30</sup> The repressive core of his regime came from the elite Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP) military unit, whose soldiers received better pay, weapons and training than their counterparts in the regular army. The RSP commander Gilbert Diendéré was one of Compaoré's closest allies

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<sup>27</sup> Harsh, 'Burkina Faso in the Winds of Liberalization', p. 632. As Harsch notes, only a quarter of deliveries were monitored by clinics, so the real mortality rate was actually much higher.

<sup>28</sup> Nadoun Coulibaly, author interview, 27 January 2016. Coulibaly is an economic journalist who has written for Reuters and *Jeune Afrique* as well as numerous Burkinabè publications.

<sup>29</sup> Burkina Faso was also the only West African country that agreed to plant Monsanto's genetically modified cotton.

<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso*, p. 9.

(and a favourite of the French and US militaries).<sup>31</sup> A series of unexplained deaths and disappearances removed troublesome figures. In 1991, the academic Clément Ouédraogo, who had called for a national conference to be held before the following year's presidential election, was killed when a grenade was thrown at his car.<sup>32</sup> But the most controversial murder was that of the journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998. It ignited a protest movement that became a watershed in Burkinabè political life.

### *After Zongo*

Norbert Zongo was Compaoré's most outspoken critic in the Burkinabè press and had continued to write highly critical articles for *L'Indépendant*, the weekly journal he edited, in spite of previous assassination attempts. In March 1997, he published a story called 'The Heron'. 'A heron,' the story begins, 'borrowed the clothes of his friends and went to the festival. He was the most handsome, the most admired . . .'<sup>33</sup> Compaoré was the heron; his friends were the guests and reporters who had gathered in Ouagadougou for the FESPACO film festival.<sup>34</sup> Zongo was exasperated by the enthusiasm which foreign visitors expressed for Burkina Faso's purportedly emergent democracy. His allegory, in which the heron was decked out in borrowed 'democratic finery', suggested that a façade of democracy could be more pernicious than none at all. The tale was equally damning about the heron's sycophantic friends, who approved of him because he appeared to look like them. In the end, the friends betray the heron, taking back their loans and leaving him naked 'before the eyes of the entire world, a hideous spectacle of brutality and cruelty'.<sup>35</sup> In the light of recent events, Zongo's story now seems most prophetic.

In December 1998, the journalist's body was found in a burnt-out car about a hundred kilometres from Ouagadougou. Zongo and his companions had been riddled with bullets before the vehicle was set on fire. All fingers pointed to the RSP: Zongo had recently been investigating the involvement of Compaoré's brother in the murder of his chauffeur by RSP soldiers. The killing provoked an unprecedented crisis for the

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<sup>31</sup> The soldiers who killed Sankara had been under Diendéré's command.

<sup>32</sup> Sten Hagberg, "Enough is Enough": an ethnography of the struggle against impunity in Burkina Faso', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Zongo in Wise, ed., *The Desert Shore*, p. 164.

<sup>34</sup> The annual Festival Panafricain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou has been running since 1969.

<sup>35</sup> Zongo in Wise, ed., *The Desert Shore*, p. 166.

Compaoré regime. Twenty thousand people took to the streets to follow Zongo's hearse. In a country where only 15 per cent of the population could read, this was an impressive demonstration of solidarity at the funeral of a print journalist. In the months that followed, a wave of strikes and protests against the impunity and injustice of Compaoré's regime swept through the country.<sup>36</sup> In several towns, public buildings and the homes of Compaoré's political allies were set alight. The anger at Zongo's murder converged with a wider sense of outrage at the continued political repression. In January 1999, a civil servant working for the national power company was tortured to death by gendarmes after a private quarrel in a bar; his fellow workers imposed a one-day power cut throughout Burkina Faso to ensure that the killers were brought to justice.<sup>37</sup> Between May and August 1999, the Burkinabè trade unions called three two-day general strikes, linking the demand for Zongo's murderers to be prosecuted with opposition to privatization and civil-service redundancies. Compaoré was forced to allow an official inquiry, presided over by a collective of unions and civil-society groups that had come together after the assassination. Their report held the RSP responsible; protesters took to the streets once more; but Compaoré clung onto power. Just one of the six suspects named by the inquiry was brought before the courts; the case was dismissed in 2006 after a key witness retracted a statement.<sup>38</sup>

The Zongo affair offered striking evidence of Compaoré's ability to duck and dive within the institutions he had built around himself. In the local elections of September 2000, those opposition parties that were prepared to play the game made their first inroads, winning six communes out of forty-nine.<sup>39</sup> The opposition was also granted three seats in a national unity government formed in November of that year. In March

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<sup>36</sup> Ernest Harsch, 'Trop, c'est trop! Civil Insurgence in Burkina Faso, 1998–99', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 26, no. 81, September 1999. There had been a harbinger of this movement in the winter of 1996–97, when students embarked on a bitter three-month strike to demand proper funding of the education system, braving the violence of the security forces. A visiting US academic noted that his sympathy for the students was not shared by officials at the US embassy, who 'suggested that students lacked sufficient maturity to accept the fact that the era of government-subsidized education is now over, an antiquated relic of the Cold War period': Christopher Wise, 'Chronicle of a Student Strike in Africa: The Case of Burkina Faso, 1996–97', *African Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 2, September 1998, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Hagberg, "Enough is Enough".

