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“Thousands of New Sankaras”: Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso

Sten Hagberg

Abstract: This article analyses recent political developments in Burkina Faso, particularly the failed coup d'état in September 2015. The coup was led by the former president's security forces (RSP), comprised of 1,300 heavily equipped and well-trained soldiers. The RSP took the president and government hostage and declared the coup d'état. The coup was condemned by most Burkinabe, civil society organisations, trade unions, and political parties, as well as by the international community. Across the country, people mobilised in popular resistance and civil disobedience. RSP soldiers patrolled and shot live rounds into neighbourhoods, while residents built barricades. Resistance mounted in Ouagadougou and elsewhere in the country, and after a few days it became clear that the coup would fail. In this article, I describe the courage and determination of the Burkinabe people in the face of the coupists and thereby show that popular resistance and revolutionary struggle are part and parcel of Burkinabe political culture. In conclusion, I discuss the prospects for a veritable democratic breakthrough in Burkina Faso.

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Keywords: Burkina Faso, coup d'état/military insurrection, political resistance, political culture

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This paper analyses recent political developments in Burkina Faso, particularly the coup d'état in September 2015 that failed after seven days of resistance and struggle. The coup occurred towards the end of the one-year transition in power following the revolution that had ousted President Blaise Compaoré from office in October 2014. The coup was led by the former president's security forces – the notorious Regiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (Regiment of Presidential Security, RSP), an army within the army made up of 1,300 well-trained and heavily equipped soldiers. For decades, the RSP¹ has been involved in most of Burkina Faso's political killings and violence, including the assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo in December 1998 (Frère 2010; Hagberg 2002). Over the previous year, the RSP had threatened the government by interfering on several occasions until it finally took the government hostage and declared the coup d'état.

The RSP coup was condemned by most of the country's citizens, civil society organisations, and political parties, as well as the larger international community. Many Burkinabe took to the streets to protest. Across the country, people mobilised in popular resistance and civil disobedience. Trade unions declared a general strike covering the entire national territory that was largely followed even by petty traders and others in the informal sector. Soon, Ouagadougou looked like a dead city. RSP soldiers patrolled and shot live rounds into residential areas while their inhabitants built barricades to keep the soldiers out. Other forms of civil disobedience were practised as well, in Ouagadougou and elsewhere in the country.

The struggle against the coup united the Burkinabe, and after a few days it became clear that the coup would fail. This article demonstrates that popular resistance and revolutionary struggle are crucial to Burkinabe political culture: it is a culture of “enough is enough” (Hagberg 2002), implying that at a certain point people will take to the streets “to take their destiny in their hands” and to confront “the forces of evil.” In the first part of the article, I describe how the people's resistance and struggle resulted in the coup's failure. In the second part, I discuss essential features of this popular resistance and revolutionary struggle that signal that a “new

1 The RSP replaced the Centre national d'entraînement commando (National Centre for Commando Training, CNEC) that had been in charge of presidential security since 1983. The CNEC was involved in the coup d'état on 15 October 1987 in which President Thomas Sankara was killed. By presidential decree 95-482/PRES/DEF on 21 November 1995, the CNEC was replaced by the RSP.

Burkina Faso” may be on the horizon. In the conclusion, I consider the prospects for a true democratic step forward in Burkina Faso.

Chronicling the Popular Resistance

During the second half of September 2015, Burkina Faso was a source of breaking international news. In the midst of a government meeting on the afternoon of 16 September, RSP soldiers took President Michel Kafando, Prime Minister Isaac Yacouba Zida, and other members of the government hostage and seized power. News quickly spread on the radio and throughout social media. Many people in Ouagadougou gathered at the Place de la Revolution and then made their way towards the presidential palace, Kosyam, in the luxurious neighbourhood of Ouaga 2000, where the RSP were holding the president and members of the government. But demonstrators were met with RSP soldiers shooting live rounds. People fled for their lives. Civil society leaders urged people to return home to avoid being killed.

