

BURKINA FASO

BETWEEN REVOLUTIONARY HOPES AND POLITICAL REALITIES



**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**

WEST AFRICA OFFICE

Interview with
NAMTANDI COMBARI

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IMPRINT

Published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung West Africa Regional Office
Cover & Editorial design : Yessine Ouerghemmi

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*This interview was conducted with a Burkinabè civil society actor
whose name has been changed to protect their identity.*

Ibrahim Traoré appears to enjoy considerable popular support, particularly among young people. How do you assess the extent of this support today, and how has it evolved since he came to power?

There is no denying that Ibrahim Traoré enjoyed enormous popularity when he came to power. This needs to be understood in its historical context. The two preceding administrations, under Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, had created the impression of a weak state, particularly in their response to terrorist groups. This had deeply wounded the country's sense of national pride. Traoré's youth and political rhetoric helped him gain widespread support. However, as he himself acknowledged at the beginning of his rule, his success would ultimately depend on tangible results, both in terms of security and living conditions. Yet everyday life has become increasingly difficult for many people. Assessing the extent of his current support is challenging, particularly as space for public debate has become increasingly restricted. In my view, even state agencies are no longer permitted to publish certain statistics, especially those concerning population displacement. The government has become virtually the sole source of official information, while people increasingly perceive a gap between official statements and the realities they experience. I believe these developments are gradually isolating the authorities, who increasingly respond to dissent with repression. Young people still have hope for their country's future, but that should not be confused with support for the government. Among poorer communities, particularly in rural areas, deteriorating living conditions and persistent violence appear to have weakened the popularity Traoré enjoyed when he first came to power.

The government speaks of creating a 'new kind of Burkinabè'. What does this vision entail, and what role does the compulsory patriotic immersion programme, attended by around 65,000 young people in 2026, play in it?

First, it is important to clarify that the authorities no longer speak of a 'democratic and popular revolution', but of a 'progressive and popular revolution'. This is a significant distinction. As for the values that are supposed to define this new citizen, they have not, in my view, been

clearly articulated. Some indications may be found in the authorities' official texts and manifestos. What I observe above all, however, is an increasingly militarised conception of citizenship, in which the soldier becomes the model that others are expected to emulate. Journalists, cultural workers, newly recruited teachers, students and recent secondary-school graduates are called upon to participate in periods of 'patriotic immersion' in military camps. These programmes combine military drills, civic education, history lessons and familiarisation with military codes and practices. For me, they are among the clearest expressions of this vision of citizenship. The precise content of these programmes would need to be examined to determine which values are actually being transmitted. But I also believe they serve a political purpose: encouraging young people to embrace the president's vision and consolidating a base of support for the government. In my view, patriotism cannot be instilled in a month if it has not already been cultivated through family upbringing and education. What these programmes can do, however, is foster admiration for the military institution and, by extension, for a head of state who is himself a soldier.

The Patriotic Support Fund has raised more than CFA 250 billion as of September 2026, notably for the war effort and the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). How do you assess the mobilisation, use and results of these resources?

We need to distinguish two stages. Initially, many Burkinabè supported the idea of a citizen mobilisation to give the government the means to fight terrorism. Today, however, a significant share of the Patriotic Support Fund comes from contributions that are not voluntary, including taxes on certain products and compulsory salary deductions. It is therefore difficult to interpret these contributions as an indicator of popular support. The central question is transparency. To my knowledge, there is no oversight mechanism that allows the public to independently verify precisely how these resources are used. The authorities manage the fund and report on its use. The fund should ultimately be assessed by concrete results: displaced people returning home, economic activity resuming, public administration being restored and security improving, rather than by official statements alone. The authorities have announced

that they have regained control of a substantial part of the territory — a figure of around 74.53% has been mentioned. But for those familiar with the realities in rural areas, the picture looks quite different. Attacks continue, people remain displaced, and some localities are still affected by insecurity despite the presence of military forces. I am thinking, for example, of warnings raised by communities living in areas where military forces are stationed, as well as protests in the east of the country, notably around Mani in September, where residents called for protection against continuing attacks. With information from affected areas often difficult to access, many people in urban centres remain unaware of the extent of the insecurity. In my view, the security improvements achieved so far do not correspond to the scale of the resources mobilised.