<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso*, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> Mathieu Hilgers and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'L'Après-Zongo: Entre ouverture politique et fermeture des possibles,' *Politique Africaine*, no. 101, 2006, p. 9.

2001, surrounded by assorted dignitaries and chiefs as he addressed an audience of 30,000, Compaoré begged forgiveness for all of the crimes committed by the Burkinabè state since independence. His regime conceded some political reforms, rewriting the electoral code, strengthening voting procedures and allowing greater press freedom. The May 2002 legislative election bore witness to the growing strength of the opposition, which won 54 of 111 seats.<sup>40</sup> And yet this crisis also seemed to strengthen the regime, by giving it a greater veneer of democratic legitimacy. Compaoré had mastered the art of the electoral tightrope act, conceding just as much power as was necessary to survive, without relinquishing his grip altogether.

Even so, the tradition of social mobilization in Burkina Faso, which dated back at least as far as the ouster of Yaméogo in the 1960s, had been reinvigorated by the protests against Zongo's murder.<sup>41</sup> Strikes were common: in 2005, the Kebayina Burkina Women's Association led a struggle that, with the help of an international solidarity campaign, won compensation for employees sacked by the cosmetics group Yves Rocher, which had decided to close its factory on the outskirts of Ouagadougou.<sup>42</sup> Amidst global financial turmoil, food prices soared in the first two months of 2008: 30 per cent for meat, 44 per cent for corn, and 50 per cent for cooking oil.<sup>43</sup> The price hikes triggered riots in the four largest cities, and two general strikes were called by a coalition of trade unions and human-rights organizations in April 2008.<sup>44</sup> In 2011, a secondary-school student died in the town of Koudougou after being beaten up by the gendarmerie. The popular reaction sparked three months of upheaval, with shopkeepers, peasants, lawyers and soldiers all playing their part.

The crisis of 2011 differed from that of 1998–99 in two important ways. First, it was less concentrated, in both political and geographical

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<sup>40</sup> Hilgers and Mazzocchetti, 'L'Après-Zongo', p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> In a study of urban protest events in Burkina Faso, which excluded nationwide political mobilizations, Ernest Harsch counted 207 such events between 1995 and 2007. There had been just twelve in the four years preceding Zongo's death; in the four years after, there were 75; in the next five, 120: Harsch, 'Urban Protest in Burkina Faso', *African Affairs*, vol. 108, no. 431, April 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Servane Philippe, 'Tara Nacanabo, féministe malgré elle au Burkina Faso', *TV5 Monde*, 24 September 2015

<sup>43</sup> Bettina Engels, 'Trade Unionism in Burkina Faso', *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 224, no. 4, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Bettina Engels, 'Different means of protest, same causes: popular struggles in Burkina Faso', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 42, no. 143, 2015.

terms. Discontent was not channeled by any organization; the protests developed spontaneously, without leaders or demands; moreover, ‘demonstrations began in the periphery and not the centre’.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, the unrest coincided with an army mutiny over disciplinary issues: soldiers looted shops in Ouagadougou and vandalized the home of the city mayor, while a rogue RSP unit fired heavy weapons at the presidential palace, forcing Compaoré to leave the city. RSP loyalists were mobilized to crush another mutiny in the city of Boso-Dioulasso, bringing the trouble to an end. This drove a wedge between the RSP and the army; the fact that RSP mutineers escaped punishment, while hundreds of regular soldiers were imprisoned, did nothing to ease tensions. This would prove to be a factor of some importance when the President finally overreached himself.

### *Compaoré’s fall*

That moment came in 2014 when Compaoré tried to change the constitution in an effort to hold onto power. As we have seen, protests reached a crescendo in October of that year as the Burkinabè parliament prepared to vote on the proposed amendment. The National Assembly itself was occupied, and the homes of Compaoré’s relatives and political allies were sacked, along with the offices of the ruling party and the state broadcaster. Under pressure from the army’s top brass, as well as Washington and Paris, Compaoré agreed to step down on 31 October.<sup>46</sup> After some jockeying for position—Army chief Isaac Zida initially proposed himself as head of state, but agreed to share power with a veteran

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<sup>45</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso*, pp. 30–34.