In the early morning on 17 September, a declaration was read on national television by an RSP spokesman which stated that a so-called “National Council for Democracy” under the command of General Gilbert Diendéré had dissolved the government and the transitional parliament and stripped President Kafando of his functions. The coup was justified by reference to the new electoral code, according to which former power holders were not eligible to stand in the upcoming presidential and legislative elections. The declaration asserted that “the electoral code [...] is a tool to negate the values of our people, founded on the spirit of justice, equity, and tolerance” (*Afrik.com* 2015). The “exclusion” of those who had supported Compaoré’s modification of the Constitution was denounced by the coupists. Yet, these justifications were simply rejected by the public, who believed that Diendéré and the RSP finally had crossed their Rubicon – that is, they had transgressed the limits of the acceptable and thus crossed the point of no return. People reacted with anger and resistance. Virtually all Burkinabe seemed to reject the military takeover. Civil society, political parties, trade unions, students – citizens from nearly every walk of life expressed their disgust. Chérif Sy, the president of the transitional parliament, went underground and led the resistance in his capacity as interim head of state, given that President Kafando was unable to perform his duties.

The regular army did not support the coup either, even though many citizens felt that the army remained very passive in this regard. In regional capitals, demonstrations took place outside military camps to urge the

army “to take responsibility” (Hagberg et al. 2015). The coup was condemned internationally and categorically by the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United States, France, and other European countries. The AU suspended Burkina Faso and called the coupists “terrorists,” restricted their travels, and “froze” their assets (RFI 2015a). Among the few who publicly supported the coup were some leaders of ex-President Compaoré’s *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (Congress for Democracy and Progress, CDP) and other parties in the so-called *Front républicain* (Republican Front). Djibrill Bassolé – general of the gendarmerie, ex-minister of foreign affairs and one of the “excluded” presidential candidates – made what many saw as an ambiguous declaration on Facebook in which he condemned the use of arms and violence, while inviting the political class to get over their frustrations, resentments, and antagonisms. He did not explicitly condemn the coup but urged for “the preservation of the cohesion, operational efficiency, and republican character of our national army.”

RSP soldiers went out from their camps Naaba Koom I and II,² and patrolled the streets and neighbourhoods of Ouagadougou. They shot people and blocked even small streets with motorbikes and other vehicles to prevent people from gathering. Many young people were wounded or killed over the course of these actions. The population responded by building barricades to prevent the RSP soldiers from circulating in the streets. Social media abounded with images and eyewitness accounts, rumours, and public statements. Since RSP soldiers attacked radio stations, *Radio de la Résistance* began broadcasting.

During this week of violence and military repression, 14 people were killed and 251 were wounded.³ Some were hit by stray bullets, such as the 14-year-old girl who died inside her home and the pregnant woman who had to have an urgent Caesarean section because the fetus she had been carrying had been hit by a bullet (Amnesty International 2015).

Whereas the RSP tried to control Ouagadougou by means of curfew and street patrols, other Burkinabe towns and cities disobeyed the coupists. In Bobo-Dioulasso, Gaoua, Banfora, Dedougou, Ouahigouya, to

2 Naaba Koom I is the notorious *Conseil de l’Entente* building in the centre of Ouagadougou where killings and torture have taken place since the 1980s, including the assassination of President Sankara; Naaba Koom II is adjacent to the presidential palace, *Kosyam*, in Ouaga 2000.

3 These figures are probably low, as eyewitness accounts hold that many more corpses were carted away by RSP soldiers. In November 2015, one of the wounded teenagers passed away, adding to the list of deaths.

mention a few, people took to the streets and refused to respect the curfew. Even in the capital, RSP soldiers were only barely able to control the city. They were soon exhausted, especially because of their endless tearing down of barricades on every street corner. Even in coup leader Diendéré's hometown, Yako, people protested, and Diendéré's house was destroyed.

ECOWAS deployed mediators – President Macky Sall of Senegal and President Yayi Boni of Benin – to Ouagadougou. Yet, while diplomacy seemed to be in full swing, the number of deaths and wounded continued to grow. Horrible images of dead bodies were circulating on social media, and protests grew in intensity. ECOWAS mediators presented a draft agreement to be adopted by the ECOWAS summit meeting of the West African heads of state in the Nigerian capital Abuja two days later. This draft included amnesty for the coupists, an issue that led to public outcry and massive protests. Political parties, civil society organisations, and other actors objected to not having been consulted. While under house arrest, President Kafando declared that he had received the draft agreement only after it had been rendered public (RFI 2015b). Amnesty for those who had committed the atrocities was simply unthinkable to most Burkinabe, who feared that ECOWAS mediators would accept the coup retroactively. Demonstrators intensified pressure on the regular army across the country. In Bobo-Dioulasso, protesters publicly asked the army to give them weapons: “*Comme vous êtes en train d’hésiter, donnez-nous des armes et des tenus. Nous allons vous devancer et vous allez nous suivre après.*”⁴ And when the regular army finally intervened, and troops began to move to Ouagadougou from various garrisons around the country, people enthusiastically welcomed them. The army wanted to avoid confrontation and initiated negotiations with the coupists. The population was urged to stay at home. On 22 September the ECOWAS summit meeting in Abuja rejected the mediators' draft agreement. The strong Burkinabe resistance had paid off. And the same evening, the RSP and the regular army signed an agreement that included the disarming and retreat of the RSP. President Kafando was reinstalled and the government was back in office. The coup had failed and its general, Diendéré, said he “regretted the coup” and that “we do not talk about it” any longer (Lefaso.net 2015).