How have relations between Ibrahim Traoré's government and Burkinabè civil society evolved? What explains the authorities' restrictive approach towards critical voices?

Burkinabè civil society is highly diverse and has a long tradition of critically engaging with those in power, well before Ibrahim Traoré came to office. At the beginning of the transition, he benefited from mobilisation by smaller, sometimes informal groups. His youth and the parallels drawn between him and Thomas Sankara also helped generate initial support. Relations became more strained as substantive political debates emerged. Some civil society organisations distanced themselves from the authorities, while criticism of the government was increasingly portrayed as support for imperialist interests. This was accompanied by measures targeting political parties and associations. In my view, organisations that publicly express disagreement now face a very real risk of sanctions or repression. Even organisations that do not take an explicit political position face difficulties. Some have renewed their governing bodies but have had to wait months for the administrative documents required for official recognition. Their day-to-day operations are also affected. In the name of monitoring organisations suspected of serving foreign interests, the authorities require them to use a state-controlled banking arrangement. This can delay access to funds for several months and complicate the implementation of their activities. Administra-

tive and financial oversight has thus become another means of limiting organisations' room for manoeuvre, and I fear that relations will deteriorate further. Organisations that wish to maintain a critical voice risk facing consequences, while others remain silent primarily to preserve their ability to continue working on the ground. Yet the country's social and security challenges make independent voices all the more essential. This logic extends to the digital sphere. While critical voices face scrutiny and monitoring, networks of influencers amplify narratives favourable to the authorities, sometimes with little regard for their accuracy. The issue goes beyond disinformation: it is about constructing a narrative in which support for the government becomes a measure of what is considered true. This makes it increasingly difficult for independent information about conditions on the ground to circulate.

The current government presents itself as a break with the previous political order. How can a revolutionary project avoid reproducing authoritarian practices and ensure space for dissent and public accountability?

In my view, the dissolution of political parties and threats against associations reveal a fundamental contradiction: a government that calls itself revolutionary appears unwilling to have its promises tested against reality. If breaking with the past means ending the rule of a small elite, it should begin by giving ordinary people a greater voice. Yet I see no fundamental challenge to the influence of political, military and economic elites. Meanwhile, low-paid workers, civil servants, unemployed people and citizens demanding change find it increasingly difficult to express criticism. For many Burkinabè organisations, a genuine break with the past requires more than the departure of French troops or a change in military partners. It also means challenging existing economic dependencies, including those involving the IMF and the World Bank. Yet I see little evidence of a fundamental shift. Replacing one foreign influence with another does not constitute an anti-imperialist policy. Burkina Faso's history of political struggles and Thomas Sankara's legacy give the idea of revolution particular significance, perhaps more so than in Mali or Niger. But revolutionary claims must be judged by their concrete results. A genuine revolution must persuade rather than impose. It requires a clear political programme, developed through debate with the population, that explains what needs to change, how and within what

timeframe. Citizens must also be free to question decisions and assess their consequences. The gap between political promises and the realities of governing is not unique to Burkina Faso. Even movements that come to power through elections face this challenge. In Senegal, for example, the expectations surrounding PASTEF illustrate how contradictions can emerge once a movement assumes power. When citizens see little tangible difference between competing political programmes, even the distinction between elected governments and military regimes may begin to lose significance in their eyes. In Burkina Faso, the military came to power without first presenting and debating a political programme with the population. Policies have therefore had to be developed along the way. This makes public scrutiny all the more important: without the freedom to say what is working and what is failing, how can citizens hold those in power accountable?

The government invokes Thomas Sankara's revolutionary legacy. Where do you see continuities with his vision, and where are the differences?

Unlike many of my peers, I do see continuities between Sankara and Traoré, including in some less flattering respects: the central role of the military, a degree of trial and error in policymaking, and certain repressive practices. Accounts from activists who were critical of Sankara at the time remind us that his period in power should not be idealised. There is, however, an important difference. Under Sankara, despite political tensions and repression, debates still took place within revolutionary circles. Left-wing organisations and parties, including Marxist ones, participated in political life and engaged in ideological debates. I do not see a comparable space for political debate today. The political landscape has also changed considerably. Since the 1990s, parts of the organised left have weakened, while some activists have shifted towards electoral politics. Traoré therefore came to power in a very different environment from the one in which Sankara operated in the 1980s. Burkinabè society, meanwhile, has become more politically demanding. Since the late 1990s, the country has witnessed successive waves of popular mobilisation, culminating in the 2014 uprising and the struggles that followed. These experiences have strengthened citizens' willingness to question those in power and challenge the country's relations with foreign powers. Ideas of sovereignty and revolution have

consequently become deeply embedded in political consciousness. In my view, this also helps explain why Traoré's government has sought to present itself as revolutionary. Comparing Sankara and Traoré therefore requires us to consider not only their rhetoric and methods, but also their historical contexts and the actual impact of their policies on society.