<sup>46</sup> Anissa El Jabri, ‘Burkina: la France a aidé au départ “sans drame” de Blaise Compaoré’, *RFI Afrique*, 4 November 2014. Three weeks earlier, Hollande had offered Compaoré a new job, ‘if he wished to put his talents at the disposal of the international community’. In August 2014, Obama’s Secretary of State had warned Compaoré and other regional leaders against trying to cling on. The US Ambassador, Tulinabo Mushingi, had delivered a similar message on 4 July, warning the Burkinabè that they must ‘sacrifice themselves’ to promote a transition and citing Obama: ‘There is no change without risk, no progress without sacrifice’; a fortnight later Mushingi met with Balai Citoyen at the embassy. See respectively: *Jeune Afrique* editors, ‘Exclusif: la lettre de François Hollande qui mettait en garde Blaise Compaoré’, *Jeune Afrique*, 30 October 2014; Fabbi Kouassi, ‘Présidence à vie en Afrique: John Kerry tire sur Blaise Compaoré, Sassou N’Guesso et Joseph Kabila, mais rate sciemment Faure Gnassingbé’, *27avril.com*, 6 August 2014; Valérie Tianhoun, ‘Ambassadeur des USA au Burkina Faso: “Les Burkinabè doivent se sacrifier pour prôner l’alternance”’, *Le Pays*, 7 July 2014; Dimitri Kaboré, ‘Burkina Faso: Le “balai citoyen” reçu par l’ambassadeur des Etats-Unis’, *Fasozine*, 17 July 2014.

Compaoré diplomat, Michel Kafando, after meeting with a US Under-Secretary of State—a transitional government was put in place until new elections could be arranged, with Kafando serving as President and Zida as Prime Minister.<sup>47</sup>

A national vote was planned for November 2015, but before that could happen, the Burkinabè people had to mobilize once more against an attempted coup. On 16 September 2015, members of the RSP detained Kafando and Zida during a cabinet meeting at the Presidential Palace. The next day, the RSP announced that the borders had been sealed and that veteran Compaoré loyalist Gilbert Diendéré, who had recently been ousted as RSP commander, would assume the presidency until ‘inclusive and peaceful’ elections could be held. *Africa Confidential* suggested that much of the RSP’s anger was directed towards Zida, Diendéré’s former deputy:

Diendéré had—wrongly—calculated that Zida would be the instrument by which he could get the transitional government to do his bidding. However, Zida turned out to have a mind of his own and began arguing for the RSP to be dismantled. The coup was, first and foremost, a settling of scores between Zida and his former comrades-in-arms, who felt betrayed by their old second-in-command.<sup>48</sup>

Soldiers forced a prominent radio station, Omega FM, off the air and set the cars of its journalists alight; they also tried to shut down Burkina Faso’s internet. The Burkinabè media—radio in particular—had played a vital role during the previous year’s uprising, and it seemed that Omega was being punished for its critique of the RSP and support for the protesters. The studio of Balai founder Smockey was attacked with rocket-propelled grenades. Twenty people died.

But the coup failed, not because of international intervention—though Benin’s president Yayi Boni and his Senegalese counterpart Macky Sall flew in to mediate on behalf of ECOWAS—but because it faced an immediate popular backlash.<sup>49</sup> This time, the placards read ‘The soldiers have

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Burkina: visite surprise de la sous-secrétaire d’Etat américaine à l’Afrique, qui rencontre zida’, *aOuaga.com*, 8 November 2014.

<sup>48</sup> ‘The people take on the putschists’, *Africa Confidential*, 25 September 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the first agreement proposed by the ECOWAS mediators had to be withdrawn after its call for the coup leaders to be granted amnesty provoked a furious response: Sten Hagberg, “‘Thousands of New Sankaras’: Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso’, *Africa Spectrum*, no. 3, 2015.

confiscated our revolution.’ Barricades were constructed, and the trade unions called an indefinite general strike. There had already been many demands for the dissolution of the RSP, whose soldiers were accused of killing protesters in cold blood in 2014. The generals of the regular army initially hesitated to oppose the coup, but came under intense pressure from junior officers to take a stand.<sup>50</sup> Diendéré was forced to back down and has now been charged with several offences, including murder, while the RSP has been disbanded. Transitional arrangements and electoral preparations resumed. The election went ahead on 29 November 2015; Roch Kaboré of the People’s Movement for Progress (MPP) became Burkina Faso’s new president, with 53.5 per cent of the vote on a 60 per cent turnout. The ‘democratic transition’, in that curiously depopulated phrase, had succeeded.