Two days later, the government adopted three decrees: the first ended the functions of the general commander of the RSP; the second ended the functions of the minister of security; and the third dissolved the RSP. The

4 “As you hesitate, give us weapons and uniforms, and we will take the lead and you can follow us later.”

disarming started, but soon Diendéré and the RSP refused to disarm. Strong appeals by the army and civil society sought to convince RSP soldiers to change sides, and many did so. But the core group around Diendéré refused to disarm and the army prepared for the final assault. Meanwhile, the government published a communiqué denouncing not only General Diendéré but also General Bassolé. Bassolé, former minister of foreign affairs, was accused of having mobilised foreign forces and *jihadist* groups to support the RSP coup (*Le Pajys* 2015), alluding to his connections with Guillaume Soro⁵ in Côte d'Ivoire and the rebel groups in Northern Mali. The government communiqué sent shock waves through the Burkinabe. Bassolé was arrested and the final assault was launched. Combat came to an end, even though Diendéré himself fled to the Vatican's embassy. Some 30 RSP soldiers fled and are still being looked for. On 1 October Diendéré gave up and was arrested.

The Burkinabe revolution in October 2014 rejected President Compaoré's attempt to modify the Constitution – he wanted to, in effect, make the presidency a life-long post. Compaoré was ousted from power and a Transitional Charter was elaborated by the country's social and political forces (Chouli 2015; Frère and Englebert 2015; Hagberg et al. 2015). The September 2015 coup d'état failed, and for many the Burkinabe revolution has now been accomplished. Yet behind the mediated images of a determined Burkinabe people, it is worth recalling that popular resistance and revolutionary struggle resonate with Burkinabe political culture. Resistance and struggle are grounded in student movements and trade unions, as well as in traditional cultural values of combat and integrity (Hagberg 2002, 2007; Hilgers and Mazzocchetti 2010). The army has played a role since the first popular uprising that ousted President Yaméogo from power in 1966. When all other institutions are fragile, people expect the army “to take responsibility.” The so-called international community is also central, because conflicting sides tend to mobilise international support – notably, French actors and institutions (Hagberg 2002). But the current resistance and struggle also add something new. In the remainder of the article, I discuss key features of the “new Burkina Faso,” where “nothing will be as before” and in which “regardless of who is president, the Burkinabe people will stay vigilant.”

5 Guillaume Soro was the leader of the Forces Nouvelles during the Ivorian civil war and later prime minister under President Laurent Gbagbo. Nowadays, Soro is speaker of the Ivorian Parliament. A telephone conversation between Bassolé and Soro that supposedly took place on 27 September started to circulate on social media in November 2015.

Understanding the Revolutionary Struggle for a “New Burkina Faso”

In the revolutionary fever that runs throughout the country one would expect factionalism and dissidence once the common enemy is defeated. The spontaneous, heterogeneous coalitions pulled together were movements of the day that showed efficiency, organisation, and discipline in terms of mobilisation and resistance. A telling example is that when civil society leaders realised that RSP soldiers were shooting to kill, protesters were urged to return home and build barricades. It was a cat-and-mouse game: people quickly built barricades in order to disappear and protect themselves, and then the RSP would arrive and tear down the barricades; once the soldiers had left, people quickly rebuilt the barricades. In some neighbourhoods, RSP soldiers were trapped in between two barricades, and when their munitions finally ran out, residents took the soldiers into custody and called the gendarmerie. At least two of the RSP's vehicles were taken by residents. Another example of the coalition pulling together is that civil society leaders welcomed RSP soldiers who changed sides to join the regular army. The RSP are “our brothers and sisters,” it was stated, as to prevent people from striking back. Appeals for dignity and respect for justice stressed that those who had committed crimes would be brought to justice, but that not all RSP soldiers were guilty. The intense work to prevent acts of vengeance from being carried out was also a strategic move to facilitate disarmament.