Beyond national control of resources, what would genuine economic sovereignty entail for Burkina Faso?

This applies not only to Burkina Faso, but also to Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and West Africa more broadly. Our economies are largely outward-oriented. Their economic structures are organised to serve interests that have little to do with the needs and priorities of their own populations. Economic growth figures may look impressive, but when you examine the everyday lives of ordinary people, whether workers, teachers or nurses, little has changed. For me, a genuine break with this model would mean building an economy centred on meeting people's most pressing needs. This includes strengthening local productive capacities and providing producers with the tools they need to improve their productivity. It also means addressing essential social needs through investment in healthcare, teaching and education, as well as access to information and scientific knowledge. Ultimately, an economy can only be truly viable if it is organised around the needs of the people it is supposed to serve.

What does the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) mean in practice for people in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? What kind of regional cooperation is it seeking to build?

In my view, the AES did not emerge from a clearly articulated popular demand. Admittedly, the Malian military authorities' announced rapprochement with Russia generated sympathy in neighbouring countries. However, the creation of the AES and its growing prominence were driven primarily by the military regimes' determination to resist pressure from ECOWAS to restore constitutional order. In this sense, the AES provides these regimes with a means of collectively resisting re-

gional pressure and resisting ECOWAS demands for a return to constitutional order. Yet immediately after the coups, these same authorities had declared their intention to honour their commitments, including agreed electoral timetables. ECOWAS's response to the coup in Niger subsequently fuelled a sense of injustice. Why was military intervention being considered to restore constitutional order when many people felt that their countries had received insufficient support in confronting terrorism? This perceived contradiction helped strengthen support for the military regimes. Ultimately, the central question is what these regional organisations actually deliver for their populations. Neither ECOWAS nor the AES can derive its legitimacy from institutional principles alone. Both must also demonstrate that they can respond to people's everyday needs.

Russia is presented as a strategic partner for Burkina Faso's sovereignty. Does this relationship strengthen the country's autonomy, or could it create new forms of dependence?

Russia's growing involvement in the Sahel raises important questions about what economic sovereignty actually means. Does replacing one foreign partner with another necessarily lead to greater independence? We have long criticised the lack of transparency surrounding agreements between France and countries in the region. Yet what do we know today about the agreements concluded with Russia? If these agreements are beneficial, why not make their terms public? Without transparency, citizens cannot assess what their country actually gains from this cooperation or what commitments it may be taking on. I do not believe there is such a thing as 'good imperialism'. Foreign powers pursue their own strategic and economic interests. They may initially offer favourable conditions, only to revise them once their influence is firmly established. The question is therefore not simply which country Burkina Faso chooses to cooperate with, but whether the terms of that cooperation genuinely strengthen its autonomy.

We must also distinguish diplomatic rhetoric from economic reality. I am not convinced that Russian capital has replaced French capital in Burkina Faso. French economic interests remain significant in sectors such as telecommunications, logistics, transport and hydrocarbons. To understand whether the country's economic dependencies have actual-

ly changed, we would need detailed studies of corporate ownership, investment and capital flows. Political confrontation with France does not automatically mean that the economic structures established through decades of cooperation have disappeared. There is also an important domestic dimension to this question. Foreign economic interests do not necessarily depend on political freedoms or a strong civil society. On the contrary, restrictions on trade unions and civil society organisations can weaken the ability of workers and citizens to challenge existing economic arrangements. Such restrictions may therefore leave foreign economic interests largely untouched, even as the government presents itself as breaking with foreign domination. This is why I would be cautious about equating diplomatic hostility towards France with an anti-imperialist transformation. The real question is whether the structures of economic dependence are changing, and whether the population has any greater influence over the economic decisions that affect its future.