The immediate political winners from the uprising had been (very) late arrivals to the party. Kaboré and his ally Salif Diallo had been part of Compaoré’s inner circle until shortly before his ouster. Kaboré, a former banker, served as president of the National Assembly, prime minister and CDP chairman under the old regime; Diallo also held several prestigious portfolios. Their break with Compaoré was triggered by his plan to change the constitution, of which Kaboré had been openly critical for a long time.<sup>51</sup> Kaboré, Diallo and Simon Compaoré, the former Mayor of Ouagadougou (no relation to Blaise), announced their resignation in January 2014. The CDP had been reduced to a ‘business for friends’, they wrote. The ‘democratic commitments’ of the party, and the ‘dearly-won victories of its tireless activists’ had been squandered.<sup>52</sup> This hardly came as a revelation; what was more striking was that it had taken the defectors so long to reach such conclusions. They took 72 prominent party members with them to form the MPP, dealing a heavy blow to Compaoré’s grip on power. In the months that followed, they joined the protests against their former boss.

‘We have dined with the devil,’ Diallo said when asked about the MPP’s connections with the old regime at a press conference a few weeks

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<sup>50</sup> Hervé Taoko, ‘Burkina Faso, a year after uprising, will head to polls’, *New York Times*, 26 November 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Abdoulaye Tao, ‘Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, President du CDP’, *Le Pays*, 8 February 2010. This was not the first time Kaboré had switched sides: he was a member of Sankara’s government, but lined up with Compaoré just before the coup.

<sup>52</sup> The letter was published on the news website aouaga.com on 5 January 2014.

before the 2015 election. ‘But we ourselves are not the devil. We had very long forks.’<sup>53</sup> Another journalist asked him specifically about a recent controversy. An academic (and former Sankara ally), Valère Somé, had published a book charging Diallo with complicity in acts of torture on himself and other prisoners. It was not the first time Diallo had faced such allegations: the president of the General Union of Burkinabè Students (UGEB), Patrice Zoehinga, had previously accused him of being involved in the arrest of Dabo Boukary, a student who died under torture in 1990 after criticizing the government.<sup>54</sup> Another question mark hovers over the role of Diallo and Kaboré in the assassination of Sankara: Diallo was with Compaoré on the day it happened.<sup>55</sup> Diallo naturally denied everything. The real question, he insisted, was how much Somé had been paid to write such ‘insanities’; it was best not to pay any attention to a man who deserved the ‘Nobel Prize for lying’.<sup>56</sup>

Whatever baggage he may have been carrying from the past, Kaboré’s status as a former prime minister carried weight with the voters when they went to the polls in November 2015: he outpolled his nearest rival Zéphirin Diabré in every province except Nahouri and Boulgou. The triple bill of Kaboré, Diallo and Simon Compaoré helped the MPP appeal to different parts of the country; Diallo is from the north, where the party did particularly well. Like those of its rivals, the MPP’s campaign focused on themes of justice and the struggle against poverty, although the techniques it used were strongly reminiscent of CDP methods—big concert-rallies, with the distribution of money and sacks of rice to the poor.<sup>57</sup>

If the roots of the old regime remain intact, what happened to the plant itself? It turned out that the French had spirited Compaoré away to safety, with help from the special forces he had allowed them to station on Burkinabè soil as part of Opération Barkhane. He has remained in exile since, evading an international arrest warrant; a stay in a Moroccan

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<sup>53</sup> Ismaël Nabile, ‘Salif Diallo’, *Burkina* 24, 2 November 2015,

<sup>54</sup> Editor, ‘25e Anniversaire de l’assassinat de Dabo Boukary’, *Le Quotidien*, 19 May 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Bruno Jaffré, ‘Le Burkina élit comme président l’ex dauphin de Blaise Compaoré’, *Mediapart*, 4 December 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Ismaël Nabile, ‘Salif Diallo’.

<sup>57</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Burkina Faso: transition acte II’, *Briefing Afrique de Crisis Group*, no. 116, 7 January 2016.

hospital was followed by Compaoré's return to Ivory Coast with his wife Chantal. He has recently become an Ivorian citizen in order to stave off the threat of extradition.<sup>58</sup> The Abidjan villa where Blaise and Chantal live belongs to the Ivorian Interior Minister Hamed Bakayoko—also, among other things, a good friend of Roch Kaboré.<sup>59</sup>

### *Dissenting voices*

In a country where presidential power has changed hands more often by way of coups than elections, and with the threat of the military still looming in the background, some expressed relief that 'normality' had apparently resumed in Burkina Faso—a peaceful and broadly transparent election went ahead as planned in November 2015, and without Compaoré. 'When you think of the risks that the country was running at the end of Blaise Compaoré's reign, a successful election was a good thing,' says Habibou Kouanda, a member of the Kebayina Women's Association.<sup>60</sup> Notwithstanding the weak turnout and the problems with the electoral register—three and a half million eligible voters were missing—there is a new face in the presidency, with no soldiers in his administration. By contract, Martine Yabré, President of the Council of Burkinabè Women, described the new government as a 'huge deception for women': 'For us it was an opportunity to lay the foundations for a more equitable society which would be more inclusive of women and young people. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.'<sup>61</sup>