In the end, the days-long nightmare culminated in a sense of pride for the Burkinabe people, because it was the failed coup that facilitated the dismantling of the military arm of Compaoré's power. The defeat of the RSP has improved the prospects for a veritable democratic breakthrough.

A Generational Shift

The 2014 revolution that faced backlash in September 2015 has now been accomplished by the popular resistance and revolutionary struggle against the coup d'état. This is a youth revolution in the sense that it includes a generational shift in governance, perspectives, and opportunities. It was young people who took to the streets and faced lethal military violence. Most victims were youngsters who were shot by RSP soldiers. It was also a youth revolution in the sense that young people were fed up waiting for a better society with equal employment and educational opportunities.

But beyond these outward features, the Burkinabe revolution represents a more profound generational shift. Leading organisations, such as

Balai citoyen, Citoyen africain pour la renaissance, and Front de résistance citoyenne, are movements created a few years ago to combat Compaoré's plans for a life-long presidency (Frère and Englebert 2015; Hagberg et al. 2015). Other civil society organisations have also experienced a generational shift, including trade unions and human rights organisations. In political parties, the generational shift now seems under way. While it is true that most current party leaders were members of Compaoré's past governments – specifically, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, Salif Diallo, Simon Compaoré, Zéphirin Diabré, and Ablassé Ouédraogo – it is also true that many younger politicians are ascending electoral lists. Among the stronger presidential candidates, only Bénéwendé Sankara does not originate from Compaoré's power sphere. He is a lawyer who was actively involved in human rights movements after the assassination of the journalist Norbert Zongo in December 1998 (Loada 1999; Hagberg 2002). The generational shift is related to young generations' use of social media with its instant publication of news, rumours, and hearsay. Among journalists and bloggers, a new generation played a pivotal role in the popular resistance: The Radio Omega team, led by former Radio France Internationale correspondent Alpha Barry, is composed of young journalists and includes social media journalists to complement the conventional reporters. Radio Omega, which broadcasts from both Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, played a critical role in the 2014 revolution (Hagberg et al. 2015). This made Radio Omega a primary target of the RSP; the radio station in Ouagadougou stopped broadcasting after direct threats were received from the RSP, whereas the one in Bobo-Dioulasso did not receive such threats and kept broadcasting.

In the regular army, a similar kind of generational shift became evident during the days of resistance. Young officers wanted to stop the RSP coup well before the army commanders decided to do so. The popular pressure was tremendous – for instance, in Bobo-Dioulasso people gathered in front of the military camp Ouézzin Coulibaly four times during the critical days of the coup. The young officers were on the side of “the people,” whereas their superiors hesitated. Even within the RSP there was a generational cleavage. Allegedly, many young RSP soldiers felt betrayed by their superiors, given that the younger soldiers' goal was to force changes related to working conditions rather than carry out a coup d'état. This indicates the presence of tension between generations within the RSP itself.

Street Power

Since the 2014 revolution, the importance of street power – *la ruecratie* – has been increasingly discussed in Burkina Faso. The notion of street power implies the penchant for demonstrating in the streets to resolve certain political issues (Somda 2015). A broader definition would be to take to the streets to assert authority and power vis-à-vis power holders. Civil society organisations, trade unions, and other movements have demonstrated a tremendous capacity to mobilise and take to the streets to press claims. Nominations and decisions are assessed by the street (Hagberg et al. 2015). During these days of resistance, the strength of street power was also related to lethal retaliation; brutal killings allegedly strengthened street power and photos of dead bodies galvanised the struggle.

Yet, while street power has shown its strength, there are reasons for concern when it comes to the limits of this populist turn. Prime Minister Zida has often referred to “the people” as the ultimate decision makers. This populist strand has been reinforced since the successful resistance against the coup, because one cannot but be impressed by the discipline, organisation, and determination of the Burkinabe. It was the people’s determination that altered the balance of power and forced the ECOWAS summit meeting to reject the draft agreement in which amnesty for the coupists was proposed. The current revolutionary struggle with the street pressing claims is therefore a strong and self-confident movement. Yet a country cannot really be run by “the street,” and one good question is how actions taken by protesters can be transformed into everyday democratic governance.

