

Burkina Faso: Masses Rise Up Against Neo-Colonial Rule

Thousands hold signs and wear t-shirts honoring the revolutionary legacy of Thomas Sankara

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Hundreds of thousands of people in Burkina Faso have forced the longtime imperialist-backed leader, President Blaise Compaore, to resign amid mass demonstrations and rebellions in several cities across the West African country. Compaore took power in a French-supported coup on Oct. 15, 1987 against revolutionary Pan-Africanist and socialist leader Capt. Thomas Sankara.

Several political parties and movements that are seeking to reclaim the legacy of Sankara were very much in evidence during the unrest that reached a critical point on Oct. 30 when thousands stormed the parliament building and setting it alight. The legislative body was set to vote on a motion to extend the 27-year rule of Compaore, who although coming out of the military, ran for office repeatedly as a civilian candidate.

Compaore sought to reassert his authority by refusing to formally resign from the presidency until the evening of Oct. 31. Gen. Honore Traore announced after the rebellion on Oct. 30 that he was assuming power and dissolving parliament.

Immediately people within the various opposition parties began to object to the leadership of Traore. The following day Nov.1, yet another military leader emerged claiming to be in charge.

This time it was Lt. Col. Isaac Zida, the deputy commander of the elite presidential guard. Media reports emanating from Burkina Faso said that the military had endorsed the leadership of Zida.

After meeting with foreign diplomats on Nov. 3, Zida said that the military would hand over power to a civilian transitional authority which is acceptable to the people of the country. If the military leader does not move swiftly in this regard, there could be more violent unrest.

Masses Call for Return to Civilian Rule

On Nov.1, the opposition forces called for a major mobilization on Sun. (Nov. 2) to demand that Zida relinquish power. Thousands took to the streets and later gathered outside the national television station (RTB) in the capital of Ouagadougou.

Members of the crowd attempted to enter the television studios but were prevented in doing so by the army. The soldiers later fired shots and one person was killed.

Reports indicated that opposition leader Ms. Saran Sereme was at the television station

saying that she and a leading general were prepared to head a transition team. Sereme later denied this claim and said she was brought to the location by force.

The army continued to emphasize on Nov. 3 that it does not want to maintain power but create the conditions for a smooth transition to civilian control. Nonetheless, the opposition forces were demanding a rapid turnover to non-military figures to lead the country.

An army spokesman said in the aftermath of the clashes on Nov. 2 that “The army does not want power. But the anarchy needs to stop. Any violation will be punished with the utmost energy,” said Auguste Barry, in reference to the shooting at the television station.

Later on Nov. 2 after leaving the RTB studios, the crowds moved towards the Place de la Nation where disturbances on Oct. 30 resulted in the attacks on parliament. Military forces set up barricades to prevent demonstrators from getting close to the location that was damaged by fire.

Burkina Faso Emerges As Major Gold Producer in Africa

Historically the country of Burkina Faso, formerly known as Upper Volta, was known as an agricultural producing state. In recent years the production of gold and other mineral commodities such as granite, marble, phosphate rock, cement, dolomite and pumice have accelerated.

At present Burkina Faso is the fourth largest producer of gold in Africa. There are at least six major mines in operation.

However, the revenue generated from the export of gold and other minerals are not being shared with the majority of workers, farmers and youth. The official unemployment rate is 77 percent and the country ranks 183 out of 186 on the index of living standards for nations throughout the world.

Burkina Faso still maintains close ties with the former French colonial power. Paris has used the country as a rear-base for its operations against rebel fighters in northern Mali.

The close ties with the mining industry have not benefited the country’s people at all. One of the major firms involved in the extraction is Orezone Gold Corporation based in Ottawa, Canada.

In a 2011 study by Orezone, it noted that Burkina Faso ranked sixth in the level of potential for mineral production, including gold. Orezone has been involved in the country since the late 1990s.

According to the mineral analysis conducted by Orezone in 2011, a section of the report says that:

“We recognized the enormous potential of Burkina Faso 15 years ago when we started exploring the area. Although we have discovered more than 10 million ounces of gold to date and we expect to put new gold mines into production over the next few years, we believe we have barely scratched the surface in terms of its true potential. The results of this survey demonstrate the on-going commitment of Burkina Faso to creating a favorable investment climate for companies like Orezone Gold and we are delighted to work in this country.”

(orezone.com, 2011)

The recent unrest inside the country has reportedly caused a suspension in gold production. Orezone issued a statement on Nov. 3 indicating that it is following the political situation closely in light of the economic interests it has in the country.

This statement posted to their website says that “Orezone Gold Corporation has temporarily halted its activities in Burkina Faso until the political situation in country has stabilized. All personnel are safe and accounted for.” (orezone.com, Nov. 3)

The same statement goes on to say that:

“Although the area around Bomboré has been relatively calm during the recent events, minor vandalism occurred at the Bomboré camp over the weekend. Our staff and the local community at Bomboré, including the police and local representatives, have been very supportive with respect to the safety of our employees, camp security and our efforts to continue to develop the project; for that we are grateful.”

Legacy of Sankara Still Relevant

During the tenure of Capt. Thomas Sankara (1983-1987), the Burkinabe leader advocated the cancellation of the international debt which African states were obligated to pay due to the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Sankara instituted policies which utilized local production of cotton and other commodities for internal consumption.

With Burkina Faso being a landlocked state, it is essential that it develops genuine trade links in partnership with neighboring African countries. Nonetheless, the imperatives of the transnational corporations based in the imperialist states is to exploit the natural resources and labor of the African states which does nothing for the improvement of the conditions for the majority of the populations within these countries.

Sankara attempted to build mass organizations and Marxist study groups throughout the country. His efforts were undermined by France and its major ally at the time in the region, Ivory Coast, then led by President Felix Houphouët-Boigny.

In recent months unrest and strikes among the working class have increased in West Africa. In Ghana, to the south of Burkina Faso, a general strike impacting oil workers, educators and other public sector employees has prompted legal actions by the government to force the employees back on the job.

Both Ghana and Burkina Faso have been lauded for their increasing rates of economic growth. Nevertheless, if these profits from the production of gold and other strategic minerals are not shared with the people, the working class and youth will continue to demonstrate and strike in opposition to neo-colonial rule.

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