The UGEB advanced similar criticisms, emphasizing the importance of activism and dissent in creating social change. Four days before the election, they released a statement urging their members to free themselves from 'electoral illusions' and remain organized to press demands on the government. The students' union pointed out that no candidate had proposed a break with the Bretton Woods institutions and the 'criminal policies of structural adjustment'—indeed, Diallo and Kaboré were 'the very people who were in business when structural adjustment

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<sup>58</sup> 'Burkina Faso ex-leader Blaise Compaoré becomes Ivorian', *BBC News*, 24 February 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Baudelaire Mieu and Benjamin Roger, 'Pendant ce temps, Blaise Compaoré se fait discret', *Jeune Afrique*, 28 December 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Correspondence with author, 14 February 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Fatouma Ouattara, 'Martine Yabré, présidente du Conseil des femmes du Burkina', *Queen Mafa*, 28 August 2015.

programmes were introduced’—and warned that ‘students have nothing to hope for from the elections of 29 November 2015.’<sup>62</sup>

Such reservations about the significance of elections are plainly coloured by the experience of Compaoré’s rule, but their roots can be traced back further. Thomas Sankara had given his own definition in an interview shortly before his death: ‘Democracy is the people, with all their strength and potential. Ballot boxes and electoral machinery in and of themselves don’t signify the existence of democracy. Those who organize elections every so often, and are concerned about the people only when an election is coming up, don’t have a genuinely democratic system.’<sup>63</sup> This still chimes with many. ‘Democracy is what happens between elections,’ says Aziz Sana, national co-ordinator of the Mouvement Ça Suffit. ‘It’s the manner of governing and using power. To be always with the people.’<sup>64</sup> In this view, the ‘democratic transition’ is not an end point, but a beginning. According to Nadoun Coulibaly, ‘The real transition begins now’—‘Kaboré will be judged on what he does next. Burkinabès are waiting and watching, and they have much to wait for, in terms of access to water, access to electricity.’<sup>65</sup>

Economic development and rural poverty remain pressing concerns for Burkina Faso, which has one of the lowest rates of urbanization in the region: just 26 per cent in 2010.<sup>66</sup> Ninety per cent of the domestic workforce is engaged in farming, mostly at subsistence level, selling any surplus for cash. The agricultural sector is dominated by small-scale farms of five hectares or less. Sorghum, millet and maize are the most widely produced crops, while cotton is the most lucrative: its value as

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<sup>62</sup> Union Générale des Etudiants Burkinabè, ‘Déclaration sur les élections du 29 Novembre 2015’, RTB, 25 November 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Prairie, ed., *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, pp. 384–5.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview, 27 January 2016. The Mouvement Ça Suffit was renamed the Collectif 3D in April 2015 on the grounds that its central demand for Compaoré’s departure—‘that’s enough!’—had now been fulfilled. The rebranding was also intended to draw a line under factional disputes that had seen Sana’s position as coordinator challenged by others in the movement. Sana himself was a deputy in the transitional government but did not stand in the 2015 elections.

<sup>65</sup> Author interview, 27 January 2016. The Chamber of Commerce estimates that the uprising cost the Burkinabè economy CFA40 million and led to 7,500 job losses; furthermore, cotton and gold prices have fallen this year, leading to a further contraction in government revenues.

<sup>66</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso*, p. 5.

an export commodity has recently been surpassed by the gold-mining boom, but Burkina Faso remains one of Africa's leading cotton producers.<sup>67</sup> At present, agricultural land covers 43 per cent of the country's territory, but this cultivable space is being reduced by desertification as a result of climate change. There is also increasing competition for land, thanks to one of the highest rates of population growth in the world, and the conflict-driven return of migrants from Ivory Coast.<sup>68</sup> Land conflicts are pervasive and intensifying, with the contradiction between chief-administered land-tenure systems and new state laws at the heart of many disputes.<sup>69</sup>

### *Resistance music*

The uprisings of 2014 emerged not out of, but in response to, the co-opted history of democratization, drawing instead upon traditions of civic dissent that have characterized the political history of Burkina Faso—in spite of technocratic attempts to privilege 'stability' and 'order'. One notable aspect of the 2014 rebellion, however, was the new coalition of forces involved. While Burkinabè trade unions have historically been central players in the country's politics, they were divided on the overthrow of Compaoré; instead, young people mobilized by musicians like Smockey, as well as social movements and even politicians from the official opposition, played a leading role. The General Secretary of the CGT-B (Burkinabè General Workers Confederation), Tolé Sagnon, argued in 2014 that Compaoré could simply be replaced by 'different political forces that present themselves as alternatives to the power in place but which mostly share the same neoliberal principles.'<sup>70</sup> For the Mouvement Ça Suffit, this reluctance to engage in the struggle to prevent Compaoré from changing the constitution suggested 'a kind of complicity between the President and certain unions, because