Once the presidential and legislative elections are over and the new president, parliament, and government are in office, the ways in which street power will be exercised depend on the government’s capacity to satisfy social, economic, and political claims. The trade unions will certainly pursue the struggle, and the same may apply to other movements as well. Some civil society leaders are likely to become ministers, and the question is what will happen when they no longer represent “the street.” For instance, Augustin Loada, professor of law at Ouagadougou University, was a civil society leader in the 2014 revolution who was appointed as a minister in the transitional government, but since then he has not been shown any mercy by “the street” – that is, people have been equally suspicious of him. Ideally, civil society will continue to act as a citizen watch-dog. But civil society is also fraught with ambiguities, as it includes everything from leftist movements with links to the underground communist party via

human rights and civil society movements to organisations that have been co-opted by power holders or that are externally driven.

Sankara and Sankarism

Burkina Faso is currently caught up in Sankara fever. Young people have come to celebrate the late president, Thomas Sankara, and revere the revolution he led from 1983 to 1987. Sankara's speeches, statements, and slogans are often quoted. The most cited line is the rather fatalistic "*Tuez Sankara aujourd'hui, demain naîtront des milliers d'autres Sankara.*"⁶ Thomas Sankara represents a role model for political morality for the youth more than an ideology (Harsch 2013). While the Sankarist parties do have some support, it is not the parties' ideology but the ideal of Thomas Sankara himself, as a power holder who was upright and did not engage in embezzlement or corruption, that is celebrated. For many, he was a true patriot, and exemplary in his denouncement of imperialism. His speeches and images are widely shared on social media and sold by street vendors across Burkina Faso.

Sankara came to power in a coup d'état that was called the Democratic and Popular Revolution. Today's "thousands of new Sankaras" do not aim for such a revolution, but strive for a liberal-democratic Burkina Faso with a multiparty system, freedom of speech, and freedom of association but also – and this is a common thread – a society in which social and economic inequalities are addressed. In other words, whereas Sankara represents a role model of political morality, the regime he led belongs to the past. The "thousands of new Sankaras" did take to the streets to revolt, but the very content of that revolution concerns simultaneous struggles for democracy and freedom, employment and education, and ultimately a better future.

Conclusion

The coup d'état failed, due to a wide range of factors and circumstances that this brief article cannot possibly capture. It is nevertheless clear that popular resistance and revolutionary struggle played a critical role in stopping the coup. Beyond the description of events, this contribution has sought to show that popular resistance and revolutionary struggle are part and parcel of a long tradition in Burkinabe political culture. Yet, there are some intriguing issues that have emerged in the "new Burkina

6 "You can kill Sankara, but tomorrow thousands of new Sankaras will be born."

Faso”: the generational shift of the country’s social and political leaders; the importance of street power that galvanised the struggle; and the re-emergence of Sankara as a role model for political morality. The Burkinabe people’s revolution is being seen more and more as an African model for the resolute defence of freedom and democracy. What is happening in Burkina Faso is likely to affect the entire African continent. In the news and on social media, there are stories of young people in Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Benin, and Senegal, to name a few countries, being inspired by the Burkinabe popular resistance and revolutionary struggle. In a sense, I would therefore suggest that the “thousands of new Sankaras” are not only Burkinabe, but represent a pan-African role model from which to draw inspiration.

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“Tausende neue Sankaras”: Widerstand und Kampf in Burkina Faso

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Artikel werden die jüngsten politischen Entwicklungen in Burkina Faso analysiert, insbesondere der gescheiterte Staatsstreich im September 2015. Der Coup wurde von den Sicherheitskräften (RSP) des früheren Präsidenten geführt, 1.300 schwer bewaffneten und gut ausgebildeten Soldaten. Das RSP nahm den Präsidenten und die Mitglieder der Regierung als Geisel und erklärte den Umsturz. Die große Mehrheit der Bevölkerung, zivilgesellschaftliche Gruppen, Gewerkschaften und politische Parteien wie auch die internationale Gemeinschaft verurteilten den Putsch. Im ganzen Land reagierte die Bevölkerung mit Widerstand und zivilem Ungehorsam. Die RSP-Soldaten patrouillierten und schossen scharf in Wohngebiete, während die Bewohner Barrikaden bauten. In Ouagadougou und anderen Teilen des Landes wuchs der Widerstand stetig und nach ein paar Tagen war klar, dass der Coup scheitern würde. Der Autor beschreibt den Mut und die Entschlossenheit der Bevölkerung Burkina Fasos gegenüber den Putschisten und zeigt, dass Widerstand und revolutionärer Kampf ein Element der politischen Kultur des Landes sind. Abschließend diskutiert er die Aussichten für einen echten demokratischen Durchbruch in Burkina Faso.

Schlagwörter: Burkina Faso, Staatsstreich/Militärputsch, politischer Widerstand, politische Kultur