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<sup>67</sup> FAPDA, Burkina Faso Country Fact Sheet on Food and Agriculture Policy Trends, April 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Moussa Ouédraogo, 'Land tenure and rural development in Burkina Faso: Issues and Strategies', IIED Issue Paper no. 112, 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Kent Elbow, 'Burkina Faso's Ambitious Experiment in Participatory Land Tenure Reform', *Focus on Land*, August 2013. Alongside official laws—private land is now permitted again—there exists a customary land tenure system with the *chef de terre* acting as custodian of community land, inherited via family lineage from father to son. This system can come into conflict with state law.

<sup>70</sup> Engels, 'Trade Unionism in Burkina Faso'.

of their silence.<sup>71</sup> Another reason for the relative marginalization of the unions derived from broader trends in Burkinabè society. Civil servants and public-sector workers are the most important social base for trade unionism in Burkina Faso, as in many African states. The elimination of public-sector jobs as a result of IMF programmes has weakened unions, which now often rely on government subventions and ILO support in order to survive. Furthermore, the unions remain a predominantly urban and middle-class phenomenon, in a country where the vast majority of the workforce earns its living either through subsistence farming or the informal economy: recent estimates suggest that just 2 per cent of informal-sector workers have been unionized.<sup>72</sup>

This helps explain the importance of the role played by musicians in mobilizing young people behind the protests. With most of the population unable to read, and less than 10 per cent connected to the internet, popular music has been an important tool of politicization. There is a strong tradition of politically inflected music, especially rap, in francophone West Africa, and the Balai Citoyen musicians are part of a network that stretches beyond Burkina Faso, in terms of both strategic inspiration and intellectual influence. The title track of the Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi's 2013 album, *My Revolution*, began with a quote from Frantz Fanon: 'Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.'<sup>73</sup> 'My revolution,' he declared, rapping in French, 'comes from Thomas Sankara, it comes from Gandhi, it comes from Nelson Mandela.' Awadi describes himself as a 'musical activist'. The year before that album came out, huge protests had stopped Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade from extending his twelve-year reign. Awadi and his fellow musicians were instrumental in leading the charge against Wade. A movement of younger rappers and journalists called *Y en a Marre* gathered momentum, and helped bring thousands of young people onto the streets of Dakar. In March 2012, Wade was defeated at the ballot box; it was a triumph in the face of entrenched power. Next came the victory in Ouagadougou. Like *Y en a Marre*, Balai was founded by musicians, and initially relied upon

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<sup>71</sup> Author interview, 27 January 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Craig Phelan, 'Trade unions, democratic waves, and structural adjustment: the case of francophone West Africa', *Labor History*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London 2001, p. 166.

their financial support—though the organization soon had its own self-financing branches throughout the country.<sup>74</sup>

Smockey and Awadi are part of a self-conscious network of francophone musicians in whose lexicon and iconographies there are strong echoes of the anti-colonial resistance of an earlier generation. Fanon's 'On National Culture', quoted by Awadi, was based on a speech he had given at the second Black Artists and Writers' Congress in Rome in 1959.<sup>75</sup> The conference was organized by Alioune Diop, a Senegalese intellectual who edited the Paris-based review *Présence Africaine*. The Rome congress and its predecessor in Paris three years earlier were important milestones in the struggle against European colonialism. The dialogue between activists and intellectuals from different countries and linguistic backgrounds led to a productive theoretical cross-fertilization: the Angolan writer Manuel dos Santos Lima remembered the 1956 conference as 'an unbelievably important step in my intellectual life'.<sup>76</sup> Mário Pinto de Andrade, the founder of Angola's liberation front, the MPLA, met Fanon at the Rome congress, later remarking that the philosopher-psychiatrist's presence had lent the gathering a clear 'political dimension'.<sup>77</sup>

At the time, of course, that primarily meant the battle for national independence. But Fanon also warned that the struggle would not end on the day that new flags were raised. It was important to draw on the resources of the past, he told his audience: 'We must rid ourselves of the habit, now that we are in the thick of the fight, of minimizing the action of our fathers.'<sup>78</sup> At the 1966 Havana Tricontinental, the Guinea-Bissauan

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<sup>74</sup> Activists from Y en a marre came to Ougadougou to support Balai's initial action on 29 June 2013, when Smockey and Sams'K Le Jah appeared on stage at a public rally against Compaoré's constitutional changes, brandishing brooms. By August 2013 Balai had established a national committee to coordinate branches throughout the country and drafted a charter calling for 'liberty, democracy and good governance'. For its part, Y en a marre succeeded in opening offices in each of Senegal's 14 regions, with support from the Open Society Institute of West Africa. See the interview given by Fadel Barro to Mbaye Gueye, 'Sénégal: Le Mouvement "Y en a marre" n'est "pas manipulable", selon son coordonnateur', *Alerte-Info.net*, 5 May 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Fanon, 'On National Culture', p. 166.

<sup>76</sup> Manuel dos Santos Lima, 'Escritores Falam', in Associação Casa dos Estudantes do Império, *Mensagem: cinquentenário da fundação da Casa dos Estudantes do Império, 1944–1994*, Lisbon 1997, p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> Michel Laban, *Mario Pinto de Andrade: Uma entrevista*, Lisbon 1997, p. 150.

<sup>78</sup> Fanon, 'On National Culture', p. 166.

independence leader Amílcar Cabral anticipated two stages of the anti-imperialist struggle: the first would be a fight against ‘direct domination’ by a foreign power; the second, a struggle against ‘indirect domination’ exercised by means of ‘native agents’.<sup>79</sup> The afterlives of African independence struggles have now moved into this second stage, and are concerned not so much with the creation as with the transformation of nation-states erected by that earlier struggle. Cabral receives an entire eponymous track to himself on Awadi’s 2011 album *African Presidents*; on another, spliced through with recordings of Thomas Sankara’s voice, we hear Smockey announce that ‘the bells are ringing for freedom’.

The sound of those bells can be heard throughout the region, with young people, especially in francophone countries, mobilizing to block the spread of ‘third termism’ as leaders seek to extend their time in office: in particular, the DRC’s Joseph Kabila and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame appear to be following a path already traced by Cameroon’s Paul Biya, Burundi’s Pierre Nkurunziza, Congo-Brazzaville’s Denis Sassou Nguesso and Gabon’s Ali Bongo. Senegalese and Burkinabè influences are visible in the DRC: in March 2015, Kabila’s police force detained over forty activists at a press conference in Kinshasa organized by a pro-democracy youth group, Filimbi (‘whistles’ in Swahili).<sup>80</sup> A Balai Citoyen member, Oscibi Johann, was among those arrested, as was the journalist Fadel Barro of Y en a Marre. Johann, Barro and others had travelled to the DRC from Senegal and Burkina Faso to share experiences and skills with Filimbi, just as Y en a Marre had done ahead of Balai Citoyen’s successful mobilization in October 2014. Questioned about the arrests, the DRC’s information minister denounced the activists as ‘instructors in insurrection’.<sup>81</sup>

In November 2014, soon after Compaoré had fallen, Fadel Barro insisted that the Burkinabè success would ripple far beyond the country, and described the scope of the youth movement they were trying to build.<sup>82</sup> Y en a Marre was, he said, in contact with youth activists all over Africa:

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<sup>79</sup> Amílcar Cabral, ‘The Weapon of Theory’, in Cabral, *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*, New York 1979, p. 128.

<sup>80</sup> See Joe Trapido, ‘Kinshasa’s Theatre of Power’, NLR 98, March–April 2016, p. 79.

<sup>81</sup> Along with the arrested activists was an official of USAID’s democracy and good governance programme in the DRC, Kevin Sturr, who was quickly released: Aaron Ross, ‘Congo frees US diplomat but detains African democracy activists’, *Reuters News*, 16 March 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Author interview, 8 November 2014.

in the DRC, Mali, Guinea, Gabon. Two activists with another Congolese group, LUCHA, said that the connections they had forged with Balai, Y en a Marre and others were ‘mutually enriching’. One of their members, Fred Bauma, was arrested at the Kinshasa press conference and imprisoned for seventeen months. They cite Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela as role models: ‘We are inspired by all of these people to build what they started, to try to finish what they were not able to do and to do better what they did not do well.’ LUCHA, however, is committed to non-violent protest: ‘We have known too much violence.’<sup>83</sup>

### *Prospects*

In Burkina Faso, this productive idealism engenders a deep scepticism about official politics, which means that many of those who struggled against Compaoré are reluctant to become part of the political class themselves, as Aziz Sana of the Mouvement Ça Suffit explains:

After Blaise’s departure, there was a big discussion in the civil society about whether we should be part of the transition or not. We decided no: in the government, we wouldn’t have the same freedom, because power corrupts absolutely. We didn’t want to sacrifice our freedom of expression. Outside the government it would be easier to speak and to critique.<sup>84</sup>

According to Smockey, Balai Citoyen has also given itself ‘an oppositional mission’.<sup>85</sup> They say they will mobilize again if it proves necessary. There are clear echoes of Thomas Sankara in this emphasis on the need for an engaged citizenry. Sankara’s slogan *Seule la lutte libère*—‘Freedom can be won only through struggle’—was repeated again and again during the 2014 uprising, and remains prominent on Balai Citoyen’s website. At the same time, Balai has positioned itself as a kind of sentinel of the institutionalized democratic process, organizing a public education programme, funded by European development money, showing people how to vote and how to recognize and report electoral fraud.<sup>86</sup> In an

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<sup>83</sup> Author interviews, 25 January 2016. For more information on LUCHA, see Marta Iñiguez de Heredia, ‘Youth movement in Congo demands social justice’, *Pambazuka News*, 30 October 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Author interview, 29 January 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Marina Bellot, ‘Interview de Smockey, porte-parole du Balai Citoyen’, *Tournons La Page* website.

<sup>86</sup> Editor, ‘Elections 2015: ‘Le Balai Citoyen appelle à voter et à rester dans les bureaux de vote’, *Burkina 24*, 5 November 2015.

interview before the election, Smockey warned that ‘we have to avoid personifying political power’ and strengthen Burkina Faso’s institutions instead: ‘We have to move on from providential men and women.’<sup>87</sup>

The gene pool of those involved in Burkinabè party politics has not changed very much, despite the upheavals of the last two years. It remains to be seen how the power of a politicized citizenry will weigh against the material strength of those now in control of the structures of the state. After the Norbert Zongo crisis of 1998–99, a window of opportunity opened briefly and then closed. It is clear that the space for change which emerged in 2014–15 is already beginning to contract. In his investiture speech, Kaboré cast himself as spokesman for ‘the nation’: ‘the nation is grateful to the brave sons and daughters, fighters for freedom and democracy these past years and especially during the popular uprising.’ He led a minute’s silence for the deceased, saluting Burkina Faso’s young people and the victory of democracy over dictatorship. But the new president went on to rail against ‘incivility, the undermining of the authority of the state’, and insisted that ‘order and discipline must prevail’—‘I am the first to know that the return to normality won’t be easy, but it’s the price we must pay if we don’t want to continue living in a Burkina Faso that runs at different speeds, with an uncertain future, where the gap is widening every day between a dwindling number of the wealthy, who have rights, and the broader masses doomed to poverty and exclusion.’ It sounded as if Kaboré was worried that too much unrest would put off the foreign investors whom he intends to court in order to finance the social and infrastructural investments Burkinabès demand. ‘This is why’, he concluded, ‘we must manage things like a good father: careful, diligent and honest.’<sup>88</sup>

There is every reason to be wary of this characterization of state power as an individual, a man, an elder, someone who knows better than the Burkinabè people themselves—and of the framing of ‘normality’ as a time when ‘order’ and ‘unity’ must prevail, given that the most forceful expressions of popular sovereignty in Burkinabè politics have come when dissent has managed to hold its head above the parapet. Indeed, Kaboré’s words echoed Compaoré’s swansong: the televised appeals to

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<sup>87</sup> Birame Faye, ‘Entretien Avec . . . Smockey, leader du Balai Citoyen du Burkina’, *Le Quotidien*, 21 November 2015.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Discours d’investiture du Président Roch Marc Christian Kaboré’, *Le Faso*, 30 December 2015.

protestors in his final days to ‘put the needs of the nation’ first and stop protesting (in his first statement after losing power, Compaoré even declared himself a ‘sacrificial lamb for national unity’). Concerns for ‘national security’, which currently rank high on the political agenda, serve to buttress his approach. In January 2016, gunmen attacked a hotel and restaurant in Ouagadougou, killing thirty people. Foreigners appeared to be the main target, although five Burkinabè were also killed; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility. A little over a week later, former RSP members raided an armoury in Yimdi, to the west of the capital, making off with rocket launchers and AK-47s.<sup>89</sup> Such episodes contribute to a sense that the Burkinabè state is vulnerable and exposed to threats from within and without, helping to legitimize an official rhetoric that prioritizes unity over dissent. Security is crucial—but whose security Kaboré has in mind remains unclear.

More broadly, the new president has yet to fully reveal what he intends to do in office, and on whose behalf. Reforming the army and dismantling the Compaorist economy will be difficult, and Kaboré has thus far not demonstrated any appetite for such tasks. Of course, it is more than a question of Kaboré’s will: Burkina Faso is caught in structural webs larger than the president or his government. The question is how he chooses to position himself in relation to those webs. It is nonetheless clear that Kaboré will not be able to rule in the same fashion as Compaoré. His party is nine seats short of an overall majority in the national parliament. More importantly, there has been a real change in popular consciousness after the experiences of 2014–15. As Smockey puts it: ‘What the Burkinabè people did to Blaise Compaoré, we are ready to repeat for someone else.’<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> ‘Burkina Faso foiled coup attempt in early October, minister says’, *Reuters*, 22 October 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Birame Faye, ‘Entretien Avec . . . Smockey’.